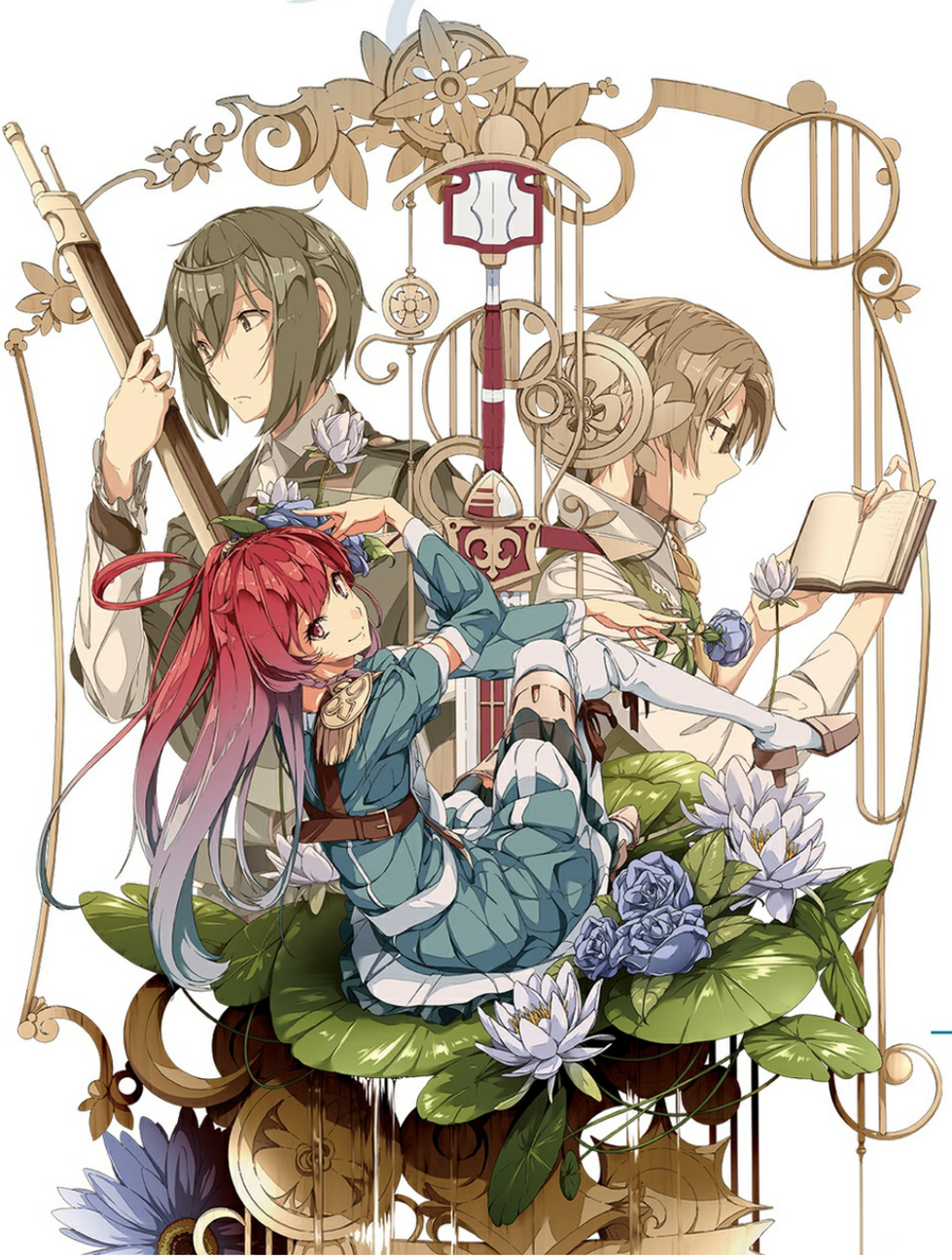
X

Author: Yukiya Murasaki
Illustrator: himesuz



# ALTINA
## the Sword Princess

# ALTINA
## the Sword Princess
# X




“Rot in hell!”
Third-Grade Combat Officer
Varèse
Girl from the Iron District
Fel


"I-I'm sorry..."
"You there! I don't care if you're Regis's personal maid or whatnot— do not enter your master's room without permission!"
Renard Pendu Arbalist
Franziska
Renard Pendu Fortune Teller
Jessica
Second Daughter of House Tiraso Laverde
Fanrine


Belgarian Marshal General
Latrielle
"Very well, Regis. Let us see your tactics."
"Marshal General, sir. Please bring the left flank even farther back."
Bibliophagic Tactician
Regis

# ALTINA
## the Sword Princess





# TINA
## 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.



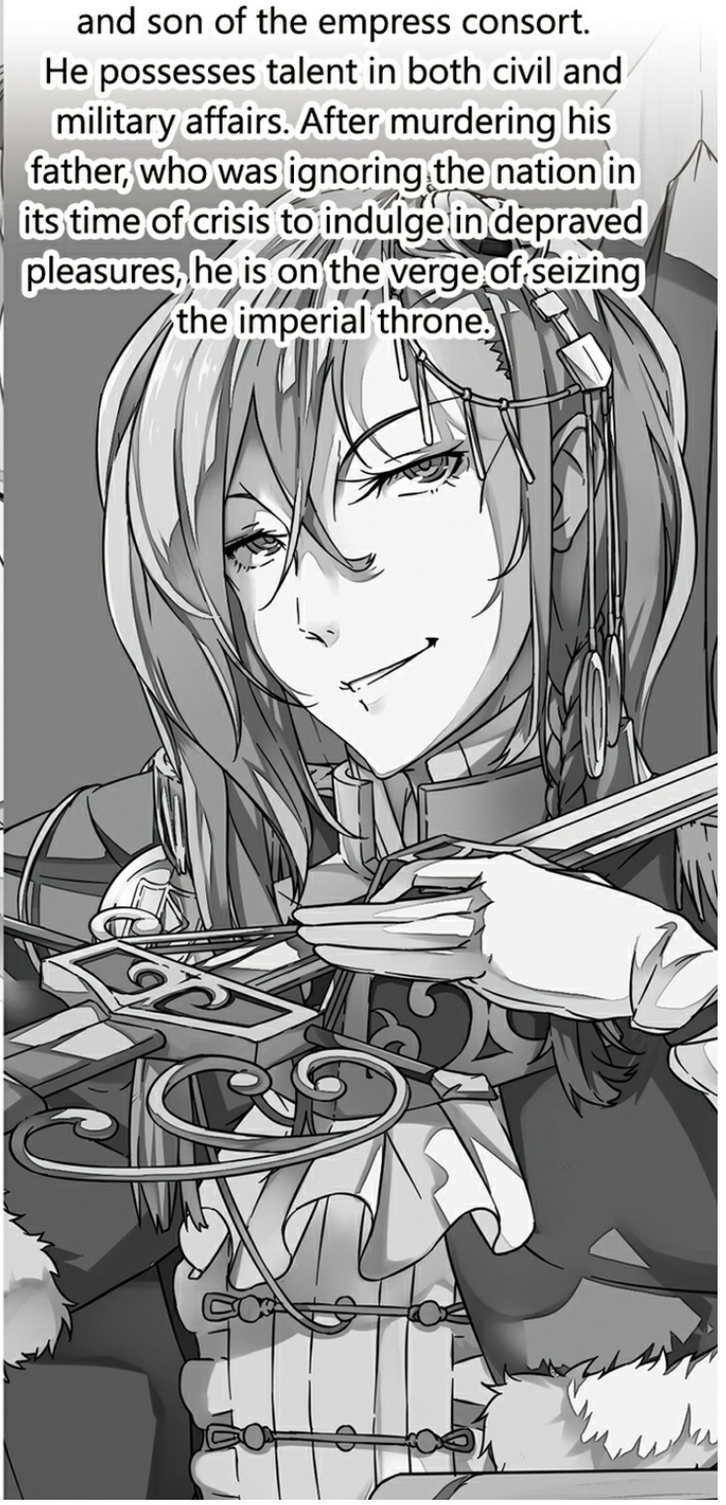


## Heinrich Trois Bastian de Belgaria

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.




Grand Duchy of Varden
M E R
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— In the Belgarian Empire, there lives a girl named Marie Quatre Argentina de Belgaria—"Altina" for short—who happens to be the fourth in line to the imperial throne. She is a princess who, at a mere fourteen years of age, resolved to fix the corruption plaguing her nation.**

"I'm going to become empress," she tells Regis Aurick. "I need your wisdom."

Now, Regis is inept with a sword, unable to ride a horse, and apathetic toward the empire he serves. He is a hopeless soldier by all definitions who spends his days buried in books, yet she still enlists him to be her tactician.

Through a duel with the hero Jerome, a battle against barbarians, and the capture of the impregnable Fort Volks, Altina steadily raises a formidable military force.

At the beginning of April in the year 851, the fourth princess makes her return to the imperial palace of La Branne. Here, Regis uses his ingenuity to fend off a scheme by Second Prince Latrielle and corner First Prince Auguste—actually Auguste's younger sister Felicia in disguise—into relinquishing his rights to the throne.

Later that same month, 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.

On May 19th, the two nations meet in the Battle of La Frenge. The Empire's Seventh Army forms a close-knit formation and charges their foe, but when pitted against High Britannia's newest firearms, the Belgarian Army's attack 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 enemy fleet. From there, he immediately leads the Empire's Fourth Army to rout the last supply shipment 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. But the Mercenary King does not go down so easily. 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, he 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.

The fleeing High Britannian Army joins forces with the Kingdom of Langobarti, and together they capture the fortified city of Grebeauvoir to the north. At Latrielle's request, Regis joins the First Army in its campaign to recapture the stolen territory.

On July 20th, Third-Grade Combat Officer Jean Juris de Varèse manages to infiltrate the city. With the assistance of a local girl named Fel, he immediately gets to work, contriving to meet the representative of the captive citizens.

# Preface: Progress Report

Regis had already left his tent and arrived at his destination by the time the sun had crawled up over the eastern horizon. He now stood among the mass of trees running up the mountainside; they were densely packed for the most part, but areas of deforestation revealed the loamy red soil underfoot.

There were many soldiers at work, but they weren't readying themselves for battle. Rather, they stabbed their shovels into the earth with single-minded focus.

The commander of the sappers saluted upon spotting Regis. "Glad you could make it, Strategist Aurick!"

"...A pleasure."

Regis was officially no more than a strategic adviser, but he decided not to dwell on the matter—after all, he was only working with the First Army temporarily. Even so, rumors were starting to spread that Latrielle had reached out to him personally, and now the soldiers muttered among themselves with wide-eyed stares.

"So that's the magician..."

"He's won every battle he's fought against High Britannia, right?"

"Volks was deemed impenetrable for forty-odd years, yet this guy captured it with only two thousand men."

"He lost just yesterday, though, didn't he?"

"Shh! He might hear you!"

Indeed, it was just yesterday that the Empire's First Army had attempted to attack Grebeauvoir's iron-processing district with siege weapons. Their efforts were ultimately in vain, and while the operation did serve as a diversion of sorts, there was no getting around all the lives that were lost in the process.

Despite his lowly rank, Regis was still a staff officer, so the troops would not criticize or mock him openly. Based on the conversations he had overheard, it seemed he hadn't fully lost his credibility yet, but there was no telling what

would happen after another loss.

Regis scratched his head. The rumors going around—namely, that he was asked to tag along by the second prince himself—were not entirely untrue, but the circumstances were much less flattering than they outwardly appeared.

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Regis thought back on his promotion examination to become a third-grade administrative officer, focusing in particular on his last visit to Minister Berard of the Ministry of Military Affairs before his departure.

When Regis had told Latrielle that he wished to explain the circumstances behind his sudden leave to the minister, the second prince had offered to accompany him there; the Ministry was set up inside the palace, meaning it wasn't much of a walk, and the devil was in the details.

It was abnormal for the marshal general—the man who oversaw every single one of the Empire's armies—to waste his time on a mere fifth-grade admin officer, and while Regis had started to wonder how acceptable it was to take up such an offer, he was in no position to refuse.

And so, Regis headed for the Ministry, walking meekly behind the prince. Berard was sitting in his office, but he shot up into a panicked salute the moment Latrielle made his abrupt entrance.

"Y-Your Excellency! What brings you here?!" he stammered. "I would have come at once if you had called for me!"

"No need," Latrielle replied, calmly shaking his head. "This will take no time at all. It is about the promotion examination."

"Sir! Is there an issue?!"

"I wish to conduct Regis d'Aurick's examination on-site."

"Re...gis...?" It was only then that the minister realized Regis was there at all. "You little...!" he growled, pointing a sharp finger at the tactician before suddenly remembering himself. "Ah, err... Fancy seeing you here."

"The, er... The pleasure is mine," Regis replied, lowering his head. "Sorry for the sudden intrusion."

“Sir Regis here is scheduled to undertake his promotion examination to become a third-grade, correct?” Latrielle asked.

Berard nodded. “Y-Yes... A quick check to ensure he has everything memorized, coupled with a simple practical test.”

The practical apparently required one to display their sword-fighting skills, so Regis was absolutely certain he would fail no matter how low the bar was set. Unless the examiner was miraculously blinded the very moment Regis swung his sword, he would surely assume it was all some kind of joke and scold the tactician for not taking things seriously enough. The moment the poor instructor then realized that Regis was indeed giving it his all, he would no doubt obstinately demand a retest.

Regis did not care about losing his promotion—he did not have much interest in advancing his career to begin with—but regulations meant he was required to keep retaking the test until he passed.

*If only there was a way to avoid taking the practical entirely...* Regis had hoped. Taking the proper exam would almost certainly result in him having to redo it again and again, trapping him in a torturous cycle until the very last days of his pitiful existence.

“I’m sure you’re aware, Berard, but...Grebeauvoir has been occupied,” Latrielle went on. “It seems a great many soldiers and civilians have been captured also. We must retake the city without a moment’s hesitation, but our resources are limited, and we must consider the safety of the capital as well.”

“Of course. I received the report,” Berard replied. “The circumstances are regrettable indeed.”

“That is why I’ve decided to take Regis with me on the campaign.”

“What?! But he’s the Fourth Princess’s—”

“He is a close aide of my sister Argentina, yes. It will only be a temporary transfer, lasting until Grebeauvoir is liberated.”

“...That shouldn’t be too much of an issue then.”

Latrielle grinned. “Even I don’t plan on using the nation’s crisis to gain an

advantage in these petty struggles for power."

*I don't doubt that he's an upright man who likes to do things fairly, but does he truly believe he's so far ahead that he doesn't need to take his opponents' personnel...?* Regis wondered. The second prince's confidence certainly wasn't misplaced; once High Britannia and Langobarti were driven out of the country, nobody could stop him from proclaiming his succession rights and taking the throne.

"I am petitioning Sir Regis not as some political gambit, but for purely militaristic reasons," Latrielle continued.

"I-Is he really that great...?" Berard asked, looking at Regis dubiously. "Say he does get promoted; he'd still only be a measly third-grade."

The minister seemed completely incredulous, and for good reason. Regis looked much too unreliable to be a soldier—he was notably slender, his posture left much to be desired, and his voice lacked any semblance of confidence.

