IX

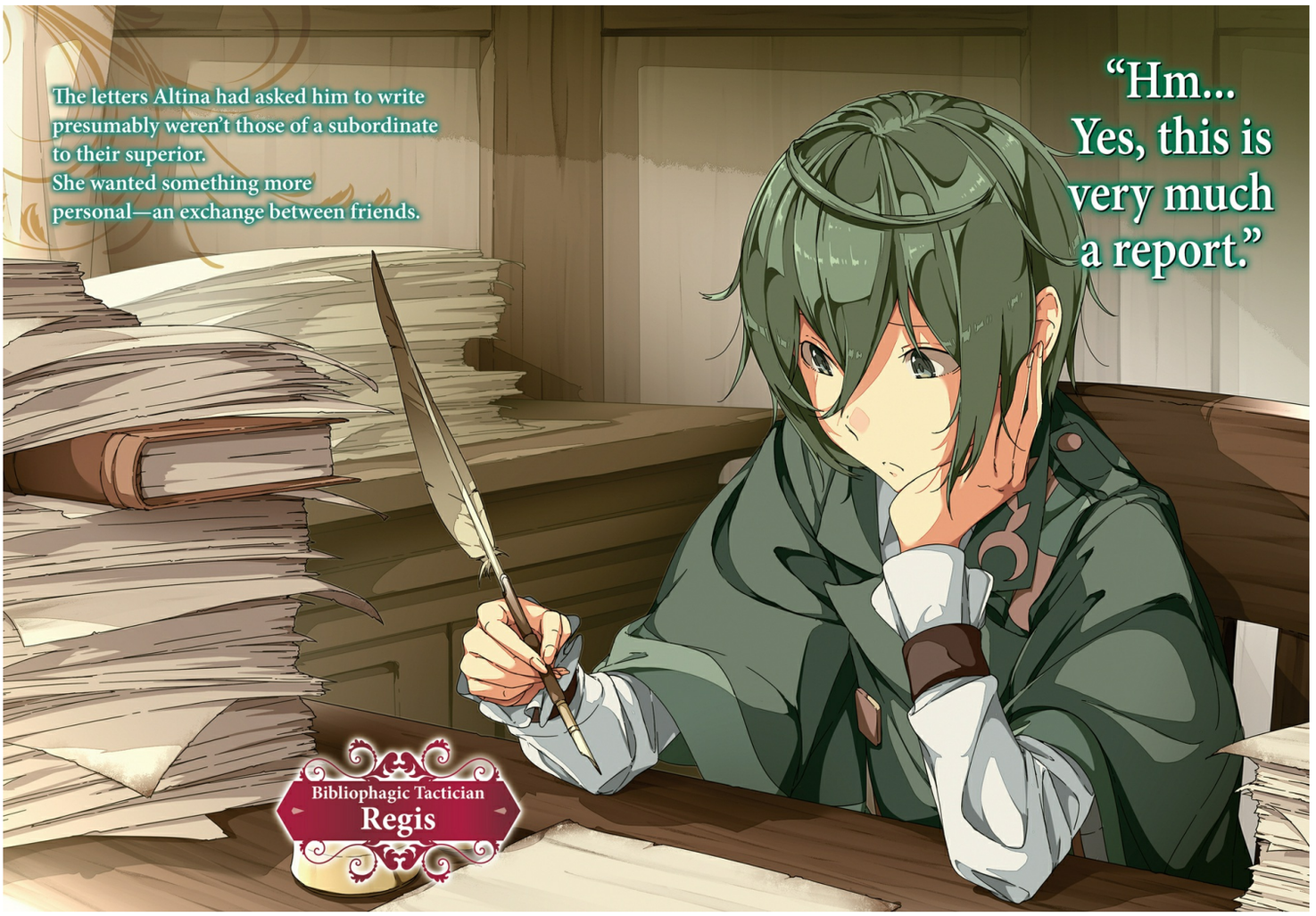
Author: Yukiya Murasaki
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ALTINA
the Sword Princess

ALTINA
the Sword Princess
IX




The letters Altina had asked him to write presumably weren't those of a subordinate to their superior.
She wanted something more personal—an exchange between friends.
"Hm... Yes, this is very much a report."
Bibliophagic Tactician
Regis


Renard Pendu Mercenary
Franziska
Third Prince of Belgaria
Bastian
Heir to the High Britannian Throne
Elize
"This is my house."
"Hey. Hey, Bastian. Why are we at the palace? You taking us sightseeing? We here for a little look-see?"


Former Duke Balzac
Balthazar
"Good grief. You're slackers, the both of you! We've barely even started and you're struggling to breathe!"
Sword-Wielding Princess
Altina
"Phwah!"
"Hah... I'm tired..."
Guard of the First Prince
Eddie

ALTINA



the Sword Princess



ALTINA
Characters

Marie Quatre Argentina de Belgaria

Fourth princess of the Belgarian Empire. She was named after her mother's homeland of Argentina, and is known as "Altina" for short. Boasting red hair and crimson eyes, she swings around the Grand Tonnerre Quatre, a sword even taller than she is. She has resolved to try and become the next empress for the sake of those suffering under the Empire's tyranny.



Clarisse

A maid six years older than Altina who has been by the princess's side for as long as she can remember. Altina trusts her from the depths of her heart. While Clarisse is usually silent like a doll, she tends to joke incessantly with anyone she's taken a liking to.

Regis Aurick

Fifth-grade administrative officer. A bibliophage who dreamed of becoming a librarian in the military library. He was an abject failure in the military academy, unable to swing a sword, draw a bow, or even ride a horse. The abundance of knowledge he has obtained from his books does give him some talent as a tactician, however.





Eric Mickaël de Blanchard

A Belgarian knight and the grandson of Everard. While serving in Marquis Thénezay's army, he was deeply impressed by Regis's command, and personally volunteered to be sent to the front lines to chase after the man he respected so much.

Jerome Jean de Beilschmidt

Revered as an accomplished general, he was driven to the border by those envious of his achievements. He would spend his days as the de facto commander of Fort Sierck drinking and gambling, but he surrendered this position when Altina bested him in a duel.





Eddie Fabio de Balzac

First-grade combat officer. The new head of the House of Balzac, famous for its outstanding swordsmanship. Despite having inherited his house's aptitude for swordplay, Eddie has never cut down a person on the battlefield. The sword he carries, the Défendre Sept, has been passed down in his family since the days of the first emperor.

Carlos Liam Auguste de Belgaria

First prince of the Belgarian Empire. When the real Auguste was assassinated, his younger sister Felicia stood in and assumed his identity. As of now, she has abandoned her claim to the throne and is living in Fort Volks with Eddie.



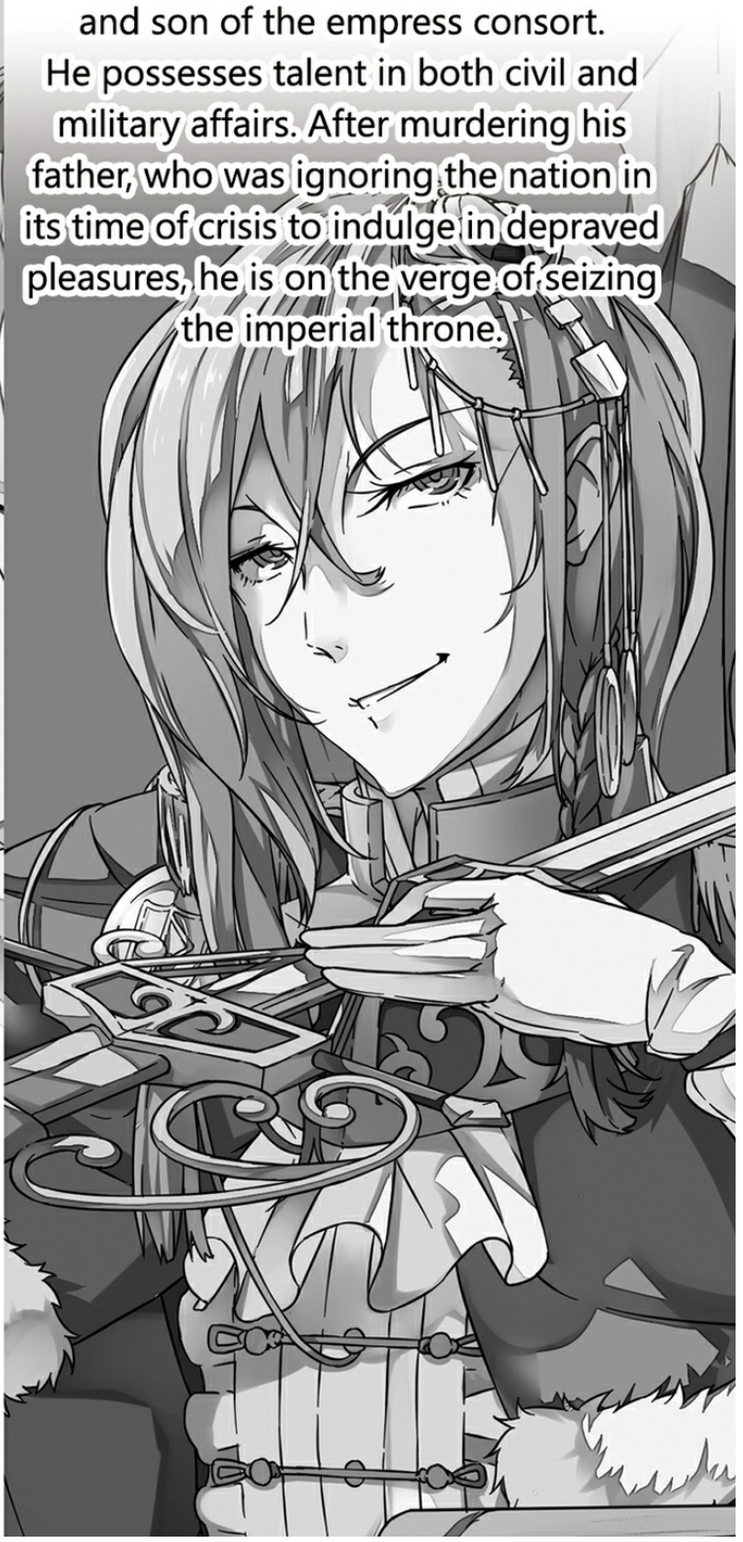


Heinrich Trois Bastian de Belgaria

Third prince of the Belgarian Empire. Detesting the very notion of getting involved in power struggles, he left Belgaria to study in High Britannia. Frustrated that his siblings were being handed treasured swords left and right, he may or may not have secretly made off with the Vite Espace Trois.

Alain Deux Latrielle de Belgaria

Second prince of the Belgarian Empire and son of the empress consort. He possesses talent in both civil and military affairs. After murdering his father, who was ignoring the nation in its time of crisis to indulge in depraved pleasures, he is on the verge of seizing the imperial throne.




MER
Grand Duchy of Varden
Fort Volks
Langobarti
15Li
Grebeauvoir
Fort Sierck
8Li
70Li
100Li
Theonveil
High Britannia
Verseilles
Fort Boneire
Estaburg
Belgarian Empire
Hispania

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The story so far—

Inept with a sword, unable to ride a horse, and apathetic toward the empire he serves, Regis Aurick is a hopeless soldier who spends his days buried in books.

The year is 850 on the Belgarian imperial calendar—

Having been banished to Fort Sierck on the northern front, Regis was approached by the tenacious Fourth Princess Marie Quatre Argentina de Belgaria—"Altina" for short—a stunning young woman whose imperial lineage was denoted by her crimson hair and red eyes. The daughter of a commoner, she was shunned by the queen and other high nobles, eventually being appointed commander of a faraway border regiment at the unprepared age of fourteen.

Under normal circumstances, her time would have been spent idly, the empty title making her little more than a decoration. But the impassioned princess, having spent her adolescence caught between internal struggles for power, aspires for something greater. She has seen the strife caused by self-seeking nobles—the ruthless taxation and pointless wars—and so resolves to change the country!

"I'm going to become empress. I need your wisdom."

Altina soon proves her mettle as a commander by taking on the hero Jerome, and while Regis feels no more confident in his own abilities, he swears to work as her tactician.

By repurposing the strategies from books he'd read over his life, Regis manages to gain the allegiance of a barbarian army, take down an impregnable fortress, and bolster the forces of Altina's border regiment.

And so the year turns to 851—

At the beginning of April, Altina makes her return to the imperial palace of La Branne. Regis is initially overwhelmed, but he ultimately secures the cooperation of rising noble Elenore, while First Prince Auguste—later revealed to have been Fifth Princess Felicia in disguise—rescinds his right as next in line

to the throne. He expresses his desire for Altina to take his place, and as a result, she is finally established as a prominent candidate to become empress.

On April 23rd, High Britannia declares war on Belgaria. A western port falls to a vicious bombardment, and upon making landfall, High Britannia's First Division devastates the Empire's Second Army.

Almost one month later, on May 19th, the two nations meet in the Battle of La Frenge. The Empire's Seventh Army forms a tightly knit formation and charges their foe, but when pitted against High Britannia's newest firearms, their attempt leads only to catastrophic losses.

Meanwhile, Second Prince Latrielle, marshal general of the Belgarian Army, falls victim to a surprise attack from Mercenary King Gilbert. The encounter leaves Latrielle partially blinded, though his eyesight is expected to one day deteriorate completely.

Regis manages to defy the odds on the western front. Serving as admiral proxy, he leads the Western Liberation Fleet to a swift victory, managing to take out the High Britannian ships. From there, he immediately leads the Empire's Fourth Army to rout the enemy's last supply shipment, which is under the protection of the infamous Mercenary King.

Their battle unfolds in the western regions of La Frenge, and while a great number of casualties are expected, Regis causes a thick fog to set in that renders the enemy's guns near powerless. The Mercenary King does not go down so easily, however. He launches a surprise attack on the Fourth Army's main camp...but to no avail. He is bested in combat by Altina, the newly improved *Grand Tonnerre Quatre* in her hands.

And so, the Belgarian Army puts a stop to the High Britannian invasion. Latrielle returns to the imperial palace to deliver the news, but the behavior he witnesses is completely unbefitting of a nation-threatening crisis. The emperor spends his time indulging in pleasures, and upon seeing him succumb to such depravity, the prince's anger finally reaches breaking point. His hand moves to his treasured sword, the *Armée Victoire Volonté*...

The cause of the emperor's death is of course falsified: he is announced to have died of old age, with the sixth consort having taken her own life out of

grief, while the Empire being embroiled in war gives Latrielle an opportunity to hold an informal state funeral.

Regis has his share of doubts about the situation and, following a summons from the Ministry of Military Affairs, separates from Altina and the Fourth Army to investigate the capital.

“...I’ll be sure to write.”

“Then I will too! I’m not very good when it comes to letters, but I’ll do my best! I’ll send you one every single day!”

After returning to the capital with ministry officer Fanrine as his supervisor, Regis nearly loses himself in a familiar bookstore. He is there for more than the latest fiction releases, however: the young tactician has a plan to gather the information he seeks.

Around this same time, Third Prince Bastian happens upon the Mercenary King’s three sisters—a development driven purely by coincidence...or perhaps the guidance of the stars.

Preface: Regis's Letter

July 1st. Sunny.

Dear Altina,

I have recently been stationed in Mordol, fifty lieue north of the capital, as part of a temporary transfer. It is a prosperous town with flourishing papermaking and iron-processing industries, due in no small part to their river and the strong winds from the nearby mountains. There are large-scale vineyards as well; in fact, the region is famous for the Mordéu wine it produces.

While I'm sure you have already heard via report, we are currently in the process of retaking the fortified city of Grebeauvoir, which has been occupied by the combined forces of High Britannia and Langobarti of the Germanian Federation. The city in question is just through the mountains from where I am now.

The Empire's First Army is twenty-thousand strong, comprising three thousand horsemen, three thousand artillery, and fourteen thousand foot soldiers—certainly quite a few more foot soldiers than I was hoping for. This is due to the majority of these troops having formerly belonged to the Third Army.

As you know, Lieutenant General Buxerou and his Sun Knights lost their lives defending Fort Boneire just short of a month ago. With their command structure in pieces, the Third Army was dismantled and its troops merged into the First Army. While we could do with more cavalry, it should not prove too much of an issue with retaking a city.

On another note, we have greatly increased the number of sappers at our disposal. We were able to gather quite a large number through temporary conscription, likely due to the high population density and the abundance of skilled personnel around the capital.

I shall write about the role our sappers are playing at a later date.

What has intrigued me most about the First Army is their expansive lineup of military cooks—never in any of my books have I read of any one unit with so many. There is a great surplus of ingredients as well. Our destination is not too

far from the capital, so I believe these are preparations in case our battle turns into a drawn-out siege. Perhaps our unit should take inspiration from these actions...

"Hm... Yes, this is very much a report."

Regis gave his writing a good look over, then crossed through the "Dear Altina" line twice, replacing it with the words "Status Report." That was one job done, if nothing else, but the letters Altina had asked him to write presumably weren't those of a subordinate to their superior. She wanted something more personal—an exchange between friends. He decided to try again, this time focusing on the kind of details they usually talked about.

Dear Altina,

How are you? I'm doing quite well myself.

I went to a bookstore the other day and bought a few books from Mrs. Carol. There is one in particular that has held my attention—a tale about a kindhearted protagonist who struggles with his schoolwork, and whose classmates help one another to improve. Indeed, it is the finale of a series beloved by many a reader, and what a moving finale it was. I believe the first volume was released eight years ago; I must have been reading these stories since I was twelve. The part that hit me most was—

Regis lifted his pen from the paper. "Hrm... Now this is a book review."

When it came to books, he simply couldn't stop himself. He decided to stop writing for now, otherwise he would run out of time to do anything else—time to read more books, to be more specific.

He recalled the many letters he had read that were written by great historical figures. "There was that letter Emperor Vicente sent to a lovely lady... He was highly praised as a poet, so maybe I should use that as a reference."

Regis took out a blank sheet of paper and started his letter anew.

O my dearest Altina,

So long as you are in good health, the world is roses all around.

I send my most precious treasure along with this letter. Can you guess what it

is?

It is my love.

Regis slumped down onto his desk, holding his head. “This... This is just wrong...”

He’d written literal mountains of reports and request forms in the past, but he couldn’t remember the last time he’d sent a letter to a friend.

“Fine. There’s not much else I can do right now. I’ll write it tonight instead.”

He was scheduled to attend a meeting in just a few minutes, after all. Regis put down his pen and exited the room he had been afforded.

Boisterous voices filled the air as Regis walked the unfamiliar halls, and armored foot soldiers saluted him as he passed. When he reached his destination, he peered through the open door into a large room. An elliptical table stretched down the center, around which ten-odd officers were seated.

The blond, red-eyed man farthest in the back met Regis with a smile. He was Alain Deux Latrielle de Belgaria, marshal general of the Belgarian armed forces, commander of the First Army, and almost certainly the next emperor.

“Over here, Regis. Allow me to introduce my staff.”

“Oh, thanks...”

Regis had taken a seat at the foot of the table, only for Latrielle to summon him by name. The prince gestured to the seat directly to his left, opposite where Germain was sitting to his right.

Latrielle rose to his feet and gazed across all the faces gathered. “While I’m sure you’re already aware, this is Third-Grade Admin Officer Regis d’Aurick. I’ve borrowed him from the Fourth Army for this mission. He will serve as the First Army’s chief strategy advisor.”

Regis was officially still a fifth-grade admin officer, but here he was being treated as though he had already been promoted. The staff officers stood and saluted in unison, and the flustered tactician frantically returned the gesture.

“I-It is a pleasure to work with you all.”



Germain was eyeing Regis from across Latrielle. As the prince's adjutant, his duties overlapped with those of the new chief strategy officer. The two were business rivals, as it were, but his expression remained calm nonetheless.

"Hah..." Germain sighed. "I'm sure there are some among us who believe I am unhappy with this development, but allow me to put those misconceptions to rest. I have experienced Sir Regis's extraordinary foresight and resourcefulness firsthand, and my respect for him is eternal. Do not forget that my lord is the one who enlisted his services, believing him to be the perfect man for the job. I see this as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to learn from his example, so please, Sir Regis, there is no need to act so reserved around us."

"Oh, well... I'm honored. I'll do my best to be of some use."

Despite his words, Regis felt nothing but shame. As far as he was concerned, being put on such a high pedestal would only make the drop that much more painful when someone inevitably dragged him back down to earth. Much to his surprise, however, it seemed there wasn't anyone quite so ill-natured among the First Army's staff officers; many nodded in earnest, while others looked relieved. He was met with a few glares as well, though. It sure was a complicated mix of emotions.

How terrifying... Regis thought, feeling a shudder run down his spine. He was from a commoner house, the youngest in the room, and the lowest-ranking to boot. Not only was he not a subordinate of the second prince, he had once cost the First Army quite a few casualties over what was essentially a domestic dispute. The law was of course on his side, but that didn't change the fact he had sent many of their associates to an early grave.

At the same time, however, they seemed to recognize Regis's achievements in the war against High Britannia. He was also joining them as the result of a direct invitation from Latrielle, so even those who couldn't stand him deep down probably knew they were unable to voice any disagreements.

Those suppressed negative emotions are more terrifying than any blatant abhorrence... Should I refuse the offer? Regis wondered. He was growing more doubtful by the moment.

Even so, he had joined the mission for his own benefit as well. It was too late

to turn back now. He needed to glean more information on Latrielle for Altina's sake—both on his potential involvement in the emperor's death and his plans henceforth.

There was also the fact that—as selfishly motivated and terribly pathetic as it was—Regis needed to pass the third-grade promotion exam in order to return to the Fourth Army where Altina was waiting for him. It unfortunately came with a practical portion, and as someone who couldn't even swing a sword properly, he didn't stand a chance of passing. And to make matters worse, failing the exam would send him into an endless loop of retakes.

Regis only had one path open to him: as the marshal general of the Belgarian Army, Latrielle had enough authority to make this mission count as his examination.

I've joined an army that hates me. Now I just need to gather information on Latrielle and make sure the recapture of Grebeauvoir ends in success so I can pass my exams—then I can return to the others.

It sounded simple enough in his head, but the overwhelming anxiousness that washed over him made it feel as though he were trying to scale the summit of a great mountain shrouded in fog.

Chapter 1: The Third Prince's Return

Franziska, a mercenary under Renard Pendu, tilted her head. *Do Belgarians not know what fear is?* she wondered. The security around the palace was understandably stringent, but Verseilles itself didn't even have protective walls. They had walked in so easily that it was actually somewhat of a letdown.

She had entrusted her armor to her older sister and shoved her favorite crossbow into a covered basket. Now she walked the streets alone, wearing frilly clothing befitting a woman her age. The pendant proving her allegiance hung at her chest, tucked beneath all the fabric.

A vast stone-paved road stretched straight from the south gate to the palace's front door. Each path that branched from it was simple and easy to navigate.

It's like they're not even considering that someone might invade. Now, ain't that some confidence?

It seemed everyone living here shared this sentiment too, believing it impossible that an enemy nation might reach the capital. That was why city walls were deemed unnecessary. It was rather unsettling—distressful, even—from Franziska's point of view, but in the hundreds of years since Verseilles had been established, not once had their assurance been challenged. This held true even now, as while High Britannia had certainly come close, they were ultimately forced to retreat.

Belgaria was detestably prosperous. There were shops lining both sides of the main street, each and every one stuffed with so many goods they were almost bursting at the seams. The locals were just as gaudy: legions upon legions of people passed her by every second, all wearing outfits that were much too elegant. Many were of course wearing black mourning clothes—their emperor had just died and their troops had endured one large-scale battle after another—but even they looked finer than expected. They couldn't all be nobles, meaning even the commoners here had enough extra wealth to consider what they wore.

In addition to this, there were troops stationed on every street corner. It

wasn’t that the Empire was on high alert; they were presumably there to keep the peace. Franziska knew it would be too much hassle if someone recognized her, so she was hiding her eyes beneath her bangs, taking care not to make any unnecessary eye contact.

Franziska hailed from the northern parts of Germania, in a poor region where the long winters sealed the land in snow. Their economy was, for the most part, supported by the earnings of mercenaries. She had never been to High Britannia before, but she couldn’t imagine even they were this prosperous. As any good mercenary knew, wealth could be converted into military strength at the drop of a ducat, so why had anyone considered it a good idea to wage war on this nation?

She stepped onto a side street, then slipped into a quaint brick café a little farther down. Her eyes scanned the tables for a youthful yet apathetic-looking woman and a ten-year-old girl—her older sister Jessica and her younger sister Martina, respectively. It wasn’t long before she spotted them sitting across from one another in oak chairs.

“A coffee,” Franziska told the waitress before making her way over to her sisters’ table. “Sorry to keep you guys waiting!”

“Welcome back, Sis!” Martina exclaimed. She got up from her chair and immediately clung to Franziska, who caught her with open arms.



“Hee hee! Did you miss me, Martina?”

“Nuh-uh!”

“You are five minutes late...” Jessica said calmly, taking a small sip of coffee.

“Erk... I-It’s not my fault. Not like I was out playing around or anything.”

“Take a seat already.”

Franziska noticed that the waitress was already heading over with her coffee. She put Martina back in her chair, settled into her own seat, then set the basket containing her crossbow down by her feet. Once she had taken her drink and the waitress was gone, she nonchalantly reclaimed the leather bag containing her armor. It was quite a large parcel.

With their little exchange complete, Franziska took her first sip of coffee. A pleasant aroma slowly dissipated through her mouth. A bitterness entertained her palate, complemented by a faint, lingering acridity and just a hint of sweetness.

“This is crazy good!”

Franziska had cursed the Empire when she placed her order, wondering how on earth a single drink could be so expensive, but now she understood. It seemed to contain sugar, which was an expensive luxury. It contained so much, in fact, that she could hardly even call it coffee anymore. Surely it was something else—a dessert of some kind, perhaps.

“So? Did you find anything?” Jessica asked in a hushed voice.

“Mhm, ’course I did. There were more Belgarian officers in town than I knew what to do with, and not one of them stood a chance against my masterful seduction techniques,” Franziska replied, attempting to sound coy. She elegantly crossed one leg over the other, trying her best to emphasize her toned waist and shapely but slender limbs. “A few words was all it took for them to spill the beans.”

“Wow! You’re so cool, Sis!” Martina cried, her eyes glistening with simple admiration.

Jessica raised an eyebrow. “Really...? What part of threatening them with a

knife is seduction?”

“Y-You were watching?!”

“So that *was* what you were doing.”

“Urgh... There was still a lot of seduction involved, though!” Franziska shot back, raising her voice. “That is, up to the point I coaxed them into the shadows!”

Jessica fixed her with a stern glare, then warily glanced around them.

Whoops...

They were speaking Germanian, but there were bound to be some Belgarians around who could understand them. She decided it best to speak in a quieter voice.

“Moving on...” Franziska continued. “I’ve got good news and bad news. Which one do you want first?”

“Nobody ever asks for the bad news first,” Jessica replied.

That might be true, actually.

“The good news is that Gil wasn’t hanged. Someone as important as him would get a publicized, large-scale execution, but there was nothing like that from the Fourth Army. He either escaped, he was released, or—and this is the most likely outcome, they say—he was hired. The fourth princess is apparently hard at work reinforcing her army.”

Jessica had actually predicted something similar but a few days prior. *“If she wanted him dead,”* she had explained, *“she could have had him executed the day after his capture... The fact he is still alive surely means that she wishes to recruit him.”*

While this news had come as somewhat of a relief to Franziska, she had more to say. “Unfortunately, it seems the war between Argentina and Latrielle is pretty much settled. The emperor died, right? There’s nothing else to it. Latrielle’s already got enough achievements to his name, and he’s first in line to the throne. Word on the street is he’s already staked his claim.”