Regis sighed. *I understand where he's coming from. I can't say I trust myself either...*

Latrielle offered a wry smile. "If you know of another tactician who could conquer Fort Volks while at a numerical disadvantage, best a fleet of steamships, and annihilate a supply unit armed with the latest guns and cannons, please introduce me to them. I would rather not be in Argentina's debt, you see."

"Ah, yes. That's—"

"There is no better man for the job. Failure is not permitted, and we are in a race against the clock. I have no time to wait for his exam to finish," Latrielle said curtly, his tone making it clear that he would not accept anything less than his suggestion.

Berard reluctantly hung his head. "You are correct. Should you decide to hold Regis's examination on-site, there is no conceivable way anyone would object to the results."

"Good. In that case, I leave the paperwork to you."

“Understood.”

In the end, the matter was resolved without Regis needing to say very much at all. He and Latrielle exited the minister’s office and started walking back along the corridor, just the two of them, when a young officer came into view. The man frantically moved to the wall the moment he spotted the second prince, scrambling into a salute before freezing like a statue.

As he passed, Regis noticed the young officer looking somewhat perplexed. That came as no surprise, since the position beside Latrielle was almost always occupied by Germain.

Truth be told, Regis had no further business in the palace. There was nothing preventing him from going on his way, but after bothering the marshal general himself, he thought it would come across as rather presumptuous to simply leave. Competent enough at reading the situation, he instead waited for Latrielle to dismiss him.

“Well, everything should now be in place for your promotion, Regis. Though I still think third-grade isn’t nearly enough for you...”

“On the contrary! You really saved me there, Marshal General, sir. Thank you ever so much.”

“It’s a little too early for that. Save your gratitude for when—or rather, if—we manage to recapture Grebeauvoir.”

“Oh, that shouldn’t be an issue.”

“Hm. I’ve never taken you for the confident sort.”

“Me? Oh, no. I’ve just memorized a thing or two, that’s all. Assuming the situation is as I suspect, we shouldn’t have any problems taking back the city. All that remains is figuring out how to save the captives, and how to keep casualties as low as possible.”

Upon hearing those words, Latrielle glanced over at Regis with wide eyes; then he let out a chuckle.



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Regis sighed. He couldn't bring himself to tell all the soldiers gazing at him with awe and respect that he was actually there to avoid taking the Ministry's standard practical exam.

The sapper captain spread out a blueprint on a nearby table. "Here's how things are looking at the moment," he said.

"I see, I see... Everything seems to be going steady."

"It is! All we've really done is move dirt around, though. Is this really going to help liberate the city?"

"Yes, that's the plan."

The captain turned his eyes south toward Grebeauvoir, but it wasn't possible to see the city from where they were standing. "Are we building the foundation for a fort here? If so, we're better off making it on the south side, closer to the capital. What exactly are you putting us up to?"

"Yes, well... I understand your question, but..." Regis hesitated; he had deliberately avoided giving the sappers all the necessary diagrams to minimize the risk of the plan being leaked.

The enemy had already been prepared for his scheme during their most recent engagement. He hadn't given any potential conspirators time to meet or relay any messages, so he was sure he had simply lost in a battle of wits. Even so, there was no harm in a bit of extra caution. He had arranged things so that the isolated work of several teams would ultimately come together as one.

Regis cleared his throat. "This plan is probably going to be worth our while, so...I would really appreciate it if you could trust me and go along with it."

"Right. O-Of course. I've never doubted your plans!"

"Thank you. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to have a look at the other sites."

With that, Regis gave a middling salute and then went on his way.

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Belgaria's First Army had set up camp sixty arpents (4,387 m) from the

occupied city of Grebeauvoir. By the time Regis had returned after visiting all the teams, it was time for lunch.

Regis returned the salutes of the sentries outside the troop headquarters before stepping inside the canopied tent. When he was with Altina, he was able to sort his papers and read books without paying much attention to his surroundings, but he couldn't imagine the First Army would permit such a lack of decorum.

Latrielle was sitting with his arms folded at the back of the tent, with Germain to his side. The eyes of the other officers gathered around the long table all focused on Regis, and a young knight among them spoke up in an irritated tone.

"How goes the plan, Tactician?"

He was Batteren, commander of the White Hare Brigade.

"Relatively smoothly..." Regis replied.

The First Army's recent failure had resulted in a strained, tense atmosphere. Their infiltration mission had proven a success, so it wasn't all for naught, but the imperial army had still lost a great number of very fine soldiers. It was understandable why so many harsh eyes were now fixed on Regis, who had proposed the idea in the first place.

"I understand we've now got a better grasp on yesterday's losses," Latrielle said, prompting his aide.

"Right away." Germain took out a sheet of paper and began reading aloud the figures. "No damage to our three thousand cavalry. We have lost six hundred gunners and seven cannons. Of our foot soldiers...we have lost three thousand, leaving us with eleven thousand."

"I see..." Regis replied with a nod. Try as he might, he could muster no other response. His heart ached at the knowledge that three thousand men had given their lives in the attack, but he was the one who had devised the plan in the first place; he could not afford to show weakness, lest it make the others grow anxious.

Regis did not care about his own reputation in the slightest, but if something in his reaction caused the plan to stall, it would make their rescue operation

even harder to complete. He kept his lips pursed, doing his best to keep any signs of unrest from reaching his face.

“Were these figures within your expectations?” Batteren asked, watching Regis with harsh eyes.

They were, but saying that outright would only invite further irritation. Regis needed to avoid making the officers hostile toward him at all costs; should the on-site commanders decide to ignore his plan, defeat would be inevitable.

“I swear to you,” Regis began, choosing his words carefully, “I do not think lightly of those who have made the ultimate sacrifice for this operation.”

Batteren fell silent. He certainly didn’t take too favorably to Regis, but he was still in the main camp, in front of the supreme commander, and Germain was not yet finished with his report. For those reasons, he complained only in hushed murmurs. While young and emotional, it seemed that he was at least capable of self-restraint.

“Our food stockpile is more than sufficient, and we have secured a steady supply of water and firewood,” Germain went on. “We are running through our food much quicker than usual due to our many sappers, but we are still receiving supplies from the capital, so this should not be an issue.”

Here in the First Army, it was the duty of the logistics officers to ensure that food and other supplies were being shipped from the capital. This was a far cry from the Fourth Army, where Regis had to arrange it all himself.

“Any information on the enemy?” Latrielle asked.

“Yes. It is believed that thirty of their cannons were destroyed in combat, though they still have fifty visible atop the walls.”

“If we exchanged fire in our current condition, is there a chance we could win?”

“Our army has twenty-three cannons remaining. If all goes the same as yesterday, we just might—”

“If we make such a move, the First Army will suffer massive losses to both its foot soldiers and artillery,” Regis interjected, trying to stop the idea from

gaining any further momentum. “We should avoid engaging them again, instead focusing on national defense henceforth.”

Latrielle nodded. “Indeed. We must avoid any unnecessary losses.”

According to Germain’s report, the shroud bridge had since been burned down—there was of course no reason for the enemy to leave it there—and soldiers with rifles now lined the tops of the ramparts.

“What’s next on the schedule, Regis?” Latrielle asked.

“For now, we must place our faith in Officer Varèse. If we do not receive a signal from him within five days, we will carry on with our mission.”

“And there won’t be a signal if the man is caught or shot dead.”

“Unfortunately so... But under those circumstances, there is nothing else we can do.”

“Do you mean to say we’d give up on the captives?”

“...I’m afraid so.”

It was a hard decision to make, but Regis hadn’t managed to lay much groundwork for this campaign. By allowing the siege to continue any longer than was necessary, Belgaria ran the risk of enemy reinforcements arriving or other nations joining the fray. This would complicate the plan further, but above all else, it would result in yet more casualties.

No matter how many civilians were being held captive, Regis could not trade them for all the elites of the First Army. A soldier’s duty was to protect the people—this he believed—but losing such a crucial military force in this battle to reclaim Grebeauvoir would mean exposing far more civilians to danger.

All eyes were gathered on this battlefield. There were certainly scouts from all over, and Belgaria would need to demonstrate its strength...or else.

# Chapter 1: Varèse's Mission

## July 20th, night, in the Grebeauvoir iron district—

Varèse peeked out from the building before quickly drawing his head back in. Fel waited in the darkness behind him, her curly blonde hair and greenish eyes faintly glimmering as they caught the meager traces of moonlight streaming in through the doorway.

"How's it look, Varèse?"

"Your information was accurate. Four soldiers watching the alleyway... They're equipped with rifles, and they've got knives at their hips."

Varèse and Fel were standing before a street that divided the district in two, large enough that it seemed impossible to cross without being spotted. They were up against four troops, but they were all poorly trained; Varèse could tell their skill level just from how they carried themselves. The men kept their eyes on their surroundings, but they were enjoying a pleasant chat. Defeating them would prove simple enough.

"But if even a single shot is fired, my work here becomes a lot harder," Varèse murmured.

"Yeah..."

The enemy soldiers were still wary of the First Army stationed outside the city, but that wouldn't stop them from investigating the northern district if a gunshot rang out.

"My mission is to meet the civilian representative and convey the details of our rescue operation."

"I know. You're going to save everyone, right?"

"Yeah."

"And then you're going to slaughter those guys, right?"

"I see no reason to let them live."

Fel had lost her mother because of the High Britannian soldiers, and now she

was forced to do business with them just to live under their rule. Varèse was an accomplished chevalier, but as far as family memories went, he only remembered training in an orphanage to become a soldier. He did not know what it meant to have a mother, yet he still tried to understand her hatred.

“To complete my mission, I must avoid engaging the lookouts,” Varèse said. “Do you have any ideas?”

“Yeah. Leave this to me. I’ll draw their attention, so use that opportunity to cross.”

“What are you going to do?”

“You want to know? Do I really have to say it?”

“...Many lives depend on my mission. If your idea is unlikely to succeed, I must remain cautious and choose something else.”

“Hm... How about you hide somewhere nearby? Then, if you think I’m doing a good job, you’re free to cross the road.”

“Won’t that put you in danger?”

“More or less.”

Varèse was reluctant to drag a civilian into the mission, but he knew there was no time to waste. He needed to have spoken to the representative and prepared the civilians for their rescue by the time the plan was executed.

“...Understood,” he eventually said with a nod. “I’m leaving this to you. I’ll cross only once I’ve determined that you have successfully distracted the guards.”

“Got it!” Fel replied, balling up her fists. It was a childish gesture, but one that was to be expected, considering that she was still only fourteen years old.



“I’m sorry...” Varèse murmured. “I know I shouldn’t be bringing a child into this.”

“Aha. Is that what’s bothering you? You sure are weird.”

“Why am I weird...?”

“I mean, this is war, you know? Even the kids are at risk of dying unless they put up a fight. That’s why you’ve gotta do what you can.”

“...I really am sorry.”

“Oh, hush up,” Fel shot back with a smile. She picked up her wicker basket, then removed the bread and wine from inside.

*What’s she planning to do...?*

✧ ✧ ✧

Fel confidently strolled across the moonlit street. She was a civilian being held captive in the iron district, so that much was hardly a problem. Varèse, meanwhile, watched from the shadow of a nearby building.

*How’s she going to draw their attention?*

A few of the lookouts turned their attention to Fel as she approached, but there were four in total, and at least one was always watching the road. Even if Varèse moved without a sound, he would most likely be spotted.

“Good evening, soldier,” Fel said to the nearest lookout.

“Oh, you again. You can pass,” the man curtly replied, nodding her through. It seemed at least one of the soldiers knew Belgarian.

Fel returned the nod, but then she stood still for a while, looking somewhat lost.

“What are you waiting for?” the soldier asked.

“Y-Yeah, um... Business didn’t go so well today...” she said weakly, showing him the basket devoid of all the supplies she had received for her services.

The lookout merely shrugged. “How unfortunate.”

“Please, just some bread is enough... Won’t you? My mom is waiting for me.

I'll be in for a smack if I return empty-handed."

"Our supplies are running low too."

"Oh, don't be stingy. I'll make it worth your while. All four of you for a loaf of bread. How about it?"

The soldier raised an eyebrow, then turned to the other lookouts and started to interpret for them. «She said the four of us for one loaf of bread.»

The men all exchanged glances, then their expressions twisted.

«That's cheap.»

«Goddammit... Look at her. She's still just a brat.»

«Doesn't bother me.»

"...That's cheap, I'll admit."

"Isn't it?" Fel replied, her smile widening. "I usually charge a bottle of wine too, but that didn't quite work out after all the ruckus today... How about it, soldier?"

Fel moved her thumb up to her lips, tracing it with her tongue before lightly sucking on the tip. A soft smacking noise was audible each time her lips parted, and by that point, the guards' attention was entirely focused on her mouth.

"So, what do you say?" Fel asked again. "I can guarantee your men will love you for it, and all for a measly loaf of bread."

"Y-Yeah... It's not exactly a bad deal..."

The lookout relayed the message to the other soldiers, at which point the lips of one man in particular curled into a wicked grin.

«Do we have a deal then?» the translating soldier asked. «We'd just need to take turns, right? Pretend we're going to take a leak.»

«Hah! Sounds good to me!»

All of a sudden, a rough hand grabbed Fel by the shoulder. «Last chance to back out,» said the grinning lookout. «I can be pretty rough.»

"O-Okay? I, err...don't know High Britannian."

“He said to keep quiet no matter how much it hurts.”

Fel could feel the tears welling up in her eyes as she heard those words, but she forced a smile onto her face nonetheless. “O-Oh, I see... I’ll keep that in mind... Aha... Aha ha...”

The soldiers’ attention was concentrated on Fel, meaning they had completely neglected their lookout duties. Varèse rushed out at once; this was his chance to cross the street.

*The plan must succeed. This is to save the captives!*

Fel had willingly accepted this role, and it was clear from her exchange with the men that she wouldn’t lose her life. There surely wasn’t a problem.

“...Of course there’s a problem!”

Varèse ran with hushed footsteps, but his destination was different than originally planned. He didn’t cross the street, nor was he still actively avoiding the soldiers’ not-so-watchful eyes.

The man holding Fel raised his head just in time to see the figure racing toward them. «Hm? What...?» His reaction was somewhat lax, considering that Varèse was wearing a High Britannian uniform, but it wasn’t long before the other soldiers were also focused on the approaching man.

«Halt, you!» one of the lookouts yelled, readying his gun. «Which unit are you from?! Stop, or I’ll—!»

“No!” Fel cried, wrapping herself around the soldier’s arm.

«Out of the way, Galian!»

“Gnn?!”

Fel was knocked away with an elbow to the temple. She dropped to the ground, no longer able to restrain the lookout, but the time she had bought Varèse was more than enough.

“Rot in hell!”

Belgaria’s army was recognized as the strongest on the continent. Their greatest elites were gathered in the First Army, and Varèse stood out even

among them. In contrast, those in the High Britannian Army received much less training. These lookouts weren't even considered good enough to contribute to the city's defenses, instead having been relegated to night watch, so to say they were outmatched was a grave understatement.

Varèse needed only to flash the dagger in his right hand for fresh blood to gush from the throat of the soldier who had struck Fel.

«Guh?!»

«E-Enemy attack!»

The second soldier screamed out a warning to the others, but Varèse's dagger pierced straight through his heart a beat later, killing him instantly.

The third soldier, poised with his gun, was a half-pace too far away to be taken out. Varèse instead opted to aim for his finger, which was just barely within reach; the gun couldn't be fired without anything to squeeze the trigger.

Having seen his comrades cut down, the fourth lookout started to run, but Varèse tossed his dagger at his fleeing back. Its blade stabbed into the man's cervical vertebrae, causing him to crumple to the ground before he could raise his voice.

In this brief moment, the third soldier, who Varèse had not yet managed to kill, drew his combat knife with his left hand.

«G-Graaah!»

"Silence."

Varèse stepped forward, avoiding the knife that was thrust at him, before grabbing the lookout by his neck and crushing his windpipe in one deft motion. It wasn't a move that would cause instant death, but it stopped the final soldier from being able to cry out. He fell to the ground, convulsing in pain; he would inevitably die soon enough.

"Suppression complete..." Varèse muttered to himself.

By the time he looked back at Fel, she was crouched down and quivering in fear. She had tried her best to put on a brave face, but she was a civilian, a girl, and a mere child; he couldn't blame her for letting the mask slip.

“Ah... Did, err... D-Did you kill them...?” Fel asked.

“Yes, they’re all dead—or as good as dead. If you can stand, then help me clean up.”

Without waiting for a reply, Varèse hoisted up a corpse in each arm. Things had become somewhat troublesome. Perhaps these guards were due to change shifts soon, or maybe a patrol would come by. That was why he needed to hide the bodies quickly. They would surely be found eventually, but he just needed enough time to meet with the civilian representative.

Fel collected the fallen combat knife. “You need to hide this too, right...?”

“Yeah.”

“W-Was my plan...no good...?” Fel stammered. She looked terrified beyond words.

Varèse opened the shed of a nearby house and shoved the bodies inside. He then picked up the remaining two and threw them on top before retrieving his dagger from a corpse.

“Your plan...successfully drew the attention of the guards,” he said.

“R-Right? So why did you do something so dangerous?”

“Because I couldn’t just sit back and let that happen.”

“But! But! If they’d shot at you, your mission would be over!”

“It would complicate the situation, yes, but it wouldn’t guarantee failure. I would much rather evade a search party than allow those men to do as they had intended. I’m here to save the civilians, and that includes you. I *will* get you out of here.”

Varèse was honestly quite aware that he had acted recklessly. It was foolish to expose so many people to danger just to save one individual—this was a teaching that had been hammered into his head over years of training.

A clear droplet ran down Fel’s cheek, but she quickly wiped it away with her small hand. “Thank...you...”

It could surely be argued that Varèse had made a foolish decision. As he saw

Fel’s desperate attempt to hold back her tears, however, he knew in his heart that it had been the right one.

# Chapter 2: Regis and Jestina

**July 22nd, noon, in the First Army's camp— After the strategy meeting had come to an end, only Latrielle, Germain, and Regis remained in the tent. The prince was the one to break the silence.**

"How do our preparations look, Regis?"

"They're going steady enough that I'm pretty sure we could pull things off this very instant if we needed to. Failure is not an option, however, so we are still adjusting the finer details."

"I see."

"Is all this really possible...?" Germain asked as he spread a map over the table.

"There was a siege two hundred years ago that used this same plan on similar terrain. I must admit, though—all my knowledge on the event is from a drama written about it."

"Betting the lives of over ten thousand soldiers on a theater play..." Germain murmured, his brows tightly knitted. "No matter how I try to look at it, that's a terrifying notion."

"The play is based on events that really did happen though," Regis replied, awkwardly scratching his head.

"And this really is possible, yes?" Latrielle asked, fixing the tactician with a firm stare.

"Of course. We sent our units ahead to conduct fieldwork, and after more than half a month with this many sappers, we are more than prepared."

That said, there were no guarantees. Regis could have easily spent days listing off everything he was worried about, but there was little point in doing so. The way he saw it, this was currently the plan with the highest chance of success.

The prince's lips curled into a wry smile. "I see. If you had grown fainthearted this late into the game, I would have needed to chastise you for your cowardice. Please proceed as scheduled."

"Very well."

Once before, during the meeting after the Seventh Army's defeat, Regis had felt that something was off about Latrielle; not once had the second prince even attempted to meet his gaze. Now, however, he looked Regis dead in the eye as they spoke, as though staring into his very soul.

*Has he recovered, or was I simply mistaken back then?* Regis wondered. In either case, it seemed that his concern was no longer an issue.

"Still..." Latrielle muttered, chewing his lip as he lowered his gaze to the map.

"Is something the matter?" Germain asked.

"Say this plan does succeed. We will of course be able to fend off the enemy."

"Certainly, sir."

"But what of Grebeauvoir?"

"That is..."

Both men turned their attention to the tactician; this was a question he had addressed back when he first proposed the plan.

"...Reconstruction is possible, but it will require quite some time," Regis reiterated.

Latrielle nodded. "And for that reason, you've proposed that we fall back to the fort on the mountain summit, correct?"

"Yes, sir."

Grebeauvoir stood to the north of a large mountain, while the city of Mordol stood to the south. Between them, at the summit of the mountain, was an old, mid-sized fortress—one that had served as the Empire's front line before Grebeauvoir was established. Some modifications would need to be made to its stone walls, since it had been constructed during a time before cannons became so powerful, but the terrain advantage afforded from being at such a

height would make it a much easier position to defend.

Latrielle's expression became tinged with uncertainty. "You're suggesting that we surrender territory?"

"We will certainly lose the city, but we will also show the other nations that the Empire stands firm," Regis replied.

"That is not enough."

"Attempting to keep Grebeauvoir will place a great burden on the garrisoned forces. I believe that setting up a defensive base atop the mountain and focusing troops on the other lines, at least for now, will benefit our nation in the long term."

"Langobarti swindled a city from the Empire. They must pay the price."

"I-In that case...what will we do about High Britannia?"

"That goes without saying—we shall ensure that we receive just recompense from them as well."

"It is reckless to take on two countries on at once, especially when the Belgarian Army has already lost so many troops."

"So we lack the men?"

"Correct. It would take at least a hundred thousand well-trained soldiers just to invade Langobarti."

Germain's expression turned grim; Regis's current position in the First Army did not encompass advising Latrielle on long-term policies. The prince seemed to be permitting it, however, so Germain had no choice but to let it stand.

A faint smile played on Latrielle's lips. "I see. You're surprisingly set in your ways, Regis. Even when you have the wit to propose such an outlandish scheme."

"To be honest, I would prefer clashing fair and square. Not fighting at all would of course be the best option."

"Hah. The imperial army is certainly exhausted, and we're lacking in numbers...but those notions are grounded in the thoughts of a bygone era."

“What do you mean?”

“I expect you’ve already noticed. I know that you sent those captured rifles to Argentina.”

“Th-That’s...”

Before the expedition, Regis had received a letter from Altina stating that Eric’s grip strength had deteriorated due to his injuries. He had replied suggesting that the knight become a sharpshooter, a duty that would entail using a rifle to guard the fourth princess, and then eventually serving as an instructor when specialized gun-wielding units were eventually formed. Regis wanted someone he knew and trusted to master the rifle before anyone else.

*I knew it—he’s been checking the items I send to the Fourth Army. I doubt he would have opened the sealed letters, but...* For now, the letters weren’t a priority. What really mattered was figuring out Latrielle’s intentions. It was partly to this end that Regis had joined the expedition in the first place—he needed to know what policies the prince would enact after becoming emperor.

“From now on, wars are going to be settled with firearms,” Latrielle concluded.

“...Indeed, sir.”

“I’ve already given the order to have our own ones developed, though I’m sure you’ve heard about that.”

Regis nodded. Thanks to bookshop owner Carol and southern noble Fanrine, among others, he had formed a moderate information network since arriving at the capital. As such, he was clued in whenever there was a large maneuver of any kind.

“I’ve also heard that you summoned a great many blacksmiths from Rouenne,” Regis noted.

Latrielle chuckled. “You have no backing in the capital, yet news reaches you this quickly. You’re quite something.”

“I’d assumed that you had only just begun developing the new guns, but to bring in that much assistance... Have you already made considerable progress?”

Latrielle paused for a moment in thought, while Germain placed a contemplative hand over his own mouth. The latter man was no doubt trying to avoid conceding any information, but that was enough for Regis to surmise at least some intel about their current situation.

It seemed that Latrielle had also surmised something from Regis, as a sly smile crept onto his face. “Hm... Regis, I see you as a talent who could change the very fate of the Belgarian Empire.”

“Sir, I couldn’t possibly—”

“At the very least, your recent string of accomplishments makes this an appropriate conclusion to come to.”

“I’m not...”

Regis was on the verge of denying the prince’s words when he recalled what Fanrine had told him: *“No matter how little self-confidence one might have, successes bring with them the anticipation of even further successes.”* His duty right now was not to lament his poor self-esteem, but to figure out the best next move.

Regis took a deep breath. “Say your evaluation is indeed accurate... Would you tell me about the guns then?”

“Of course. Please take a look.”

Latrielle gave Germain an order, and for the first time, Germain did not act on it straight away. He seemed hesitant, no doubt wondering whether this was really all right. The loyal adjutant could not oppose his lord’s wishes, however; he fetched a wooden crate from the back of the tent and carried it over to the table.

“Go ahead,” Latrielle said, urging Regis toward the crate.

“Is this a gun...?”

“Yes, a prototype that only just arrived. I received a number of variations, but I personally believe this is the best one so far.”

“...I’m going to take a look.”

Regis lifted the lid, and as expected, inside was a rifle. At first glance, it looked

almost identical to those used by the High Britannian Army, but a closer inspection revealed that it had more streamlined contours, making it appear slightly more elegant. It seemed to be functionally different as well.

“I call it the Fusil 851. Belgaria’s very first,” Latrielle declared. Even the name had been decided.

“May I touch it...?”

“Of course.”

Once Regis had the gun in his hands, he noticed it seemed a tad lighter than any other he had held before. When he pulled the lever to open the chamber, he saw that rubber was being used to create an airtight seal. Rubber was a valuable material that could only be procured in the south—a material that was easy enough to obtain in Belgaria, but not in High Britannia.

“So that’s the difference...” Regis mused aloud.

“There’s more. We use this as ammunition,” Latrielle said, placing on the table a bullet wrapped in paper.

“Paper casing?”

“Indeed. We immediately understood how hard it would be for us to mass-produce the metal cartridges used in High Britannia. These paper ones, however, can be prepared in no time at all.”

“I see...”

“The Fusil 851 exceeds the High Britannian make in both range and firepower. Its parts wear out faster, but that is a problem for another day. It won’t be long before we can mass-produce them.”

“You’re already moving to mass production?”

“We cannot let ourselves fall behind. We’re speeding up cannon and steam engine development as well, but those will require more time than the cartridges.”

“So what you mean to say is, we will soon have weaponry on par with the High Britannian Army.”

“On par with or better than, in half a year’s time.”

Regis was astounded. By poring through documents, he had gleaned that Belgaria had a high latent potential for industry. The late emperor had been apathetic to military and political matters alike, so he had never made use of that might...but Latrielle was about to wake a sleeping behemoth, the strength of which surpassed even Regis’s expectations.

*To think they’re expected to produce improved cannons, steam engines,* and *rifles in only half a year!*

“With such developments on the horizon, wouldn’t you say we have even more reason to pull back the war fronts and sort all our domestic matters?” Regis asked. “Investing more time will put us at a greater advantage.”

“Wrong. You’re missing the point.”

“Am I really?”

“At the moment, only Belgaria and High Britannia are capable of procuring so many rifles. In ten years’ time, however, the technology will spread, and our neighbors will naturally produce their own.”

“Right...”

The circulation of technology was inevitable, no matter what efforts were made to conceal it. If any conflicts broke out, regardless of scale or outcome, a gun or two would eventually end up in enemy hands. Even if other nations could not recreate them exactly, they could at least produce something similar and use a touch of ingenuity to compensate for any shortcomings. Perhaps they would even come out with a superior product.

Latrielle placed a hand on the Fusil 851. “I intend to use this gun to conquer all our neighbors within the next two years.”

“Wha—?!” Regis’s voice suddenly caught in his throat. This was a bold statement for the second prince to make, and yet his expression could not have been more serious. Germain beside him looked just as sober.

Regis considered the situation from as many angles as he could, thinking over myriad possible outcomes, before ultimately reaching his conclusion: this was

much too reckless.

“The look on your face tells me you do not agree,” Latrielle said, his expression not wavering in the slightest. “Are you about to say we cannot win?”

“We will only end up in the same situation High Britannia is struggling with now. Guns and cannons are heavily dependent on supplies; we cannot properly engage our opponents with barrels of gunpowder in our hands, and once the powder runs out, it would be impossible for us to fight on. When our supply chain is inevitably severed, it would only be a matter of time before our soldiers are routed.”

“You say this, but there is no guarantee the enemy will also have a Regis d’Aurick capable of such plans.”

“It is far too optimistic to expand every war front under the assumption that not a single one will have its supply chain cut.”

“We wouldn’t attack without a plan. I’m not naive enough to think we could claim victory with our new guns alone.”

“Why are you so fixated on invasion...?”

That was the mystery. It was true that Belgaria could mass-produce rifles that would pose a threat to all the nations that did not have them, but as High Britannia’s recent retreat had proven, war was not quite so simple.

Latrielle sighed, staring into the distance as though gazing at some faraway land. “Everything I do is to ensure the Empire lives on. It may seem as though our prosperity is ensured, but it is ever fleeting. This war has proven it, painfully so. If we fail to keep up with the developing weaponry of other nations or lose even a few battles, our capital will fall. In the grand scheme of things, we are but a small nation. Like *La Dame Blanche*, we must become a great monolith—a superpower.”

Latrielle spoke with conviction, but his ideals were far too grand. There were countless wars waiting on the path to his goal.

“And that’s why we must conquer those around us...?” Regis asked.

“Our nation shall never fall to war if only one power remains on the globe.”

“Plenty of countries have collapsed due to civil war.”

“And most successful civil wars involve outside powers.”

“There are plagues and famine.”

“If a country is large enough, when tragedy strikes one area, the rest of the nation is there to provide aid. This happens in the Empire already.”

“But if a country is too large, its orders will not reach its farthest borders. You would need to grant the lords of each region a great deal of authority. Is that not ultimately the same as having separate countries?”

This much was basic knowledge written in every book on governance, so it was only natural that Latrielle must have considered it. By raising his question first, Regis could remain a passive listener.

“We will deem each territory beyond a certain size a state. Each state will have a lord to govern it, but these lords will possess no military authority.”

“Pardon?”

“A national army is necessary to manage a large nation. Argentina is the commander of the Fourth Army, but she is not the lord of Beilschmidt, nor does she govern the lands around Fort Volks.”

“That is correct.”

“We will arrange the entire army as such, and do away with that system of allowing each noble to keep their own army—after all, even a lord who wishes to rebel can do nothing without military authority. Meanwhile, I will personally manage a thorough upheaval of the army’s personnel and deployment procedures.”