Jessica put that week’s newspaper down on the table. She had a more recent

extra with her as well. “There hasn’t been an official ceremony, so he hasn’t been *enthroned*, per se. To be more precise, he said, and I quote, ‘I promise to carry on my father’s will and lead Belgaria to greater prosperity.’”

“Hm...”

Franziska could speak Belgarian, but she couldn’t read it. At most, she could pick out the words she did understand and use her imagination to piece them together.

Her sister Jessica, meanwhile, could understand the languages used in thirteen different countries. According to her, all the languages in the region originated from the common tongue of an ancient empire, so they were pretty much just dialects. She had also mentioned that this ancient empire had fallen to Belgaria’s first emperor.

“So, what might the bad news be?” Jessica asked.

Franziska sighed. “The fourth princess has returned to Volks. Didn’t even stop by the capital.”

“I see...”

While the sisters were riding in a wobbly carriage with Bastian, taking a detour around where the battlefield was thought to be, the Empire’s Fourth Army had started marching in a completely different direction.

Franziska found herself growing irritated at Jessica’s apparent lack of concern. “Your fortune-telling didn’t warn you about that?”

“Even with my fortune-telling... I could not care less about the location of the Fourth Army.”

“But our brother’s there!”

“Is knowing where he is enough for us to save him?”

“Erk...”

Indeed, finding Gilbert had never been the issue. Had the three sisters attempted to raid the Fourth Army alone, they wouldn’t have managed to save their brother or their other captured comrades. This was what Jessica foretold, at least, though it seemed to Franziska that her sister always saw things

differently from everyone else.

“What do we do now then?” Franziska asked.

“Information will naturally gather at the capital. Our first course of action should be to establish contact with the remnants of our brigade.”

“I see!”

While Renard Pendu had been defeated in their previous battle, they hadn’t assigned their whole brigade to assist the supply unit; there were still around seven hundred mercenaries accompanying High Britannia’s First Division.

“A mere seven hundred mercenaries would not be enough to stage a rescue mission, though,” Jessica added.

“So it’s hopeless...”

Jessica gazed out the window and up at the sky. The sun was beginning to set, dyeing the western sky madder hues. It was almost time for dinner.

“Yes, such a move would be impossible with them alone...but they carry strength and determination. They are a star that I cannot ignore—a star that glimmers in the night sky. Beside it, I see the twinkle that is Queen Margaret and her retainer...then the Empire’s second prince and fourth princess... They are all glittering stars, and it is my duty to watch them. This city is a most convenient spot to observe those stars on earth.”

“In other words, we need more information. Is that it?”

“Yes. Have no fear, though—we are coming ever closer to Gilbert.”

“Hah... Fine. I’ll believe you,” Franziska conceded. But with the Fourth Army headed to Fort Volks, distance-wise, they were getting farther and farther apart.

“You look down, Sis.” Martina seemed rather concerned as she peered into her big sister’s eyes.

“I’m fine,” Franziska reassured her, patting the girl on the head. “Hm, but wait... I get that we need to get in touch with Renard Pendu, but where exactly are they? The way things are going, isn’t High Britannia headed straight home? Are they gonna take our men with them, or dump them in a ditch somewhere?”

“For starters, Oswald Coulthard is not foolish enough to discard such valuable war assets.”

“Maybe, but Margaret’s a bit...you know.” Franziska prodded her temple.

Not even Jessica could disagree with that. “This is true, but I cannot imagine Queen Margaret would pull out so easily. Could you be a dear and gather more information for me? I have suspicions that something is happening on the Germanian front...”

“Let me guess—the stars again?”

“Before the war began, High Britannia was frequently exchanging messages with the Kingdom of Langobarti. If they do not make use of their connection now, they will have laid the groundwork for nothing.”

“What, d’you think they’re going to help them run away?”

“If Queen Margaret were that predictable, she would not have accompanied the expedition to Belgaria. High Britannia’s main force retreated, but they have not experienced any significant losses, nor are their troops fatigued.”

The High Britannian Army was unharmed, though they had been forced to retreat due to a severed supply chain. Jessica could easily envision them attempting something more drastic.

“But in that case, they should’ve just held their ground at Boneire. They still had a pretty big advantage there.”

“Had they made the wrong call, though, the war would have already come to an end. The Fourth Army simply would have appeared from behind while they fought the First Army, and as the High Britannian soldiers are novices when it comes to war, they would have deserted in terror.”

“I guess that’s one way to look at it...”

Belgaria had reserve forces in the capital as well, so there was a high chance the High Britannian troops would have been cut down before they reached the capital. In fact, there was no guarantee that reaching the palace would even secure their victory.

Jessica called herself a fortune-teller, but she more often did the work of a

tactician. “Queen Margaret had the troops retreat, foreseeing a pincer attack, but the situation might change if they can receive supplies from the Langobarts in Germania. She is not the sort of woman who would willingly return home empty-handed.”

“But isn’t it that Oswald guy who’s controlling the army? Colonel... Coulthard, I think his name was?”

“He is simply devoted to Her Majesty, purely and naively. He can already see where the war is headed, but he knows what the queen desires and moves the army accordingly.”

“Even knowing he’s fighting a losing battle...?”

“A more common occurrence than you might think. Renard Pendu was defeated, yet you still work so hard for our brother.”

“W-We’re not the same!”

“We agree to fight in wars for money, because we need money to live.”

“Exactly!”

“There is something Queen Margaret needs as well—something to live.”

“What’s that?”

Jessica shrugged, then her tone became even colder than usual. “Entertainment, I presume.”

Franziska gritted her teeth. “Entertainment? I swear, if we ever see that bitch, I’m going to smack her.”

“Such is why the High Britannian Army will not abandon Renard Pendu and return to their country. It is easier for us to gather information here in the capital, and we are far more likely to establish contact with our comrades. More power means more viable options, and so we will continue our preparations...until we seize the opportunity to save our brother.”

Franziska nodded; saving Gilbert was indeed the most important part. “We’ll save him no matter what. He’s our brother, for crying out loud. He’s family!”

Jessica looked up at the sky again, watching the deep-red clouds set ablaze by

the setting sun. “The second prince’s star shines brightest. The power he holds right now is unlike anything else.”

The stars aren’t even out yet... Franziska thought, curiously tilting her head. She turned to her older sister. “So are you saying the Empire’s gonna win?”

“But of course. The outcome of this war is so clear that there is no need to even divine it. What remains uncertain, however, is what the Empire will end up sacrificing in the process. So long as the conflict draws on, I am certain something will be lost.”

“Sounds about right...”

“It is my belief that, in the end, Queen Margaret will return to High Britannia... after obtaining one thing and losing another.”

“She’s seriously prancing home all carefree after everything she’s done?”

“There are darker clouds looming over her western star—the star that represents her motherland. I wonder what will happen...”

“That mess in High Britannia’s none of our business anyway.”

“Perhaps...”

All of a sudden, Martina’s hands shot up into the air. “Hey! It’s Bastian!”

Franziska looked up just in time to see the familiar face entering the café.

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Bastian was sixteen years old, putting him at the same age as Franziska. He had brown hair and a build that was on the slender side. Unlike before, he was now wearing sunglasses; it seemed he also had a reason to conceal his identity in the capital.

Accompanying him was the blonde girl. She was short and had absolutely no curves to speak of, but she was apparently their age as well. Her name was Elize.

Franziska recalled their previous conversation, back when Jessica had asked the girl why she was lying about being an exchange student.

“What?!” Bastian had exclaimed in response, leaping to his feet in an instant.

The atmosphere in the carriage had grown infinitely more tense, and while Franziska had known deep down that she should have been on edge, she couldn't bring herself to react. Having seen Bastian's unmatched speed, she knew she had no chance of winning against him in a fight.

Elize, however, had remained calm. "What makes you think I'm lying...?"

"There might be a war at the capital tomorrow," Jessica had answered simply. "Your very life would be at risk if any Belgarian recognized you as a High Britannian, and there is also a chance the High Britannian Army could kill you by accident. It is much too risky for a normal exchange student to head there at this point in time."

"I see now... You're right. It was quite a thoughtless charade on my part," Elize had said with a nod, owning up to her lie at once. It had quickly become apparent that she was choosing her next words with the utmost care. "I can't go into the specifics, but, erm... I had to flee from High Britannia. I do intend to return eventually, but when I can depends on the state the country is in. I'm going to the Belgarian capital for Bastian, to help him achieve his goal."

Bastian had folded his arms and nodded. "Don't get me wrong here, I don't really know what I'm doing either! I've just got this feeling that I need to get to the capital or something bad will happen."

"You may be skeptical about us going to a war zone for such an ambiguous reason," Elize had added with a wry smile, "but that's simply the sort of person Bastian is."

So, he's an idiot? Franziska remembered thinking at the time. Bastian had saved her though, so she didn't dare say it aloud.

Jessica had closed her eyes. "We were serving in the High Britannian Army."

Franziska had been petrified by her sister's sudden admission, but Bastian and Elize had merely looked at Martina in shock.

"The child too?"

"You've got that right!" Martina had exclaimed, throwing up her hands in delight. "I did my best!"

“I see... You sure had it rough.”

How exactly had they interpreted that? In any case, they hadn’t seemed to think they were mercenaries. Franziska had covertly breathed a relieved sigh as Jessica continued, mingling fact and fiction.

“We have no homeland to return to, so we intend to rely on some acquaintances at the capital.”

“So that’s how it is, huh...?”

Bastian had looked convinced, though Elize hadn’t seemed to fully believe their story. Either way, their conversation had continued for the rest of the journey, with neither side quite revealing their true intentions.

That very same pair were now making their way toward the sisters’ table.

“Hiya,” Bastian greeted them, raising a hand. “Kept you waiting, huh?”

“Were you able to accomplish what you were hoping to?” Jessica asked.

“It all worked out, one way or another. How about you? Found those acquaintances of yours yet?”

She looked reluctant to answer, instead directing a worried glance toward Martina. The meaning behind the gesture was so thinly veiled that it didn’t take Elize long to guess what she was trying to say.

“Martina, have you tried the cake here?”

“The cake?”

“It’s very delicious, you know. How about we go and get a slice? My treat.”

“Really?! Hooray!”

The “cake” Elize was referring to was brioche, to be more precise—a type of rich bread sprinkled with sugar. It was an expensive luxury compared to normal bread, but still just barely affordable for the common man. Franziska personally loved it, but in their current situation, she was aware that she needed to restrain herself.

With that, Elize and Martina headed for the register.

She sure knows what she’s doing... Franziska mused.

Jessica's gesture had served two important purposes: it removed both Martina, their worst actor, and Elize, the one with the better acumen, from the conversation entirely. Now only her, Franziska, and Bastian were at the table.

"Thank you for your consideration," Jessica said with an appreciative nod.

"Don't worry about it. There are some things a kid shouldn't have to listen to. So yeah—what happened exactly?"

Jessica added a tinge of gloom to her tone as she continued. "Our acquaintances are unfortunately gone... According to the neighbors, the husband died during the war, and the wife returned to her homeland with the three children."

This was all a lie, of course; there was no way mercenaries from Germania would have had acquaintances in the capital. Even so, it seemed that her ploy had managed to earn them Bastian's sympathy.

"I see. Yeah, that's rough... What are you going to do now?"

"It is hard to say. We do not have much in the way of travel funds."

This time, Jessica was telling the truth. They wouldn't have been mercenaries in the first place if they were rich. Even those in Renard Pendu, reputed as the strongest brigade on the continent, weren't wealthy enough to walk around covered in gemstones like the noble lads and lasses.

The three sisters had enough money to hitch a ride to Germania, but as their current objective was to save their brother Gilbert, they would need to remain in the capital, at least for the time being.

Jessica gazed into her empty coffee cup on the table. "Ah, I know... I could try writing to another acquaintance."

"Do they live nearby?"

"They live in Germania, but we have nobody else to turn to. The last thing I want is for my dear sisters to grow up on the streets."

Bastian folded his arms and groaned. His attire seemed to suggest he was a noble: the material was first-class, and sunglasses were considered a luxury item. For this reason, Jessica intended to extort him as much as she could. She

spoke calmly, of course, even trying to avoid showing too much sadness or any unnecessary tears. This subtleness only made her fake predicament come across as more real.

Franziska focused entirely on combat, so she wasn't a particularly good actor. *I want cake... I should have followed Martina,* she thought as she kept her head down, trying her best not to interfere with her sister's negotiations. She wasn't entirely against extracting a few days of expenses from this spoiled brat's wallet.

"All right, I've got an idea!" Bastian exclaimed, slapping his knee. "You can stay at my place! There may be a few naysayers, but we've already shared a journey and a meal, and nobody's gonna toss three women out onto the streets —not on my watch. They might not treat you as guests, but...how about it?"

Franziska's eyes widened at this sudden development. "Are you serious?! Do you even know who we are?!" she blurted out, earning her a kick under the table from Jessica.

Not another word, eh? Boy, that sure was pathetic of me...

Bastian gave her a bitter smile. "Nope, don't know a thing about you. I've got terrible instincts, so I can't really tell who's good and who's bad, and I've made a huge mistake in the past as a result. But even so, I couldn't bear to live suspecting every person I come across."

"You really are weird..."

"You think so?"

It was around that point that Martina and Elize returned with a wooden tray, on which a brioche loaf was divided into five pieces.

"We got some for you too, Sis!"

"Really?!"

Franziska had once again spoken without thinking. She was embarrassed, of course, but they *had* been on the battlefield for quite some time, and she hadn't eaten anything truly sweet for two whole months.

"Bastian, did anything important happen while I was away?" Elize asked.

“Yeah. It looks like they’re gonna have to contact some faraway acquaintance, so I was just asking if they wanted to stay at my place for a while.”

“Excuse me?! What are you thinking?!”

“Huh? Are you against it?”

“Of course I am! Inviting these marriageable women you just met *into your home*? That’s... That’s indecent!”

Bastian’s cheeks flushed red. “I-I don’t mean anything by it, though!”

Franziska waved her hands dismissively. “Ah, no! You don’t need to worry about anything like that happening! Really! This would really help us out, and, w-well... I know I’m pretty cute and all, but Bastian doesn’t look like the sort of guy who’d get up to anything shady like that.”

“There is nothing to worry about; we are not going to take him from you,” Jessica added quietly, wearing her usual expression—an expression that made it hard to tell whether she was looking at someone or gazing far into the distance.

This time, Elize went red. “Th-That’s not what I meant! I’m merely reminding Bastian what’s expected of a gentleman! The two of us, we’re...we’re not like that at all!”

Meanwhile, Martina was happily munching on her brioche as though the conversation didn’t concern her in the slightest. “So sweet!” she gasped.

“A-Anyway!” Bastian jumped to his feet. “We’ve got plenty of spare rooms you could use. You don’t need to be anywhere near mine!”

That seemed to be enough to ease Elize’s concerns. “Very well, then. I suppose I’m going to be intruding myself, so I have no right to oppose anyone else staying at Bastian’s house. As long as this isn’t a bother to any of you, of course.”

Franziska hurriedly shook her head. “A bother? Definitely not! As far as we’re concerned, just having a roof over our heads is heaven! A whole lot better than camping in the rain and marching the nights away!”

“...Right.”

“Do you have beds?! Do you?!” Martina asked excitedly, placing her hands on

her cake-stuffed cheeks in surprise. “Is this heaven?!”

“Looks like it won’t be an issue then,” Bastian said with a nod, seeing no reason to turn them down. “Welp, we should get going. There’s a little something I need to do tonight, so it’d be best if we could get things settled early.”

And so Bastian and Elize made their way outside, with Franziska and her sisters trailing along behind them.

As they walked along the evening road, Franziska became lost in thought. *If only I’d properly stalled the border regiment, then that blasted Regis Aurick wouldn’t have made it to the front lines. High Britannia’s supply ships would’ve been safe, the First Army would’ve fallen, and the capital would be occupied. But what then...?*

Would Gilbert have been walking these streets with the three sisters or even with the rest of their brigade? She took care to keep the irritation from showing on her face, though her clenched fists had started to shake.

Bastian boldly walked forth, bringing them closer and closer to the extravagant structure up ahead: the imperial palace, La Branne. It wasn’t long before they made it through the lines of noble villas and were standing right before the ornamented gates.

Not to mention the gates are wide open. Am I missing something here? Isn’t there a war going on? Not that I think these delicate things are gonna be of any use in holding back an army... Still, Belgarians really will make anything into art, won’t they? Franziska thought with a quiet sigh.

In contrast, her homeland of Germania prioritized sturdiness and practicality, such that reliefs were seen as nothing more than unnecessary bumps. She had grown quite used to these customs, though that wasn’t to say she didn’t admire Belgaria’s flamboyance to some degree. And now, the palace—the nexus of all the nation’s glamor—was right before her very eyes. Franziska inadvertently breathed a longing breath, but still, what were they here for?

“Hey. Hey, Bastian. Why are we at the palace?” she asked. “You taking us sightseeing? We here for a little look-see?”

Bastian scratched his head. “Err... How should I put this? Right...” He removed his sunglasses to reveal his eyes, which gleamed an even richer crimson beneath the evening sun. “This is my house.”

“Huh?” Franziska froze, unable to process what she had just heard. It seemed that Jessica had already figured things out, as she did not react to the announcement in the slightest.

“Wowee!” Martina cried out, though she did not seem to grasp their situation either.

Elize merely sighed. “I had hoped you would tell me before we got here.”

“Hah... I had a vague feeling that you already knew,” Bastian replied. “It would’ve been strange for me to just spell it out, right?”

“I still wanted you to tell me proper...”

“Really? Does it make a difference if you already know?”

“Hmph.”

In the midst of their light quarrel, they were approached by a sentry—a man clad in first-rate light armor that shone a brilliant silver. “*Ahem*! Pardon me, kids, but could you identify yourselves? What did you come around here for?” he asked, his voice ever so slightly menacing.

The simple fact he was a soldier of the Empire caused Franziska to tense up, but Bastian was brazen as could be. “Oh, great timing. Could you go and fetch Marquis Bergerac for me?”

“What was that, son?”

“I’m pretty sure he’s still the minister of ceremonies...assuming he hasn’t been fired yet.”

The sentry observed Bastian carefully, evidently not impressed by his tone of voice, but then his eyes widened in surprise. “Brown hair and... Huh? Red eyes? K-Kid... No, *sir*. You can’t be...?!”

Bastian flipped his hair in a grandiose gesture, though there was a somewhat bashful look on his face. “It’s embarrassing having to introduce myself after such a long time, but... I am none other than Heinrich Trois Bastian de Belgaria,

third prince of the Belgarian Empire. Please call for my grandfather, Marquis Bergerac.”

The sentry responded with such a crisp salute that Franziska could practically hear him snapping to attention. “M-My humblest apologies!” he stammered. “I beg for your leniency with my punishment!”

“Yeah, yeah. Enough of that. Can’t expect anyone to recognize me when I come back like this. More importantly, I really need to see my grandpa.”

“Understood!”

The man immediately turned on his heel and raced back to his post. He appeared to exchange a few words with the other sentries, who then leapt to their feet at once, a few sprinting off elsewhere. It wasn’t long before a legion of maids were springing up to welcome them.

There was, of course, a more conspicuous figure among them—a dignified old man whose chest was covered with medals, and whose arms were wrapped in mourning ribbons.

“Bastian?! Is it really you?!”

“Hey, Gramps. I’m back.”

“You’re alive?!”

“Harsh...”

It was Marquis Bergerac, head of the Ministry of Ceremonies, father of the third imperial consort...and Bastian’s grandfather.

“You dullard!” the marquis exclaimed. “First I heard that you ran away from school, then you disappeared entirely!”

“Ah...”

Now that Bastian thought about it, he hadn’t been in contact with the school since he sprinted off after Elize.

“Then the war broke out right after,” Marquis Bergerac murmured. “I was so certain you were...”

“Ha ha ha! No way in hell am I ever going to die.”

“Did anything happen in High Britannia?”

“Nah, nothing aside from me getting shot and cut up a little. Oh, right—I met Queen Margaret too. Had a duel with her retainer and everything. Think his name was Oswald or something. Anyway, he was ridiculously strong.”

The marquis immediately collapsed to his knees, sending the maids into a panic. A few began to cry out.

“Is everything okay?!”

“Sir!”

“Fetch his medication!”

As Franziska listened from the sidelines, she couldn’t help but wonder what on earth Bastian was talking about. Under any other circumstances, she would have assumed it was a joke, but after seeing his strength firsthand, she was certain he could take on a whole battalion. Given his amount of skill, perhaps he was even close to rivaling her brother.

Marquis Bergerac fixed Bastian with a glare. “D-Don’t tell me... This war wasn’t all your fault, was it?”

“...I can accept the blame for not being able to stop it, but that Margaret chick seriously wanted this to happen.”

“My heart is going to give out just listening to you...”

“Done in by a story? That sure is rough. A little exercise should sort you right out.”

“Imbecile! The devil is in the details!”

“Aha, so it was that remarkable, eh? Is my overflowing literary talent oozing into my masterful conversational skills?”

“Grr... You walking international incident. Just you try repeating all that to Latrielle. He very well might have you thrown in a cell.”

“Latrielle? Is he that on edge?”

“There was a massive war, during which the imperial army suffered greater losses than ever before. And to make matters worse, the emperor has passed.”

“I see. Can you tell me a bit more about that second part? Word is my old man died of old age, but doesn’t that seem a bit strange? He’d just taken a wife, and he was eating plenty of meat at the New Year’s party.”

“Hm...” Marquis Bergerac glanced over at Franziska. “Who are these young ladies?” he asked. It was quite obvious he was attempting to change the subject, but he had every right to be curious.

What should I say? Bastian pondered, looking over Elize, Franziska, Jessica, and Martina. It didn’t take him long to decide on his answer.

“They’re my friends.”

“Friends...?”

“They’re stuck in this country with nowhere to stay. We’ve got plenty of rooms in the palace, right? Could we house them there for a while?”

The already prominent crease in the marquis’s brow deepened. “Ghh... What nonsense.”

“Not an option?”

“A member of the royal family is asking the Minister of Ceremonies to house his compatriots. Of course I must oblige, and that is exactly the problem.”

“Hm?”

“Hah... In the midst of a national crisis, during which His Imperial Majesty passed and so many soldiers have fallen, the third prince—who just had to have been studying in High Britannia, of all places—returns dragging four women along. This is a scandal worthy of every front page in the Empire.”

“C’mon, they put me in the papers all the time. It’s nothing new.”

“Hngh! My heart...!”

Despite their exchange, Marquis Bergerac still welcomed them inside the palace. Bastian remained calm all the while, but the rest were too overwhelmed to speak; the grand sights elicited nothing but sighs of various sorts.

They were surrounded by such splendor, such magnificence. Franziska wasn’t sure whether Margaret had ever visited La Branne before declaring war on the

Empire, but if she had, then her war was more than idiotic—it was plain suicidal.

Or perhaps this very palace was what she wanted.

Bastian headed off toward another room, explaining that there was something he needed to discuss with the old marquis, while the others were asked for their preferred living arrangements. Elize was ultimately given her own room, while the three sisters shared one between them. The Ministry always kept a number of rooms at the ready in case of sudden visitors.

Franziska's head started to spin as she looked around the room they were given. "Is this for real...?" she sighed.

"We have snagged a surprisingly large catch..." Jessica muttered under her breath.

"I was sure you'd already known, Sis."

"The stars were not *that* talkative..."

"That ought to have been the first thing they brought up! Heck, I'd give them a good kick if they weren't so far away."

"You would...kick the stars?"

"Yeah! Hah... I was expecting to spend the night in some stable or another, but...look at that. A canopied bed with gold-embroidered covers."

"Wow-ow-ow! It doesn't smell like straw!" Martina cried out as she leaped beneath the sheets.

"Top-end mattresses are filled with cotton these days," Jessica informed her.

Mercenaries were generally quite poor no matter how famous they became, so Franziska had never slept on a cotton bed before. Her surroundings were so luxurious that she ultimately found it all rather depressing.

"I'm sleeping on the floor," she said.

"Whatever has gotten into you...?"

"When our big bro's been captured and put through so much, I... I just can't..."

“How idiotic. What if you are unable to rest away your fatigue? What if you cannot muster your strength when you need it most? How can we save our brother then? There is absolutely no need for such pointless restraint.”

“T-True, but—”

“And besides, if you do that, a certain someone is stubbornly going to join you.”

“Ah...”

Franziska glanced over to see that Martina was already sound asleep in bed. It was still quite early in the evening, so she must have been considerably tired.

Jessica sat down in the splendid chair in the corner. It was upholstered in embroidered fabric, and its wooden legs were carved with intricate designs; it suited her strangely well.

“They said they would bring our meals to our room. I shall wake you when they come. Get some rest, Franziska.”

“What about you, Sis?”

“...I have some thinking to do, so I am going to stay awake.”

“Then I’ll stay up with you! I don’t really have much on my mind, but I can always tend to my weapon.”

“Are you deliberately trying to cause a commotion? The maid will no doubt scream if she walks in to see you handling a crossbow.”

“Erk.”

“Please, just go to sleep. You really do look terrible.”

“Hey! I’m always as cute as can be!”

Jessica offered a gentle smile. “You always overexert yourself trying to protect us. The stars say that we are safe here, so at the very least, please take a short nap. That is all I ask. And thank you for everything that you do, Franziska.”

“If you insist...”

Franziska didn’t believe in the stars, but an overpowering wave of drowsiness hit her the moment her sister told her to sleep. *Is this magic too...?* she

wondered as she dropped onto the bed, her consciousness fading as she sunk into a deep, deep slumber.

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After speaking to Marquis Bergerac, Bastian ate a light dinner and exited the palace. He had made himself a lot more presentable, having changed into clothes befitting a Belgarian noble.

“Did you finish talking to your grandfather?” Elize asked, walking beside him.

“I asked what I needed to. I could sense there was a lecture coming though, so I gave some excuse and slipped out.”

“How awful...”

“You can say that again.”

“For him, that is.”

“Pff—?! H-Hey, c’mon. I don’t go around causing problems because I want to.”

Elize let out a small giggle. “I’m only joking. So, did he say anything concerning? You look rather pale...”

Bastian had used perfume-infused water to wash the grime from his skin, changed into his finest clothes, and put on sunglasses to hide his eyes. He almost certainly looked far better than he had that afternoon, and yet Elize was still able to notice even the slightest changes in his expression.

Incidentally, Elize had also changed into the clothes of a Belgarian noblewoman. She now wore a long dark-green dress, the skirt of which was decorated with lace and frills. Its color paired quite nicely with her vivid gold hair.

Purchasing new clothes usually required one to have their measurements taken by a tailor. The completion of an order would take about a week, though finer pieces could require upward of a month. The Minister of Ceremonies, however, was able to prepare a perfectly fitting dress at a moment’s notice.

“You look adorable in those clothes,” Bastian said, a sudden glint in his eyes.

“Wha—?! Wh-What are you talking about...?” Elize sputtered, the abrupt compliment causing her face to turn red. “Oh, Bastian...”

“Now I know what the heroine of my next book is going to wear.”

“I should have seen it coming...” she sighed.

Even under their current circumstances, Bastian spent each day gathering new material for his future masterpiece.

“But yeah, back to what I was saying before.” Bastian ruffled his finely combed hair. “I found out quite a few things, but the most concerning part has to be about my old man and my brother.”

“Yes, His Imperial Majesty is no longer with us. You have my condolences...”

“Well, the thing is...it’s starting to look like my brother did it.”

“...Excuse me?”

Bastian quickly checked their surroundings. They were walking along the widest street in Belgaria—one that stretched out straight from the imperial palace and was illuminated by streetlamps even well after sunset. The period of mourning meant the city was a lot quieter than usual, however, so there wasn’t anyone close enough to eavesdrop on their conversation.

“It’s not like I saw it myself, and I haven’t got any evidence, but...word is my old man and his new lady were in their bedroom, then my brother went in and found them dead. Doesn’t that sound weird to you? And guess what he does next—he stations soldiers all around the premises, then only lets the grand chamberlain and a select few doctors and maids inside.”