“You’re...doing away with noble armies?”

“Yes. The deployment of officers will be settled by the Ministry of Military Affairs. We intend to respect the wishes of each commander, of course...but we will not permit any arbitrary promotions or dismissals, and we will not keep them with the same members for too long.”

Moving the officers around on a regular basis would make it much harder for anyone to conspire. If a rebellion was being plotted within one army, it would

disperse once the commander was swapped out, and those with nasty rumors following them could simply be sent elsewhere. This tactic would also make it less likely for military executives to get too close to the lords. Commanders assigned to completely new units would naturally struggle to get a grasp of their men, but...

"Without any opposing forces, there shouldn't be any problems..." Regis murmured to himself.

"Correct."

By abolishing noble armies, taking military authority away from the lords, and uniting the army under one banner, commanders would be treated not as those with authority, but as those with ability. Regis could feel a sudden chill run down his spine; he had read enough books that contained similar ideas, but none that had set forth a plan that was so all-encompassing and yet also so particular. What would the intelligentsia have to say if they learned of these ideas? A number of new books would no doubt be added to the nation's bookshelves.

*This is completely novel. Latrielle is looking toward a completely new type of nation...* Regis thought. It was an exciting concept, to say the least.

"But even so...this idea relies on us having conquered every country in the vicinity," Regis said.

"We will win. We *must* win. Otherwise, the Belgarian Empire will eventually fall."

"Is it not possible for us to form peaceful relations with our neighbors?"

"Your pacifism must have influenced Argentina..."

"...I can't deny that. But even if we do manage to conquer the surrounding nations, the embers of resistance will continue to burn. Many will die, and these deaths will only breed animosity."

"That is what the system is meant to contain."

"Are the nobles really going to obey a plan that involves using their armies to invade other nations, only to dismantle those very same armies after the fact?"

“The First Army will deal with those who refuse to cooperate.”

“You’ll incite a nationwide civil war. To make matters worse, the Fusil 851s are going to be in circulation by then; there’s no guarantee that you’ll win against the nobles’ armies.”

“There’s no guarantee, but even so, we will win.”

“Just how much strife do you intend to cause...?”

“I will fight every single enemy who stands in my path—who stands between me and my ideal—and I will defeat them all. That is my only choice; otherwise, it will be impossible to create an evergreen utopia, the peace and prosperity of which would not wane in a thousand years.”

There was a fire burning in Latrielle’s eyes—one that proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that he was Altina’s brother. Regis felt outmatched and overpowered. Without everything he had experienced over the past year, perhaps he would have fallen to his knees and pledged his allegiance—that was simply the degree of magnanimity the second prince exuded. But Regis had made an oath.

*I will move for Altina’s sake. I’ll go on the offensive, no matter how insecure I am.*

At this point, it was too late for him to find the optimal solution to their problems as they were presented to him; he needed to be proactive in pushing the entire situation in Altina’s favor.

Latrielle had devised an innovative form of organization, but it was rooted in militaristic hegemony. His path differed from the one that Altina and Regis had set their sights on, and once upon a time, simply knowing this would have been enough to make Regis shrink back. Now, however, he dared to press onward.

“Was His Majesty also standing in your path?”

Germain’s eyes shot open. “What are you implying?!”

Latrielle, however, did not react. His face remained an unchanging mask, and it was in this mask that Regis saw the truth. Had the second prince truly not been involved in the emperor’s death, such a remark would have caused him to

fly into a rage, no matter how highly he viewed Regis as a tactician.

"If the head of one old man had been enough to save a million imperial lives, then I would have swung my sword however many times it took," Latrielle replied, forcing a calm voice. "Tradition, authority, *purity*... How many lives have been stolen by our obsession with these words? And what do they give the people in return? We must proceed toward our ideal, and the blood that has been spilled in the process cannot be wasted. You should think long and hard about this, Regis. About where you should stand."

*In other words, I need to side with him, or I'm dead.*

Latrielle wouldn't feel any qualms about eliminating a mere tactician, nor would he so much as hesitate to cut down his sister Altina—after all, he had already killed the emperor.

There was one more thing that Regis now knew for certain: Latrielle had the imperial court in the palm of his hand. That was why he had admitted to his crime before Regis, who was loyal to the fourth princess Altina—Latrielle knew there was no evidence, and that it was pointless for them to even raise the issue.

Regis closed his eyes. "I'm not the brightest, I must admit... May I have some time to get my thoughts in order? For now, I think it's best we focus on the siege."

Latrielle nodded. "Indeed, you have a point. I've been somewhat...hasty. We'll continue our discussion once this matter with Grebeauvoir is settled."

"...Thank you."

After giving a firm salute, Regis stepped out of the tent.

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Regis walked out into the blinding sunlight and exhaled a long breath; it almost felt as though he were emerging from a serpents' nest. The sentries hurried to salute him, and it was then that he noticed—there were crumbs dotting their lips.

*Are those from...sweets?*

Standing before the sentries were two women, the first of whom was Fanrine. Her black hair reached down to her hips, and she was wearing an equally black one-piece dress that was bound at her waist with a large ribbon. While she was a daughter of the esteemed House Tiraso Laverde, she had been sent by the Ministry of Military Affairs to assist Regis as an escort officer, even going so far as to join him on the expedition. While she was at times an incredibly mature-sounding lady, she was otherwise an energetic girl with a carefree smile on her face.

The woman standing beside Fanrine had faintly colored hair, ghastly pale skin, and slender limbs. She seemed very much like a woman with a high-class upbringing—she had serene eyes and a voice that was like the chime of a silver bell. Her name was apparently Jestina.

“Good work, Regis.”

“Splendid work...Sir Aurick.”



“Oh, not at all,” Regis replied.

Jestina was a servant sent by the Ministry of Ceremonies who had recently started aiding Regis with his daily routine. Why the Ministry of Ceremonies had found this necessary, he wasn’t entirely sure. Perhaps they wanted to strengthen their ties with Altina, or maybe they had some other intention entirely. Either way, Jestina came on the recommendation of the minister of ceremonies himself, Marquis Bergerac—or rather, on the recommendation of his grandson, Third Prince Bastian.

Fanrine had been wary when Jestina first arrived, but she had relaxed considerably over the course of the expedition thus far. Regis similarly took no issue with the development—Jestina spoke fluent Belgarian, had a courteous demeanor, and boasted incredible housework skills—but the simple fact she was an older woman meant he found her somewhat hard to deal with.

“What are you doing all the way out here, Fanrine?” Regis asked.

“I baked some sweets and thought the fine men here might want a taste,” Fanrine replied with a giggle as she held out the basket hanging from her arm. A white cloth covering the top was pulled back enough to reveal the cookies stored inside. Sweets were completely unsuited for the battlefield, but they looked and smelled absolutely delicious. It was quite impressive that she had managed to make them with the impromptu stoves set up at camp.

“Those look amazing...” Regis breathed. “Oh, but...” He could already imagine one of the more serious staff officers finding out and then yelling something like, *“Did you come here for a picnic, Tactician?!”*

Fanrine slumped her shoulders, evidently crestfallen. “Have I done something I shouldn’t have?” she asked.

“Ah. No, not exactly. But there is a proper time and place...”

“My apologies,” Jestina interjected, lowering her head. “It is because I insisted.”

“You did...?” Regis asked.

“I have heard that sugar helps immensely when thinking over difficult

matters.”

“Ah, that’s a good point. Maybe you can get the head chef to give them out?”

“Great idea!” Fanrine exclaimed, clapping her hands together. “These cookies do need some tea, after all.”

“Aha...”

It seemed that Fanrine’s leisurely lifestyle had seeped into her character, making her somewhat more laid-back than one would expect.

*Altina is always drinking tea as well, so maybe this is just normal behavior for high-class women.*

“Why not come with us, Regis?”

“I’ve just come out of a long discussion, so I think I’ll return to my tent. I’ve got some matters to attend to.”

Jestina leaned closer to the tactician, bringing her lips to his ear. “Miss Fanrine worked very hard to make them...” she whispered. Those words alone were enough to make Regis’s heart ache; he knew now that he could not leave empty-handed.

“I-If you’re, er... If you’re busy, I wouldn’t want to take up your time...” Fanrine said apologetically. “Oh, but are you not going to have lunch?”

Regis hadn’t intended to, but from what he could see, Fanrine had prepared some lunch as well. *I might as well eat now, otherwise my next meal might not be until tomorrow.*

“Right... I guess I’ll have something then,” Regis conceded. “I am in a bit of a hurry though; I need to get quite a few things in order before this afternoon.”

“Is something happening then?” Jestina asked.

Regis nodded. “You should start packing as well. Load the carriages if you can.”

Fanrine tilted her head. “Is the camp moving?”

“That depends...”

The trio made their way to the head chef and asked that he take the sweets.

After “tasting” quite a few—supposedly to ensure they weren’t poisoned—he decided they were just right to serve with tea and accepted them.

With that done, Fanrine and Jestina accompanied Regis to his tent—that is, assuming it could even be called a tent. It consisted only of a few pillars with sheets stretched between them as makeshift walls, and there was no ceiling to speak of. When Regis brushed aside the cloth serving as the entrance, however, he noticed there was a servant girl inside. Long brown hair hung down over her glasses, and freckles peppered her cheeks.

“Erk...” she groaned.

Regis cocked his head. “Do you need something? Er... Ms. Franka, was it?”

For a brief moment, Jestina shot the servant girl a hard glance.

Fanrine placed a hand on her hip. “You there!” she called, her voice firm. “I don’t care if you’re Regis’s personal maid or whatnot—do not enter your master’s room without permission!”

“I-I’m sorry...” the servant girl replied in a feeble whisper, deeply bowing her head. Jestina moved next to her and apologized as well.

“My apologies... This all happened because I told her to change Sir Aurick’s sheets.”

“I’m not sure how you handled things at the last place you worked, but startling a master in his room is disgraceful behavior for a maid. Please take care next time,” Fanrine chided. As expected of a noblewoman, her words really packed a punch.

Regis scratched his head. This was his first time living with servants, so he couldn’t help but wonder whether this was how things were supposed to be.

“Yes, well...there’s always next time,” he said.

# Interlude

«Phah!» Franka exhaled. She had made her way to the riverbank, a reasonable distance from Regis's tent, with his bedsheets in hand. «That was a close one!»

"Might I ask that you not use Germanian here?" cautioned Jestina—or at least, the woman who was going by that alias. Her real name was Jessica Schweinzeberg.

"Oh, right."

"You never know who might be listening..."

"I know, Sis."

Similarly, Franka's real name was Franziska Schweinzeberg. She couldn't sense anyone around, but there was nothing lost in exercising a bit of caution.

"So?" Jessica asked. "How did the search go?"

"We hit the jackpot. I could only find miscellaneous memos, but I think I've got a grasp on his plans! Aren't I amazing? How about some praise?"

"You were only afforded this opportunity because my helping with the sweets bought you some time. I was naturally expecting results."

"Ah, right. The sweets. Yeah..."

"And the only reason I was doing that was because you claimed to be incapable of cooking. Remember?"

"Sorry..." Franziska muttered. She was certainly stronger than Jessica in terms of brute strength, but she found her sister so terrifying at times that she struggled to even maintain eye contact.

"Well, all that aside...you are probably better off staying well away from Sir Aurick. It was nighttime, and there was some distance between you, but you have occupied the same battlefield in the past. There is a chance he might recognize you."

"True. Especially seeing as there aren't all that many girls out there who're as

cute as me.”

“Tell me about his plan.”

Franziska shrunk back as Jessica refused to even acknowledge her comment, but this discouragement didn’t last very long—simply remembering the tactician’s plan made her hair stand on end. The Empire was plotting something truly dreadful.

“You know,” Franziska began, “I’m starting to think that Regis guy is actually a monster in human clothing...”

“We would not have come here unless I shared your suspicion.”

✧ ✧ ✧

## About a month prior—

By pure coincidence, or perhaps the guidance of the stars, the Schweinzeberg sisters had come across Third Prince Bastian of the Belgarian Empire. They were subsequently lent a room in the palace, where they spent a night.

Dinner was extravagant, and breakfast was no less impressive. The rows of pompous dishes almost made one forget that an enemy army had very nearly reached the capital just the other day. There was vegetable soup, fresh salad, rare roast beef, soft bread, and thick slices of succulent-looking ham.

Perhaps because the prince had ordered that they be welcomed as guests, the sisters had not needed to endure any background checks whatsoever. As a result, they were easily able to amass the information they needed at the very center of the nation.

That night, the three girls shared their findings.

“Looks like Gil wasn’t hanged after all,” Franziska noted.

Jessica nodded, not seeming all that surprised; she could make up for any information she wasn’t able to gather with her divinations. The youngest sister Martina, in contrast, threw up her arms in joy.

“Great news!”

“Yep!” Franziska replied with a nod. “Super-great news!”

“It will most likely be impossible to save him,” Jessica interjected curtly.

“Huh?! Why?!” Franziska cried, slamming a hand against the table in outrage.

“First of all, we would struggle to rescue him with just the three of us. The imperial army is wary of our brigade’s remaining forces plotting to retrieve him, and they are no doubt already looking for us.”

“That’s why we’re regrouping with the others from Renard Pendu, right? Isn’t that why we came to the capital in the first place?”

“Yes. This city is where information gathers,” Jessica replied. Just as planned, she had spent the entire day gathering as much intel as possible.

“So why is it going to be impossible?!”

“Because at this rate, we will not even be able to save Renard Pendu...”

“What? Even without Gil, they’re still a force to be reckoned with, right? They might be outnumbered several times over by the imperial army, but I still can’t see them losing!”

Franziska had fought alongside the mercenaries a number of times before. They had not been granted their current positions due to favoritism of any kind —their reputations were nothing if not well-earned.

“I would not usually worry about them, but...” Jessica sighed. “They are in danger right now.”

“Right now? What’s happening?”

“In a joint venture with Langobarti, the High Britannian Army has occupied the fortified city of Grebeauvoir. Naturally, Renard Pendu is with them.”

“Why’d they go off occupying a city of all things?”

“I assume their intention is to publicize Belgaria’s exhausted state to anyone paying attention. Should they manage to hold the city for, say, half a year, some countries will come under the impression that the imperial army is no longer anything to fear.”

“I see! Well, those imperials did take a massive hit. I think the High Britannians have got a fighting chance.”

“Belgaria is sending its First Army to recapture the city. They are due to depart in one week’s time.”

“So Latrielle is joining the battle, eh? I hear he’s already set up to be the next emperor. To think he’s going out himself... What a hard worker.”

“Perhaps he feels the need to prove himself, particularly considering that all of the Empire’s achievements in this war belong to Fourth Princess Argentina. The problem is not the commander, however.”

“What are you concerned about then?”

“Regis d’Aurick,” Jessica replied, allowing that sinister name to pass her lips. “He was invited to join the campaign as a tactician.”

“Urk.”

In its early stages, the High Britannian invasion had proceeded even smoother than expected: the Belgarian officers were more pigheaded than anticipated, and they had failed to devise any competent measures against the new guns. The only exceptions were Argentina and the Fourth Army—they had fought back the steamships that were thought to hold an insurmountable advantage, and then they had gone on to crush High Britannia’s supply unit.

Rumor had it that the tactician Regis d’Aurick was responsible for these accomplishments. This man’s bizarre decision to create fog out of seemingly nowhere was the only reason Mercenary King Gilbert was now captured.

Before the war had started, Franziska was given the task of sealing Argentina’s army inside Volks. Much to her dismay, however, the unit she had marched toward the fortress was bested in a single night. She had consequently been unable to stall the fourth princess, and to make matters worse, this failure had earned her a scolding from Gilbert. Simply hearing the tactician’s name now gave her goosebumps.

“So that tactician is joining the campaign... Isn’t he one of Argentina’s men though?” Franziska asked.

“Perhaps the prince petitioned him; maybe Sir Aurick has even turned coat. There are all sorts of rumors going around, but such details are not important. All that matters is that they will leave the capital in a week.”

“Urgh... But no matter how monstrous of a strategist that man is, he surely can’t recapture a fortified city so easily.”

Jessica shrugged. “Such optimism can be a virtue. I respect that.”

“So things aren’t looking too good for us, huh?”

“If we do not act now, we will miss our opportunity.”

“Gotcha. What do we need to do then?” Franziska asked. She was a mercenary who had raced across many a battlefield; she would not hesitate to fight if she had to.

“Okay!” Martina exclaimed, balling her hands into fists. “Martina will do her best!”

“Indeed. The three of us will pull this off,” Jessica said with a nod. “We will save Renard Pendu from the jaws of death...and rescue our brother.”

Franziska could sense that things weren’t going to be easy. Reuniting with the Renard Pendu mercenaries holed up in Grebeauvoir was their first challenge, and even if they somehow managed that, they would only number seven hundred in total. This was nothing compared to the ten thousand or so stationed at Fort Volks, where Gilbert was presumably being held.

*Any normal person would’ve given up by now,* Franziska thought. Her sister Jessica, however, was heralded as a magician—she could make her way through any situation, no matter how desperate.

“First, let us make use of that naive third prince...”

✧ ✧ ✧

The three sisters began looking for Bastian, asking any servants they passed along the way where he might be. They had been afforded the dresses of Belgarian noblewomen, meaning they were able to walk around the palace without drawing much attention to themselves, and they continued their search until eventually reaching the hallway leading to the Ministry of Military Affairs.

“Well, if it isn’t my hard-ass brother...” spoke a familiar male voice.

“Back from High Britannia, are you? I’m glad to see you’re still in one piece.”

They had spotted Bastian, but the situation was far from one where Franziska could call out to him; the third prince was confronting a general who was clearly ranked extremely highly in the military. The sisters hid in the shadow of a nearby pillar and watched the conversation unfold.

*Wait a second... Bastian just called that man his brother. Does that mean...that blondie over there is Prince Latrielle?!*

Franziska was unarmed, since the dress she was wearing had nowhere to conceal any weapons. Her mind raced as she tried to process the situation.

*If the second prince notices we're from Renard Pendu, can we outrun him? Nah, not happening... Maybe I could, but Jessica's slow, and we've got Martina with us too.*

There was nothing they could do but continue to watch in silence.

Bastian sighed. "Man, you can't imagine what I've been through. I was chased, shot at, forced to leap into a river—you name it."

"It just goes to show that you need to settle down somewhere. Find a place for yourself, whether it be in politics, the military, or whatever else you desire. Do you not think it's about time you started working for the sake of the nation?"

"In other words, you want me to support you. You're not even emperor yet, but you sure are starting to speak like one."

"Does that displease you...?"

"Nah. I don't really care, to be honest. Altina and I are idiots; we're just not cut out for this kind of stuff. There is one thing, though—I used to think politics was such a bore, but maybe you can weigh in on something...O brother of mine."

"Hm?"

"What would you think if I said Belgaria needs its own parliament?"

Latrielle was taken by surprise for a moment, and then he burst into laughter. Bastian had always refused to listen to his tutors, and now he was not only bringing up politics, but also making the sort of proposal one would expect from

a liberalist.

“I never know what to expect from you,” Latrielle said with a wry smile. “You made an interesting friend over in High Britannia, I assume?”

“Well, I can’t deny that I’m borrowing this knowledge from a friend. I think I understand it somewhat, though.”

“The idea is absurd. There is no issue with the Empire’s current legislative process. Under our current system, the emperor’s power reaches from the highest to the very lowest rungs of society; we have no need for an organization that would oppose him. Remember this: the emperor is an absolute, inviolable entity.”

“Hm... Well, I’m sure you’d make a great emperor, Latrielle, but what about when you’re all old and dried up? There’s no guarantee your kids will share your talents.”

Latrielle frowned. “If we end up in such a situation, we will merely rid ourselves of those who aren’t worthy.”

“Oi!” Bastian exclaimed, fixing Latrielle with a glare. “D’you mean...?!”

“I’m sure you’ve already heard the news.”

Bastian wasted no time in reaching into his breast pocket. “Then, Bro... Did you... Did you actually...?!”

“Hmph. Had I denied it, would you have believed me?”

“That’s gotta be going too far!” Bastian yelled. He moved to draw his dagger, but no sooner had his fingers grazed the handle than a silver blade shot toward him at an abnormal speed. It was the second prince’s single-edged blade, the *Armée Victoire Volonté*, and its tip now rested mere inches from Bastian’s right hand.



Bastian froze; continuing his attempt to draw his dagger would only result in his hand getting impaled. Backstepping to a safer distance was an option, but there was no guarantee that Latrielle wouldn't close the distance just as quickly. To make matters worse, a dagger was at a clear disadvantage against a longsword. Bastian had no trouble slicing through a normal weapon, but the blade focused on him was made of trystie, the same as his own.

A chill ran down Bastian's spine. "You serious...?" he sighed. "Were you always this fast, or have I gotten slower?"

"There was never any reason for me to get serious while sparring against someone eight years my junior."

Bastian gritted his teeth. *So he's always been holding back, eh?*

"I am prepared to eat mud for the future of the Empire," Latrielle continued. "How about you? What have you done for our nation? What *can* you do?"

"I've...been giving it some thought. Do nations really exist for the good of the people? I just don't see it. If someone is born a commoner here in Belgaria, how can they be happy? Is putting up with taxes so that nobles can live in luxury supposed to give them purpose? Don't you think that's unfair?"

"Yes, it's very unfair. What's your point?"

"What...?!"

"You're not seeing the bigger picture. You wish to create a fair nation, but how can such a society maintain an unshakable army? How will it nurture exemplary commanders, who are required to lead when barbarians or other nations attack? Liberalism and all its proponents—how will they protect the nation?"

"There are exemplary commoners too, though, right?"

"It is foolish to rely on exceptions. Competency is not about one's blood; it is about their environment. Nobles receive far superior education—it is from infancy that they begin to learn how to manage the land and its people, as well as how to lead armies. Could a commoner do the same?"

"I-In that case, we just need to educate the commoners too, right?"

“Education costs time and money, both of which are always in short supply. Belgaria does not have the surplus to give every commoner an education, so which commoners would you grace with this opportunity? And how would you make that decision?”

“.....”

“If you give only a select few the privilege of an education, that is no different from the restrictive system of nobility that is currently in place.”

“Erk...”

“Bastian, are you beginning to understand the value of all the opportunities you have thus far refused to engage with? It’s not too late to improve yourself—to strive for more. If you commit to your studies, you can become a minister or a general. I’ll even help you get there,” Latrielle said, pulling back his sword. “Work for the Empire. A prosperous nation will save many citizens, don’t you agree?”

“You’re telling me to shut up and accept all the inequalities around us...?” Bastian replied, unable to offer any other rebuttal.

“I’m saying it’s far better than watching everything crumble under the might of foreign powers. I’m happy to hear that you’ve taken an interest in politics—I shall allow you to preach your ideals as much as you want, and I will gladly keep company with you—but if you get in my way, I will consider you an enemy. You will receive no mercy from me then.”

“Ngh...”

It was only after Latrielle had gone that Franziska finally slipped out from the shadows. “H-Hey...” she stammered, struggling to greet the third prince.

“Hm? Oh, you three. Did you see any of that?”

“Aha... A little bit...”

“Good grief. You couldn’t have caught me at a more awkward time. Could you keep this between us?”

“Ah! ’Course I can!” Franziska replied, nodding again and again. Martina shot up her hands with similar enthusiasm and an earnest “Sure!”

Jessica, however, courteously lowered her head to Bastian. “I wish to apologize...and ask you a favor.”

“A favor, eh?” the prince repeated.

“We cannot allow ourselves to be treated as guests forever. I was wondering if you could write us a letter of introduction so that we might find work.”

“You reached out to that friend of yours, right?”

Such was the lie the three sisters were going with. Their ultimate goal, of course, was to rescue their brother Gilbert from the Fourth Army.

“I have sent a letter, but there is no guarantee I will get a favorable reply. I heard rumors of a tactician who does not yet have any service staff...so I was wondering if perhaps I could tend to him.”

“You want to be a maid, huh? Well, sure. Why not?”

*Well, that was easy... This prince is way too clueless. Deceiving him is almost effortless!* Franziska thought. Of course, she knew not to speak her mind.

Jessica offered a few words of gratitude before bowing her head once again. “As for my apology...I initially did not know who you were, so I introduced myself under a false name.”

“Oh, did you?”

“Yes. My real name is—”

Jessica had gone as far as to prepare handkerchiefs embroidered with the false name she was about to assume.

Bastian gave an understanding nod. “Got it. I’ll put in a good word wherever you want, but you’re probably better off leaving the child here,” he said, crouching down in front of Martina.

Upon hearing those words, Franziska broke out in a cold sweat. She felt as though something had suddenly clamped down on her heart.

“Okay! Marchena will stay!” Martina declared, throwing up her arms again.

“Good girl.”

*So he’s willing to introduce us, but he wants a hostage. And a child, no less! He*

*really is Belgarian royalty. Can't let my guard down around him, but what do we do?*

In stark contrast to the panicking Franziska, Jessica offered a calm nod. "As you wish. Please be good to Marchena," she said.

"You're okay with this, Sis?!"

"Franka. I know that you want to keep her close, but we cannot take a child to a battlefield. We must not waste this goodwill."

"I-Is that all right...?"

"Of course. She will be much safer here than where we are headed. Do you understand, Marchena? Do not cause any trouble, okay?"

"Okaaay!"

Jessica was not the sort of person who would sacrifice her little sister to save her brother—at least, that was what Franziska wanted to believe, but she couldn't subdue her concerns. She even wished that she could have taken Martina's place.

"Good luck out there, Fran!" Martina chirped, giving her sister a big hug.

"...Thanks. I'll come back for you, no matter what," Franziska replied, wrapping her arms tightly around the girl's tiny body.

# Chapter 3: The Battle of Grebeauvoir

**July 25th, half past one— The sun was just beginning its slow descent back toward the horizon. Lunch had been tidied away, and afternoon training was due to start.**

Thirteen staff officers were gathered in the First Army's headquarters—the heads of all three knight brigades, as well as the commanders of the artillery and infantry units. Alongside them were the administrative officers in charge of supply and relief.

The men were all sitting so perfectly upright as they focused on Marshal General Latrielle that one might have assumed they were posing for a picture. Germain was to the second prince's right, while Regis was standing to his left.

*They're all anxious,* Regis observed. He felt completely out of place, as though he were the only one isolated from the stately atmosphere.

Latrielle gazed across his men before finally opening his mouth to speak. "We will now execute the operation to rescue Grebeauvoir's prisoners of war."

"What?!" came a joint cry from the officers, most of whom were completely taken aback by the announcement. Batteren of the White Hare Brigade in particular raised his head.

"We're doing it now, sir?!"

"Indeed," Latrielle replied. "Do you object?"

"No, but...I was told it wouldn't be happening until tomorrow."

"There were some suspicious points about the enemy's countermeasures during the first battle. I do not doubt any of your loyalty, but I cannot say we have a firm grasp of every soldier in the army."

"Y-Yes, sir."

"We are on the battlefield. I trust that you'll prove your mettle, even if our plans have changed slightly."

“I’ll do everything in my power to meet your expectations!”

Batteren withdrew, but not before shooting Regis a momentary glare. It had of course been the tactician’s idea to hide the real schedule from the officers until the very last moment; there was a very serious chance that a conspirator lurked among the First Army’s ranks, and it was crucial that the upcoming battle began with a surprise attack.

Another reason for Regis’s decision was that he did not want to give the soldiers time to unknowingly reveal the First Army’s next move. The troops would no doubt start behaving differently if given time to themselves before such a decisive battle—some would grow more quiet and contemplative, while others would act noticeably cheerful. Perhaps the meals would even be a bit more extravagant. It was evident that the High Britannian commander had an eye for detail, so maybe he would pick up on these minute changes.

*We need to take the initiative this time.*

Once Germain had spread out a map of the area, Latrielle spoke again, this time with an audible degree of restlessness. “I will now tell you the details. The crux of this operation is that we must precisely follow the schedule. Any unit that moves out of turn risks annihilation.”

Those gathered were immediately astir. The unrivaled strength of the Empire’s First Army meant its troops were used to more straightforward battle strategies; never before had they experienced a plan where one wrong step would result in catastrophic failure. As they listened to the details for the very first time, their faces became colored with anxiety and disbelief.

Olbath, an elderly knight, started stroking his beard. “Hm, I see... This certainly is a bold plan. Was it Sir Aurick’s idea, by chance?”

In an instant, Regis found himself on the receiving end of countless gazes. “Yes, that’s right,” he admitted with a nod. Keeping silent here simply wasn’t an option.

Olbath spoke gently, but he did not hesitate to press further, even in the presence of the second prince. “I’ve never heard of such a plan before,” he said. “Will it work?”

The nervous expressions of the other gathered officers made it clear that Olbath was not the only one eager for an answer. Not even Latrielle could weigh in here, since sticking up for Regis too much would only invite antipathy from the other soldiers. The second prince's men would think he was favoring the new tactician over those who had served the First Army for years.

*No matter how popular Latrielle is, this is the battlefield. These officers are putting not just their own lives on the line, but the lives of their men as well.*

In the Fourth Army, Regis could simply rely on his previous accomplishments and ask that his comrades trust him. Here, however, he needed to think more carefully. "If you are unable to place your trust in me, we can remove your unit from the operation and rethink our formations," he replied. "I will admit, though, the plan will need to be delayed if too many units drop out, and we will most likely lose our chance to save the captives."

"I see. Is that not an unreasonable ultimatum, Sir Aurick? I would assume that saving the captives and our willingness to trust you are separate issues."

As expected of an officer serving the First Army, Olbath put forward a reasonable argument. Regis was sure he could debate the knight easily enough, but merely talking him down wouldn't do much for troop morale; he needed these men to wholeheartedly believe in his plan.

It was in that instant that Regis remembered something—not a passage from a book he had read, but words that had quite recently been spoken by a certain princess.

*"I am asking you to risk your life for me, so it's only natural that I put my own on the line as well."*

"I'm asking you to risk your lives," Regis muttered, doing his best to echo Altina's past declaration, "so it makes sense for me to risk my own as well."