“Y-Yes, well, I assume it’s normal to keep people from entering the emperor’s bedchambers, especially when something so serious has happened...”

“They even denied his dead wife’s attending physician. The situation’s gotten so bad that Estaburg has snapped; they’re on the verge of declaring war.”

“War?!”

“Granted, Belgaria’s always at war, so it’s not too rare for tensions to escalate, but their refusal to send her body home or allow her doctor to even see it is pretty crazy, right?”

“Yes, I must admit...”

Elize’s face clouded. Bastian was insinuating not only that the official statement on Consort Juhaprecia’s cause of death was untrue, but also that one of the Empire’s princes had committed the grave sin of patricide.

“Why does the Empire permit such reckless actions?” Elize asked, despondent.

“I reckon for the same reason High Britannia hasn’t put Queen Margaret on trial—there’s no evidence. Sure, there are plenty of things that don’t add up here, but nothing decisive. And then there’s the fact that most ministers recognize my brother as the rightful heir to the throne.”

“Then...surely that makes them traitors.”

“Not really. My old man wasn’t too keen on military or political matters. It was under his reign that we nearly lost to High Britannia.”

“Is that really the issue here?!”

“There’s no mistaking that this country needs a strong leader. That might not be the right way of running things, but the Empire wouldn’t have survived this long if we were any weaker. That much is fact.”

“So that’s why they recognize him...”

“Beclard accepts it—he’s the grand chamberlain, by the way—and the big nobles around the capital are all in the second prince’s faction too. Isn’t it more important to choose the side that has the most to offer, rather than dwelling on whether its actions are right or wrong?”

“Are you really okay with that?”

Bastian folded his arms. “Hm... I don’t really know if what he did was acceptable. The way I see it, the important part is what he plans on doing after he becomes emperor.”

“...That’s a reasonable way to look at it.”

“Either way, I’m going to do what I think is right. I made a promise, after all.”

Bastian’s fingers stroked the leather pouch hanging at his hip. Inside was the

memorandum given to him by Roland, his dear friend from High Britannia. He was a man who had preached liberalism, even going so far as to write a book to communicate his ideals. His belief was that every man, woman, and child should have the freedom to seek happiness, and as things currently stood, those in Belgaria did not have such freedom. The nobles lived in luxury while the commoners were exploited, and countless lives were continuing to be lost as the nation persisted with its endless wars.

"Something's got to change, but that's not to say I think the Empire's all bad. We can't just bring the entire system down."

"Right. Nothing good ever comes of such abrupt, widespread change."

"But what to change, and what to keep? I don't know. That's why I've decided to ask someone who might."

With that, the two continued their nighttime walk down the street.

✧ ✧ ✧

Far from the hustle and bustle of the city center, where extravagant shops and noble residences lined the streets, lay the outskirts where the commoners lived.

Bastian and Elize went down a narrow side street and, after taking a few wrong turns, eventually arrived at a certain pub. It was a brick structure around the size of a cozy cottage. The area was incredibly quiet with few passersby to speak of, and most of the surrounding buildings had shuttered windows, yet this one establishment alone leaked warm light out onto the street. Its wooden door was ajar, and a great many voices could be heard conversing inside.

A sign that read "*Provence*" dangled above the entrance.

Bastian pulled the door fully open. Oil lamps hung from the ceiling inside, keeping the place bright as day. There was a counter to their immediate left, and the bartender behind it glanced up at them as he continued to dry a tankard.

Farther inside was a partition to obscure the seated patrons from prying eyes, making it feel as though half of the pub were a private room. One large, round table sat in the middle of the open space, with four mismatched tables around

it.

The patrons were all adults. There looked to be around thirty in total, many of whom leaned on their elbows with tankards in hand. Alongside the food on the tables were a variety of newspapers and books, making it immediately apparent that this was no ordinary pub. Almost all those inside were engaged in spirited debate, though these discussions came to an abrupt halt as everyone cautiously eyed Bastian.

Fifteen was the age of adulthood in Belgaria; there should have been no issue with Bastian and Elize entering a pub, and yet they had garnered quite a bit of attention.

Elize fearfully tugged on Bastian's sleeve. "U-Um... Is this really the place? Are we allowed to be here?" she whispered.

"Oh, right. The drinking age in High Britannia is seventeen, right? Are sixteen-year-olds barred from pubs there?"

"You should only drink when you're a responsible adult..."

"Well, you're an adult here. Everyone over fifteen is."

"I presume that law was made for convenience's sake, to prevent any issues that might arise from the nation treating its conscripts like children as it sent them to the battlefield," Elize mused. "Both mentally and physically, most people younger than seventeen should be considered underage, though this goes up to eighteen—even twenty—in some other countries."

"Fifteen is around the age where you can kill an enemy soldier one-on-one, and any bloke who can take a life should naturally be treated as an adult. It's the least amount of respect we can show to our fallen enemies."

"That way of thinking is why Belgaria thinks so little of women's rights... Well, putting that aside for now, do you see whoever it is you're looking for?"

"Can't really say. I've never seen them before."

Bastian could feel the patrons' eyes silently following him as he made his way farther inside. There was no denying that he and Elize were the center of attention.

No, wait... Bastian thought to himself. *They're not just curious; it seems like they're wary of us too.*

Upon reaching the counter, Bastian raised a hand to get the bartender's attention. "Do you have a sec?" he asked.

"I'm very sorry, sir, but we don't stock any tea that would suit a young noble's tastes," the man replied. He had spoken courteously, though it was clear to all those in earshot that what he really meant was, *"Get lost, brat."*

There were plenty of establishments that scorned nobles in the provincial cities, but they were a rare find in the capital.

Bastian chuckled. "C'mon, don't be like that. Lighten up, eh? I'm searching for someone. A certain Bourgine."

The bartender's expression soured the moment he heard the name, and the silence in the pub somehow grew even heavier than it had already been. The mixture of disgust and caution that had been present in all the eyes watching them quickly turned into blatant hostility.

All of a sudden, one of the patrons—a rather well-built man—drew his long sword. The others retreated to the wall, hoping not to be caught up in the mess.

Nothing stood in the armed man's way. The way he gripped his sword made it clear that he knew how to use it, and a number of scars cut across the thick arms that protruded from his shirt. His battle-ready glare made it easy to assume he was either a soldier or had previously served in the military.

"Bourgine ain't here," the man growled. "Get lost. This ain't no place for a noble brat to be messin' around."

"Really? I heard this was the best place to look," Bastian replied.

"I said get lost."

"No can do. This is too important for me to turn away now."

"You've seriously got a death wish, huh?"

The man raised his sword, sending the onlookers into an uproar. Some cried out words of encouragement, while others urged him not to do anything stupid.

Bastian refused to budge even as the blade came at him. He could hear Elize let out a panicked yelp from behind him, but there was no real cause for concern; the prince could tell that the attack wasn't going to reach him, and just as expected, its tip cut through nothing but air.

"I didn't come here to fight; I came to meet this Bourgine person," Bastian said calmly. "Made a promise to a friend, you see."

"Quit your babbling. It don't matter what your reasons are. A meetin' with a noble like you's completely outta the question!"

The man took a step closer. This time, he was in range to strike for real. Bastian knew that he could dodge, but with Elize right behind him, he was better off catching the blade on the extremely slim chance that something did happen. The only problem was that drawing a dagger here would erase any hope of a civil conversation, and this was his only lead to his mystery mark.

Do I really have to do this barehanded...?

Bastian clenched his right fist just as the man raised his sword again.

"Stop this at once!" came a sharp voice from somewhere deeper inside the pub. The man flinched and immediately lowered his weapon, following the others in turning his gaze to the source of the command.

Stepping out from behind the obscuring screen was a woman who looked to be about thirty. She wore a cape over her green blouse and a long skirt, which was reasonably standard attire for a civilian. Her perfectly straight brown hair was mostly bunched beside her head, positioned so that it elegantly draped down across her chest, though her skin was pale and her arms slender to such a degree that she looked awfully sickly. It also appeared that something had happened to her leg: she carried a cane, and her foot dragged along behind her as she walked.



The man with the sword winced when met with the woman's stern glare. "You shouldn't have come out, madame! He might be a soldier from their faction!"

"A child like him? Without a sword, even?"

"Well, we've gotta play it safe..."

"Threats I can understand, but when you actually intend to harm someone, it crosses the line from caution into senseless violence. I never wish to be protected through such means."

"I-I wasn't going to really..." the man murmured as he tucked his sword back into its sheath in embarrassment.

The woman turned to Bastian. "You mentioned a promise just a moment ago."

"Y-Yeah... Are you Bourgine?"

"Some do call me that, though I can't say whether I'm the Bourgine you're looking for."

"Do you know Jean Roland de Tiraso Laverde?"

She widened her eyes ever so slightly, then sighed. "He's not here. He went to study in High Britannia."

"Yes, that's where I met him."

"...Is he the one who told you to look for me?"

"Yeah. Well, that's kinda the case, kinda not. It's a little complicated..."

Bastian could feel his chest tighten as Roland came to mind, while Elize simply looked down at her feet.

"Very well, then. Come take a seat," Bourgine said, gesturing toward the back of the pub.

The other patrons, who had up to this point been watching with bated breath, were suddenly overcome with surprise. "Madame! Are you sure about this?!" one cried out.

“I want to hear what he has to say. Does anyone object to this?”

Nobody did.

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There was a round table behind the screen, on either side of which was a two-seater sofa. Even closer to the back of the pub were several barrels, as well as stacks of unused lumber and brick.

Once Bastian and Elize were seated, the woman introduced herself as Morgane Bourgine. She explained that she was a commoner who had once taught at a school in the capital, though she was now having to live in hiding.

Still unsure whether they could trust her, Bastian and Elize decided to continue using the same false names they had adopted in High Britannia.

“Are you hiding because someone’s out to get you?” Bastian asked.

“Yes, I have a faction of nobles at my throat, all because I publicly voiced my objections to the nation’s current policies.”

“What sort of objections?”

“Oho... It was three years ago when I went into the square and shouted, ‘This country is rotten to the core!’”

“What?!”

“A small portion of those in power make a living by exploiting everyone else. Something must be done. Everyone should have the right to pursue happiness from the moment they are born.”

“Wait, when you say you went into the square... Do you mean right outside the palace?”

Bourgine nodded. “That’s where I would have the biggest audience, correct?”

Bastian broke out in a cold sweat. The beliefs she espoused fell under the doctrine of liberalism. Roland had been a liberalist himself, so it wasn’t much of a surprise that his teacher shared such views, but to raise them so brazenly in public...

“You sure got up to some crazy things,” Bastian murmured.

“I did not break any laws.”

“Yeah, but once the nobles have their eyes on you, you’re bound to get harassed.”

“Yes, I was fired from my job as a teacher within the day. There was apparently an issue with my ‘work ethic.’”

“That’s tyrannical!” Elize exclaimed, her eyebrows shooting up in surprise, but Bastian just sighed.

“That’s what happens when you lash out at nobles in Belgaria.”

“That’s right. They see it as the natural order that commoners are exploited and fall into ruin at their hands. They consider it no different from harvesting their crops and culling the harmful weeds.”

“So what you’re saying is, you made your address knowing full well who you were up against,” Bastian said.

Bourgine nodded again. “I lost my job, but thanks to the help of my supporters, my liberalist awareness program lives on. My mother was High Britannian, you see, so I’ve been to that country on a number of occasions. All I do is teach what I’ve learned.”

“The freedom for anyone to find happiness... Right?”

“Yes, the boy came to me while I was spreading that message.”

She was of course referring to Roland. He had come to the capital with his merchant grandfather at the age of thirteen and one day heard Bourgine giving a speech in the square. After returning south, he spent a month doing his own research. Then, once he had learned as much as he could alone, he used every means at his disposal to find her and further his studies even more.

He was a passionate one, all right... Bastian conceded.

“He really is quite clever; he absorbed my teachings like parched sand absorbs water. I hear he learned High Britannian through his own efforts, and once again, he wished to expand his knowledge.”

“Is that why he went abroad to study?”

“Yes... I tried to stop him. I knew it would be dangerous once the war started.”

“You knew the war would happen?” Bastian asked, taken aback by the statement.

“Not exactly. I knew that the pro-war faction was dominating the mainstream and deduced that the rest was simply a matter of time.”

Elize’s expression darkened. “The war has of course started, so I can’t deny that...but there were plenty of people advocating against it too.”

“Yes, I understand that. I simply did not believe they would be able to subdue the push for war, as unfortunate as that is.”

“...Is that so?”

Bastian and Elize had tried their hardest to stop High Britannia from declaring war on Belgaria, yet their efforts had ultimately been in vain. Knowing this, Elize could only look on sadly.

Bourgine shrugged. “Putting that aside, such is as far as my relationship with young Roland goes. So, do you think I am the Bourgine you are looking for?”

“Yeah. No doubt about it,” Bastian replied, though he had never doubted it from the start.

He took in a deep breath. To be blunt, he felt more nervous now than when he had dueled Oswald or leapt from the tower. Bourgine had taught Roland—she was the mentor who had so heavily shaped not just his way of thinking, but his life—and as anyone would expect, she was concerned for her pupil’s safety and well-being.

Bastian had to be the one to tell her.

The incident in High Britannia hadn’t been the first time he had witnessed death firsthand, but it was the first time it had ever made him feel this way.

He looked at her head-on. “Roland...is dead.”

Bourgine closed her eyes. A short while passed during which she stayed quiet as a mouse, and it took a moment for Bastian to realize she was offering a silent prayer. When she looked up at them again, she nodded just once, not asking for

the specifics.

“Roland had his ambitions,” Bourgine eventually said. “However he met his end, it would have been the result of the choices he made. There is no point in me asking how he died. Such arbitrary declarations as, ‘That’s how he would have wanted to go,’ or, ‘He must have regretted that,’ would only be an insult to his determination.”

“I never thought about it like that...”

Bastian had been convinced that Roland had died a sad, regretful death—he certainly hadn’t gone in a way he would have deemed satisfying. Perhaps, however, that was not for him to decide.

“All that matters is what you do from here,” Bourgine said. “Right?”

“I...think I want to carry on his will. He entrusted it to me. The world needs to move forward—to become somewhere every man, woman, and child can seek happiness.”

“And you’re doing this for the sake of your friend?”

“That’s part of the reason, but I also think there’s some sense to what he said. That’s what I thought when I read this, at least.”

Bastian pulled something out from his pouch and set it down on the table. It was the book Roland had bequeathed him. Bourgine picked it up, slowly flipped through a few pages, then sighed.

“Precisely what I expected him to write—a wild goose chase after an ultimately unattainable ideal.”

“Is he wrong?”

“No... There’s no right or wrong when it comes to ideals. So you read this and thought it made sense, did you?”

“Yeah, but...I also realized that I didn’t fully understand it. That’s why I need to learn more. From you, if possible.”

Bourgine offered a bitter smile. “I don’t know how you’ve interpreted liberalism, but it is a very counterintuitive way of thinking for a noble like you.”

“Why? Because I’d lose my ancestors’ privileges? I couldn’t care less about those. Once upon a time, there was something I wanted to accomplish. I was certain that as long as I could do that one thing, I wouldn’t need anything else. I was even willing to give up my life to achieve it. But I failed.”

He hadn’t been able to deliver Elize to the palace, nor had he saved Roland.

“If you do this, I can guarantee you’ll face some strong opposition...”

“Don’t worry about it—I’m used to causing trouble. I made my resolve a long time ago. Those kinds of noble privileges aren’t what I need right now.”

“You...honestly want to learn from me?”

“Did it sound like I was joking?” Bastian replied, overflowing with determination.

It was clear from the look on Elize’s face that she wanted to say something. Bastian wasn’t sure what her take on the matter was going to be. They weren’t in High Britannia, so liberalist views weren’t publicly prohibited, but that didn’t mean they weren’t still suppressed as dangerous ideas.

Whenever a person was outed as having liberalist beliefs in Belgaria, they would quickly lose their social standing. Would this also be the case for Bastian, though? There was no past precedent of a liberalist prince, though with Latrielle now having essentially seized power, there was no telling what might happen to him.

But even so...

“I need to learn,” Bastian said. “To carry on his will, I need to study just as he did.”

“But a noble child...”

“I’m not a child, and Roland was a noble too.”

“That is true, but I was quite hesitant to teach him as well. Considering all that happened, I can’t even say whether I taught him right...” Bourgine murmured, a crease setting in along her brow.

“If you can only teach a commoner, then I’ll just abandon my house! That should solve things, right?!”

But no sooner had he made this declaration than he heard some voices brewing from beyond the screen.

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“We’ve had reports of someone causing a commotion,” an unfamiliar-sounding man announced. It was clear from his tone that he was a policeman.

“Was I really that noisy?” Bastian asked in a hushed voice.

“No, that is the noble faction. They are searching for me,” Bourgine explained, grabbing her cane. “We’ll have to continue this another time.” She proceeded over to the clutter at the very back of the room; then she opened the side of a barrel.

It’s a door!

As it turned out, the pub had a secret exit—hidden inside the barrel was a stairway that led underground. As Bastian peered inside, he could hear the other customers arguing with the policeman.

“Oh, c’mon. You’re not going to find anything here,” said one of the patrons, much to the policeman’s ire.

“Well, it’s my job to make sure! Out of the way!”

“What are you trying to find, exactly? Tell us and we can help you look.”

It seemed they were buying them time.

Bourgine practically crawled into the barrel cavity, her lame leg making the process unbearably slow. “I’d rather not be spotted by the police,” she whispered to Bastian. “What are you going to do?”

“I’m coming with you.”

Bastian couldn’t understand what was going on. It was the job of the police to capture criminals, but being a liberalist wasn’t an arrestable offense. Could it be that this woman was running because she had actually committed a crime? He couldn’t say for sure, but the point still stood that she had been Roland’s teacher; he wanted to hear more of what she had to say.

And so Bastian climbed into the barrel as well. “The staircase is pretty steep,

Elize, and a little damp too," he said as he started making his way down. "Be careful you don't fall."

"C-Certainly."

Elize gingerly followed as well.

"This way," Bourgine whispered as the staircase descended into pitch-black darkness.

"I know," Bastian replied. "I can see."

"There isn't any light down here though."

"Yeah, that's why I took off my sunglasses."

As Bastian led Elize by the hand through the darkness, he could faintly make out Bourgine a short distance ahead. She was feeling along the wall, no doubt using it as a guide. The stench of wine and mold wafted through the air; they were presumably in an underground storage, but the thick layer of dust that covered everything inside suggested it wasn't being used.

They pressed onward. Even with his vision obscured, Bastian could work out how far and in what direction he had traveled with considerable accuracy. They certainly weren't on the pub premises anymore, though he wasn't entirely sure what building they were headed toward. At the very least, he could tell they were now in someone else's cellar.

They continued walking alongside the wall until they reached a wooden ladder leading back up to the surface.

"Interesting... So it *is* a secret escape route," Bastian mused aloud. "That's pretty cool."

"I haven't broken the law, but the police are dangerous. We must take care," Bourgine warned.

They were now in a pitch-black room on the first floor of an undecorated warehouse, which led out into a narrow alley. The road was little more than a dirt path, which was a rare sight to see in the capital where most roads were paved; it was probably only used to carry goods.

When the group stepped outside, Bourgine winced. There were figures

standing in the dim moonlight—soldiers in black military uniforms. It was the police.

Bastian swiftly donned his sunglasses and stepped forward so that he was next to Bourgine. The police were responsible for upholding the law, so he doubted they would be too dangerous, but she seemed fearful enough that he thought it necessary to prepare for the worst.

“Looks like they were waiting for us,” Bastian noted.

“This can’t be happening...” Bourgine murmured, her voice quavering.

There were five policemen in total, and soon enough, one stepped forward—a man with a round, mild-mannered face. “I take it you’re Madame Bourgine,” he said.

She didn’t respond.

“Where are you going so late at night, hm?”

“I thought it was about time for me to get home...”

“Mhm... Could you lead the way then? It gets awfully dangerous out here at night, so allow us to escort you.”

“In case you haven’t noticed, officer, I’m not alone. I don’t require your assistance.”

The man glanced over at Bastian and Elize. Bastian rarely attended public events, so very few people would recognize him by appearance, plus it was quite a stretch of the imagination to think that the third prince would be wandering around in a place like this. It was for those reasons that the policeman’s attention was immediately drawn back to Bourgine.

“Madame, there have been reports of a burglar around these parts,” he said.

“I see... What dangerous times we live in.”

“Might I check your belongings?”

Bourgine nodded. “O-Of course.”

Bastian had never been searched by the police before. He wondered whether this was a measure they used to harass liberalists; after all, Bourgine quite

clearly had little more than her cane on her. As far as he was concerned, the most she had to fear was being delayed by a few minutes.

But the third prince was naive.

The policeman moved his hand to Bourgine's waist, and then his expression became tinged with doubt. "What do we have here?" he asked, holding up a gold earring set with a precious gem.

Bourgine shook her head. "I haven't a clue where that came from."

"That so? Because this looks like the earring that was reported stolen. Why is it on your person?"

"I have nothing to do with this. You came up to me with it in your hand, and shamelessly so!"

"Then why did I find it in your pocket, hm?!"

"These clothes have no pockets."

"You can't talk your way out of this one! All right, boys. Take her in. We'll look into this back at the station."

Bourgine stood frozen in place as the other policemen moved in to prevent her escape. "I haven't done anything wrong! This is completely unreasonable!"

"Yeah, yeah. Save it for when we reach the station."

"This is exactly what happened with my comrades, and not a single one of them have been seen since!"

"Silence, you destructionist provocateur!"

Bastian was unable to contain his shock. *Is this seriously happening?! How can they act so unjustly toward those the law is meant to protect?!*

Just before the policemen could grab Bourgine, Bastian stepped forward to confront them. "You're being a bit harsh, don't you think? I can't let you take her like this."

"Judging by your clothes, you seem to be a young noble..." the round-faced policeman said. "Do you know who this woman is?"

"I know enough. She's someone my friend and many others look up to as

their teacher. Now I've got a question for you: what's that earring? Do you really think a woman with a cane is somehow committing burglary, and then walking around with her stolen goods in her non-existent pockets? No way can you seriously believe that!"

"Ngh!"

"Who the hell would accept such a crude fabrication?! If this were a book, I'd be livid about your terrible writing!"

"What are you on about?!"

"Preaching liberalism isn't against the law, yet here you are, arresting her without cause. Are you really protecting the capital like this?!"

The man clicked his tongue. "I don't know what kind of a noble you are, but we're not leaving another liberalist on the streets. Oi, bring him in too!"

"I ain't a noble."

"A commoner, then. I've got to say though, you're pretty well dressed for one."

"That's because I'm not a commoner either."

"Huh...?"

Bastian tore away his sunglasses and pushed back his brown bangs, exposing his crimson eyes to the world. "I am Heinrich Trois Bastian, third prince of the Belgarian Empire. I know all of your faces now, so you'd better prepare for what's to come!"

"Wh-What?!"

The men paled and exchanged a few worried glances, their shoulders trembling in uneasy bewilderment.

"H-His Highness...? It can't be..."

"Are the police always committing such unlawful acts?" Bastian asked. "Who do you take orders from? I know you're an arm of the military, so is it the Ministry of Military Affairs? It's not the minister, is it? Who told you to capture Bourgine?"

Each question made the policemen more and more flushed, and it wasn't long before their confused embarrassment gave way to rage. The men were now seeing red.

"Urgh... Y-You fake! He must be an impostor!" one policeman screamed. "A prince wouldn't be here, and he certainly wouldn't be sticking up for a liberalist!"

The liberalists opposed the existence of an emperor above all else. An emperor existed above any and all of the nation's laws, and every citizen had an obligation to unconditionally follow his words; simply living in Belgaria meant obeying his divine will. His sons, the imperial princes, benefited greatly from the arrangement as well. It was no mystery why the policemen found it inconceivable for a prince to tolerate the existence of a liberalist, let alone adhere to her beliefs.

"Well, would you look at that," Bastian sighed. "Guess my status isn't even enough to stop them."

"You're no more than a scoundrel appropriating His Highness's good name! This is nothing short of treason! You'll be executed on the spot!"

Bastian couldn't tell whether the policemen truly believed he was a fake or simply feared punishment so much that they were trying to silence him. He didn't have long to dwell on the question, however, as the man at the lead drew his blade. It wasn't the usual long sword used by soldiers on the front lines—rather, this was a short one-handed saber. Shorter weapons were easier to handle in the city and considerably easier to carry.

It wasn't long before the other policemen had also readied their weapons.

Bastian reached for the dagger at his waist—one of the treasured blades of the Empire. Legend spoke of the faeries bequeathing the sacred metal trystie unto *L'Empereur Flamme*, the first emperor of the Belgarian Empire, which was then forged into seven swords.

In Bastian's hand was the *Vite Espace Trois,* a weapon that was approximately 4 palms (30 cm) long to match the first emperor's foot. The double-edged blade that extended from its intricately designed handle drew a slender triangle from its wide base to its tip. It was thin and as light as paper, with some even saying

it could be swung fast enough to sever sound.

Bastian had made off with the dagger about half a year ago, and he had grown quite accustomed to it since then. He no longer felt a rush as he drew it, nor did he feel any need to grip it with unnecessary force; he could move his hands naturally as though he were wielding nothing at all.



“Graaah!”

The policemen rushed at Bastian with their swords raised. Their voices resounded through the alley, but their footwork was half-baked and their swings much too slow.

This is about what I’d expect from a soldier who’s never been to war...

Bastian swung his dagger. The movement was accompanied by a shrill metal *twang* that assailed the ears, and then, a moment later, a saber blade stabbed into the earth by his feet. He had cut through the first policeman’s sword, severing it at the base.

“Step forward again and I’ll aim for your neck,” Bastian said, fixing the man with a stern glare. “I’ve decided that I won’t hold back when I’ve got someone to protect.”

“E-Erk!”

The policeman stumbled backward, his compatriots faltering with him a beat later. They had heard rumors of the third prince’s abnormal strength; some said that he even surpassed Marshal General Latrielle in terms of physical might.

Finally understanding who they were up against, the men paled and started to quiver. It wasn’t long before one broke down and ran. The others were quick to follow.

Bastian sheathed his dagger. “Ah... They never told me who gave the order.”

“Bastian! Are you hurt?!” Elize called out, her concern all too clear on her face.

“Hm? Weren’t you watching? There isn’t a scratch on me,” he replied in his usual tone.

A relieved look crossed her face. Bastian had been gravely injured not too long ago, and while his wounds had since closed, he certainly wasn’t in peak condition.

“Are you really Prince Bastian...?” Bourgine asked, a deep frown creasing her brow.

“Yeah.”

“Then what’s your game here? If you truly read Roland’s book, then you should understand the sort of creature a liberalist is.”

“To some degree. Is it wrong for a prince to share those views?”

“It makes me reluctant to trust you. Why would someone who enjoys all the privileges of the current regime seek to destroy it?”

“That kinda stuff doesn’t matter to me. I know this is going to sound pretentious, but...I grew sick and tired of all the luxuries by the time I turned ten. To me, the palace is just a long list of restrictions; I can barely even breathe there. I’m far more concerned about carrying on the words Roland entrusted me with to the very end.”

“So this *is* all for him...”

“Like I said before, that’s only part of the reason. His book made me realize the Empire is wrong in its current state, but I haven’t studied enough. I don’t know what needs to change and what should stay the same.”

“And what if I told you I wanted to destroy the Empire in its entirety?”

“I’d want to hear your reasons; then I’d come to my own conclusion. If what you say makes sense, then sure, I can crush an empire or two. As I am now though, I think doing that would be wrong.”

“Are you sure about this? If you continue down this path, you’ll never be able to return to the life you know now.”

“You were living nice and peacefully as a teacher, right? So why did you make that speech in the square?”

Bourgine paused for a moment in thought before making her declaration. “For my own justice.”

“Then I’m the same,” Bastian replied. “I’ll do whatever I think is right, no matter what I need to give up.”

“And you?” Bourgine asked, turning to Elize beside him.

“Me...? Truth be told, I come from High Britannia. I do intend to return home

one day, but I've been thinking I should learn more about Belgaria before then. I won't insist on it if you think I'll be in Bastian's way, but..."

"I see. You need not worry about that, but you very well might end up in a situation like this again."

"That doesn't bother me. When you have such a lofty goal in mind, this sort of thing happens more often than you'd expect," Elize said with a small chuckle.

"I assumed you were just some noblewoman, but for you to write off an attack so easily means you must have been through a lot..."

"Aha. I suppose you could say that."

Elize had sprinted through a forest to escape troops armed with guns, fallen victim to a trap by an uncle she had trusted, escaped a fortress of soldiers, and plummeted into a river at the bottom of a chasm. Compared to all that, this really was a rather mundane occurrence.

"Bourgine, I need your guidance," Bastian said. "Then I can decide for myself whether this is a road I want to walk."

"You really are a prince, aren't you? When one wants to become someone's student, they normally make a request along the lines of, 'Please, won't you teach me?'"

"Erk... Sorry."

Bastian had never spoken like that before, not even with his own father. He was used to people speaking to him in such a way, of course, but he couldn't quite muster it when put on the spot like this.

Bourgine carefully scrutinized him. "If you truly wish to see the Empire change, then there are two options available to you. For one, you could return to the palace and offer your opinion to the second prince. You might be able to get a few proposals through, depending on how convincing of an argument you make, and the country will be better than before as a result—somewhat more equal, with a little more freedom."

"And my other option?"

"You move the people. The Empire does not exist because of an emperor and

some nobles; it exists because of the populace as a whole. Everyone has simply forgotten this. If you wish to change this nation, you will first need to change the public's perception. Will you be able to do that?"

Bastian was stunned into silence for a moment. It all seemed so obvious now that Bourgine had said it.

"Change the people, eh...?"

"If you want to do that, you'll need to know how to speak properly. You're better off returning to the palace if you're going to make orders like a prince."

"G-Gotcha! No, I mean... Understood, ma'am!" Bastian hurriedly corrected himself, straightening his back as he had seen the palace guards do many times before.

Elize immediately burst into laughter. "That doesn't suit you at all, Bastian."

"Oh dear. My apologies..." Bourgine said with a broad grin. "Everyone has their strengths. What matters is having the right person in the right place, as they say. Your speech will improve with time. Until then, there are plenty of other things to learn."

"Was it really that strange?! At least try to hold back your snickering! Wait... Other things? Does this mean you're going to teach me, Bourgine?!"

"You could at least call me *Ms.* Bourgine. But yes. You saved me from those policemen, and there's that matter with Roland as well. I'll teach you everything I know."

"Then I'm in your care, Ms. Bourgine!" Bastian held out his right hand to his new teacher, and the two exchanged a firm handshake.

"I have high hopes for you, Bastian."

All of a sudden, Elize turned. She was tickled by a peculiar sensation, as though she had noticed someone smiling in the shadows of the moonlight.

Chapter 2: The Letter Arrives

“That’s enough!” Balthazar’s voice echoed out.

“Phwah!” Altina exhaled as she collapsed to the ground and sprawled out across the soft undergrowth, staring up at the blinding blue sky. Each breath came out a weak rasp, and she gulped in air as though it were the finest delicacy. Her hands were numb, and beads of sweat dripped down her skin.

Eddie was resting a short distance away. He was in a similar state, though he seemed a little less exhausted—he was squatting down, but upright nonetheless. Pieces of a broken wooden sword were scattered across the nearby earth.

“Hah... I’m tired...”

“Good grief. You’re slackers, the both of you! We’ve barely even started, and you’re struggling to breathe!” Balthazar called out spiritedly. There were bandages wrapped around his right arm, coming all the way down to his fingers; he had fractured a bone in his fight against the Mercenary King.

Under normal circumstances, only the forearm would have needed to be secured, but the lady doctor knew what Balthazar was like—he would have immediately reached for his sword if she hadn’t restricted his hand as well. Now that he couldn’t hold a weapon, he could only watch and give instructions as Altina and Eddie trained.

“Hah... Hah... I think this is the first time Balthazar...has actually taught me any footwork,” Altina wheezed.

“Yeah, I don’t think I’ve ever received instructions this detailed,” Eddie said with a weary shrug.

They were currently atop Fort Volks. As the fortress was a repurposed mine carved into the side of a cliff, it was only natural that there was earth right above it. There was even a watering hole nearby. It would have been the perfect place to grow crops, but some had said it was blasphemous to farm over the head of a royal. As a result, it was only being maintained to the bare

minimum; the soldiers were reluctant to work the land, even if Altina herself allowed it.

Those who were more superstitious had been especially against the idea. They claimed it was a bad omen to lay dirt over one's commander since this signifies defeat in the local religion. The fortress's very design meant that having earth overhead was inevitable regardless, but this ill fortune was supposedly negated by having Altina sleep on the very top floor, and establishing the roof as an extension of her quarters.

Altina didn't really mind playing along to keep the soldiers calm, plus she often used the roof as a personal training area. Scouts were occasionally posted up there in times of war, but the terribly strong winds meant she was usually alone. Even now, she could feel the wind stroking her body. She let it sweep over her as she thought back on the day's practice.

"You're pretty strong, huh, Eddie?" she mused aloud.

"Yep. Don't go falling for me though."

"I very well might've if you weren't an idiot. But you are, in fact, an idiot."

"There was no need to say it twice, damn it."

Altina got to her feet and looked over the sword in her hands. It was the renewed *Grand Tonnerre Quatre*, now with a massive weight on the pommel that made it look somewhat like a metal hammer. The hilt was thick and wrapped in leather that nicely conformed to her grip, and what it lacked in ornamentation compared to more modern swords, it more than made up for with durability. The parts used were all notably sturdy, and Enzo, a blacksmith from Rouenne, claimed that he had now returned the weapon to its original form.

It was of course heavier than it had been before the revisions, but its point of balance was a lot more reasonable, meaning it was considerably easier to move. Before, Altina had only been able to swing once before needing to reposition herself. Her movements had been sluggish, as though she were tilling a field with a hoe, but now she could smoothly transition from one motion into the next.

Even with these revisions, however, the princess struggled to keep up with Eddie. She had beaten him once so far, but also lost three times. It wasn't unreasonable to say he moved as quickly as Latrielle.

Altina touched a finger to her lips in thought. "I'm good at dealing with slashes, but thrusts really break my rhythm..."

"Maybe that's why spears are more effective than swords on the battlefield," Eddie chimed in.

"Nah, spears are much easier to read; you know exactly what to expect with them. But with swords, the thrusts can happen between a flurry of slashes, you know?" Altina made a variety of explanatory hand gestures as she spoke.

Eddie nodded a few times in agreement. "Well, you wouldn't have to worry about thrusts so much if you kept your distance."

"But you thrust no matter where I am. And you're just about as fast as Latrielle."

"That's because you're always too close. Your weapon's huge, so keeping your distance should be your top priority."

"Am I reacting too slowly, perhaps...?"

"It's like you're still too hung up on how your sword reacts to your movements. When your opponent comes in close, you should be backing away automatically."

"Close combat is what I'm good at, though..."

"I get that, but at a range where both weapons can reach, the lighter sword is almost always gonna strike first."

"Ah! Of course!"

"Hm?"

"So what you're saying is, I need to swing the *Grand Tonnerre Quatre* faster than you and Latrielle can swing your swords! Then I'm sure to win!"

"Y-You serious?!" Eddie cried out in genuine amazement. "You really are a genius, huh?"

Altina triumphantly puffed out her chest. The sight was enough for Balthazar, who had been watching their exchange from the sidelines, to let out a long sigh.

It wasn't long before a fourth figure appeared, using one hand to stop her maid uniform from getting blown about by the fierce winds as she trampled the undergrowth.

"Princess."

"Oh, Clarisse! Is it lunchtime already?"

"You've already eaten lunch, haven't you?"

"He he he... I've moved around so much that I'm hungry again. Is it dinnertime then? That works for me too."

"It's only three, Princess."

"Why isn't dinner served at three?"

"Because three isn't dinnertime."

"Then three seriously needs to get its act together. So be it though, I suppose. How about some tea? I really am hungry."

"...Very well. Incidentally, you have received a letter."

"Really?"

"From Mr. Regis."

"Really?! You should've started with that!" Altina exclaimed, hurrying over at once. Her knees were shaking from exhaustion, but she quickly put a stop to that using nothing but willpower.

Eddie gave a wry smile. "Welp, I guess that's it for today's training."

Balthazar nodded, then turned his gaze to Altina. "Argentina..."

"Yeah?"

"When it comes to training of any kind, I'm of the belief that careful thought and simulation are more important than repetition. Use the past to predict the future and better the present."

"Right."

“Do you understand me?”

“Y-Yeah?”

“Look me in the eye when you say that!”

Altina was already doing some thinking on her part, though evidently not enough to satisfy Balthazar. While she didn’t believe that using her head was something she was particularly good at, she couldn’t rely on that excuse forever—especially when she didn’t have a strategist by her side to rely on.

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After descending the stairs leading down from the roof, Altina offered the lookout a salute. The fortress was entirely underground, excluding the few passageways that protruded out from the cliffside, so the interior was always dim no matter how bright it was outside. Most of their light came from the torches fixed to the walls, which colored the once gray stone corridors a shade of orange.

Even so, the soldiers didn’t have the time for this to put a damper on their moods. Jerome was absent, but they still had Everard, who was just as well-versed in Jerome’s teaching methods. The senior officers like Abidal-Evra had also grown more pragmatic from their countless battles in the war against High Britannia—under their instruction, the soldiers would be out training every day, barely spending any time in the claustrophobic corridors. The nine thousand soldiers currently stationed at Fort Volks were a mishmash from various units, but as things were going now, it wouldn’t even be half a year before they became a formidable force that acted as one.

Following the Fourth Army’s achievements in the recent war, there were an increasing number of people requesting to join them. This didn’t come as much of a surprise—those who realized they were going to be fighting either way were a lot more enthusiastic to do so under a commander who had already proven herself able to win.

Altina wholly attributed these achievements to Regis, so she found it rather off-putting whenever applicants showered her with praise. Even so, her new reputation had proven more than effective—the Fourth Army had not only recovered its lost forces but had also seen an overall gain in numbers.

Someone was approaching from the opposite end of the stone passageway—what looked to be an attractive young man with silver hair and crimson eyes. It was First Prince Auguste. He wore the elegant clothes of a normal gentleman rather than a military uniform, since he was naturally not a soldier, and while he was royalty, he had already renounced his claim to the throne and gone into an early retirement.

At least, this was the official story.

In reality, the person most believed to be Auguste was actually his younger sister Felicia in disguise. The real first prince had died a year ago, though this was a grave secret known only to a select few. This fact was naturally being kept from the soldiers, and it was for this reason that Felicia always dressed as her late brother while in the fortress. Eddie was accompanying her as the prince's guard.

"Something the matter, Auguste?" Eddie asked.

"To think you were training again... You've been at it every single day lately."

"Of course. I've got a good sparring partner and a wise old man to teach me."

Balthazar reverently lowered his head to the prince. "Thank you for taking in this incompetent grandson of mine."

"Oh, no. It really is no problem at all," Auguste replied. "Eddie is always looking out for me. It's just... I sometimes wish he would spare some time for me as well..."

"Is that so?" Balthazar paused for a moment, then gave an understanding nod. "This boy's only good for swinging swords, but please use him as you see fit."

A broad grin spread across Eddie's face. "Ah, I see. You want to work on your sword skills too, don't you, Auguste?"

"Absolutely not!" he shot back, inadvertently raising a girly shriek.

Eddie suddenly sneezed, prompting the first prince to whip out a white handkerchief which he then handed to his trusty guard.

"You'll catch a cold if you walk around covered in sweat. Come on, I'll wipe

you down. So, err...let's return to our room."

"We were about to go have tea," Eddie explained.

"Tea, when you're in such a state? We may be on the front lines, but I stand against such a blatant lack of courtesy."

"That so?"

"Come. I'll even help wash your back for you."

"It's fine, really. I can do that myself."

"So you say, but how can I be sure you won't just run away?" Auguste said. He then grabbed Eddie by the arm and began dragging him away.

"I won't run away! Really!"

"Too late now. I'm going to scrub you down like a horse. You should be honored."

"Ha ha ha. You say that, but when it actually comes to washing me, you're always too embarrassed to put any strength into it. It just tickles, if anything."

"W-Well, that won't be the case today!"

With that exchange, they disappeared around the corner. Felicia was ever the cautious shut-in, but when dressed as her brother, it seemed she grew considerably bolder, regardless of whether that was the proper way for a prince to conduct himself. There were already rumors among the soldiers of an extraordinary relationship between the imperial prince and the duke, but perhaps that was safer than them believing the former was actually a princess in disguise.

Balthazar sighed. He was not among those privy to Auguste's true identity, so the prince's relationship with his guard must have looked quite bizarre to him. "It seems my lineage shall end with my grandson..." he murmured.

"Nah. With how well they're getting on, you should be just fine," Altina replied. The unaware old man could only cock his head in response.

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The workshop at Fort Volks—

A burly man arrived pulling a cart tightly packed with crates. His name was Gilbert Schweinzeberg, though he was better known throughout the continent as the infamous Mercenary King and the captain of the mercenary brigade Renard Pendu.

Despite his reputation, Gilbert was now being put to work as a prisoner. He would be sent to the gallows unless he continued to follow orders, so he and his men cleaned, transported boxes, and made minor repairs around the fort.

Gilbert brought the cart to a halt. “Is this good...?” he asked, his voice a low, heavy rumble. This was a man who could steal an enemy soldier’s consciousness with just a single glare on the battlefield, and yet the smith who greeted him wore an unfazed smile.

“Oh, finally here! Good work. Could you crack one of those open for me?”

“...Understood.”

The large, bear-like man making the request was Enzo Bardot Smith, blacksmith of Rouenne. He didn’t seem at all afraid of the mercenary, though it wasn’t as though Gilbert was particularly trying to scare him.



Gilbert began opening one of the crates as ordered. It appeared to contain coal, but it was coal unlike anything he had seen before—rather than the glossy black luster he was used to, the rocks had a strange dullness to them.

“What’s this...? It’s not the right color for coal.”

“Oh, good of you to notice. This is coke, sent straight from Rouenne,” Enzo said, plucking one of the rocks from the crate. He then rolled it around on his palm, checking its quality.

“What is coke?” Gilbert asked.

“You know how you need to heat iron in a forge before you can work it? Sure, you could burn charcoal, but sometimes that just doesn’t give enough heat. That’s where coke comes in—it burns much hotter, you see.”

“So it’s different from coal then?”

“Yeah. Coal doesn’t get hot enough, for one, but it also produces sulfur. That stuff weakens the iron.”

“Is using this fuel common?”

“Only a fraction of the blacksmiths here in Belgaria use it, though I’ve heard there’s a booming market for the stuff over in High Britannia. After all, you can’t process that special alloy of theirs without a coke blast furnace.”

“What?! Then you can make new-alloy with this?!”

“Ah, so that’s what you lot call it? Hm... It wouldn’t be easy with the forge here at the fort since the bellows are man-powered. I’d want something hooked up to a waterwheel before I even thought about giving it a go, but for that, I’d need a whole new workshop.”

Gilbert sighed. “I’d assumed High Britannia was leagues ahead, but it seems Belgaria is closer than I thought. Perhaps Germania has simply fallen behind...”

The sizable reward was of course one of the main reasons Renard Pendu had allied with High Britannia, but it was the promise of new-alloy weapons that had truly sealed the deal—not only did excellent arms greatly improve one’s odds of securing military gains, but outdated gear was also a good path to an early grave. Had the Germanians been able to make new-alloy themselves,

perhaps Gilbert never would have agreed to assist High Britannia in the first place.

Enzo tilted his head. “I wouldn’t say they’re behind. The Germanian Federation might not have the newest iron alloy or the latest guns, but they were the first ones to make a proper forge. Of course, that was before they became a federation... Oh, I heard they’re also the folks who came up with putting buttons on clothes.”

“That was a long time ago.”

Enzo merely shrugged. There had indeed been revolutionary inventions in the northern countries many years ago, but a string of civil wars had caused them to fall behind in both manufacturing and agriculture. The seemingly never-ending conflict caused a drop in global power all throughout the Federation, but it also created a situation that was very convenient for the mercenary industry.

As it stood, Belgaria already boasted a powerful military. If they were able to bolster that with new-alloy weapons and guns, the Federation wouldn’t stand a chance.

Germania’s sovereign state, San Preussen, had been increasing its forces in recent years. Its current king was a thrifty economist with a knack for military matters, and there were rumors on the wind that he might try to absorb the surrounding small countries to form an empire. This certainly was a valid means for survival, but nobody could see the leaders of the Federation’s other nations agreeing to the arrangement.

For the Federation, unification and ruin were both on the horizon; it was simply a matter of seeing which direction things headed.

Whatever happens to the Federation shouldn’t matter to a mercenary...though I guess I’m not even a mercenary anymore. I’m just a laborer now, Gilbert thought with a sigh.

“All right, bring as much coke as you can carry over here,” Enzo said, beckoning Gilbert to the forge.

“Right...”

Gilbert glanced at the workstation, and it was then that he caught sight of a

longsword. It was the type often used by the Belgarian soldiers, but this one was different—it glimmered as though it had been forged from pure silver, and its leather grip had been applied better than any he had ever seen before. Before he knew it, he was reaching out a hand toward its hilt.

The weapon fit perfectly into his hand, as though it were made just for him. It was significantly lighter than what he was used to, but it made him feel strangely reassured; he was holding the sword for the very first time, but it was like he had spent years growing acquainted with it.

"Oi! What are you doing?!"

For a brief moment, Gilbert had been so enraptured that he had forgotten where he was. His overseeing officer had quickly pulled him back to his senses, but now the man was standing with his spear at the ready. Gilbert could feel his heart suddenly hammering in his chest; the Belgarian soldiers were already wary enough, and he knew what it meant when a prison laborer picked up a sword.

Ghh... Talk about careless. To think I'd make such a stupid mistake. What now?

There was only one soldier before him at the moment, around five paces away, but his loud voice would surely cause more to gather. There were also two other lookouts nearby, though they were currently only watching. The workshop was filled with tools, and there was a sizable worktable to consider, but there was still ample space to fight freely.

The main problem was the chains binding his legs. They weren't much of a hindrance when he was transporting materials, but they would absolutely get in the way during combat, and a fast approach was an absolute necessity when using a sword against a spear.

Right. I'll allow him to thrust, then I'll steal the spear, Gilbert told himself. Catching a peon's spear wouldn't be a challenge at all, but a bead of sweat trickled down his brow nonetheless. *What happens to my men, though? What about the ones getting medical treatment? They're all dead meat.*

The chance of such an impulsive rebellion being successful was infinitesimally small. Gilbert was at a standstill. He locked eyes with the spear-wielding soldier

until Enzo suddenly broke the silence.

“What are you doing? Help me out already.”

“Huh?!” Gilbert inadvertently cried out. The blacksmith was still beckoning him over without a care.

“He’s a prisoner requiring special attention! They call him the Mercenary King!” the overseer yelled, his voice rough. “I saw him pick up a sword! This is a rebellion!”

Enzo shrugged. “He picked it up because I asked him to, right? Now hurry up and bring it over. The coke too.”

“Get away from him, blacksmith!” the soldier barked, evidently not satisfied with the explanation. “He’s dangerous!”

“He’s in a fort with ten thousand soldiers; it doesn’t matter how dangerous he is. What can he accomplish with one sword, anyway? And I have you here to protect me, right? As far as I’m concerned, there’s no need to worry.”

“Grr...”

Gilbert would have no hope of escaping the fortress when his rebellion consisted of one man with a single sword—that much seemed obvious. He placed the silver sword atop the boxes of coke and pulled the cart closer, bringing it right up to the forge. The overseer lowered his spear the moment he saw his supervisee had put down the weapon, and the other soldiers who had gathered returned to their stations upon seeing that things had de-escalated.

Did this man just save me?

Gilbert couldn’t help but wonder, since there was no reason to bring an already completed sword over to a forge. There were no two ways about it—seeing that the soldier had misunderstood the situation, the blacksmith had stepped in to ease the tension.

“Why did you help me out?” Gilbert whispered as he started tossing coke into the fire.

“I could tell from the look in your eyes.”

“My eyes?”

“I saw a man who entrusts his life to his weapons staring at my work like a kid in a candy store, forgetting himself in the process.”

It was a somewhat unseemly way to put it, but true nonetheless; Gilbert had certainly been charmed by the man’s handiwork.

“Hmph...” Gilbert grumbled, then realizing that he had both intended and failed to thank the smith.

“That said...” Enzo smiled. “You’re pretty famous, eh?”

“I don’t recall ever using such an embarrassing nickname myself.”

“How did you like my sword then?”

“It’s very well made, but too light for me.”

“Yeah, I thought that might be the case. You usually use a polearm, right?”

“Did my eyes tell you that too?”

“No, your muscles did.”

The two men continued to work as they conversed. It wasn’t long before the first crate had been fully emptied into the forge.

“All right, now we’re going to strengthen the flame,” Enzo said. “Could you get those bellows moving for me?”

Acting as instructed, Gilbert gripped the handle protruding from the box-shaped bellows, pushing and pulling to inject air into the forge.

“Not bad at all. You’re working that thing better than my apprentices.”

“I’ve never lost to anyone in raw strength.”

“It shows. Keep at it like that.”

Carrying coke and working the bellows were jobs that the apprentice smiths normally handled themselves, but the fort had gained so many new soldiers that anyone who could work metal had enough on their plate to keep them going day and night. As a result, the strong-looking laborers were being asked to help out.

Gilbert had initially seen the job as simple, monotonous work, but sending

just enough air to keep the flames at a particular strength took a surprising amount of concentration. There was also the fact that a furnace capable of turning iron bright red was burning right before his eyes. He was sweaty in no time.

Enzo heated the iron, struck it, then heated it again. There were blacksmiths in Renard Pendu, but Gilbert soon realized this man was something else entirely. He continued doing whatever work the man asked, paying no mind to how much time had passed.

From that day onward, Gilbert was often called to help at the forge.

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After separating from Balthazar, Altina returned to her room. It wasn't long before Clarisse brought in tea and some brioche, with Eric then appearing only moments later.

Eric was a handsome young man not much older than Altina, having apparently turned seventeen not too long ago. He currently served as the princess's escort officer, though an injury during the first battle of the war had left him unable to put any strength into his left hand. This would not prove much of an issue in daily life, but it prevented him from holding a large shield or gripping a horse's reins.

Altina offered Eric a chair—slender, white, and elegant. Fort Volks had only been their base of operations for half a year now, but nobles and merchants continuously sent them gifts of all sorts, so the place had gotten considerably gaudy. Vibrant curtains hung over the fortress's few windows, tapestries decorated the walls, and delicate vases filled with fresh flowers brought some much-needed life to the otherwise dimly lit rooms.

The fortress lacked the gold, silver, and precious gems that one would usually find in the capital, but compared to when they had retaken it from Varden, it was almost unrecognizable.

It was a common belief among the Germanian Federation that minimalism was the peak of artistic accomplishment, and so its people often rid themselves of anything deemed unnecessary. For this reason, it was considered shameful for one to decorate their room.

While Altina detested pointless spending herself, she believed that even modest decorations did wonders to enrich the heart, in the same vein that people could not happily live on bread alone.

Clarisse placed the tea set on a round table adorned with tiles around its rim. “We received a shipment of fresh tea leaves from the capital just this morning. They said that our shipping routes are recovering.”

“So it seems.”

Word had spread about Belgaria snatching the latest ship-of-the-line from High Britannia, and so the pirates who usually targeted transport ships had distanced themselves from the nearest seas.

In truth, these pirates were the navy of the Hispanian Empire to the south. They raised a black flag rather than a flag of war, brazenly using their acts of piracy to benefit their nation. They naturally claimed that this wasn’t the case, though whenever a pirate vessel was seized, their weapons and a large majority of their crew always proved to be from Hispania. These actions understandably led to worsening relations with its neighboring countries, to the point that Belgaria might have launched their own attack had High Britannia not invaded at such an inopportune time.

Altina picked up a white porcelain teacup; a pleasant fragrance drifted up from the light-crimson liquid within.

Clarisse and Eric took seats around the same table. A maid and an escort officer normally wouldn’t sit across from their commander—they would stand by the wall and the door, respectively—though the fact that no other soldiers would see inside Altina’s personal room meant she had no obligation to enforce the standard hierarchy. Here, the princess treated the two as friends.

Clarisse took out the letter. “It arrived this morning with that wooden box over there,” she said, gesturing toward a crate by the door that was big enough to hold a longsword. “Ehe he he... What could it be, I wonder? It might just be a present for you, Princess.”

“If that’s true, there are only going to be books in there,” Altina said with an unenthusiastic shrug. Eric, meanwhile, wore a somewhat troubled expression, evidently having thought the same thing.

Clarisse sighed. “Oh, Mr. Regis... It seems you’ve built up quite a reputation for yourself. Now then, let’s read the letter, shall we?”

She broke the wax seal, opened the envelope, then set the letter down on the table. Three curious faces peered at the paper spread out before them.



“His penmanship is as good as ever,” Clarisse said with a smile. “*Ahem.* ‘Dear Altina, it is very sunny at the capital today.’”

“Wait! Clarisse!” Altina interrupted. “Why are you reading it out loud?!”

“Is something the matter? I’m quite confident in my impersonation skills.”

“You weren’t actually that far off, but that just made it even worse.”

“Where was I...? Ah, yes. ‘To my dearest Altina. Who would have guessed that a mere day without you would pain me so deeply?’”

“It doesn’t say that anywhere!”

“I believed some creative liberties were in order.”

“You’re reading a letter! You shouldn’t be taking any liberties!”

As he watched Altina and Clarisse’s exchange, Eric cracked a slight smile—something he had barely done since learning about his injuries. The princess knew this, and she had called him here precisely to pep him up a little.

Eric officially served Altina as an escort officer, but he had done more than just keep her safe—he had stayed by her side through even the most troublesome times, and he had only sustained his injury because he had moved to protect her precious comrade Regis.

The first letter Altina had written to Regis was about Eric’s condition, though the considerable distance from Fort Volks to the capital meant it had taken a few days to reach him. To make matters worse, the first correspondences she had received from him were mere status reports.

While she didn’t particularly want to admit it, Altina had cried when she first learned that her faithful strategist was becoming Latrielle’s staff officer. Regis had done his best to assure her that it was just a temporary arrangement, but it had thrown her heart into disarray for quite some time nonetheless. Since then, however, she had finally found peace; the daily letters that she received from Regis were enough to convince her that he was telling the truth.

Judging by the number of days it took for a message to travel to the capital and back, Altina wondered whether it was about time for Regis to reply to the question she had posed in her first letter.

As per usual, the newest letter from Regis began with a status report directed at Altina. He was apparently due to leave the capital in a few days' time to head in the direction of Langobarti, a kingdom in the Germanian Federation. Given that this correspondence could have been sent perhaps even a week ago, was he already on the expedition? He was a staff officer going into a siege, so there was probably very little chance he would actually face the enemy, but the princess still found herself growing somewhat concerned.

The next section of the letter was directed at Eric.

I understand the situation—you certainly have it rough. I have read a few books on prognosis symptoms, and there are plenty of records detailing full recoveries, so there is no need to give up. That said, the process may take a few years.

Eric had already heard something similar from the lady doctor. "I knew it," he sighed. "It won't get better anytime soon..."

I am sure it will prove rather difficult for you to fight on horseback. An escort officer does not necessarily need to ride a horse, but keeping someone who cannot ride in such an important position will impact overall morale. We would not want the others to think the princess is showing favoritism, and in such a case, you might find it disconcerting to be around the rest of the army.