"Oh? Are you saying that you'll forfeit your life if your plan fails? You're resolved to be beheaded in the case of our loss?"

"If that is what it takes, then yes."

Regis had agreed so readily that he surprised even himself. Failure now meant certain death, so it would not have been unusual for him to break into a sweat,

for his heart to race, or for his voice to have quavered as he made the announcement...but he was perfectly calm. He could not say why, but he had accepted the situation with neither hesitation nor resistance.

“Do you honestly mean that?” Olbath asked, his eyes widened in shock. The other officers looked just as taken aback.

“Err... Time and time again, I’ve bet the lives of good men on reckless strategies. There have even been battles where our defeat risked putting innumerable civilians in danger. This plan is no different. The stakes are so high that my life is not worth even the slightest hesitation in comparison.”

Regis was only now realizing it, but he had at some point developed the resolve to bet his own life on the outcome of a battle. *I suppose that should come as no surprise—every single engagement in this war has been at least somewhat of a gamble.*

Olbath swallowed his breath; then he dropped to one knee and respectfully lowered his head. “I apologize for having doubted you. Your dedication is as expected of a tactician who has triumphed over so many harsh battlefields. It is only natural you would wager your life on your plans.”

“Oh, no. It’s not like I want to die or anything... I’m just certain we’ll succeed.”

“Then, if you will overlook my discourtesy, please include my unit in your plan!”

“Of course. I’m counting on you.”

None of the others voiced any objections. Regis let out a relieved sigh, knowing he had earned at least some degree of trust.

An amused smile played on Latrielle’s lips. “Just as I thought...” he commented. “You’re not meant to be a third-grade officer, Regis.”

“Am I getting a demotion, sir?”

“Hah. Quite the contrary—you have the makings of a general.”

“Huh...?”

“But that is a discussion for when our mission is over. There are captives awaiting rescue in the city of Grebeauvoir, so enough chitchat.” Latrielle drew

his sword, the *Armée Victoire Volonté*. Its glimmering silver blade reflected the faces of all those assembled. “Onward, to victory!”

The officers raised their fists and cheered.

It was when the sun had started its descent toward the horizon that the bugles sounded, signaling for the First Army to begin its advance. Reinforcements had arrived from the capital, and now its core comprised twelve thousand foot soldiers at the vanguard, two thousand artillery soldiers, and thirty cannons. Covering their flanks were the cavalry units of Olbath and Batteren, each a thousand riders strong.

The main camp was protected by the thousand riders of the White Wolf Brigade, with three thousand foot soldiers stationed in the rear as reserve forces. Fifty thousand sappers were already proceeding with the operation as planned.

Grebeauvoir lay in what was essentially a basin among the mountains, and the Empire had the high ground, which allowed Regis a full view of the battlefield. Latrielle, Germain, and the other officers rode horses, but as the tactician could not, he simply stood beside them.

Regis checked his pocket watch. It was five past two. “It’s about time to launch an attack on the fortress. We need to take their eyes off the rescue operation.”

“The enemy has come out to meet us!” Germain exclaimed, pointing at the fortress.

“Oh. They’re already deviating from expectations...” Latrielle muttered. He had expected the enemy army to once again fight from within the fortress, considering that it had worked for them during their previous battle.

Even so, Regis was calm. “This should not be an issue,” he said. “This opening is within the realm of developments I am prepared for, and the on-site commanders have already been informed.”

“Hm.”

Germain cocked his head to one side. “Isn’t there something strange about the enemy vanguard...?”

It seemed that Germain had good eyesight. Regis wasn't quite so fortunate—he couldn't make out the enemy in much detail from their current location—but he was more focused on the time. He glanced at his pocket watch again and again, until eventually...

"It's time."

Smoke erupted from the cannons being dragged along by the artillery soldiers. There was a brief moment of quiet, and then came the shockwave, powerful enough that Regis felt as though he had crashed into a wall of air. The boom reverberated not just through his eardrums, but through his entire body. It was a simultaneous barrage that caused the very earth to tremble beneath him.

At almost that very same instant, a great noise came from behind them as well. It was the sound of their preparations coming together.

*We're going to be in quite some trouble if this doesn't work properly...* Regis thought.

It was at this moment that the First Army broke into a charge. They needed to draw the enemy's attention.

"Looks like we're up against an even mix of High Britannians and Langobarts. Around twenty thousand soldiers in total."

Latrielle nodded. "They have rifles and a numerical advantage; they must think they can seize a quick and easy victory on the open plains. Quite the aggressive tactic."

*Is that enough of a reason for them to leave a sturdy fortress though? Or do they have another plan?*

The distance closed between the two armies. Since their guns had superior range, High Britannia were the first to open fire. There wasn't much that could be done about this; Belgaria had prototypes of the Fusil 851, but it had yet to enter mass production. Perhaps it would become more readily available in a year's time, but it was impossible to assemble enough for this battle.

The two armies grew even closer.

“Mn...” Germain groaned. “Why haven’t we started returning fire?”

“Indeed,” Latrielle noted. “I don’t hear any gunshots from our side.”

“They should already be within range...”

The Belgarian Army was being one-sidedly fired upon. It was a sight that sparked unrest in all those who watched.

“Message! We have a message!”

A horseman raced in, dismounted in front of the second prince, and then dropped to one knee. “The enemy’s front line consists of bound captives!” he shouted. “They’re using our civilians as shields!”

“What?!”

Latrielle’s crimson eyes took on a darker shade. Regis, meanwhile, could feel an uncomfortable heat rise up from the pit of his stomach.

*What sort of strategy is that...?!*

“Those scoundrels!” Germain spat. “Is that what the leader of a nation should do?!”

Accompanying the enemy army was High Britannia’s new queen. Blowing up her own subordinates was bad enough, but using captured civilians as shields would earn her the ire of all the surrounding nations, regardless of whether she was acting in the midst of a war.

“Our front line is in disarray!” Germain cried out. “Your Highness, we need to pull back and—”

“No! We’ve already started the device!” Latrielle interrupted. “We need to maintain the line, no matter what!” But as things were, the Belgarian Army might as well have been standing before a firing squad.

This battle was already reckless enough. They were attempting to best an opponent who had superior equipment, a numerical advantage, and a captured stronghold. Regis wished that he’d had a night—no, even just an hour—to consider the situation. Perhaps then he would think up some wonderful countermeasure. But a single late response could prove fatal; unless he made a decision this very instant, the entire battle would be lost.

*I don't know if we can save the civilians, but we can at least circumvent them. The enemy army isn't as well trained as ours, and if they're dragging along hostages who have no will to fight, it should be impossible for them to quickly change formation. If we take a detour to mess with their ranks and send in the cavalry...*

Regis was partway through formulating a countermeasure when Latrielle gave a sudden order.

"Return fire! There's no way for us to save the civilians!"

Regis promptly shut his half-open mouth. Avoiding a head-on engagement would cause the Belgarian Army to lose more soldiers than anticipated, so Latrielle's decision would ultimately reduce their number of casualties.

*And we'll only cause confusion if we try to retract the order now.*

A number of messengers had already raced off to relay the prince's message, and the soldiers had already begun their charge after seeing the smoke signal. With the direction of the wind in mind, the smoke tower had been erected just slightly east of their headquarters, and the fire burned continuously. By throwing in gunpowder, it was possible to give the smoke color.

Soon enough, the First Army began its counteroffensive. Foot soldiers charged forward into the seemingly endless barrage of gunfire, but they were no fools; their frontmost lines consisted of men with sturdy shields, protecting them at least partially from the onslaught.

These defenses were by no means perfect, however—the soldiers soon came close enough that the bullets could pierce through the metal. It was impossible to arm the men with shields thick enough to withstand the blast, as a shield that was too large would be impossible to hold.

The First Army eventually managed to close the distance and achieve some results with their spears, but their situation wasn't looking much better than when the Seventh Army had lost at La Frenge. The war was harsher than anticipated.

"Send out Batteren's White Hares from the left flank!" Latrielle barked. "Attack the enemy's right flank and collapse their rank of guns!"

“But sire, that would mean putting them in range of the city’s cannons!” Germain warned, but the second prince refused to rescind the order.

“That is precisely why the enemy is keeping watch of our right flank instead. We will not be able to stir them up unless we take them by surprise. It won’t be so easy to take horsemen out with cannons!”

“Understood, sir!”

The messengers raced out, and a new smoke signal colored the sky. This method of communication was faster, but the imperial army still relied on messengers to convey the actual intent of each action. These measures proactively worked together within the unit.

*So this is how the First Army does things...* Regis mused. Latrielle took full command. His adjutant Germain would weigh in whenever he had any doubts, but never did their opinions seem to fully clash.

In one corner of the camp, Regis muttered to himself. “Perhaps it was a little too upfront to take them by surprise...”

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The White Hares advanced from the left flank, yet the nimble cavalry soon collapsed, tripping over what appeared to be nothing at all.

*Did they set a trap...?*

“Curses!” Latrielle snarled. “Stop the Hares’ advance!” It was an urgent command, but it would take some time to change the smoke signal. They would then need to wait for those on the chaotic front lines to notice the order.

Germain groaned. “It seems they anticipated our move. That man is as terrifying as ever...”

The enemy had completely dominated the scene by using captured civilians as shields, and then set traps where the First Army were most likely to go on the offensive, presumably having used the cover of night to dig holes. Casualties and losses were thankfully being contained to a minimum, but their current circumstances meant another cavalry charge wouldn’t be easy.

The soldiers of the two armies had already made contact and were now

engaged in close-quarters combat. High Britannia had already proven that its formation of shields and rifles was incredibly effective, and this time was no different; at this rate, the battle would end the same as with the Seventh Army.

Regis looked up at Latrielle, who was sitting atop his horse. “Marshal General, sir. Please bring the left flank even farther back.”

“What?”

“What are you planning here, Regis?”

Both Latrielle and Germain expressed their confusion in turn, but it took only a brief moment of thought for the second prince to shift to action.

“Very well. Let us see your tactics. Send a messenger to Batteren.”

Latrielle had the courage to trust his men. He knew that wasting time on an explanation would only lower their chance of success.

The messenger hurried over, awaiting the order that he was to deliver.

“Have the White Hares pass behind our main unit, even farther than our right flank; then have them climb the slopes and circle behind our opponent,” Regis said. “We need to take the enemy’s rear, but if the enemy has countermeasures in place, tell the Hares to pull back.”

“Understood!”

The messengers of the First Army were skilled at what they did, and so the message got through at an alarming rate. The knights immediately moved as told.

It was only twenty-eight past two, so the battlefield was perfectly visible. Once night fell, however, it would not only become harder for combatants to see one another, it would also become difficult for messengers to reach their destinations. Smoke signals would similarly lose their effectiveness.

Of course, this all depended on the amount of moonlight, but it would prove essentially impossible to conduct any large-scale combat maneuvers with any sense of coordination. Night raids with smaller units would most likely be their only potent means of attack.

In any case, this was a battle that needed to reach its conclusion before

sunset.

A strong wind raced down from the summit as the White Hares carried out their orders, darting behind the other units and circling around farther than the right flank in an attempt to reach the enemy's rear. The High Britannian Army shifted its left flank in response.

Regis nodded. "They're falling apart, leaving themselves open to our right flank."

The Empire's right flank was captained by Olbath's White Tiger Brigade, who instantly broke into a charge, unwilling to let this opportunity pass them by. There were traps laid out in their path, as expected, but the imperial army now knew to expect them, so they did not fall into chaos this time.

"We've bitten into the enemy's left flank!" Germain cried. "Those seem to be knights from Langobarti. They fight well, but they won't hold against a joint attack from the Tigers and the Hares!"

"Splendid," Latrielle replied.

"Oh... The enemy retreats!"

"Pursue them! But do not rush. We don't know what traps they have waiting for us."

"Understood! I'll order them to proceed with caution."

For a moment, Belgaria's main force had started to crumble, but the main camp received a surge of energy once they managed to push back the enemy. The stifling mood took a complete turn, and spirited voices rang out all around.

Latrielle dismounted his horse to stand beside Regis. "This success comes as no surprise. You did well in realizing the enemy's weak point was their left flank."

Regis shook his head. "No, I'd say it was their right flank that failed to take action."

"How do you figure?"

"Perhaps they simply weren't as nimble as the White Hares, but when our formation changed, they kept pushing forward instead of assisting their left

flank.”

“True, but had their right flank managed to push far enough, they could have flanked our main infantry unit.”

“Indeed. I’m sure that’s what they were going for,” Regis replied. He had naturally thought up countermeasures for such a situation, but it seemed they were no longer necessary.

Latrielle gazed over the battlefield. “I see now... Not only are High Britannia’s soldiers poorly trained, but they’ve also formed an alliance with the foreign Langobart Army. Attacking their left flank proved so effective because they were unable to coordinate with the rest of their forces. You realized that, I assume?”

“Yes. New recruits and mixed armies are surprisingly competent when it comes to combat, but they often fall apart when required to suddenly change formation or direction.”

Regis had experienced this firsthand with the Fourth Army, whose lack of coordination training had allowed Mercenary King Gilbert to charge all the way into the troop headquarters. They had only been saved back then because Altina had managed to defeat him one-on-one, and while it might not have been the best experience, it was certainly a useful one.

“The men of the First Army are well-trained, and it is for precisely this reason that we rarely consider the weaknesses of a poorly trained army,” Latrielle said with a sigh. He had assumed it was only natural for an army to move and change formation as commanded, so such an idea had never even occurred to him.

“I’m glad everything went smoothly,” Regis said.

“Indeed. A splendid plan from an experienced tactician.”

“Me? Oh, I, err... Thank you for the compliment, sir.”

Regis was surprised to hear someone describe him as “experienced,” but it was during that moment that he realized—this plan wasn’t one he had taken from a book, but rather one based entirely on his own personal experiences. That wasn’t to say it was a completely novel scheme, of course; there were

countless other stories that involved a similar tactic, more than he could count on both hands.

Even so, the point remained that Regis had put together his own plan. Without that experience to draw from, he might have proposed something less practical, or perhaps even nothing at all.

*Am I getting used to this?*

Germain jumped down from his horse as well, unable to stay mounted while his lord was standing. “The enemy has regrouped,” he said. “Their front line is once again secured.”

“They outnumber us, but if a drawn-out battle is what they’re hoping for, that works nicely in our favor.”

“Yes! That was a splendid play from Regis!” Germain exclaimed. His unexpected compliment was enough to make the tactician feel ever so slightly warm and fuzzy.

Regis glanced down at the river below. “The water level has gone down quite a bit...” he noted.

“Indeed,” Latrielle replied. “Has the enemy noticed yet?”

Germain stared at the fort, squinting in an attempt to see better. “Hm... They have yet to react, so I presume they haven’t.”

Regis took out his pocket watch. It had not yet struck three. “We’d need about another hour...” he murmured.

“The front lines have reached a stalemate. If we allow the situation to remain calm for much longer, we will have failed to keep High Britannia’s attention. We’ll need one more distraction—something they won’t be able to ignore.”

That something came from an unforeseen direction.