Altina nodded along in understanding—she had received special treatment from the moment she was born, becoming a target of envy before she even knew her own name. She had been stationed as a commander for her very first assignment, despite having never even attended the military academy, so she still struggled to grasp the emotions of normal people—especially their desire to climb the ranks.

Altina, of course, wanted to become empress, but that was only because it was a means to change the Empire. Not once had she actually wanted to improve her title—in fact, she found the very concept of titles rather vague as it was.

Regardless of these views, however, the reality was that the soldiers all had their sights on something or another, and all for their own reasons. Altina needed to avoid showing clear favoritism to Eric; if she did not treat him in a

manner that seemed to match his skills and accomplishments, the troops would quickly lose enthusiasm.

She continued reading the letter.

Until his hand has fully recovered, I recommend that you remove Eric from his current position.

“I see... That really is...the only option...” Eric murmured, starting to slump his shoulders. But Altina prodded the paper before her.

“Wait. There’s still more.”

However—and this is entirely up to him—I do have one proposal should he want to stick with the army. They have not been established in the imperial army as of yet, but there is a certain type of soldier that will undoubtedly become a mainstay in the near future. I wish for him to take the initiative to master the craft and instruct those who follow.

“Eh?” Eric leaned in at once, his eyes curiously devouring the rest of the letter.

It is my hope that Eric will become the Empire’s first sharpshooter. The necessary tools should arrive along with this letter. Have you opened the box yet?

Eric squatted down by the box and gripped the lid at one end. The lack of strength in his left hand meant he struggled to pry it open, though even an able-bodied soldier would have struggled; the wooden crates used to transport military goods rarely employed any fancy opening mechanisms, instead being held together with solid nails.

“Leave it to me,” Altina said, crouching down next to Eric and putting her hands beside his.

“N-No, I couldn’t let a princess do such—!”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m strong enough.”

Altina started forcing open the lid. It let out a harsh groan as the nails keeping it secured were torn from the wood, then abruptly snapped in two. The box itself was expendable, so this thankfully wasn’t an issue; it would simply be

used as firewood.

“Oh dear...” Clarisse sighed and set down the nail puller she had produced, realizing it might have been wise to mention it sooner.

Inside the box was a cylindrical object, wrapped in cloth that smelled of grease. Had Regis not already hinted at what the item was in his letter, Altina would have assumed it was a sword.

Eric carefully unwrapped the cloth with bated breath. Inside was a breech-loading rifle, as well as some ammunition.

I will send over three of the rifles we have captured in good condition, plus one hundred rounds of ammunition, though I should be able to prepare more if necessary. At present, we only have access to the type made in High Britannia, but we should eventually be able to make guns and ammunition of the same quality here in the Empire. Prince Latrielle has been very proactive in their development. It will not be long before the gun shall rule the battlefield, so we have an urgent need to secure talents who excel in their use.

The rest of the letter was a detailed explanation covering how to use and maintain a rifle. As one might expect from Regis, there were large blocks of text written in tiny letters spelling out nothing but warnings. Altina knew without a doubt that it was impossible for her to handle such a weapon.

“‘Rule the battlefield,’ eh...?” The war against High Britannia had proven the military superiority of guns on so many occasions that Altina had grown sick of seeing them. Belgaria had still managed to come out on top, though it had required a considerable amount of scheming.

As someone who had spent day after day honing her sword skills, Altina found it hard to accept that war was entering a new era. But what about Eric? Surely he too had undergone harsh sword training since infancy. Would he be able to accept a gun all of a sudden?

“You don’t have to if you don’t want to, Eric.”

“Oh, no. That’s not it. I’m just a little surprised. Guns are only useful for intimidating the enemy at the start of a battle, so how could they become the stars of the battlefield...? I’m sure Mr. Regis has a well-thought-out answer.”

Loading and firing a Belgarian gun was a laborious process, and the resulting shot left much to be desired. Since Eric had never seen how the High Britannian Army fought, he was even more confused about this development than the princess.

Sensing Eric's bewilderment, Altina explained what had happened during the Battle of La Frenge, when the Seventh Army had suffered devastating losses. The gun before them was the very same make as those the High Britannian Army had used to tear through the Belgarian ranks.

"I don't know how many guns Belgaria is going to make, nor do I know whether this new style of warfare will really take off, but...Regis seems very confident."

"I see..." Eric said, having listened with a serious look on his face. "I'd already heard that High Britannia's guns caused a great number of casualties, but I didn't realize the battles were that one-sided."

"Granted, if we had known how dangerous they were beforehand, I think we would have devised a better attack plan."

Eric thought for a moment. "Mr. Regis does have a point. In my current condition, this might be the most I can do...but giving up the sword will not be an easy decision to make."

"Why not train with both?"

"Mr. Regis mentions in his letter that he expects me to not only become a gunman, but also to instruct others on how to use these rifles."

"Right."

"If my aim is to become good enough to assume such a position, then I cannot afford to take any half measures."

"Hm... You might have a point there."

Belgaria already had muzzle-loading rifles known as rifled muskets. They didn't see much use in actual warfare, but there were still many in the Empire who were well accustomed to using them—most predominantly fresh recruits and conscripts who struggled to use spears, and so were given guns instead.

In the Empire, the cavalry were the blooming flowers of most battles, followed in importance by the spearmen, then the archers. In many cases, gunners and cannoneers didn't even make the cut; there were a fair number of commanders who believed it was far more worthwhile to carry food than such heavy weaponry. This general apathy meant there were no dedicated riflemen in Belgaria—this was a position that existed only in High Britannia.

"My injury..." Eric muttered. "It was a Renard Pendu mercenary with a crossbow who put me in this state."

Franziska—Altina had never forgotten the name. She still vividly remembered the events of that night. She had been mercilessly toyed with, then forced into a corner by the mercenary's nimble movements. Eric had been shot shortly after coming to the princess's aid, sending her into a frenzy during which she accidentally broke the *Grand Tonnerre Quatre*.

She bested me without a doubt, Altina thought.

In their most recent battle, the Belgarian Army had managed to capture Gilbert, the head of mercenary brigade Renard Pendu. His sister Franziska, however, had gotten away. Where was she now? The brigade originally hailed from Germania, so perhaps she had returned home. Or perhaps she was near Fort Volks, already plotting a rescue operation.

It seemed that Eric hadn't forgotten Franziska either. "That mercenary fought with nothing but a crossbow, no matter how close she got to her opponent," he said. "I could never call myself an instructor unless I reach that level, and when Mr. Regis says that guns will rule the battlefield, I don't think he's talking about bayonets."

"Yes, a musket with a bayonet is essentially a spear."

Since the type of gun used in Belgaria took far too long to reload, it was decided to attach a blade called a bayonet to the barrel. Thus, after the first shot was fired, the weapon essentially became a spear.

"Of course, I still think every soldier should know how to use a sword," Eric noted, "but Mr. Regis is counting on me to introduce this new form of combat."

"Yeah. And as you said, there's no use taking a half-hearted approach."

“If we start using these guns as spears after firing a single round, they won’t be any more useful than the ones we have now.”

Using such a strategy would hardly constitute ruling the battlefield, but did firearms truly have a place in an era where swords and spears reigned supreme?

Eric stared at the mass of iron that lay within the box. “I...”

“Hm?”

“I think I’m going to trust Mr. Regis on this one.”

“Are you sure?”

“I don’t know whether I can actually be of any use to you, but...” He lifted the new gun out of the crate. “I’ll put my all into mastering this weapon.”

Altina nodded. “Understood. I’m counting on you, Eric, no matter what you decide to wield.”

“Your words are wasted on me, Princess. I’ll definitely protect you.”

And so, Belgaria’s first sharpshooter was born. This event, which had transpired after a string of coincidences, would greatly influence the spread of such weapons throughout Belgaria. The surrounding nations who had seen High Britannia’s defeat decided that firearms were too risky of an investment, but the Empire, who had witnessed the military strength of these guns firsthand, came away with the opposite impression.

Unbeknownst to Altina, she was widely considered a national hero. Many nobles and soldiers were already eyeing her every action with great intrigue, so her enlisting a sharpshooter to serve as her personal guard did not go unnoticed. The new gun soon developed a reputation as an honorable weapon used to protect the princess and was subsequently sought after by those in power.

Belgaria would go on to embrace the firearm before any of its neighboring countries, and this development alone would greatly alter the fate of the Empire.

Chapter 3: Late-Night Coffee

The night breeze was strong enough to rattle the windows of the houses in Grebeauvoir, but such luxuries did not exist on the mountain range around 5 lieue (22 km) away. It was early in the summer, so the forest was densely packed with leaves that obscured their vision.

Regis felt as though he had become a shaman straight from the age of mythology—beings who communed with spirits of the trees, the earth, the water, and the breeze. They lived among the faeries, and in a forest like this untouched even by the moonlight, it wasn't strange to think they might run into one or two.

The First Army had been traversing the road stretching from the capital to Grebeauvoir when they decided to set up camp. Having their headquarters somewhere in plain sight wasn't an option, since they would most likely be spotted by enemy scouts and made susceptible to a sneak attack, so they had made sure to hide themselves in the forest.

Their opponent was fighting on unfamiliar terrain, but they had already launched a successful surprise attack in the past—and on the First Army, no less. They couldn't afford to drop their guard.

Regis was currently using the standard tent for senior officers. A single sheet had been spread over the damp soil, on top of which sat a collapsible chair, table, and bed. Another sheet was then stretched around its perimeter, serving as a partition.

Most soldiers were similarly afforded a sheet of cloth to place over the earth, but little else; this was where they slept, and only the particularly lucky ones were given a second sheet to cover themselves. It was calculated that the addition of just one senior officer—or at least one treated favorably enough to deserve a tent—required an additional one hundred supply carriers, plus even more to carry the food for them.

Incidentally, not even Regis's tent had a roof, though this was hardly an issue. The northern parts of the Empire very rarely saw rain, and while it was indeed

possible that he would get drenched, the weather usually cleared up soon enough and the air was so parched that most things dried in no time at all. For these reasons, it was rare for an army venturing to these parts to take measures to ward off rain; in fact, the only personal tent to come equipped with any covering was Latrielle's.

Had the First Army been camping out on the open plains, they might have prepared the house-like tents used by the Fourth Army. These were far more comfortable, but they were unusable in the forest. It was the commander's job to decide on their campsite beforehand and to ensure their unit carried the appropriate supplies.

The hanging cloth that served as the entrance to Regis's tent shifted ever so slightly, causing the tactician to look up from his papers. "Who's there?"

"It's me," came a familiar voice.

"Oh. Come right in."

"I apologize for bothering you at this hour."

The one who pushed through the cloth was Fanrine Veronica de Tiraso Laverde. She had black hair that reached down to her hips, and she wore a black one-piece dress with a sash around the waist.

Fanrine was a noblewoman who looked completely out of place on the battlefield. Her initial assignment from the Ministry of Military Affairs had been to escort Regis to the capital and then watch over him during his stay, but when the tactician was asked to join an expedition led by Second Prince Latrielle, she volunteered to accompany him out of personal interest.

In her hands was a tray laden with fresh bread and coffee.

"You're still awake, I see. I know it might seem rude of me to intrude, but I thought you'd want a late-night snack."

"It smells wonderful. Thank you."

"You're very welcome."



Regis removed the papers from his table and tucked them into the wooden box at his feet. It was double-layered, built so that its contents would stay dry even in the case of rain.

Fanrine placed the tray on the now cleared table. On closer inspection, bread wasn't the only snack she had brought—alongside it were peeled oranges and sliced peaches.

Regis picked up the wooden mug of pitch-black coffee and brought it to his lips. The strong drink was just hot enough to heat up his body and melt away his drowsiness. "This is really good," he said with an appreciative nod.

"He he... That's reassuring to hear."

"Do you usually prepare your own late-night snacks back at home?"

"Not usually...but I decided to learn nonetheless. Any woman would at the very least want to be able to prepare snacks for her husband."

"That sounds rare for a noble, but I suppose it's always good to be proactive."

"Thank you. Are you reading again?"

"Yes. Now that I'm an officer with the First Army, I've gained access to quite a few documents that I was previously forbidden from looking at."

Regis reached for the bread. It was hard, owing to them being on an expedition, but also nicely buttered—quite an indulgence, considering their circumstances.

"So, are you not going to say it, Ms. Fanrine? Everyone who usually sees me reading this late tells me to go to bed."

The orange glow from the oil lamp cast pleasant shadows across her face, making her appear even more alluring than during the day.

"I presume that is because they all worry for your health."

"Oh, of course. I understand that. And I'm grateful for their consideration."

"I also worry about your health, but I appreciate that you're going to such lengths to achieve your goal. Not everyone has that drive, and I don't want to get in your way."

“I see...”

That’s one way of putting it, I suppose... Regis thought. Fanrine wasn’t just being kind—she seemed to have her own take on the situation.

Regis took a segment of orange and popped it into his mouth, savoring the wash of sourness, sweetness, and bitterness. “How about you? Would you like some?” he asked, gesturing toward the tray.

“I’m okay, thank you. I’m going to call it a night soon. Have you grown accustomed to being with the First Army yet?”

“It seems we’re not on bad terms, per se... Not on the surface, at least.”

“That is fortunate. You seemed quite concerned when we last spoke about it.”

“...Though I doubt the remaining members of the White Wolf Brigade think too highly of me.”

“The skirmish near the capital did cause quite a stir. There were noble sons among the First Army’s knights, after all.”

The brigade had lost both its captain and deputy captain in the engagement. Regis naturally hadn’t wanted any undue casualties, but Jerome’s Black Knight Brigade numbered five hundred, while the White Wolves numbered a thousand; one wrong step and it would have been his men being annihilated, so he couldn’t afford to hold back.

The current captain of the White Wolves was a new appointment who didn’t seem to harbor any ill feelings for Regis, but there was no doubt that the other knights who had witnessed the battle still resented him. He couldn’t afford to drop his guard even for a second.

“For the moment, they acknowledge me as Latrielle’s staff officer; their loyalty to him is winning out over their animosity toward me,” Regis said. He didn’t know of any other commander who could unite his men to such a degree.

“Latrielle is going to take the throne, isn’t he?”

“I reckon he will, once this war is over. And since the enemy is holed up in a fortified city, this will probably be the last battle.”

“What do you mean...?” Fanrine asked. She was good at her job and very knowledgeable of politics, but it seemed she was estranged from military matters.

“A siege is generally over once the attackers find a way into the castle,” Regis explained, biting into the buttered bread. “Those inside are rarely able to escape, so unless the enemy has another considerably sized army stationed elsewhere, they’re unlikely to manage any further attacks. Regardless of who’s at the helm, they’d be as much of a threat as bandits; it would be high time to proclaim the end of the war.”

“I see. So you’re confident we can win?”

“Hm... In any siege, the defending side needs to chip away at the attacker’s forces enough that they are forced to retreat.” Stalling long enough for reinforcements to arrive was also an option, though this likely wasn’t an option for High Britannia. That said, having the war remain at a stalemate for several more months risked the surrounding nations marching on Belgaria.

“I’ve heard that Grebeauvoir is a very sturdy city.”

“Yes, it truly does make a splendid fortress. It’s a marvel how it fell into enemy hands in the first place.”

“Do we still not know what happened?”

“No... We’ve apparently heard the story from those who escaped, but as a guest, this information hasn’t yet made its way to me.”

“Oh. How rude.”

“I’m sure I’ll hear it during tomorrow’s strategy meeting. I must admit, this is my first time in a position where other people are organizing the information for me, so I’m at a bit of a loss...but I need to match their way of doing things,” Regis said. He didn’t want to assert himself and risk causing a commotion, though he did find the situation rather unsettling.

“So, Regis... I thought you were pushing for Princess Argentina to become the next empress,” Fanrine prodded, changing the subject entirely. “Are you sure you should be helping Latrielle?”

“Saving the people of Grebeauvoir takes priority, as does ending the war early. I can’t risk standing by and twiddling my thumbs, else who knows when the next attack will come. That’s why I need to put aside my thoughts on the political power struggle, at least for this matter.”

“Right.”

“What’s more, I need to see whether Prince Latrielle’s policies are really so different from Princess Argentina’s. My goal is not to secure power, but to ensure Belgaria is on the right course. I’m hoping for a peaceful shift to pacifism.”

“But I appraise Prince Latrielle to be a template hegemonist.”

“He was, but our losses in this war have been massive, and the introduction of the latest firearm is going to change warfare as we know it. We’re entering a new era, and my hope is that the prince’s opinions will change along with it. Though these are only hopes...”

“And what if they don’t change?”

“...That is a difficult question to answer. Should the prince decide to wage another war to expand our territory, then I will naturally be forced to take *some* measures, but he will already be emperor by then,” Regis sighed. Once Grebeauvoir was recaptured, Latrielle would surely be enthroned. “After his coronation, there isn’t all that much I can do...”

Fanrine quizzically cocked her head. “If Latrielle *is* enthroned, Princess Argentina loses her inheritance rights, doesn’t she?”

“That’s right. There are no laws when it comes to inheritance, but there are customs. The grand chamberlain currently has the strongest say in the matter. He not only holds a high position in the Ministry of Nobility, but he also previously served terms as the minister of military affairs and the minister of ceremonies. He has strong ties to the current ministers as well. If the grand chamberlain doesn’t recognize a coronation, then chances are the other prominent nobles won’t recognize it either. In that sense, there is a form of parliament in the Empire, though not one stipulated by law.”

“But the emperor is meant to be the strongest power in the country. It feels

odd that the grand chamberlain should have the final say in such a matter," Fanrine said, lowering her voice to a whisper. She hadn't been speaking very loudly to begin with, but now she was being extra cautious.

Regis could understand her bafflement. "He was appointed by the previous emperor and has a vested interest in keeping his position. But, well...putting that aside, we were talking about customs. Namely about the fourth child losing their inheritance rights when the second son takes the throne."

"Right."

"Belgaria is special in this regard. In Hispania, High Britannia, and the nations that make up Germania, a king without any offspring will normally be succeeded by a sibling. Like this." Regis picked up an unimportant sheet of paper and started writing out the standard line of succession.

Ruler's offspring → ruler's oldest sibling → ruler's oldest sibling's offspring → ruler's second-oldest sibling → ruler's second-oldest sibling's offspring...

In Belgaria, however, the siblings of a reigning emperor could not inherit the throne. This caused the order to change quite drastically.

Emperor's offspring → emperor's oldest sibling's offspring → emperor's second-oldest sibling's offspring...

"As for why our system is unique, there was a tragedy long ago that involved a touch of assassination," Regis explained. "Brothers were killing brothers, and the Empire very nearly fell apart as a result."

"And I assume that was especially problematic here, considering the nature of our royal family."

"Precisely. While this doesn't necessarily apply to them all, the members of our royal family are each a match for a thousand men, coming equipped with indomitable willpower. The rationale is to avoid this strength being misused in quite reprehensible ways..."

As he spoke, there was one story in particular that stood out in Regis's mind.

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The records were vague, and opinions clashed among historians, but there

was an event in Belgarian history that forever shaped the Empire. It had taken place approximately 500 years prior, when the capital was still in the west and much of the modern Empire's land still belonged to other nations...

There were three princes of similar ages, all of whom were blessed with red hair, red eyes, and splendid physiques. Some said it was as though the first emperor had been reincarnated thrice. All three performed splendidly on the battlefield, contributing greatly to the expansion of the nation. It was during their era when the groups who occupied what was now the capital were driven east.

It was thought that the Empire would remain firm no matter who took the throne.

When the reigning emperor died of an illness, the eldest son naturally succeeded him. He was now in a position to give orders to his two siblings, but opinions would diverge with every debate. The new emperor would argue with his brothers on how to handle the counteroffensive of the tribes they had previously driven away, and what measures were right for the famine caused by a natural disaster.

Then came the assassination.

The second prince killed the emperor—or so the story went. There was no evidence, and so despite all suspicions, he was next to take the throne. This was a mere half year after the first prince had been crowned.

Of course, the second prince was just as skilled as his brother, so the Empire did not waver in the slightest.

Another half year later, the third prince managed to expose the second prince's crimes. While the details remain unknown, it is hypothesized that he managed to capture someone involved with the assassination. There were no laws by which to judge the royal family, and with no legal recourse, it was already too late for anyone else to take action. Thus, the second prince was executed by his brother, a fellow royal.

If only the tale ended there...

There were nobles who asserted that the second prince's son was a more

worthy successor than the third prince, and claims began to spread that he should have taken the throne following the second prince's death.

The third prince turned to the nation's customs, proclaiming that the previous emperor's death annulled the enthronement of any offspring he had. His intention was to establish himself as the rightful heir to the throne, but his faction was simply too weak to silence the second prince's advocates. In the end, the situation came to a head, and the two forces became embroiled in a civil war.

Modern studies of ancient documents and precedents suggest that the third prince had most likely been correct, but it was ultimately the second prince's faction that came out victorious. The third prince was exiled, though none truly know how he spent his remaining days. Some say he raised another nation; others say he spent his last years in seclusion, and still others say he died in battle.

The result of this feud was that Belgaria lost three very competent leaders. Many crucial issues were neglected as the princes focused their efforts on the civil war, and so countless lives were lost to famine and attacks from indigenous tribes.

In this tale of so many uncertainties, one thing that is known for sure is that the eldest son of the second prince took the throne. It is from him that all current members of the royal family descended, and many say that they each inherited his nature.

The new emperor was young but still very talented, so the Empire managed to regain its power...but there was no denying it had been on the verge of demise. To prevent this grave mistake from ever repeating itself, a new custom was established—siblings were always to support an enthroned emperor.

...Or so the history books said.

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Regis's coffee had cooled enough that he could down the rest with ease. "I must admit though, I'm against the idea that one's blood should play any role in these situations. I'm also quite skeptical of using a past dispute as a basis for our system of rule."

“So that’s where the custom came from?” Fanrine mused. “Interesting...”

“In any case, for as long as an emperor has living children, they take precedence over his own brothers and sisters. This custom stands in other countries as well.”

“Actually, if you don’t mind me asking... Say Latrielle becomes emperor and then abdicates before conceiving a child—what happens then? Would the throne go to Argentina’s offspring?”

“Hm... Not necessarily. We’re speaking hypothetically, of course, but in such a situation, Prince Auguste’s children would take priority. Something similar has occurred more than once before, and in those cases, the late emperor’s mother served as ruler until the child who was next in line came of age. If we see this trend continue, this would be Latrielle’s mother—Her Majesty, the empress consort herself.”

“His mother?!”

“She wouldn’t take the throne, mind you. She’d simply serve as a proxy.”

“And this has happened before, you say?”

“The Empire is currently home to over ten million people, but its population was much smaller three hundred years ago. Even back then, we were trapped in a never-ending string of wars, and sometimes both the emperor and the first prince would wind up dead from careless missteps in a losing battle. The throne would then go to the child of a relative.”

“I’m surprised any ties to the original royal family still remain...”

“Hah... We’ve got a princess with crimson hair and red eyes, so I think it’s safe to assume the first emperor’s blood still lives on.”

Fanrine fell into thought for a moment. “What about in High Britannia? If Queen Margaret is cut down in this war, would her sister become the next queen?”

“Yes. Their country has a parliament and clearly stipulated regulations for succession. That said, Queen Margaret doesn’t have any sisters—at least, not as far as I’m aware—so I assume her cousin Princess Elizabeth would take the

throne instead. Oh, but the High Britannian parliament does have the right to dethrone their monarch. Considering their future relations with Belgaria are on the line, Queen Margaret might be booted out even if she does return alive."

"How peculiar... What sort of person is this Elizabeth then? I would rather not have another war."

"She has never appeared in public, from what I recall, and she's still only sixteen, making her a minor in High Britannia."

"Oh, I see."

"It won't matter who the queen is though; High Britannia is going to have it rough. Our peace terms will almost certainly include a demand for reparations, so if they accept, they'll either have to pay an exorbitant sum or be forced to hand over their advanced industrial technology. And if they refuse, the war will only continue. I'm against an invasion, but...I don't know what Latrielle intends to do."

Fanrine nodded. "So your main concern is what His Highness will decide when the time comes."

"Something like that. I'm personally counting on the prince to seek out peaceful diplomacy."

"Say he instead pursues military domination after taking the throne—what would you do then?" Fanrine asked. The light from the oil lamp reflected in her eyes—orange flames dancing in two black pools.

Regis was well aware that he had passively stood by and allowed the situation to devolve to its current state. At this point, he would most likely be unable to prevent Latrielle from becoming emperor, but if the prince did indeed start expanding the war fronts, what action could he take...?

"...If that happens, I'll do what I can. I won't sit on the fence, I can assure you that, though I cannot go into any further detail. My apologies."

"Oh, there's no need to apologize. I should be apologizing to you, if anything. It must be embarrassing having a woman like me ask you all these questions about politics."

“Not at all. In fact, I should thank you. Our conversation has helped me to arrange my thoughts.”

“Ah, is that so? Well, I think I’ve interrupted your reading for long enough. It’s about time for me to call it a night. See you tomorrow, Regis.”

“Yes. Good night.”

Fanrine gave a courteous bow, then she exited the tent.

Regis sighed. Perhaps the actions he planned to take would simply cause a repeat of the feud that had occurred five hundred years prior—a tragedy that would be forever etched into Belgarian history. If such were the case, there was a good chance that the history books written five hundred years later would consider him a heinous criminal.

“...I pray we can solve this without bloodshed.”

Regis didn’t want to see another feud between siblings. In his ideal world, he would never have the opportunity to prove himself as a military tactician; he would always be deemed useless, laughed at, and then left in the corner to read his books.

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Imperial Year 851, July 5th— It was afternoon, and the Belgarian First Army was 60 arpents (4,287 m) from the fortified city of Grebeauvoir. Its ashen walls were visible just over the green plains at the end of the mountain path, though they weren’t yet close enough for cannons to enter the fray. The soldiers with the most excellent eyesight could even make out the flags of High Britannia and Langobarti, meaning the intel they had gathered so far was correct.

After finishing his lunch, Regis headed for the First Army’s headquarters. The atmosphere at the camp was completely unlike what he had grown accustomed to; the soldiers were all training as hard as they could, and they maintained order so well that he could hardly tell they had been marching for several days.

He couldn’t see anyone walking around practically naked, nor was there any gambling or fighting among the troops.

There was no doubting the soldiers’ discipline as they continued practicing with their weapons, but they also took breaks when necessary. On the whole, morale seemed to be incredibly high. Regis had felt a sense of excess and complacency the last time he was stationed in the capital, but that no longer seemed to be the case, perhaps owing to the sheer number of casualties they had suffered in the war so far.

Regis stepped into the large, circular tent serving as the army’s strategy room—one of the few tents in the camp with a roof. There was a circular table inside but no chairs; meetings were to be conducted while standing.

I’m certain this was the agreed time, and yet...

Latrielle was the only person in the room, clad in light armor.

Regis hurriedly took out his pocket watch to check the time. “M-My apologies!” he stammered. “Have I come at the wrong time?!”

“Not at all. It is five minutes to one, just as I said.”

“But I don’t see anyone else here...”

“Indeed. That is because I told the others that the meeting would start at two.”

Regis felt a peculiar sense of unease; he could immediately sense that Latrielle was acting differently than usual. Perhaps he had somehow managed to rub the prince the wrong way, and this was where he would meet his end. He also couldn’t help but realize he had done nothing but read since he joined the First Army. Considering this poor work ethic, it was possible he would be driven from the capital once more as an inept fool.

Execution or expulsion... Which one will it be?

Latrielle placed a hand on the table. “Regis, it seems you are having a hard time integrating with our battalion.”

“Expulsion then...” Regis whispered.

“Pardon?”

“Oh, nothing. Um... Does my work not meet your expectations?”

“Honestly? No. You did not hesitate to speak your mind on Le Luce Hill, but in our most recent meetings, you’ve done nothing but listen.”

“...That’s because your administration has been so thorough that I haven’t seen much need for my input.”

“I see. I’d assumed you were too anxious to speak out among the others.”

“I apologize for worrying you...”

“That’s why I decided to hear you out before the meeting began.”

“...Yes, sir.”

“Could you take a look at this?”

Latrielle spread a map on the table. The scent of fresh ink wafted from the parchment, meaning new information must have been added quite recently.

Grebeauvoir was a provincial city located at the base of numerous hills. Its surroundings didn’t stretch high enough to warrant calling the place a valley, but the incline was steep enough to give carriages trouble. The city essentially lay in a basin among the mountains.

Thanks to its location, more than enough wind passed through Grebeauvoir to turn its windmills; the gusts would always move along the mountains, starting from the south and escaping north. The city also had access to a river that flowed in the same direction. It was vast and deep enough to carry a warship, eventually emptying into the western sea after crossing through Germanian territory. Its currents were notably powerful, such that it would take quite a skilled swimmer to make it from one bank to the other.

Rain was very rarely seen in Belgaria’s inland regions, so strongly flowing rivers were considered very valuable. In fact, the city had initially been built not only to put a check on Langobarti, but also to turn this abundance of water into a flourishing industry.

Next to Mordol, which lay across another mountain range to the south, Grebeauvoir was one of the nation’s leading manufacturers of paper and iron. The high-quality grapes it produced were also of great renown.

The Empire had stationed the Third Army to guard this key point on the northern front, but its commander, Lieutenant General Buxerou, had died in the war against High Britannia, and the Third Army had lost nearly half of its forces. Even so, there should have been more than ten thousand troops who remained at Grebeauvoir. Now that the city was captured, chances were they had been killed or taken prisoner. Either way, they could not be counted as usable war potential.

I see... Regis thought as he stared at the map.


To Langobarti
River
Grebeauvoir
Fortress
Town
The Empire's
First Army
To Verseilles
Mountain Trail

“According to our reconnaissance reports, a majority of the allied High Britannian and Langobart forces seem to be inside the fortress portion of the city. They number around thirty to forty thousand.”

“A siege is a risky move when we, the attackers, are at a numerical disadvantage.”

“It was never a decent plan to begin with. That’s why I’ve solicited your help.”

Regis broke into a cold sweat. “No... That’s...” It was surely too late to bring it up now, but there was no omnipotent magic that could overturn any situation. He had thought things over and made some preparations, but he couldn’t guarantee they would be of any use.

Latrielle closed his left eye, staring at Regis with his right. “Our disadvantage is why you need fifty thousand sappers, correct?”

“...Yes, that’s right. The terrain is similar enough to what I anticipated, so I think they should prove their worth.”

These individuals technically weren’t real sappers, given that they weren’t part of the Belgarian Army; rather, they were hired construction workers gathered from around the capital, the majority being refugees who had lost their homes and farms in the war. Many had joined for the compensation they would receive for participating in the expedition, since this money would keep their families and them afloat for a while.

When all was said and done, Belgaria still needed to come up with a way to financially aid the families who hadn’t been able to send any workers. The current plan was more of a secondary relief measure to help the victims of war.

Regis prodded the map, placing his finger on the city portion south of the fortress. “The citizens of Grebeauvoir should be here, correct?”

The fortress portion of Grebeauvoir was built with circular ramparts, since curved walls were known to provide superior protection against attacks. Straight walls were harder to maintain, because their corners provided the enemy two directions from which to fire. It was far more of a challenge to use round walls when planning a city, however, so while the fortress was constructed in such a way as to optimize its defenses, the rest simply had to

make do.

When looking at the map, it was clear to see that one area in Grebeauvoir had expanded west beyond the city's original boundaries. This was a district almost entirely dedicated to the flourishing iron industry, and so most of the buildings there were related to its production and distribution.

Latrielle pointed at the expansion. "According to the escapees, the civilians have been imprisoned here in the iron district. The enemy are making use of the larger city."

"There were escapees?"

"Indeed."

"Does that mean there's a secret passage, perhaps?"

"Unfortunately not. A few who were ordered to repair the wall decided they were better off jumping into the river below. They swam upstream to escape."

"The river?! They must be master swimmers to have managed that."

"Yes, it certainly isn't something we could risk doing ourselves. The First Army is lauded as the Empire's finest, but not even we have many soldiers who could accomplish such a feat."

"But you do have some?"

"Naturally."

As expected of an army comprising the Empire's elites...

"What about the prisoners of war? Do we know where they are?"

"All we know for sure is that they aren't being kept with the civilians. They must be elsewhere in the city or in the fortress itself."

"If we consider this rationally, they're most likely somewhere in the city."

"Most likely."

So long as the enemy army maintained their hold on the fortress, they couldn't lose. Even if some mistake allowed their prisoners to incite a rebellion, the sturdy wall separating the fortress from the larger city would mitigate any damages.

Limited space was another reason for keeping the imprisoned soldiers in the city portion of Grebeauvoir. The enemy had at least thirty thousand troops, which was already enough to occupy every bed in the fortress. Wells and stoves were also in short supply, meaning there certainly weren't enough to accommodate a further increase in numbers.

"This is assuming they haven't all been killed, of course..." Latrielle muttered.

Regis offered a gloomy nod. In times of war, it was up to the enemy whether captured soldiers lived or died. "Have we figured out how we lost the city in the first place?" he asked.

Latrielle nodded in turn. "Yes. We have a few escapees among our ranks who were there when it was taken," he said. And with that, he told their tale.

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It had happened on the evening of June 11th—the scouts on the southern, inland side spotted an army racing between the mountains. The dark of night had already begun to set in, so the soldiers themselves were hardly discernible, but their red flags bearing a golden sun identified them at once.

It was the Third Army, flying the very same flags that flew over Grebeauvoir. Their comrades were rushing home.

"It's Buxerou!" screamed one of the lookouts.

"They're being chased!" cried another.

The Third Army's pursuers soon appeared from among the mountains. Those in the Grebeauvoir garrison had never before seen the flags of the High Britannian Royal Army, but they had heard enough through word of mouth to know they flew two red lines on a white background.

The High Britannian troops opened fire, taking out several men in the Third Army's rearguard. Seeing this, the fortress's acting commander immediately ordered his forces to intercept. They made sure to close the city gate behind them on the off chance that their unit was breached.

Their response was exemplary. The interception unit swiftly got to work, the soldiers expertly putting their daily training to use as they got in formation

around their fleeing comrades in the Third Army.

There were close to ten thousand High Britannian troops giving chase, but Grebeauvoir had sent only three thousand to meet them. They knew that defeat was inevitable in a head-on battle, and to make matters worse, the Langobart Army had appeared opposite them to the north. There wasn't a moment to lose; they needed to get the Third Army into the fortress, and fast...

As per standard military regulations, even a friendly army needed to go through proper checks before being allowed into the city. In this case, the fort's commander should have at least confirmed that Buxerou or one of his staff officers were present. But the moment the incoming Third Army reached the front gate, someone began to scream, "We need a doctor! Lieutenant General Buxerou is gravely injured!"

The commander should have given his men the order to hold the gate, but as he headed for the entrance to perform the normal procedures, it was said that the soldiers outside continued to pressure the garrison for a doctor. From there, the situation only became more and more tense. The remnants of the Third Army were battered and bruised, with many having been struck dead before they could even reach the city limits. Their wounded couldn't be ignored, and the Langobart soldiers drew closer with each passing second.

The exact events which led to what came next were still unknown, but the truth remained that the city gate was opened before any proper checks were made. Perhaps it was an order from the commander, or perhaps the gatekeepers had felt the urgency of the situation and acted of their own volition.

In any case, once the gate was open, the rescued Third Army threw down their flags and took up arms against the garrison. As it turned out, they were not Belgarian soldiers, but rather High Britannians in disguise.

The three thousand who had marched to the impostors' rescue failed to receive reinforcements during the abrupt chaos and were subsequently annihilated. It wasn't long before the fortress's west gate was captured, after which the High Britannian soldiers moved through the city to secure and open the north gate for the Langobarts. It was at this moment that any Belgarian

soldiers continuing to resist finally raised the white flag.

The soldier who reported all this had apparently been stationed on the western rampart. Upon seeing the Grebeauvoir garrison surrender, he threw down his sword and armor, then leapt into the river and swam to salvation.

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Regis pressed a finger against his brow. “Hm... It’s not like I can’t understand why they made that decision...”

“One might also say they fell for the oldest trick in the book... But we cannot ignore that the enemy actually fired upon and killed their own men to deceive the garrison. That’s not something any sane man would do.”

“I’m sure they weighed the loss of a few soldiers against the benefits of securing a key fortress, but I can’t imagine any decent army even attempting it.”

Latrielle frowned. “Any man willing to give such a reprehensible order would surely lose the loyalty of all his soldiers.”

“Right. Well, it goes to show that loyalty is not the only means through which one can mobilize an army.”

“This has that man’s name written all over it...”

“Colonel Oswald Coulthard, you mean?”

“Indeed,” Latrielle replied with a bitter nod, having suffered heavy losses to the man’s underhanded ploys at Fort Boneire. Oswald had gotten his soldiers to hide inside barrels of gunpowder, then ordered them to ignite the powder using an external signal. Those who lit the fuses had naturally been blown to pieces.

It seemed that Oswald—the man who was High Britannia’s commander in all but name—had an affinity for plans that required sacrificing his allies.

“Buxerou served as a powerful unifying force among the Third Army. Do you think the enemy knew this and abused that fact...?” Regis mused aloud.

“Hm... Perhaps Oswald had already predicted that their land routes might be severed and their attempt to take the capital might fail. This attack on Grebeauvoir may not have been a spur-of-the-moment decision.”

Regis was also the sort of person to prepare for various scenarios, but the thought that Oswald really had been ready to take Grebeauvoir left him in awe. High Britannia evidently had Langobarti on their side, so it would have been far easier for them to ride the river to the sea and escape home. Even if that didn't work, they could have simply traveled by horseback; Langobarti had a prosperous horse breeding industry and were famed for their cavalry.

When Regis had first heard the news, he had guessed that the High Britannian Army had captured Grebeauvoir at the whim of the new queen—that was simply how pointless the move seemed to be. Now that he had the full story, however, he could tell that Oswald had made a considerable number of preparations for this mission. Had he foreseen the queen's desires, or did the city truly hold some strategic value?

"There's one thing I just don't understand though..." Regis muttered to himself.

"And what's that?"

"Oh, er... What's Oswald thinking? What's his nature? I'm having a hard time grasping his character."

"Isn't that a given? You've never even met the man."

"Just as you can learn about an author by reading their books, you can understand a commander from their strategies. But he's a formidable opponent..."

"Oh really?" Latrielle asked.

Regis didn't think he had said anything strange, but the prince was now regarding him with a curious expression. It was possible that he didn't believe in such a concept, and the fact that Regis still couldn't gauge Oswald's intentions made it even less convincing.

Does he have a goal of some sort there...?

A plan that involved sacrificing one's own soldiers was definitely underhanded, but it was also most effective against a nation whose troops were famously honest and upfront. Oswald was smart; he had an extreme knack for micromanagement and winning small engagements, but when it came

to his grand strategy as a whole, he had carried the war on a series of poor and overall reckless decisions. It was almost as though he was purposely marching his army to their deaths.

Assuming High Britannia were using the war to stimulate their economy, there was no need for them to single out Belgaria, which was known to be the strongest country on the continent. And while the tactics Oswald employed with his nation's new rifles were beyond impressive, did he really think he would reach the capital with a mere thirty thousand soldiers? He had managed to capture Grebeauvoir in the blink of an eye, but surely he should have given an order to retreat instead.

Admittedly, there was some potential value to their current move. Were High Britannia to hold the fortress for a prolonged period, it would vastly lower Belgaria's reputation, potentially spurring the armies of the surrounding nations to join the war themselves. Regis had already done what he could to prevent this.

Could it be that Oswald was planning to use the prisoners of war as bargaining chips to ensure his safe passage back to High Britannia? Regis couldn't imagine Latrielle would allow them to escape so easily, especially considering all the damage they had done to the imperial army.

"Mn..." Regis groaned.

"...Buxerou chose the wrong man to command in his absence," Latrielle eventually said with a sigh. "Regardless of whether his superior's life was at risk, as long as there was reason to suspect an enemy trap, he should have prioritized the safety of the fortress."

"Right. And there were definitely ways to check the army without wasting time..."

"For instance?"

"They could have stationed officers who would recognize the lieutenant general and his men outside the fortress when they sent out the interception unit, for instance. These men would have potentially lost their lives, but there would have been far fewer casualties."

“That sounds appropriate.”

“It’s a rather simple plan. They must have panicked.”

“I suspect so.”

Regis pointed to the city portion of Grebeauvoir on the map. “Our first course of action is to rescue the civilians. We’ll almost certainly suffer some casualties in the process, but the soldiers will struggle to fight if we leave so many hostages.”

“It’s standard practice to assume that the civilians of a captured city are already as good as dead.”

“Do you not think we should put at least *some* effort into rescuing them before making that assumption?”

For a brief moment, Latrielle’s expression was tinged with surprise. He folded his arms and closed his eyes. “Of course. I don’t intend to sit back and allow helpless civilians to die.”

“Yes, sir.”

Latrielle once again opened only his right eye. “Do you have a plan, Regis?”

Regis paused in thought for a moment, resting a hand on his chin.

“So this is a troublesome matter even for an esteemed tactician.”

“A-An esteemed tactician...?” For a moment, Regis thought he might have misheard the prince entirely.

“Is there any reason I shouldn’t refer to you as such? Just consider your accomplishments.”

“I can’t say I deserve the recognition. That aside though, there are a number of ways to rescue the people of Grebeauvoir.”

“Is that so?”

“I’m just not quite sure which one is best...”

Latrielle didn’t respond, instead just widening his open eye in surprise.

Regis awkwardly cleared his throat. “I really am just regurgitating knowledge

that has already been published elsewhere.”

“I’ve read more treatises on strategy than I care to remember, but none that would apply to this situation. What country is this book from?”

“I don’t think it’s something one would find in the imperial court...”

Regis had a particular interest in fantasy, drama, and miscellaneous essays. It was his nature to habitually read anything he could get his hands on, but he found works that played around with new, unfamiliar concepts the most intriguing.

Latrielle’s own adjutant Germain had written fantasy off as unnecessary to the Empire, so Regis naturally assumed that Latrielle avoided it as well. He had seen the books in the prince’s study, and not a single one had particularly caught his eye.

That said, I’d actually be quite concerned to see our future emperor with a copy of A Tale of Villainy Most Heinous *on his bookshelf... It’s a story in which girls are shipped in boxes labeled as food. Admittedly, it was quite a thrilling read.*

“Erm... The source of my knowledge aside, I do have a plan to propose.”

“Very good. I shall have you elaborate once everyone is gathered.”

Regis checked his pocket watch again. It was already nearing two, meaning it was about time for the others to arrive.

Latrielle gave a bitter smile. “Hm... It’s as I thought. You’re quite unique, Regis.”

“I respectfully disagree. All the knowledge I possess has long since been accessible throughout the Empire.”

“No, I’m not referring to your plans. I am a prince, a leader of armies, and a skilled swordsman. There are many who follow me, but few who dare question me.”

“Wh... Have I spoken out of turn?”

“When I suggested leaving the captured civilians to die, with the response you gave me, you might as well have said, ‘At least bother to put in the effort.’”

Regis winced, wondering whether he had acted too disrespectfully. “Th-That’s...”

“I understand that you are skilled, Regis, but I must admit, there were times when I wondered why Argentina permits such disrespect and a lack of decorum. I thought her foolish for doing so. Now that we speak, however, I’m starting to understand where she’s coming from.”

“Um...”

Unsure whether he was being scolded or praised, Regis ambiguously nodded. If Latrielle considered it disrespect, then surely this was a reprimand, but the prince looked more at peace than he had ever seen him before.

“Because of my position, no one lectures me anymore.”

“That wasn’t my intent—”

“All right. I see your point, Regis. Abandoning the effort because of the difficulty alone would be unjustified indolence on my part. Thank you for your advice.”

“That may be, but what if the plan fails? Surely then, leaving the civilians would have been the correct decision to make.”

Latrielle merely shook his head. “It seems I was rushing to make a decision, but as commander, I must consider all possibilities. From here on out, please do not hesitate to scold me for my haste.”

“Y-Yes, sir.”

Interlude

The fortified city of Grebeauvoir—

A grand terrace looked out across a courtyard, at the center of which was a pond drawn from the nearby river. The pond was fashioned in such a way that its water flowed without pause, which did wonders at cooling the surrounding air.

The terrace itself was covered by an awning that blocked the intense sunlight and furnished with softly angled chairs in which one could kick back and relax. These chairs were basket woven, meaning the wind could easily pass through them. It was as though the entire area was designed to maximize comfort, and so it was easy to forget about the summer heat.

Sprawled on one of the chairs was a woman in a silk dress, who leisurely plopped a piece of fruit into her mouth. “Oho. Belgarian castles sure are pleasant,” she cooed.

She was Margaret Stillart, the queen of High Britannia. A native Belgarian maid waited beside her with a wine glass in hand, while another held a bottle, and a third some fruit. They provided whatever services the queen desired.

Near the door leading into the fortress, which was several paces from Margaret’s chair, stood the sole man in the vicinity—a man who wore a white uniform, and a slender, single-edged longsword at his hip. He was her strategy officer, Colonel Oswald Coulthard.

“O dazzling Queen Margaret, it pleases me beyond belief that Castle Grebeauvoir is to your liking.”

“Indeed. I must admit though, capturing it really was quite the farce. We should have been in La Branne by now, and yet here we are, among the mountains on the country’s northern edge. This certainly hasn’t gone as planned, has it? I didn’t get anything I wanted. The fact this castle dares to oppose my will is the only thing I like about it.”

Oswald lowered his head. “My apologies. This petty officer lacked the

strength to see Her Majesty's wishes through."

The High Britannian Army had been a mere stone's throw from Verseilles, only to be thwarted at the last hurdle. Their supply unit had never arrived, having ultimately been annihilated, and a report had come in that the Fourth Army was approaching from behind. Oswald had accepted the likelihood that he would be put to death when he proposed a retreat, but much to his surprise, the queen had instead burst into laughter. She had been more jovial than he had ever seen her before, to the point that she even started skipping around like a child.

Margaret perceived war as nothing more than a way to kill time. The prosperity of her nation, the extravagant buildings and treasures to be claimed in Belgaria... None of these mattered to her in the slightest. She had been granted everything from birth—a blessed lineage, enchanting looks, outstanding talents—and so she quickly grew fed up with life. It hadn't been long before her days were filled with nothing but boredom.

Margaret twisted in her chair, moving in such a way that her dress rode up to reveal her pale white thighs. "Hah... Is Belgaria going to attack again? Our little vacation has dragged on for much too long."

"The enemy army set up camp three miles away at noon. They number just under twenty thousand, and our intel suggests they brought with them a large number of construction workers. They will presumably be readying *something* before they attack."

Margaret let out a refined giggle. "Is that so? I can't wait..."

"I shall ensure that nothing worrisome befalls the esteemed Queen Margaret. Please, spend your days in peace."

"In peace? I'll die of boredom."

"Then allow me to summon the musicians."

"I've heard their songs a hundred times before."

"We have rare wine..."

"I can no longer tell the difference between one brand and the next. They're

all so delicious. All so boring...”

“Why not enjoy the rustic beauty of two prisoners fighting to the death?”

“Why should I care which one of them dies?”

“Then I shall take part.”

“That makes it even more pointless. No matter who you’re up against, and no matter how close the match, you’re going to win anyway.”

“...My humblest apologies.”

It was at this moment that the door connecting the terrace to the fortress was forcefully pushed open. The booming voice of a young man resounded from within, speaking in Germanian.

«Oh, Queen Margaret! There you are!»

Out stepped a man in his mid-twenties, dressed in an impeccably neat military uniform. He boasted a tough but young-looking face, and the way he conducted himself made him seem like an adult who knew all that life had to offer. He was prone to going on about the nature of the world, but despite his confidence, his youth made him ignorant to much of what all men came to learn with time.

This man was Paul Langschultz, the new king of Langobarti.

Paul was noticeably disciplined—his hair was swept back without even a single strand astray, his uniform was the textbook definition of perfection, and numerous medals lined his chest. It seemed nobody in Germania had ever reprimanded him for his taste in women, however, as he had taken to Margaret rather warmly. He had asked for her hand in marriage the very first time they met, and then at nearly every subsequent meeting since.



«Have a look at this! I found an odd dress in the city. You like odd things, yes? Then rejoice!»

«Oh, I see... I'd say you're the real oddity here, Paul.» Margaret replied in fluent Germanian, her words causing the king's eyes to crinkle in delight.

Oswald, meanwhile, maintained a flawless half-smile, then reverently bowed to the ruler of their allied nation. He couldn't help but wonder whether the queen's last statement had been a compliment or an insult. It was most likely the latter. Paul was surely smart enough to realize this, but he seemed happy nonetheless. He certainly was an oddity.

«Margaret, you are as lovely as ever. Incidentally...what became of the dress I gave you yesterday? A splendid piece, it was.»

«I could not stand it, so I threw it away.»

«I see. That's understandable. It was a foolish little number, after all.»

«Hey. Is Belgaria going to attack again? We've gone out of our way to occupy their base, so it'd be rather drab if they put an end to the war here.»

Paul thought for a moment. He was crass enough to ogle Margaret and brazenly glance at her exposed thighs even while standing at attention, but he did not lack the skills needed for his position.

«Once summer passes, the other countries in Germania will have finished their preparations to join us. I've heard that Estaburg in the east has declared war as well. The Hispanians are cowards, but even they'll be willing to fight once the Empire's spread thin on the northern and eastern fronts. Their kind is rather susceptible to bait, after all.»

Paul always spoke conclusively, as though he had extreme faith that his words were true. This was because he kept any uncertain speculation to himself. As far as he was concerned, rather than wasting his time voicing mere theories, he was better off gathering more information to confirm his suspicions—such was the Germanian way of doing things.

The king was by no means incompetent. His analysis of the situation matched what Oswald had gleaned himself, but even so, Margaret regarded him with

scrutinous eyes.

«I don’t care about the other countries. When will the slaughter begin? Where is my mountain of corpses?»

«Belgaria has gathered fifty thousand construc—»

«Oswald already said.»

«Hm.» Paul gave Oswald a rather displeased stare, but the de facto commander merely bowed his head out of respect.

«It pains me to admit it, but Her Majesty did request my opinion on the war effort just a moment ago.»

«Think nothing of it. You are a High Britannian strategy officer; there is nothing wrong with you reporting to your superior. Now then, you were asking when Belgaria will attack, correct? That much remains unknown,» Paul said, offering a very upright answer.

«Then I suppose I really will die of boredom...» Margaret sighed.

Paul shook his head. «We can’t have that. I need you to be my queen.»

«Oh, is that so...? But being queen of some small country sounds even more mundane than ruling High Britannia.»

Oswald broke into a cold sweat. Margaret had abruptly dismissed their ally as the king of “some small country,” though Paul seemed entirely unperturbed.

«I shall not be the king of a small country forever. San Preussen has gradually been absorbing the other nations in the Germanian Federation. Once it reaches mine, I will show no mercy. After using Grebeauvoir as a foothold to secure more Belgarian land, I’ll take in my neighbors, then swallow San Preussen whole!»

«I’ll consider your proposition once you’re king of Germania.»

«Splendid!» Paul exclaimed, confidently nodding to himself. «In that case, to secure our engagement, I must smack down the Belgarians before us. They have a mere twenty thousand troops to our thirty thousand; I see no reason we would lose.»

Oswald couldn’t help but feel that Paul was treating the situation much too lightly. The Langobart forces stationed at Grebeauvoir may have made up only a small portion of the nation’s total army, but the ten thousand High Britannians were all Oswald had at his disposal. He had lost twenty thousand men and several warships since their invasion began, and the king treating High Britannia’s soldiers as his own to use was simply unacceptable.

«Please excuse my boldness, but High Britannia’s soldiers are still exhausted from the long march, so they will have a hard time keeping up with your nation’s elites.»

If you’re heading out, go with your own men—that was what Oswald had truly wanted to say.

Paul pondered the situation again. «I see... Will they need time to recover then?»

«Our foes wave the flag of the First Army—the flag of Second Prince Latrielle himself,» Oswald explained. «They are the strongest force the Empire has to offer. They have many capable horsemen, so we will undeniably find ourselves at a disadvantage if we fight on the open plains.»

High Britannia’s soldiers were already feeling war-weary, so keeping up their morale in the midst of combat wouldn’t be easy. Paul was quite evidently displeased about having his proposal rejected, but he was no fool. He swiftly changed the topic of conversation.

«I received a report that the First Army had a certain strategist traveling with them. Do you know him? ‹Aurick› is apparently the name he goes by.»

«That’s...»

«This information must be important if our spies decided to relay it, but I’ve never heard the name before.»

«He is the tactician who captured Fort Volks.»

Paul’s eyes widened in intrigue. «Interesting... I did hear about the fortress being seized, but I was under the impression that the fourth princess was responsible. Am I wrong?»

«He serves Fourth Princess Marie Quatre Argentina as a staff officer, and additionally managed to sever my supply chain. He's a dangerous opponent.»

«I see. It makes perfect sense to sever the supply lines of an invading force.»

«Yes, unfortunately.»

The tactician Regis d'Aurick had managed to sink steamships with mere sailing ships, and he had produced fog at will. His skills were extraordinary enough that rumors claimed he had a contract with the devil, but no matter what Oswald said about the man, it could not serve as an excuse for his failure. He promptly shut his mouth, deciding that such talk was pointless.

Had they only been facing Latrielle, Oswald was sure he could have managed with Langobarti backing him. The presence of this infamous strategist, however, flipped the script considerably.

«If that tactician is indeed there, then affording him time is the worst thing we could do...» Paul mused.

«Perhaps, but I think sending our exhausted soldiers to engage the enemy would have a much worse result. Grebeauvoir is rather uniquely designed, but the defenses around the city are weak. I presume the First Army intends to have their workers build siege weapons so that they can attack the southern ramparts.»

«Even if they do manage to capture the city, there's still a strong wall separating them from the fortress.»

«Indeed, but I have a feeling Sir Aurick will want to prioritize the civilians. My sources tell me he is the compassionate sort.»

«Oh... But what about the prince?»

«Latrielle would not have brought Sir Aurick with him unless he intended to take his advice seriously. He must have been appointed for his skilled responses during his previous engagements.»

Regis d'Aurick served Argentina as her strategist, though her naivete when it came to military matters meant he essentially commanded her forces as well. The fact she would concede such a vital subordinate to Latrielle was a sure sign

that she no longer intended to oppose his rule. Or perhaps she instead saw this battle as one that would decide the fate of the Empire.

It was practically known by this point that Aurick had joined the expedition, but nobody could confirm that the fourth princess hadn't come with him. The risk was low, as her flag was nowhere to be seen, but Oswald couldn't shake the feeling that the Empire's Fourth Army might be lurking nearby. If the Black Knight Jerome was present, that made leaving the fortress an even worse move.

The reality of the situation was one that Oswald couldn't have imagined in his wildest dreams. Even with his great analytical skills, he never would have guessed that Regis had merely joined the expedition to avoid a practical exam. The surrounding nations believed that even Belgaria's pet poodles were the mightiest around.

«If we allow Belgaria to occupy the city portion of Grebeauvoir, they could use the shadows of the buildings to easily approach the fortress walls, making them much harder to protect...» Oswald said. «They're going to start by aiming for the southern outskirts of the iron district.»

«Can you say that for certain?»

«I'm merely anticipating the enemy's goal, so I cannot say anything for certain.»

«Then I can't risk sending out my troops. I'll gladly send them out to meet the enemy, but I won't have them go somewhere the enemy might not even be!»