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Four trails of smoke rose into the sky from the mountain to the east—one white, one black, one purple, and one red. Latrielle scrutinized them carefully.

“An enemy smoke signal so deep in the mountains...?”

“I’ll send scouts at once,” Germain said, conveying the order at once.

Regis looked on curiously. Smoke signals were normally only sent by a strategic headquarters to convey information to the troops on the front lines, or by scouts to send messages back to headquarters. What purpose could raising one in the eastern mountains serve? He knew with all certainty that the imperial army wasn’t stationed there, and there was no obvious value to the enemy stationing themselves there. Perhaps it was to signal the start of an ambush, but there was no good reason for them to announce it so brazenly.

“A third party...?”

“What?!” Latrielle cried in response to Regis’s muttering.

“Ah. Yes, well... If you eliminate all the impossible explanations, the only conclusion I can come to is that these are orders from someone else’s headquarters.”

There was a chance that these weren’t signals at all, but it was hard to believe that four different-colored plumes of smoke would rise into the air by mere coincidence, especially now of all times.

“Regis, are you saying there’s another army stationed among the mountains? They’re sending orders of some sort, but...where are the soldiers these orders are meant for? That’s the issue. They can’t be behind us, can they?”

“If they were indeed stationed at our rear, they wouldn’t risk giving away that information like this.”

“True.”

“Not to mention we have a reasonably wide search perimeter. I’m sure we’d spot an ambush in time to manage.”

“Hm... But what of our sappers?”

“They would send us a report if they were attacked. We are still receiving regular updates from them without delay, so I am led to believe they are fine.”

“Then what is the point of these new signals, and who are they addressed to...?” Latrielle mused aloud. It truly was an uncanny development.

It was then that Germain suddenly pointed toward the battlefield. “A portion

of the enemy army is retreating!” he cried.

Regis and Latrielle followed Germain’s finger to a unit slipping out from the center of the enemy’s formation. An army that lost soldiers in the midst of a battle was naturally put at a disadvantage, but this group making its way out seemed to be a gathering of elites, so the effects were especially palpable. The High Britannian Army collapsed like a building that had suddenly lost its foundations, allowing the imperial troops to breach its core.

Latrielle folded his arms. “I see. So this was what the smoke signal was for.”

“Is this a rebellion?” Regis wondered. “Judging by their equipment, it seems these deserters are a band of mercenaries.”

“Mercenaries. It’s not rare for mercenaries to flee a losing battle, but...”

“Something isn’t quite right.”

“Indeed. Something is very off. Our foe is not at a decisive disadvantage; on the contrary, the simple fact they have the fortress makes them more likely to claim victory. Mercenaries have all the incentive to remain in a winning battle, since triumph will earn them riches, and desertion will completely tarnish their reputation. They would only leave formation if they thought the battle was as good as over.”

“Or perhaps,” Regis muttered to himself, “someone is onto our plan?”

“What?!”

“I can’t say whether they really have figured it out, but...perhaps they realized that our victory is inevitable, and that they would only be annihilated if they stayed any longer. Otherwise, it would be unnatural for a mercenary brigade to drop out now.”

As the second prince had said, abandoning a battle would do irrecoverable damage to a mercenary’s reputation, such that they might even be forced to close up shop.

Latrielle cocked his head. “Regis, I take it you think the commander of the mercenary brigade is the one who raised that signal.”

“I can only imagine.”

“Thankfully, our scouts are headed there either way,” Germain said, but he was being much too optimistic.

“If that was indeed an order to desert, the mercenaries aren’t going to be gathering where the smoke was raised,” Regis explained. “Both armies know that location.”

“Nhh...”

Regis looked over the situation once more before making a proposal. “Marshal General, please give the troops an order not to push too far.”

“They were already given that order before the battle started, but it appears some are now struggling to obey. High Britannia’s vile tactics are getting to them.”

Since the beginning of the war, the First Army had fallen victim to a surprise attack and a suicide bombing. Now they were losing a great many allies to the enemy’s inhumane strategy of using captives as shields, so it was only natural that they would start behaving more belligerently than usual. This wouldn’t have been much of an issue if victory was guaranteed, but...

“I think the enemy has reinforcements,” Regis said. “Please pull the troops back.”

“What...?” Latrielle stared out into the distance, but he could see no sign of any reinforcements.

Germain looked at Regis quizzically. “Where will they come from? The fortress?”

“There’s something strange about the direction in which the enemy are retreating. They’re not headed for the fortress; they’re simply pulling back,” Regis said.

“Is that not a sign their chain of command has fallen apart?”

“When soldiers take flight on their own, Sir Germain, it is to the closest point of safety. Under any other circumstances, they would run for the fortress.”

“But falling back before the reinforcements have even appeared is grounds to be branded a coward,” Germain rebutted.

Regis could already tell where this was going—his proposal was about to be rejected. In the past, he would have backed down at such a juncture, but now...

*I can't give up! Otherwise, I'm just going to repeat the same mistake as before!*

"Please rethink this," Regis said. "It will be too late for us to act once the reinforcements are here."

"But Regis—"

Latrielle, who had been listening to their exchange, abruptly summoned a messenger. "We have reason to believe there are enemy reinforcements! Stop the pursuit, and prepare to face them at once!"

"My lord...?!"

Germain was considerably shocked to see Latrielle take Regis's proposal over his own. If this prediction proved incorrect and no enemy reinforcements arrived, Regis's standing being damaged would be the least of their worries. However, the tactician had (somewhat unfortunately) hit the mark: the enemy appeared from the north, heading downstream from the Kingdom of Langobarti. A dust cloud was kicked up as their horsemen charged.

Latrielle clicked his tongue. "Langobart reinforcements. This must be why they left the fortress to fight on the plains."

Defense was no longer an option.

"General, please order our units to circle clockwise."

"What are you...?" Germain was partway through a question when he decided to fall silent, not wanting to get in the way of their tactician's plans.

"Very well," Latrielle said with a nod. "I leave the remaining time to you, Regis."

Thirty minutes had passed since Regis had said he would need another hour. Latrielle had passed the baton to him for the remaining thirty minutes.

Regis clenched his hands, which were drenched with sweat. "Yes, sir."

*Does this mean I'm commanding the First Army now? That's a heavy*

*responsibility, to say the least...*

Nevertheless, it was too late for him to drop out due to a lack of confidence. He issued one order after the next: “Tell the White Hares to circle clockwise. Then, to fill the gap this is going to leave in our left flank, have the rest of our forces circle counterclockwise.”

“Our maneuver has stirred the enemy’s right flank. Send the twelfth infantry there at once. Do not enter their formation, and retreat when possible.”

“Send the Hares on another charge. Have them aid the infantry in their escape. Elite horsemen will come to reinforce their crumbling right flank. Have both units quickly retreat.”

“Tell the White Tigers to charge the enemy’s left flank, now that their horsemen have left. Have the first through third infantry units attack as well.”

“The enemy general will abandon his flanks and launch an attack with his central forces. Have the fourth through tenth infantry units circle clockwise and the eleventh through eighteenth circle counterclockwise to avoid an engagement. Once the High Britannian Army is caught between our troops, we can attack from both sides. Do not push too hard, though; we can allow ourselves to be breached. We are merely buying time, after all.”

Sending such complex orders via smoke signals simply wasn’t possible, so the First Army were relying on messengers. On this vast battlefield, however, it took over five minutes for each command to reach its destination.

Not just Latrielle and Germain, but even the messengers looked at Regis with confusion as he sent them out. The tactician’s orders never seemed to match up with the situation before their eyes. Germain was sure that his lord would at some point intervene, but...he instead watched the developments in silence.

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The man taking on-site command of the mixed High Britannian and Langobart forces was Paul Langschultz, the new king of the Langobarts. Despite the intrepid expression on his face, he was only in his mid-twenties—notably young for someone in his position.

Paul was completely enamored with Margaret Stillart, the new queen of the

High Britannians, and it was precisely because she had expressed her boredom at being holed up in the fortress that he had taken the battle out into the open. This decision had absolutely nothing to do with the way she had pulled up her dress as she spoke, bringing the hem up just enough to reveal her thigh. At the very least, Paul himself considered it irrelevant.

"Ah! I've been waiting for you, Ricks! Glad you could make it!"

Paul raised a hand to the leader of the horsemen who had just joined his ranks. The soldiers around the man cheered. Somehow or another, they were recovering the morale they had lost when they were unable to keep up with their enemy's movements and when the mercenaries had fled.

"Okay, this is our chance!" Paul declared. "We'll wipe out those damn Galians! Send the riflemen out front!"

Paul was a stubborn man who stuck to regulations, but he was broad-minded enough to incorporate new technologies into his tactics. It was for this reason that he was already making use of the new High Britannian rifles—the Belgarian Army did not possess such capable firearms, meaning they had no choice but to attack like savage beasts. In this time, Paul could whittle down the enemy advance force with gunfire and send the reinforcement horsemen out to flank them.

Paul always made the right decision, and in his eyes, today was no different—he had taken an accurate measure to keep losses to a minimum while maximizing military gains. But the developments that followed caused his face to cloud over.

"What...?!"

The enemy unit didn't attempt to charge as he had anticipated, but rather circled around to the left, completely circumventing the battlefield.

"Hm. So they plan to take our flank, do they? How petty!"

Belgaria had used the same tactic mere moments ago to stab into his army's left flank, which had subsequently fallen apart due to a lack of coordination with the main unit.

Paul gave an order. "Send a messenger to Ricks! Tell him to support the left

flank!”

These reinforcements were different from High Britannia’s poorly trained soldiers, since they could fight on equal footing with the knights of the Empire. On top of this, Paul repositioned the riflemen to an area they could match the enemy. His troops moved slower, but this was a simple change in formation. The imperial army was making a far more dramatic move, racing up the side of a mountain, no less.

*We can take them.*

“Hm?!”

“Sire! The Empire’s knights have reversed direction!”

“I can see that!”

It was the White Hare Brigade, judging by the flag they were flying. This unit had originally been at the enemy’s left flank, but now...

*Damn it. They keep dodging all over the place!*

“Call the riflemen back! Have our right flank deal with them!”

The king’s orders were swiftly conveyed, but the riflemen, armed with their heavy guns and massive shields, were weighed down more than normal infantry. To make matters more complicated, right after receiving an order to change formation to face left, they were immediately being ordered to return right.

The act of returning carried a harsh psychological burden on the troops; they were already physically fatigued, and these orders only made their movements even more sluggish. These were not war horses trained to endure long sprints—they were men who had grown up learning to complain.

“The enemy infantry is charging!” Paul’s adjutant shrieked.

“What?! Now?!”

A portion of the Belgarian Army’s foot soldiers were suddenly closing the distance. It was as though they knew the right flank was going to be in disarray.

*They read me like a book. They knew I would respond to the White Hares by*

*having the riflemen come back, and they knew that my formation would be vulnerable as a result.*

"Hmph! Talk about naive! That won't be enough to break through our ranks! Send Ricks's men to the right flank!"

*I was right to call my elites from the motherland...*

Belgaria's horsemen were strong and moved at a blinding speed, and when those beasts were running laps around the battlefield, it was too much of a hassle to have High Britannia's ill-trained riflemen attempt to deal with them. Paul was sure there wouldn't be any major issues, however, since he had Ricks's knights supporting him. When their infantries clashed, the rifles gave his own army the advantage.

*We can win this!*

Paul envisioned himself presenting this victory to Queen Margaret herself, but he was cruelly dragged from his fantasy by the cries of an attack—cries that came from where he least expected. The enemy had charged not toward the right flank where he had sent the knights, but toward the left flank he had taken them from.

*He knew I would send reinforcements to the right?!*

The enemy couldn't possibly have reacted so swiftly if they were simply reacting to the king's orders as they were carried out. Even if a commander on horseback was watching closely for his army's weakness, it would take a considerable amount of time for the order to reach the troops. In other words, the enemy commander must have set his countermeasures in motion before Paul was even able to give a command.

"No, that's ridiculous..." Paul murmured. For his assumption to be true, not only would the enemy need to have anticipated his next move, but they would also need to have accurately predicted when he would make them. "Impossible... This has to be a coincidence."

Regardless, the imperial army was attacking the left flank—this much was undeniably real. And now that Paul had moved the knights, his forces were at risk of completely falling apart.

“Ghh... I am Paul Langschultz! The enemy is focusing on our flanks; their center has grown thin! We will tear them apart from the inside out! Charge!”

Paul drew his longsword and thrust it straight out as he gave the order. The soldiers around him, who had started to falter, raised fierce cries in response. The messengers spread the order, the bugles sounded, and then the charge commenced.

“Vorstoβ! Hraaah!”

But no sooner had the order been given than the enemy parted to either side, as though they had expected such a move from the very beginning. Paul could only watch as his flanks were taken by a practically unscathed foe, and once again, he questioned how such a development was even possible. There was no way the Belgarian commander could have known to execute such a maneuver the very moment the king ordered the charge.

“Urk...” Paul sputtered, his expression growing stiff. “I-Inconceivable... This can’t be happening!”

“Your Majesty!” his adjutant called. “We are being pincered from both sides!”

“I know that!”

Paul was taking the perfect measures for the situation, but at the same time, the enemy was issuing the perfect measures to counter him. This was a nightmare—his central unit was being eaten away from both sides, and his soldiers were falling one after another. To make matters worse, he had sent his troops to an area of the battlefield that the enemy no longer occupied. Those in crowded formations could not see their surroundings as well as a commander on horseback, so they could only act on their orders in earnest.

“Ghh...” Paul groaned. “How did they know I was going to order a charge...?!”

There had not been a single opportunity for the king’s riflemen to take aim and fire; all their attention was focused on the empty space where the enemy was supposed to be. They were being toyed with by the speed and mobility of the Empire’s horsemen. It was as though he was presenting every opportunity for them, thinning out his forces wherever the imperial army was set to attack, and subsequently exposing his flanks.

*What's going on? It's like he's reading my mind.*

"Grr... The enemy commander... I've heard rumors that he's to become the next emperor. To think he's this good..." Paul growled.

"What shall we do, Your Majesty?!" the king's staff officer asked. "Our losses are great, and there is little merit in continuing this battle!"

"You fool! Are you saying we should retreat?! When we outnumber our foe—when we have the finest rifles from High Britannia—you're telling me to pathetically order a retreat without achieving a thing?!"

"B-But sire..."

"The eyes of all nations are on this battle, and you're asking me to drag Langobarti's name through the dirt?! To chicken out now?!"

"No, sir! My apologies, sir!"

Paul had taken in young generals who shared his disposition. They shared a strong sense of unity, but there were no seasoned old men to teach him when it was time to quit.

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"Wh-What exactly...happened here...? How can you predict the enemy like this? Is it more than just a name...? Are you really a wizard...?" Germain asked, seeming even more shocked than the enemy. Latrielle was looking on with equally wide-eyed disbelief.

Regis scratched his head. "No, not at all. Um... Given the flag his troops have raised, the enemy commander seems to be the king of Langobarti, correct?"

"So it seems."

They had spotted the king's flag in the center of the army, but his skills as a commander were as of yet unknown. There were very few records of the imperial army having engaged with them, and perhaps he had a tactician as well.