«Very well then. I will station High Britannia's riflemen there instead.»

«Leave the cannons in the fortress. No matter what happens with the city, we won't lose so long as we hold our position here.»

«...Understood.»

Why was the king of Langobarti giving orders on the placement of High Britannia's cannons? Oswald wasn't his subordinate, but it seemed the man already considered Margaret and himself a married couple, and so he treated her armies as his own. When all was said and done, however, this was nothing more than a matter of semantics. Oswald had already intended to leave the

cannons in the fortress, along with enough High Britannian soldiers to keep Margaret well protected.

Oswald had considered a number of potential situations. He knew that High Britannia's new rifles could deal with any siege weapons Belgaria could muster, but the presence of their fifty thousand workers raised another possibility—perhaps they weren't building siege weapons at all. Word had it that Fort Volks had been captured through the use of an underground tunnel, but that was surely impossible in this case; the nearby river meant that any such passageways would be flooded with water.

Another approach that Latrielle could take was to construct another fortress south of Grebeauvoir. In that case, the First Army would simply retreat from their current position once the lines were secure. Recapturing the stolen city would naturally be a better deterrent for the surrounding nations, but as long as their new fortress could put a stopper on any foreign invasions, that was enough. If this was the plan that the Empire ultimately went with, then Paul was right—their only option was to leave the fortress to meet them. Losing their strategic value was as good as a loss.

It was also possible that Belgaria might force a battle on the open plains, but with only twenty thousand troops at their disposal, they would surely be overestimating their strength in doing so. But this only posed further questions: Did they have reinforcements elsewhere? Would those reinforcements arrive before the other nations of Germania could invade?

Whatever happened, all Oswald could do now was watch and wait. He could feel his heart pounding in his chest. Margaret only needed to give the order to march, and his plans would crumble to pieces. He shot her a brief glance, but she simply yawned; it seemed that all their talk of war had bored her, and so she shooed everyone away with her hands.

"I'm all sweaty," she announced. "Prepare a bath for me, Oswald."

"Of course."

Oswald sighed to himself, politely asked Paul to leave, then had the maids begin preparing the queen's bathwater.

Chapter 4: The Grebeauvoir Rescue Operation

More than half a month had passed since Regis departed from the capital. Camp life certainly wasn't the most convenient, but the soldiers hadn't complained too much; sieges were generally expected to last two or three months, with longer ones even stretching on for half a year.

Belgaria couldn't afford to spend half a year on this rescue operation, however. Second Prince Latrielle himself was at the helm, and with him was the First Army, the Empire's greatest elites. After three months passed, it would be hard to predict what the other nations might do—there was a chance that the other countries in the Germanian Federation as well as Hispania to the south might launch an invasion.

A long expedition required adequate preparations, which involved securing weapons and food, investigating routes, and hiring a great number of transporters. It wasn't necessarily the case that the surrounding nations would invade Belgaria the moment it seemed to be in a tough spot, but they couldn't rule out the possibility that they might conspire in their preparations, or that their invasion schedules might just coincidentally happen to overlap...

High Britannia was already colluding with nations in the Germanian Federation—the Grand Duchy of Varden had attacked Fort Volks as soon as the war began, and now they had formed an alliance with the Kingdom of Langobarti. The other countries seemed to be sitting on the fence, but if the Empire failed to make any meaningful progress through August and September, it would presumably have a lot more company to deal with.

Not that Regis intended for their expedition to continue that many months.

The day's heat had thankfully dissipated as the sun sank toward the western horizon. The sky had turned a shade of orange, and the shadows of the mountains stretched across the western half of Grebeauvoir, partially shrouding the city in darkness. Soon, the sun would completely disappear beyond the mountains.

No matter where Regis looked, he was surrounded by robust soldiers—troops

clad in armor with spears and shields in hand, awaiting the order to advance. Their formation was simple enough: lines of foot soldiers in the center, with cavalry fortifying their flanks.

Regis was stationed at the very center of the foot soldiers, where they were keeping their strategic headquarters. The high-ranking officers wore full plate armor and rode atop horses, but as Regis could not ride on horseback himself, he had to do his best to keep up on foot. He had managed to make enough excuses to avoid wearing armor, but he was forced to equip a sword for the first time in a very long while. As far as he was concerned, it was nothing but a hindrance.

In the Fourth Army, Regis would normally be riding either in his carriage or with Altina on her horse. As one might expect, however, he did not receive such preferential treatment here. Rather than the success of the mission, he was more worried about whether or not he could avoid falling behind.

A bugle sounded, playing the tune that signaled for everyone to keep quiet. Silence descended over the troops before it had even finished.

From atop his horse, Latrielle addressed the two thousand combatants and the sappers behind them. “Soldiers of Belgaria! We are up against not only those underhanded High Britannians, but also the thoughtless Langobarts who so shamelessly abused the war to enter our territory! They deceived the soldiers of the Grebeauvoir fortress, unjustly occupying the city not through strength, but trickery! It is up to us to deliver judgment unto these villains, so full of themselves that they believe they can steal our land with their schemes! Elites of the First Army—justice stands with us!”

“Hurraaah!” the soldiers cried. They thrust up their spears and screamed, *“Vive Latrielle! Vive l’Empire!”*

Latrielle drew the weapon at his hip as well—the Empire’s second sword, the *Armée Victoire Volonté* (the Victorious Call to Arms). It was a perfectly straight single-edged sword said to lead armies to victory. He sliced through the wind, turning the blade’s tip toward the fortified city as he let out a cry.

“Avance de l’armée!”

Messengers spread his order, then the bugles carried it further still. The

Belgarian Army simultaneously began its advance on Grebeauvoir.

Regis moved alongside the others, matching the pace of the foot soldiers—though keeping up was the most he could do. The men were equipped with heavy armor, long spears, and large shields, and they had to march perfectly in time with everyone around them. Despite all this, they moved at such an impressive speed that Regis had to break into a jog to avoid getting left behind.

The troops hadn't made it very far at all before Regis was gasping for air. His legs were twisting more with each step, and one thought in particular dominated his mind: he was going to die.

I might actually be the first casualty of this battle, and my cause of death? Trampled by my fellow soldiers. How unfortunate.

Regis was marching at the speed dictated by the bugles, but those bugles were gradually increasing their tempo. He was almost sprinting now.

How could this be? They were still 60 arpents (4,287 m) away from the fortress. The plan was to march up to the 40 arpent (2,858 m) line, and then have only the front half of the foot soldiers advance. If the enemy sent a unit to intercept them, the cavalry waiting along the flanks would then charge.

"Hah... Hah... A-Are we charging already...?"

Regis was starting to grow anxious. Had he made a mistake, accidentally getting himself mixed up with the vanguard charging toward the fortress? He could still see Latrielle on his white horse, so that couldn't have been the case, but he suspected that the plan had at some point changed to a full-army charge without him being informed.

He fell farther and farther behind until he was eventually with the foot soldiers at the back of their headquarters.

"Tactician?! What's wrong?!" A heavily armored foot soldier raised a bewildered cry from beneath his metal helmet.

Before the First Army's plan had been put into action, Regis had been introduced with much applause as the Fourth Army's tactician—the man who had captured Fort Volks with a mere two thousand men. Many also knew about his achievements in the war, word of which had spread far and wide.

Despite his grand reputation, however, Regis's breathing was already labored. Rather than an expert tactician, he seemed more like a corpse one would see by the roadside. This was simply the inevitable result of someone who spent all his time reading—rarely even venturing out to stretch his legs—being suddenly thrust into an army march.

"Ngh... Gah... No... I'm just..."

Regis clutched at his chest as it became increasingly harder to breathe. He was at his limit, but stopping wasn't an option; the soldiers behind him would ultimately just knock him to the ground, and by the time the entire army had passed, he would have been flattened into a pelt rug.

He was beginning to feel nauseous, and it was then that the helmet-wearing soldier suddenly grabbed him by the shoulder. "Hey! Get him to the carriage!" the man yelled to the others. "The tactician's sick!"

The soldier beside him nodded, then looked at Regis with mild wonderment. "Amazing! D'you see how pale he's gotten from a little walking?!"

"He can hardly breathe! It's not lung disease, is it? Oi, hurry! Hurry!"

To the two soldiers, their current marching speed was slow enough for a casual chat; it was like a leisurely stroll. That much was to be expected of the elites that made up the First Army, though perhaps Regis was just unnaturally weak.

There was a wooden two-horse carriage at the rear of the First Army's headquarters that allowed for the injured to be swiftly evacuated. Regis was promptly shoved inside, and while there was a thick blanket spread across the carriage interior, it did very little to cushion his landing as he stumbled in headfirst.

Inside the carriage was the military doctor. He was short and fat, which was rare to see in the Belgarian military, and no sooner did he notice Regis than he frantically started examining his face. "Are you all right, Tactician?!"

"I'm going to die..."

"My word!"

“Nn... Hah... It’s been a long time since I ran this fast...”

The doctor cocked his head. “Mn? Where were you running?”

And thus, Regis was the very first person to drop out of the Grebeauvoir rescue operation.

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“Rearguard, hold!” Latrielle barked. “Vanguard, continue your advance!”

Half of the soldiers came to a stop 40 arpents (2,858 m) from Grebeauvoir. By then, Regis had recovered considerably, and he watched the battle unfold from the medical carriage. The canopied wagon allowed him to see so far that it was as though he were riding a horse himself.

“The enemy...isn’t coming to meet us,” Regis murmured to himself.

“Erm, Tactician? Are you okay?”

The doctor’s concern made Regis feel rather ashamed, but he decided to be honest. “I’m fine. I simply couldn’t keep up with the march. I never expected the First Army’s foot soldiers to move at such an impressive speed.”

“I see. Well, I’m glad you’re not ill.” The man offered a very doctorly response in a gentle tone.

Had Altina been there, she would have told Regis to ride on her horse. Jerome, in contrast, would have screamed something like, “And you call yourself a soldier of the Empire?! What utter trash!”

Now that Regis thought about it, was Jerome doing okay? He was currently supporting the eastern front. Perhaps the unfamiliar terrain was giving him trouble, though it was easier to picture Jerome himself being a nuisance to his surroundings. The tactician had considered writing letters to him as well, but he didn’t know whether Jerome would actually respond to them.

There was a sudden boom from somewhere in the distance.

“They’ve opened fire...”

White smoke started to rise from the fortress portion of the city. The advancing Belgarian foot soldiers also had cannons at their disposal, but they

were still too far away to use them.

The First Army had acquired Type-41 Elswicks from High Britannia in their most recent battle, and the cannons boasted an impressive range of around 45 arpents (3,216 m). They had a limited supply of ammunition for the Type-41s, however, and their cannoneers were not yet accustomed to using breech-loaded cannons. For these reasons, they had instead brought with them their traditional mid-sized cannons that could only fire 28 arpents (2,000 m).

Firing from atop the city walls granted the enemy army an even greater firing range, meaning the First Army would need to endure being one-sidedly fired upon before they could even get within range of using their own cannons. That said, Belgaria's losses from this bombardment would certainly be nowhere near as severe as those from La Frenge; the Seventh Army had experienced firsthand how dangerous it was to approach in a tightly knit formation, so the foot soldiers this time around were deliberately spread out.

Those in the imperial army were not fools—they had since researched and trained to deal with enemy cannon bombardments. The Belgarian foot soldiers were maintaining a good distance from one another as they advanced, and, in the case that the enemy attempted to intercept them in a more closely knit formation, they were prepared to come back together right before making contact. Such was the strategy they had devised.

In the Fourth Army under Altina's command, only Regis would have proposed such a plan, but the First Army had strategists like Germain and wise generals among its ranks. They were the ones who had analyzed the tactics that resulted in the Seventh Army's defeat and devised countermeasures, and it was for this reason that Regis had spent so many of their meetings listening in silence.

The commander of the cannoneers gave the order. Belgaria was finally within range.

"Commence fire!"

The air thundered with cannon fire, and moments later, a barrage of shells struck the walls of Grebeauvoir. Gray clouds of sand and smoke burst forth from each impact, eventually clearing to reveal missing fragments of stone and collapsed enemy soldiers. It seemed that hitting the walls delivered more

residual damage than hitting the ground, as the shattered pieces of stone would often take out those nearby.

Belgaria was surpassed in both range and firepower, and its opponent was firing from a much higher position. Anyone would have expected this to put the First Army at an overwhelming disadvantage, but this was far from the case; in fact, their bombardment was completely overwhelming High Britannia. There was no secret to this development—it was simply down to the excellence of the cannoneers.

It was only natural to assume that High Britannia's troops were sufficiently trained, but the cannoneers of the First Army, handpicked from the Empire's two hundred thousand soldiers, truly were the crème de la crème. They could overturn their technical disadvantage using nothing but skill.

Regis stood on the cabman's perch, watching the battlefield in amazement. *To think that trained artillery could make such a difference!*

The cannons available when he had worked under Marquis Thénezay had served as little more than a deterrent against barbarians, while the Fourth Army —or rather, the Beilschmidt border regiment—instead focused its attention on spears and swords, meaning its cannoneers were largely untrained.

Regis was aware of how wide the gap was between a skilled and an unskilled archer, and while he had assumed a similar logic would apply to cannons and guns, he was surprised to see just how superior the First Army's cannoneers were. The enemy was weakening before his very eyes, and at the same time, their attention was gathering on the First Army's artillery.

It's about time...

Regis stumbled down from the cabman's perch, alighting from the carriage just as the first wave of casualties was being carted in from the front line. It was a sight he could never grow used to; witnessing the bloodied men with missing limbs always snatched away his willpower.

Even so, Regis mustered his resolve and broke into a sprint. He slipped through the foot soldiers on standby and returned to Latrielle at the troop headquarters. This time, he didn't have to travel far enough for him to almost collapse.

“Your Highness!”

“Mrk... Regis. I was just wondering why I couldn’t see you anywhere.”

“My apologies. I, err...admittedly could not keep up with the march, so I had to be moved into the medical carriage.”

Latrielle cocked his head to one side. “The march...?”

“Are you feeling under the weather?” Germain asked. “Or did a stray bullet get you, by chance?”

It seemed that neither man could comprehend the idea of someone being unable to keep up with a simple march.

“Well, I do feel a bit... No, not exactly... I-In any case!” Regis enthusiastically pointed toward the enemy camp. “This is our chance!”

Latrielle nodded. “Yes, I see. Their cannon fire is all concentrated on our artillery. All right, Germain. Mobilize the siege weapons!”

“Yes, sir!”

A messenger was sent out at once. The buglers changed their tune a short moment later, spurring a portion of the infantry stationed in the rearguard to advance. They weren’t formal soldiers but hired sappers—victims of the enduring war. Belgaria already boasted that its men were the strongest on the continent, and these men were additionally furious at High Britannia for having burned down their houses and destroyed their crops. They had volunteered to join the expedition themselves.

The men roared as they pushed the siege weapons—massive platforms and devices made of wood and springs. They were catapults.

These weapons had frequented the battlefield prior to cannons entering the scene, but now they were relics that rarely saw use. The kickback of the springs could be used to send stones flying through the air, but the devices themselves were incredibly feeble when compared to their modern counterpart. The stones were heavy but lighter than cannon shells, and as the projectiles varied in size and weight, they were harder to aim. They would also do considerably less damage.

When the High Britannians saw these outdated weapons being moved onto the battlefield, they had presumably pointed and laughed.

“Halt!”

The order was given once the six catapults were brought to the agreed-upon distance. They were pointed toward the iron district, and with how far they were positioned from the fortress, it was unlikely that the enemy’s guns or cannons would reach them. If the First Army could secure a base within Grebeauvoir, they would have a greater advantage in the siege.

That was when High Britannia opened fire on the catapults.

There was a massive *crack* as one of the catapults was immediately destroyed. It had been struck at the base, then collapsed as its wheels splintered from the sudden force. The sappers tasked with moving it screamed and retreated.

The sun was already sinking behind the mountains. While the sky was still red, the world below was growing increasingly dim.

The heat from the cannonball quickly ignited the struck catapult, emboldening the silhouettes of the fleeing construction workers. The First Army concentrated its fire on the cannon that had managed to hit them, then High Britannia promptly retaliated. Once again, the two nations were exchanging shots.

As this went on, the remaining five catapults went largely ignored. Regis had assumed the enemy wouldn’t attack such ancient devices; he had thought that their attention would instead be drawn to the cannons, which were perceived as much more of a threat.

“Fire!” Latrielle ordered.

While sappers were tasked with moving the catapults, trained soldiers were the ones actually operating them. On the order, they pulled the fasteners one after another. The compressed springs were released, and wooden arms longer than carriages swung with enough force to lob the stones in their buckets.

These weren’t just any stones, however—they had ropes fastened to them, and as the projectiles soared through the air, the heaps of rope a short distance

from the wooden arms were dragged along with them. They had been intertwined, much like the shrouds of a sailing ship. The extra weight and air resistance shortened their range, but...just like that, a crisscross of ropes spanned from the bank of the wide river to the very top of the city walls.

The sappers cheered. Their plan had succeeded.

The foot soldiers who had already advanced to the riverbank flooded toward the shroud bridge. They had one-sidedly endured cannon fire up to that point, but now they could finally switch to the offensive. They brandished their spears and then began to sprint, all the while screaming as though they were already victorious.

These rope bridges were far from stable ground; running on them was no easy feat, and a single wrong step would send the troops down into the fierce river below. And yet, a great many soldiers made it across.

“Hraaaaaah!” they roared.

Regis had seen the soldiers traverse such bridges many times before as they practiced for the assault, but it was still an impressive sight. What astounded him the most was that they had managed it when the sun was setting and it was hard to see even one’s own feet.

Once the soldiers had rushed inside the city and opened the gates, the First Army could send in the cavalry. Then, at the very least, the iron district would be secure.

Looking on from afar, Germain nodded. “Your Highness, our soldiers are breaching the walls. With how things are headed, we might be able to secure the gate.”

“Hm... What do you think about the enemy’s movements?”

“They’re fighting back, but...it shouldn’t be much of an issue, even if their cannons and guns sever a rope or two.”

“I see.”

Despite Latrielle and Germain’s exchange, Regis felt that something was...off. Even so, he refrained from voicing his concerns. What mattered most right now

was how High Britannia would respond.

What will they do next...?

The First Army had formed a bridge using siege weapons that were thought to belong in a museum. The enemy's guns could most likely do some damage to the ropes, but not sever the bridge completely.

Soldiers continued to cross the bridge. Once they were inside Grebeauvoir, it was only a matter of time. When the battle turned to close-quarters combat, the High Britannian soldiers had no chance at defeating the infamous warriors of Belgaria.

Evening had almost turned to night. Moving under the cover of darkness, the soldiers of the Belgarian First Army finally neared the top of Grebeauvoir's ramparts. They had already whittled down the enemy troops atop the walls with arrows and cannon fire, and now but one man remained, holding his gun at the ready.

"Graaah!"

One of the Belgarian soldiers roared as he thrust out his spear, forcing its head straight through the High Britannian's heart. Fresh blood splattered across the stone below, and the enemy soldier collapsed with a pained yelp before vomiting up a mass of red and black.

"Hurraaah!"

The first Belgarian to reach the top of the ramparts let out a mighty cry...but his jubilations were short-lived. A sudden cacophony of gunshots tore through the air, and the next thing he knew, his armor was riddled with holes.

"Hrk—?!"

His pole arm still raised in misplaced celebration, the soldier looked down over the Grebeauvoir iron district to see thousands of sharpshooters lying in wait. Their commander raised a hand, then gave an order in High Britannian.

«Fire!»

The echoing shots immediately resumed, and the Belgarian soldiers were cut down one by one as they came into view.

“Dammit!”

One man leapt from the wall and into the city, but dropping from such a high altitude while wearing armor was a recipe for disaster. His knees let out a sickening crunch as he landed on the foot-hardened soil.

“Gaah! E-Eh...?!”

«Belgarian sighted!»

It wasn’t until after the soldier struck the ground that he realized there were High Britannian spearmen waiting at the base of the walls. There was nothing he could do; he wasn’t even able to stand.

“N-No... I surrender! I yield!”

«Get him!»

Despite his pleas, the Belgarian soldier was surrounded at once and mercilessly stabbed to death.

Germain was watching the First Army’s attack from afar, and he practically shrieked as the battle started to unfold. “Your Highness! Our men are being fired on from inside the city! The enemy must have a great number of soldiers stationed in the iron district!”

“So it seems...” Latrielle twisted around to look at Regis, shooting him a glare that demanded to know what they’d do next.

Regis produced a small watch from his breast pocket. It was already dim outside, so even when he squinted, he could just barely make out where the hands rested. It wasn’t quite time yet, but the death toll was soon to reach an unignorable level. Once night completely set in, even if a retreat was ordered, the soldiers who had crossed the shroud bridge would no longer be able to return.

A chill ran down Regis’s spine. Retreating now was the easier option, but it would mean that all those who had given their lives thus far had done so in vain.

“...Please wait a bit longer.”

“Gah... How many minutes?!” German cried out. “Our infantry’s going to be

completely annihilated!”

There was a limit to how many people could cross the shroud at once, so that was almost certainly an exaggeration, but there was no denying that giving the order too late could cost the First Army several thousand men. Regis stared fixedly at his watch. His knees trembled under his weight, and his stomach churned as an intense wave of nausea rolled over him. The hands seemed to move so slowly that he wondered whether his watch was running slow. But how could he make it go faster?

When he raised his head, he was standing alone in a field littered with corpses. It was only a momentary hallucination, but when he went to check his watch again, it had finally struck the agreed-upon time.

“Retreat!” Regis shouted.

“Retreat!” Latrielle echoed, spurring Germain to follow suit. The army’s runners sprinted out to have the buglers sound the command.

Retreat! Retreat! Retreat!

No sooner had the order been given than Belgaria’s soldiers began racing back down the shroud. Some dropped into the river below, unable to be saved due to their armor. The catapults were abandoned; calls of victory rang out from inside the fortified city as the First Army took distance with its tail between its legs.

“A losing battle...” Germain muttered.

The groans of the injured turned into vengeful curses as they trudged back through the darkness.

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At the center of the tent was a table topped with a large oil lamp, around which stood Latrielle and his officers. Their faces were stained with fatigue.

One of the officers sighed. “We don’t have exact figures yet, but...we’ve lost around two thousand soldiers. Meanwhile, we only destroyed around thirty of the enemy’s cannons.”

The enemy army was known to have had more than a hundred cannons at

their disposal. It was unknown how many they had needed to abandon on their journey to the fortress, but this was not a worthwhile military gain.

“The plan...failed,” groaned another officer.

At those words, all eyes turned to the foot of the table where Regis stood stock-still, a full step away from the others. His skin prickled, and a weak “I’m sorry” was the most he could manage.

“You think an apology solves anything?!” one of the officers yelled. “Weren’t the enemy soldiers supposed to be concentrated in the fortress?!”

Regis had no rebuttal.

An elderly officer stepped in to mediate the situation. “Calm down,” he said. “You’re speaking before His Majesty.”

Regis had no trouble reading between the lines. The elderly officer no doubt had a few choice words to say about the matter himself, but being in the presence of the second prince was compelling him to bite his tongue. It made sense that he would hold some strong feelings about the failure; the First Army had lost many good men.

Once his officers had quieted down, Latrielle opened his mouth to speak. “Regis, what are your thoughts on our casualties?”

“Th-That’s... I would rather they stay as low as possible, of course.”

“Hm. Perhaps I phrased that poorly. In your humble opinion, were these figures beyond your expectations?”

Regis looked rather daunted; it certainly wasn’t an easy question to answer, but he knew that lying wasn’t an option. “No, they were within my expectations.”

“What?!” One of the younger-looking officers attempted to lunge at Regis, only to be grabbed by the shoulders and pulled back by those around him. He seemed as though he might draw his sword at any moment.

Germain cleared his throat. “I understand that you might be seething at the loss of your troops, but should our focus not be on ensuring their lives were not lost for nothing? Please keep a level head.”

The officer took a deep breath, then harrumphed. “I know that’s what we should focus on, but I can’t let this slide! He said that he anticipated these losses! In other words, he expected the enemy gunmen to be stationed in the iron district!”

Once again, the officers’ eyes homed in on the tactician. Regis wasn’t sure what to say; he didn’t want to lie and make excuses, but saying that he had anticipated the counterattack seemed to rub everyone the wrong way. What he sought was a rational discussion.

Latrielle shrugged. “I doubt Sir Regis chose a plan that would produce unnecessary casualties. Saying too little can sometimes lead to misunderstandings, Regis. I ask as the commander of this unit that you address my men’s suspicions.”

The prince made a valid point—perhaps it was time that Regis finally spoke his mind. The more he thought about it, however, the more anxious he became. His usual lack of confidence had caused the words to catch in his throat. What if voicing his plan only invited more antipathy? Would they understand his reasoning?

When Regis had served as Altina’s tactician, those around him had seldom requested that he explain himself. The captain of the artillery had said nothing when ordered to fire upon a fortress his cannons would never reach, nor had a single question been asked when he requested the regiment spread oil around the capital or freshwater over the plains. Altina, Jerome, and the commanders of the other units merely ordered their subordinates to do as he suggested.

Actually, that’s not quite true... I did usually explain my plans to them, but they hardly ever listened. Maybe they thought getting into the specifics was just too much hassle.

There was no use overthinking it. Regis needed to explain himself purely because he wasn’t yet trusted within the First Army. That was all there was to it.

Regis took a deep breath. Those gathered here with him were the imperial army’s greatest elites, the sort of people he would never have gotten the opportunity to converse with a year ago. That thought alone put him on edge,

but it also meant they were more likely to understand his views—at least, that was what he told himself.

“I expected that a majority of the enemy’s forces would be stationed within the fortress,” Regis began. “That much seemed to be common sense, and it was proven to be correct. The questions were, how many men would they spare for the iron district, and how were they going to position them? Had they put them atop the ramparts, we would have been able to gauge their numbers, but they instead formed a line inside the city as though they already knew our plan.”

Latrielle’s expression turned grim, while Germain cocked his head. “Are you by any chance raising the possibility of a conspirator...?” he asked.

The officers exchanged glances. It seemed that not even the elderly officer could maintain his composure anymore, as he furiously shouted, “Are you doubting our loyalty?!”

Regis winced and shook his head. “I wouldn’t dream of it. It was only this morning that we set our sights on the iron district. I had admittedly considered it my first priority from the moment I heard the civilians were being kept there, but I had only made the proposal and you all had only received your orders right before the plan commenced,” he explained. They surely remembered that much.

Latrielle was remaining silent, while Germain nodded along and made the occasional noise to indicate his understanding. It seemed that he was acting as everyone’s representative. “You’re right about that,” he said. “We marched out as soon as we were informed of the plan.”

“Yes, and the army marched as one shortly after. It is surely inconceivable for someone to have so quickly relayed this information to our enemy sealed away in the fortress; it would take a letter or a messenger to convey a plan as complicated as our repurposed catapult.”

“And both those methods would prove quite conspicuous on the battlefield.”

“Indeed. It would be impossible for anyone to pull off such a feat without being noticed, and it is foolish to fear the impossible. This means we must turn our attention to the real danger—a threat that is far more terrifying.”

“What could be more terrifying than a conspirator?”

“...I believe my plan was anticipated. Presumably by Oswald Coulthard, shadow commander of the High Britannian Army. He foresaw my proposal to make a shroud bridge using catapults.”

“So what you’re saying is...he out-strategized you?”

Germain was essentially asking whether Regis would take responsibility for this failure, and understandably so. The strategist had no ambition and almost no self-respect, but he still feared execution; a demotion surely wouldn’t be enough to punish his error this time. However, he had to accept the truth as it was.

“There is no denying that I was outwitted. High Britannia took near perfect measures to intercept us. Any normal army would station its sentries atop the ramparts to attack us from above; their formation inside the city walls would only make sense if they knew we were going to scale the ramparts from across the river. And from what I heard, they invested a considerable number into that formation...”

There were no objections to his explanation so far; everyone present knew about their plan, and how it had turned out.

Latrielle finally spoke up again. “That seems to match up with our current predicament. Regis, you mentioned that you foresaw these casualties. Do you mean that you expected to be outdone?”

“I thought it might be possible... Their scouts would have told them we were building catapults.”

“We kept the shroud under tight secrecy, though.”

“Either he was able to predict our scheme through simple deduction, or he knew about it beforehand.”

Regis merely drew his plans from the books spread all throughout the lands; he hadn’t a novel invention to his name. If the enemy commander were an intellectual as well, it was very possible that he had already been familiar with their scheme.

“Hm... It happens to the best of us,” Latrielle conceded.

Much to Regis’s surprise, not a single officer voiced any criticisms after his explanation. There was, however, still unrest and impatience growing among them.

“Who exactly is this Oswald...?” Germain groaned.

It was because of Oswald that the First Army had suffered such heavy losses at Fort Boneire, and now Belgaria’s fear of the enemy had been roused once again. It was as though the man’s wit were more terrifying than anything the latest guns and cannons could manage.

The young officer smacked the table. “We’re Belgarians! Aren’t we supposed to be the strongest on the continent?! Why can’t we win here?! We’ve lost on the defense, we’ve lost on the offense, and now even our tactics are inferior?!”

“Calm down,” the elderly officer chided. “You’re before His Majesty.”

“Urghh... And that’s precisely why I feel so worthless! So ashamed!”

With that, the elderly officer was at a loss for words. “Y-Yes. Perhaps you’re right...” he murmured. Another man chimed in soon after.

“What’s our next move, Tactician? Or are we all out of cards to play?”

“Well... I think I’ve already played a decent hand,” Regis replied. He took out his watch from his uniform pocket. *Is it time yet...?*

“Report! I come bearing a report!” came a sudden cry from outside the tent.

Regis looked at Latrielle, but the prince remained completely stone-faced. Germain answered in his stead, telling the new arrival to enter.

The messenger slipped through the tent flap, then courteously dropped to one knee and produced a wooden dagger. “Here!”

As the person standing closest to the messenger, Regis took the unusual object. “Where did you find this?” he asked.

“In the net you ordered the sappers to set up downstream!”

“I see... That’s good.”

The surrounding men peered into Regis’s hands. “It’s just a wooden dagger...”

the young officer said, sounding openly doubtful.

At a glance, it was indeed just a wooden dagger, but Regis pointed to the lone word carved into its hilt: “succès.” It seemed to suggest that some feat had been accomplished, but then again, a wooden dagger was the sort of trinket a father might give his son; it wouldn’t be strange for such a word to have been added for good luck.

“Even if someone spotted this drifting down the river, I doubt they would think it was being used for correspondence,” Regis noted.

“Hm? You mean to say this is something of a letter?” the young officer asked.

“Precisely. I had an officer try to infiltrate the iron district. He was told to send this down the river if all went to plan.”

“I’m sure you’re all familiar with him,” Germain added. “The man who received the rank of chevalier for standing out even among the elites of the First Army: Third-Grade Combat Officer Jean Juris de Varèse.”

“Oh, yes! Him!”

While trying to find the right candidate for the operation, Regis had heard that, excluding Latrielle’s own staff officers, Varèse was a cut above the rest when it came to both swordplay and written test scores. He was an incredibly skilled man at only seventeen years of age.

The elderly officer stroked his chin. “I see. Meaning...Varèse has managed to sneak into the Grebeauvoir iron district.”

Regis nodded. “I took a few extra measures just in case the shroud bridge failed.”

“Oh... Color me surprised. When did he manage to slip in...?”

“While the enemy’s attention was focused on our troops crossing the wall. Of course, the ideal situation would have been for the attack to succeed and our men to capture the gate, but I sent a soldier to infiltrate the city just in case we failed. The winds are strong in these parts, so I considered sending a message on the breeze...but that would be too conspicuous, and the enemy might have realized what we were trying to signal.”

Regis had also contemplated using a marked cannonball, a bird, an instrument... The stories of the world proposed countless means through which one could convey information to their allies, though none were more certain than sending a messenger.

The young officer's expression seemed to loosen. "Then today's battle wasn't for nothing... We failed to secure the gate, yes...but it served as a diversion. Is that true?"

"Yes."

"Phew... I see. Then our dead may find peace. Still, Tactician... And you too, Germain... That was quite callous of you. You could have told us if you were taking such measures."

Germain lowered his head. "My apologies, but if we had, it might have led some to believe the shroud bridge was doomed to fail from the start."

"Certainly!" the young officer exclaimed, sounding more and more convinced. "If news of a backup plan had reached my ears moments before the attack, I may have hesitated to order my men at the most crucial moments. Such indecisiveness would only be our downfall, and the diversion might have failed too!"

"Indeed."

Regis nodded along as well. "I'm just glad you understand."

There were, of course, other reasons he had kept silent on the matter. There was no guarantee the infiltration would succeed, so there was still a chance that so many soldiers had died in vain.

The battle was far from over; a daunting mission now awaited Third-Grade Combat Officer Varèse.

"The citizens of Grebeauvoir were presumably stripped of their weapons and sealed somewhere in town," the elderly officer mused. "Can Varèse really save them alone?"

"It would be impossible for the civilians to escape on their own, so..."

Regis went on to explain the plan, though he made sure to leave out as many

details as possible. He had arranged things so that even a conspirator standing among them wouldn’t be able to act in time, but there was still cause for concern. He would need to be wary, while also choosing his words carefully so that the staff officers didn’t pick up on his concerns.

Final Chapter: Varèse

The sun had already started to disappear over the horizon when the Belgarian Army fired a makeshift bridge onto Grebeauvoir's ramparts. The troops of the First Army struggled to see their own feet, but they pressed on nonetheless until they were atop the walls overseeing the iron district.

«Fire!» came the order, followed almost immediately by a barrage of gunfire. The Belgarians dropped like flies, spouting blood as they plummeted toward the ground below. Even those who managed to survive the fall and made their way into the city were soon met with spearmen ready to finish them off.

It was a one-sided battle the likes of which High Britannia had never seen before.

The Empire's soldiers were recognized as the strongest on the continent. High Britannia had superior weapons, but even in engagements where they managed to inflict far more damage than they incurred, they still ended up losing several thousand of their own men. Were the walls to be breached and the gates opened, Belgaria's cavalry would flood in, and all would soon be lost. There were fewer than five thousand currently stationed in the iron district, while Belgaria's First Army boasted three thousand horsemen.

There was no denying the cavalry's strength. During the Battle of La Frenge, the five hundred horsemen who attacked the High Britannian Army from behind had managed to break through its ranks with barely any casualties. They had then proven just as troublesome during the siege on Fort Boneire, when the High Britannians were forced to retreat the moment the horsemen charged onto the battlefield. Of course, the High Britannians had planned to retreat during the siege anyway—they needed the Belgarians to carry the human-containing barrels of gunpowder into their fortress—but such was the presence of these mighty units.

Horsemen were known to be threatening opponents, but this was especially the case in Belgaria, where the horses were larger and the soldiers expertly trained. They were declared the strongest on the continent, and the First Army the strongest among them.

High Britannia’s gunners fired shot after shot, overcome with the maddened drive to survive another day as they killed any imperial soldier who appeared atop the walls.

Countless waterways ran through Grebeauvoir, coming in through holes at the bottom of the city walls. The crucial role that running water played in processing iron meant that considerably more waterways were found in the iron district than in the fortress and the central city, but there were no bars in place to keep outsiders from climbing through—any metals used to this end would simply rust once submerged in water, while anything made of stone would be eroded by the current. There was also the fact that sand, wood chips, and fish carcasses would clog any grate in no time at all.

To compensate for the waterways being completely open, there were lookouts stationed around each hole to ensure nobody swam through. When they saw the Belgarian soldiers appearing atop the ramparts, however, they all quickly abandoned their posts; dealing with the enemy right before their eyes was a much greater priority than watching scenes that hadn’t changed for days.

High Britannia’s surveillance thus let up once the Empire’s soldiers began climbing the bridge, and that was the First Army’s chance to send someone in...

In the dim channel—

For most, remaining submerged for two whole minutes was an impressive feat, but Jean Juris de Varèse could quite comfortably manage ten. He was using weights to keep himself underwater and discarded them whenever he needed to surface. His clothes had also been painted with grease to ensure they took on less water and didn’t impede his movement too dramatically.

By following the current and entering through a hole just before the gate, it was possible to swim quite some distance into the city. Varèse stuck his head above the water just once around the center of the channel.

“Hah!”

He unwittingly let out a small gasp as the air flooded into his lungs. He quickly scanned his surroundings, then once again disappeared underwater. That momentary examination had been enough to convince him there were no

enemy soldiers around, so he promptly discarded his weights and flippers before poking his head up again.

There were steps here and there leading into the waterway, where the women would do laundry and draw water for daily use. Varèse cautiously made his way over to the ones nearest to him, moving from stone to firm earth. He could hear the ceaseless gunfire to the east, which thankfully meant he wouldn't need to worry about the sound of the water dripping from the High Britannian uniform he was wearing for the covert operation. His ability to speak High Britannian wasn't perfect, but he had learned enough to convincingly insist he came from the countryside.

Varèse combed a hand through his short hair to push out the droplets. "Infiltration successful..." he whispered.

He took a wooden dagger from his chest and tossed it into the water. The current wasn't quite as strong inside the city, but it was fast enough that the weapon soon disappeared from sight. There were a number of paths it might be dragged down, but they all ultimately led into the river via a drainage vent to the north.

The waterways also controlled the city's sewage, and so they were constructed in such a way that ensured all the water—and everything in it—was safely expelled. As long as the dagger didn't catch on the edge of the riverbank, it would flow all the way downstream.

The gunfire continued, now mixed with curses and screams. The Belgarians were no doubt continuing their charge, and the High Britannians were putting their all into pushing them back.

The nonexistence of a waterproof watch meant Varèse didn't know the time, but the fact that the battle still raged on meant he was right on schedule. Perhaps the Belgarian troops had made it over the walls and were now occupying the gate, in which case his role was now unnecessary. Either way, his duty did not change.

Not until the citizens of Grebeauvoir are secure...

He worked out his position using the map in his head. First, he needed to check the locations where the hostages were most likely to be—presumably to

the north.

Varèse started along the path, staying wary of everything around him. Not a single candle illuminated the district, meaning his surroundings were deathly dark; he relied on the light of the moon as though he were walking a desolate mountain path. A majority of the nearby buildings appeared to be residential, yet they didn't seem to be lived in.

The gunshots died down. Varèse listened closely for the sound of a gate being opened, but nothing came. In other words, the Belgarian Army had retreated after an unsuccessful attack. Their mission had failed, making his own far direr. He would need to work cautiously, yet quickly...

No sooner had the gunshots faded than Varèse heard footsteps approaching from nearby. He stopped just short of a corner, but he was too slow to avoid the figure who appeared from the shadows of the nearby buildings.

A woman!

She was notably short and exuded the air of a town girl. A kerchief was wrapped around her head, and she wore a frilled apron atop a Belgarian commoner's tunic. She widened her eyes in shock upon noticing the man now standing before her, then her lips parted ever so slightly.

Varèse launched off the ground in an instant. His left hand clamped over the woman's mouth, while his right went straight for her throat. He would have mercilessly crushed her windpipe had she been the enemy, but this girl was most likely one of the civilians he was here to rescue.

He pushed her back against the wall. "Make a scene and you're dead."

"Mff—?!"

"Struggle and you're dead. Refuse to cooperate and you're dead. Listen well and answer my question."

"Mnf..."

The woman's eyes were brimming with fear, and she accidentally dropped the basket in her hands. Out rolled a loaf of hard bread and a bottle of wine.

Is she a peddler?

It wasn’t rare for the citizens of a captured territory to conduct business with the enemy army; in fact, there were plenty of merchants in Belgaria who had made a fortune dealing with the Empire when their territories were initially invaded. Varèse was surprised to see their goods hadn’t been outright plundered; it seemed the High Britannian Army was more upright than he had assumed. Perhaps it would be possible to negotiate for the citizens’ release if all else failed.

“You. Are you Belgarian?”

“Mhm.”

“I’m Jean Juris de Varèse of the First Army. I’m here to rescue you. Understand?”

“Mm...?!”

While the woman’s eyes were full of disbelief, it seemed that she did indeed understand.

“You might be a civilian, but if you make too much noise, you’re dead. Got that?”

“Mhm.”

Varèse released the woman, then immediately reached for his dagger with his right hand. Unlike the one he had thrown into the river, this was the real deal, sharp enough to draw blood at a mere touch. He hadn’t been able to bring any other weapons with him underwater.

He glared at the woman’s neck, slender and delicate like that of a doll. He would have no choice but to kill her if she made a ruckus, but he couldn’t imagine the blade would stop at her trachea—there was a good chance it might completely remove her head.

Thankfully, the woman was wise. She didn’t scream, nor did she speak needlessly.

“Answer me,” Varèse said. “Where are the civilians being kept?”

“...They’re all in the northern district, living in a few of the houses there.”



That matched up with Varèse's intel. It seemed the hostages were being kept in the same location, even after some had escaped.

"Any lookouts?"

"A few in the area."

"I need precise information."

"There were four on the path I took today, all armed with guns."

Four. Varèse was sure he could stealthily take them out, but it would be a mess if even one man managed to fire a shot. If possible, he wanted to avoid combat entirely.

"I want to meet a civilian representative. Can you make that happen?"

"A representative? You mean the mayor? I hear he's already dead... Right now, I think some big shot from the iron trading union is the closest we've got..."

He now knew who to talk to, but not how to reach him.

"How did you manage to leave?" Varèse asked.

"I'm doing business. The food and other goods I receive as payment were originally ours anyways, but you've gotta do what you can to survive."

She brushed aside her curly blonde hair and neatened her clothes that had become somewhat disheveled. Given that she was about as scrawny as a child, physical labor was likely out of the question, and with their goods having been stolen, she probably wasn't selling anything material. Presumably, she was earning her keep by doing maid work—that was Varèse's conclusion.

In any case, this was no time to get hung up on such details. He needed to slip past the guards and meet the civilian representative.

Varèse considered leaving a message with the girl, but...that was much too dangerous. He couldn't yet say whether she was trustworthy; there was a chance she might sell him out to the High Britannians for personal gain. There were more than enough people in the world who would sell even their own allies due to fear of the enemy.

«You over there! What's going on?!»

A voice in High Britannian sounded out in the distance, and Varèse immediately felt his blood run cold. He turned to see a lone soldier running down the road toward them. The fact he had been mid-conversation, coupled with the soldier having been by himself and quite some distance away, meant he hadn't been able to hear his footsteps.

Even so, this development wouldn't pose a problem for Varèse; he could easily take the man by surprise, kill him, then hide his body in the shadows... Or so he thought. The soldier was soon joined by another ten who were trailing behind.

Varèse tutted in his head. He could run, but that would only put the men on guard, and he was far less likely to accomplish his mission if contacting the civilians became any harder than it already was. Killing them was also an option, but he wasn't confident he could take down eleven gun-wielding soldiers before any of them could fire a shot.

"Ghh..."

"Leave this to me..." the girl whispered. She removed her kerchief, allowing the night breeze to tousle her golden hair, then turned her greenish eyes to the approaching men. "Oh, soldier. This guy here isn't doing too well." She lightly dabbed at Varèse's face with her kerchief, though she was short enough that she had to stand on her toes to do so.

The High Britannian captain running at the lead cocked his head. "Not doing well, you say...?" His accent was thick, but he was evidently able to speak Belgarian. The puzzled looks on his men's faces suggested that they weren't quite so talented.

The girl shrugged. "He started feeling ill when he heard the gunshots, and then, before my very eyes, he wobbled and fell in the waterway! See? He's sopping wet."

"He hasn't been drinking, has he?!"

"Like a certain someone I know, you mean? He was in the middle of walking me home, but maybe he was weak to begin with. Ah... Do you think he might

have caught something?”

“Wha...?!” The captain stepped back. «A sickness?» he asked in High Britannian, spurring his soldiers to take their distance as well.

Those in the army often gathered in cramped spaces, at times even having to share muddy water and rotting food. They had little selection in the clothing department, and their sleeping conditions were far from sanitary.

It had been over a month since the High Britannian Army had set off on their expedition, and it seemed more men were growing sick with fear and fatigue by the day. Worse yet, some were contagious. Nobody wanted to chance being anywhere near such danger, as catching an illness in these foreign lands could very well spell death.

Varèse started to cough and wheeze, deciding to play along with the woman’s ruse. «Hac! Hac! No, I-I’m fine...»

«Which unit do you belong to?!» the captain demanded.

«Oh, I’m with— Hgh! Hac! Hac!» Varèse went into another coughing fit.

He knew the names of the High Britannian units from the soldiers they had taken prisoner during the siege on Fort Boneire, but his cover would certainly be blown if the soldiers actually took him to one. There was also a good chance that he might say a unit not actually stationed in the iron district; most were holed up inside the fortress, so the odds weren’t in his favor.

Bluffing ultimately wasn’t an option. If possible, Varèse didn’t want to commit to an answer at all.

“Hey!” the woman interjected, rubbing Varèse on the back. “Don’t push yourself too much. You wouldn’t want to throw up again, would you?”

The captain looked utterly disgusted. “He...what...?”

“Oh, don’t worry. It was only a little.”

“Oi, Galian!” the captain barked, using the purposely mispronounced abbreviation for “Belgarian” that was so commonly used in High Britannia. “Take him to the medical team! You know where that is, right? We’re busy with our patrol.”

Just like that, it became the woman's responsibility to deal with the "sick" Varèse. Her efforts had proven successful, but for some reason, she looked troubled and reluctant.

"Are you serious?" the woman asked. "They told me I could go home already. This guy's a soldier, so shouldn't a soldier take him?"

"Grr..."

"I'm already starting to feel feverish just being near him. I really must be getting home..." she continued with a sigh. She truly was a splendid actor.

The soldiers were already pulling faces that made it clear they were eager to leave, not wanting anything to do with Varèse. The captain waved them off, then pointed at the woman.

"That was an *order*, missy! If you want compensation, demand it from your new friend here! You got that?!"

"Mn, well... I did want some soft fruit to take home. I have my sick mother to look after and all..."

"Yeah, yeah. Settle it between you!" the captain spat, clearly fed up with all the talk of sickness. He barked an order at his men, then they all marched off, following the waterway upstream.

Given that there were now soldiers patrolling the waterway, Varèse couldn't help but wonder whether a lookout had seen him in that brief moment he had come above the water for air. *No, surely not... If that were the case, they would've been more thorough in questioning me. Everything's fine.*

It seemed that Regis d'Aurick's diversion had proven successful. Even so, Varèse kept up the act until the soldiers were completely out of sight, just to be safe.

«Hrk! Hac! Sorry, little lady... Grk!»

"Oh dear... What am I going to do with you, hm?"

Varèse leaned on the woman's shoulder and started to hobble as the two walked away. They continued onward until eventually slipping into a house with the door left open.

“Phew... You saved me,” Varèse said in a hushed voice.

The woman chuckled, keeping her voice equally low. “It sure is nice being able to pull a fast one on those blokes who are always so full of themselves.” She now wore a more relaxed smile, and—perhaps due to the slight change in lighting—she looked considerably younger.

A faintly metallic odor hung in the air, so Varèse started to wonder whether the house they were in belonged to someone who worked in the iron district. It didn’t look like whoever lived here was very well-off, but interestingly enough, their table and chairs were made of metal.

Varèse took a seat across from the woman. He would have loved a warm coffee right about now, but starting a fire or using the stove wasn’t an option lest he attract someone’s attention. The room was dark, illuminated only by the moonlight shining in through the window.

“Thanks for your help back there,” Varèse said. “I will save you and your mother—I can promise you that.”

The woman sighed. “Mn... My mother’s passed already. One of the soldiers kicked her when they booted us out of the house, and she was gone. Just like that. Wasn’t even on purpose.”

“Wha—?!”

“Having a sick mother was the worst. Couldn’t get married, couldn’t find any live-in jobs, and no matter how much I worked, all our money was eaten up by medicine fees. I was always asking myself why I put up with it all...”

“I see...”

“But still... She was my mother...”

The woman hung her head, causing her blonde hair to drape over her eyes. Her shoulders had started to tremble.

Varèse didn’t have any family himself, so he wasn’t sure what to say. He had been made a war orphan before he could walk; then he was picked up by the church, where a priest taught him how to use a sword and ride a horse. There were plenty of people in the church who he considered to be his brothers, and

the priest was somewhat of a father figure to him, so he could at least draw from those experiences...but he didn't really know much about mothers.

"...I see," Varèse repeated.

The woman looked up to meet his gaze, her eyes damp with tears. "So, that big shot you're looking for... Is meeting with him going to help you save us?"

"That's right. I'm here under the direct orders of Marshal General Alain Deux Latrielle de Belgaria. His adjutant Beaumarchais was there as well, and I've heard the plan was thought up by Regis d'Aurick himself—a man who already has a number of victories against High Britannia under his belt. There couldn't be a more foolproof scheme anywhere in the Empire."

"I see... I don't really follow, but I think I've heard those names before."

"One of those men is set to become the next emperor, you know."

"Aha ha! Why should a commoner care who the next emperor's going to be?"

"I suppose you have a point."

"Hey. If you manage to save the civilians, then...after that..."

"Hm?"

"You're going to cut down the enemy, right? You're going to butcher the lot of them?"

Varèse gave a firm nod. "Naturally."

The woman wiped her eyes before standing up. "Got it. In that case, I'll help out where I can. I'll take you to that union guy. Everyone seems to listen to him."

"That's the sort of person I'm looking for. But there are going to be lookouts, right? What do you intend to do about them?"

"Mn... Well, I'm sure things will work out."

"Fine. So, err..."

Varèse suddenly realized that he didn't know the woman's name, and it was surely too late to ask her for it now. He hadn't deemed it necessary to request the name of a random civilian he had encountered during his mission, but it was

a different story now that she was a collaborator.

A bitter smile played on the woman's lips. "I know what you're thinking. My name's Felicia. Laughable, right? My mother gave it to me, thinking I'd share some of that royal luck or whatever. Funny thing is, since I'm a commoner out in the middle of nowhere, calling me by that name is considered disrespectful. That's why everyone just calls me 'Fel' instead."

Varèse nodded, and it was then that it struck him. He stared at the woman closely. Fifth Princess Felicia Sis Célia de Belgaria was still a minor at fourteen years of age. For the person before him now to be named after her, she would need to be even younger than that.

"You're still a brat!" he exclaimed.

"Aha ha! You should see the look on your face!" Fel cackled, now wearing a broad grin that made her youth more than apparent.

A History of the Belgarian Empire

La production de fer

There was once a time in the distant, distant past when oxygen was in short supply and most of the iron that existed was dissolved in seawater. An increase in photosynthesizing life-forms also led to an increase in the oxygen content of the water, which in turn caused this iron to synthesize into iron oxide (rust) and settle on the seabed.

When the iron deposits created through this process eventually protrude near the surface, they are turned into iron ore mines, from which iron-containing ores such as magnetite and hematite are extracted. Iron ore often consists of around fifty percent impurities, and the iron is bonded to oxygen. These are all removed in a process known as refining.

During Altina's time, refined iron was produced using a blast furnace. Charcoal was burned not only to fuel the blast furnace and provide heat, but also because the burning would produce carbon monoxide (CO) which then reacted with the ferrous oxide (FeO) to produce carbon dioxide (CO_2) and pure iron (Fe).

The process used for la production de fer—that is, the production of iron—aged and grew more versatile, and the population grew alongside it.
This led to an increased demand for iron and subsequently an increase in iron production until, eventually, there was not enough wood to make charcoal with. Manufacturing instead switched to using coal, which could achieve even higher temperatures than charcoal and was far more abundant, but the sulfur released when it was burned would bind to and weaken the iron. Using coal as fuel also resulted in coal tar being made as a by-product, which would melt under high temperatures and clog up the exhaust vents of the furnace.



These issues were able to be resolved through dry distillation, which turned coal into coke. Using coke, however, came with its own share of problems... (Continued in the next volume.)

Thé

As briefly touched on in the section on warships, thé—the Belgarian term for "tea"—was first imported five hundred years before Altina's time, during which it was traded on a small scale via land routes. It was when larger ships entered the scene three hundred years later—around when the Belgarian Empire was massively expanding its territory through the might of its cavalry—that many nations began to compete for superiority in trade.

When it came to trade, few were more enthusiastic than the island nation of High Britannia. They exported textiles, clocks, glass, precious metals, and other luxury goods, exchanging them with the east for spices, ceramics, and—most importantly—tea.

Tea was thought to be effective against all diseases and ailments, so many nobles would bid against each other to buy up the supply. It was carefully preserved as a precious valuable and brought out only to entertain incredibly important guests.

In a time before the upper echelon had taken to drinking coffee, a warm and non-alcoholic drink like tea truly did have a positive impact on one's health. Even in modern times, scientific studies are being conducted on the ability of catechin and tannin to control disease, slow the aging process, and protect against food poisoning. It is also known that tea leaves contain vitamins, minerals, and other such beneficial substances.



After some time, High Britannia was beginning to face a trade deficit. Despite the perpetually increasing demand for tea, the goods they traded for it were mostly valuables that could only be produced in small quantities. Silver needed to be used as a form of payment, and the outflow was so high that its market value skyrocketed. In the end, High Britannia's parliament was forced to consider a bill that would ban the export of silver entirely.

Afterword

Thank you for reading *Altina the Sword Princess IX*. This is the author, Yukiya Murasaki.

This time, I tried pursuing not just Regis, but Altina and Bastian as well. My initial intention was to touch on them just briefly, but I ended up burning through more pages than I'd expected. Thanks to that, Varèse didn't receive too much of an introduction in this volume. I aim to conclude the siege—and his episode—in the next book.

I also want to include something about Jerome on the eastern front, but I don't know how that'll turn out until I actually start writing it. I hope you'll stick with me for the next volume.

The first volume of the *Altina the Sword Princess* manga, illustrated by Aomine Tsubasa-sensei and Kagimushi-sensei, will be releasing concurrently with this book. Things progress a little differently than they do in the light novel; I hope you'll enjoy it.

I'm also pleased to say that *How NOT to Summon a Demon Lord*, *The Wandering Hero is Out for Gold*, and *Kantai Collection KanColle: Zuihou of the Skies and Seas* are all still being published. The third volume of the *Koma Hibiki* manga is also scheduled for release on July 9th.

Finally, *After-School Gamefriend: A Season with You*—a fun and fleeting school-based story—is also scheduled to release on July 25th. I've tried writing this one in a different style than usual, and I would feel very blessed if you gave it a chance.

My thanks—

To my illustrator, himesuz-sensei. You've provided yet another batch of wonderful illustrations. Altina is becoming more and more expressive with each volume.

To Yamazaki-sama and Nishino-sama from Afterglow. You even attached an incredible map this time.

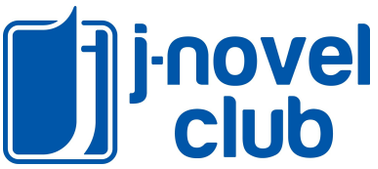
To my editor, Wada-sama. I started working early this time, but even so...I was mysteriously running as late as always! When I've got time to spare, I've found that I tend to kick back a little...

To everyone in the Famitsu Bunko editorial department, everyone involved, and to my family and friends who continue to support me.

And of course, my greatest thanks to you, dear reader, for reading this far! Thank you!

— Yukiya Murasaki


Thank you so much for reading volume 9!
I decided to go with Elize this time, since it feels like I've hardly had a chance to draw her.
Murasaki-san, Wada-san, I had a great time yet again.
Thank you.



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ALTINA
the Sword Princess