"Yes, well... Whether it is the king or his advisors, it does not matter who is making the plans. I discerned that their commander is faithful to the fundamentals of combat, that they learn quickly, and that their messengers are

excellent. After that, it was easy to predict their movements."

"Wh—? You know that much about the nature of their commander? How?"

"Before the enemy reinforcements arrived—when we had the Hares circle from the left flank around our entire army to attack their left flank..."

"What about it?"

"After seeing their response and the formation they built as they reorganized, I could tell that Langobarti's king—or perhaps his tactician—adhered to the basics and deeply regretted his failures. I was also able to learn how quickly his orders were carried."

"Now that you mention it, I can see how you were able to figure those things out...but I don't think any of those traits are necessarily bad things."

"Being predictable is not a good trait. The damage the White Hares caused made a strong impression on their commander, enough so that he would attempt to counter them with his most reliable unit. I had no doubt they would send the pristine knights who had just come as reinforcements."

Latrielle nodded. "That much I can understand."

"Because of that, their left flank—where they originally stationed those horsemen—would need to reorganize," Regis continued.

"How did you know when exactly they would move?"

"It was simply a repeat of our first command. I had already seen how quickly the White Hares could respond to a circling order and how long it would take the enemy to react."

"How could you have known it would happen exactly the same way again though?"

"There's quite a discrepancy if one or two people are acting alone. But with armies this large, it usually turns out surprisingly consistent."

Latrielle wore an unconvinced expression, but he could not think of any concrete examples to the contrary. Instead, he changed his question. "I know why their left flank was arbitrarily thrown into disarray, but why did the enemy charge with their center rather than supporting their flank?"

“Because of the regret their commander was feeling. He was late to respond to our first attack, which resulted in his left flank being taken apart. In an attempt to counter our next move, he sent his fastest horsemen to the right, which ultimately resulted in his left crumbling again. After two such failures, he would not repeat the same mistake; he would not choose to send any other unit besides his own.”

Latrielle thought for a moment. “That makes a certain kind of sense, but you mentioned a discrepancy in one or two people acting alone. Does this not apply to their commander? How can you be so sure he would not act on a whim?”

“In such a case, our preparations for their charge would have indeed been wasted. In essence, we were playing Rochambeau while our opponent was only able to choose rock or paper. We naturally went with paper, meaning the worst-case scenario was *match nul*.”

An enemy commander who understood all of this and wanted to use it against the imperial army would have chosen a different approach a long time ago.

Regis shrugged. “Well, to be blunt...the enemy commander is simply far too honest.”

Latrielle and Germain looked at Regis dubiously, causing the tactician to panic for a moment. Altina and Jerome would normally look at least a little impressed when he gave an explanation after a plan had succeeded, but this was something else.

*Are they looking at me with surprise? No, that doesn’t seem to be the case...*

In truth, the emotion they held was awe, but Regis had such low self-assessment that he was unable to realize this. A thought suddenly struck him, prompting him to glance down at his watch.

“We’re a little off schedule, but...it’s time.”

Just as planned, stopping the current upstream had caused the river to take on a completely new face; almost no water remained in the channels that surrounded Grebeauvoir. Now, even those who did not share Third-Grade Combat Officer Varèse’s impressive lung capacity could access the city, for

there were holes in the iron district walls wide enough for several people to pass through at once.

# Chapter 4: Felicia of the Iron District It was four in the afternoon, and the sun had almost reached the mountaintops. It was still daytime, but the shadows of the peaks now stretched across Grebeauvoir, steeping the city in darkness.

Word of the water level decreasing had spread among the prisoners over the past few days, but it was easily the least of their worries—their living conditions were so harsh that there was no guarantee they would even survive till sunset.

“Seriously! The water! It went and vanished!”

The astounded cry came from the second floor of a building facing the channel, from a bald man wearing an eye patch over a slash-shaped scar. Anyone would have guessed he was the leader of a band of brigands, but he was actually the chairman of the iron union and the one rallying the imprisoned civilians.

Varèse, who was standing beside the chairman, nodded. “What did I tell you? This plan was devised by Regis d’Aurick, a tactician so capable he was directly appointed by Marshal General Alain Latrielle de Belgaria. You would not find a more perfect scheme anywhere in the Empire.”

“Ah! So that soldier was telling the truth!” the chairman exclaimed. “Right, you lot! C’mon! It’s your time to shine!”

Several people raced outside immediately upon receiving the order—a group composed only of those who knew they could move at great speed. These men were also serving as scouts, so even one slow runner would impede their progress. If the enemy army caught on to their plan, they would most likely focus their guns on the canal entrances.

*I wonder if they’ll notice...*

That was the one fear Varèse held as he stood with the chairman and watched the runners leave. He was more than quick enough to accompany them, but he had another, more important duty.

Everyone gathered prayed that their efforts would remain undetected.

There was a sudden bang as a gun discharged atop the ramparts, sending out a red flash that tore through the shadows.

“Has something gone wrong?!” Fel shrieked.

The chairman obstinately shook his head. “No, those are just the usual canal lookouts. A shot or two isn’t gonna slow us down! It’s now or never, everyone! Go, go, go! Run while you can! Hurry up! Hurry! Hurry!”

“Hraaah!”

The civilians crowding in the shadows burst forth at once. Taking the lead were the men who were completely unburdened; next came the men accompanying their women; and at the rear were those carrying children or belongings they couldn’t bear to leave behind.

They had wanted to reverse this order to prioritize the escape of the women and children, but that would only lead to their complete annihilation. Lives were on the line here, and not just because of the High Britannian lookouts—one was much more likely to die from being trampled during the rush to freedom, and with the drained channels being thick with mud, it was especially easy to slip. Many were lost among the stampede, but far more managed to trace the dry moats to the outside world.

The chairman of the iron union hoisted a sack over his shoulder. “I should get going too,” he said.

“I don’t want to speak too soon, but with how things are going right now, we should succeed,” Varèse noted. “It is thanks to you that we’ve managed to save a majority of the captives. Thank you for your cooperation.”

“Don’t be stupid. If you hadn’t delivered us this information, we might not have noticed the channels drying up. Even if we had, we probably would’ve just stared at them like idiots.”

“I merely carried out my mission.”

“And we’re all thankful for that,” the chairman said with a nod. He then paused for a moment before speaking again. “Hey, are you sure about this?”

“This is also part of my mission.”

“...Got it. Don’t go dying on me, soldier!”

“I won’t. Thank you for lending me such a splendid weapon.”

In Varèse’s hand was a tremendous cavalry lance forty-two palms (311 cm) in length, painted almost entirely black—aside from the tip, which glistened silver. It was made of new-alloy.

The chairman’s lips started to curl, becoming the smile of a bandit chief who had brought down his prey. “Hmph. Just goes to show I didn’t stash that thing away for nothing.” He raced down the stairs to where his subordinates waited, and then he was gone.

Varèse felt a tug on his sleeve. It was Fel. “You’re not going yet...?” she asked.

“Why haven’t *you* gone? You could have left with the women or the children.”

“I can’t leave without you. I promised to help out.”

“Fool... The mission is—”

“Not over yet. I overheard you,” Fel interrupted. She had a broad, childish grin on her face, one that Varèse was sure he had seen somewhere, sometime before. Despite his words, he did not even consider forcing her to go ahead; he felt it more reassuring to keep her nearby.

“What am I supposed to do with you...?” Varèse said with a sigh. “Just focus on staying alive. Keep close to me whenever possible.”

“Aye, sir!”

Thunderous hoofbeats could be heard coming down the main road. Just as expected, the soldiers had spotted the escaping captives, and now the horsemen stationed in the iron district were coming to intervene. There weren’t all that many riders, but they would still easily cut through the fleeing civilians if allowed to reach them.

*Not on my watch!*

There were eight horsemen in total. Varèse set his sights on the one riding nearest the back. “Keep your eyes and mouth closed, Fel. And don’t move.”

“Eh?”

Varèse abruptly grabbed Fel by the waist and hoisted her up, taking her under his left arm. He placed a foot on the second-floor windowsill.

“Here we go!”

Fel clapped both hands over her mouth, fighting back the urge to scream as Varèse dove out the window and into the open air.

“Hah!”

After adjusting his posture midair, he thrust with his lance. The lighting wasn’t the best by any means, but he was able to pierce the throat of a rider below nonetheless. His foe was forced from his saddle, allowing Varèse to claim the newly vacant horse. He had to latch on using his feet, since both his hands were occupied.

The horse brayed and kicked so violently that Varèse was very nearly thrown off as well, but he just barely managed to stay balanced using his torso.

“Hold on...just a little longer!”

“Whoa-oa-oa!” Fel cried as the horse continued to struggle.

“Grab her mane!”

Varèse held up the lance in his right hand and placed Fel on the horse, putting her at the front so that she could cling to its neck. With his left hand finally free, he grabbed the reins to gain control of the braying beast.

“All right!”

Varèse urged the horse forward with his heels, having fallen behind the other horsemen. He would need to hurry to catch up, though that wouldn’t be much of an issue—the rider he’d replaced had been running at the back of the group, but there was absolutely nothing wrong with the horse, and Varèse was quite confident in his riding abilities.

*Besides, no High Britannian horseman is better than a rider of the First Army!*

He rode comfortably, his new horse traversing the path so smoothly that he felt as though he were gliding through the air.

“Good girl.”

It wasn’t long before Varèse had caught up to the other horsemen, who were carefully descending the stairs into the channel. One rider turned to look at him.

“Finally here, eh?! What took—”

The man’s head was torn from his body before he could even finish his sentence.

Varèse made his horse leap down into the muddy depths, not losing his balance in the slightest, already feeling as one with the mare. He swung his lance once more in preparation. The chairman of the iron union hadn’t risked his life hiding it away for nothing—it was able to separate a soldier’s head from his body with a single swipe.

As one would expect, Varèse had experience using a plethora of weapons, but never before had he held something quite so formidable. He knew this was neither the time nor place for awe, but he couldn’t deny how impressive the lance was.

The horsemen chasing down the captives had never considered that they themselves might be hunted. It was a mere instant before another two perished, but it seemed the four in the lead had already made it farther down the channel.

“Fel! Are you okay?!”

“Don’t worry about me! Get them!”

“All right!”

Varèse spurred the horse onward.

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The captives were running through the mud covering what had once been a

riverbed. *It really is like magic*... Varèse thought. He had received a detailed explanation of the plan beforehand, yet even he was surprised.

High Britannian soldiers opened fire from atop the iron district walls. The gunmen were rather few in number, but the fleeing civilians were largely bunched together as they made their escape, so each shot was sure to hit at least one person. To make matters worse, the horsemen were hot on their heels, taking out those they could reach one by one with their spears.

“Graaah! Damn Galians! Is running all you’re good for?!”

Of course, those in the rear were the ones holding their children and precious belongings. They cried out as they were cut down, unable to oppose the cavalry’s spears. Little did the horsemen know, however, the most dangerous entity on the battlefield was likewise closing in on them from behind.

“Hraaaaaah!”

The battle came to an end so quickly that it could hardly be called a battle at all. In the space of one breath, three of the horsemen who had just moments before been slaughtering the captives went limp. The last one who remained gave a timid shriek and retreated up the riverbank.

Protecting the civilians took priority—of that Varèse was certain—and the battle was far from over. He heard the rumble of yet more approaching horsemen charging down into the emptied river and inadvertently clicked his tongue.

“More Langobart soldiers!”

He started to count how many there were but gave up once he reached twenty. There were likely five times that number, all with their spears at the ready. One hundred horsemen were encroaching upon the fleeing captives, with Varèse being the only one there strong enough to challenge them.

*But this isn’t a battle I can win.*

And so, Varèse made his resolve. Tensions had been rising over the past five days, and now they had finally reached a crescendo.

“So this is it...” he murmured. “Not a bad place to die, I suppose.”

“What are you giving up for, Varèse?! You have to live!”

“Fel...? I’m sorry for getting you wrapped up in all this, but—”

“You promised me! You said you’d save me! That you’d slaughter them! So save me! And, and...don’t die!”

Could it be that she had accompanied him precisely because she foresaw this outcome? Had she known he would sacrifice himself to shield the civilians? Thinking about it logically, fleeing was the only way for Varèse to ensure his own survival—that was how dire the situation was. He could toss aside his heavy cavalry lance and run past the captives; then he and Fel would make it out alive.

*But Fel wouldn’t wish for something so foolish.*

Varèse clenched his spear. “Apologies. I need to get a hold of myself. I’ll save you, of course. And I will survive. We haven’t annihilated the enemy yet.”

“Yeah! U-Um... Varèse?”

“Yes?”

“D-Do your best!”

“...Naturally!”

There were over a hundred horsemen coming at him, yet Varèse spurred his horse, readied his spear, and gave a bold proclamation: “I am Jean Juris de Varèse of the Empire’s First Army! I will not let you pass me!”

He started off counting each foe he killed. Soon after he reached ten, however, a blade gouged into his flank and a blow to the head caused him to black out for a few seconds. He stopped counting from that point onward.

Varèse came close to giving up again and again, but every time Fel entered his field of vision, he was overcome by an emotion he didn’t quite understand—one that would spur his body to keep moving.

“Kraaah!”

As yet another rider succumbed to his lance, a furious roar came from nearby. “For God’s sake! How are you being held up by a single rider?! Surround him

and attack from all sides!”

“That’s too risky, Sir Ricks!” one soldier cried. “Please fall back!”

Varèse caught sight of a knight wearing full plate armor painted yellow. *Is he their leader? I just need to defeat him, and then...*

It depended on the competency of their deputy, but there was a high chance that a unit would retreat after losing its commander. Varèse pleaded to his weary horse for just one more charge before placing a hand on the small back of the girl clinging to its neck.

“Hah... Hah... Fel... Are you alive? Just a little more... Hold on...”

There was no reply. Had she fainted from the bloodshed around her? Varèse grew anxious, but her body was still warm.

*She’s alive.*

Protecting this girl was now the sole reason he existed, the lone thought that drove him forward. His entire life had been dictated by missions. This sense of elation—of purpose—was one he had never felt before.

“Go!”

He spurred the horse into a charge, heading straight for the one they called “Ricks.” The enemy commander grinned, and then he broke into a chortle.

“Bah hah hah! The more cornered they are, the easier they are to read.”

“What?!”

“In a time of peril, of course you’d go straight for the enemy commander. What other choice would you have?”

*I’ve been baited...*

The horsemen, already prepared for his advance, thrust out their spears, aiming for his mare. Varèse did not know her name, but of all the horses he had ever ridden, she had fought the most bravely. She cried out, spit foaming at her mouth, before collapsing entirely. It had taken three stabs to the torso to finish her.

Varèse was thrown forward onto the ground, into the mud, along with Fel. He

got up with his lance in hand, but he was so close to his limit that his legs struggled to even support his weight.

“Fel! Are you okay?!”

“Ngh... I...”

She was clutching her slender stomach. Her clothes were stained with mud, but most noticeable of all was the bright red seeping through her clothes.

*Was it a spear? A gun? When did this happen?!*

Varèse had blacked out a number of times during the battle. Had he failed to protect her then?

“Varèse... P-Please...don’t die...”

“What are you saying...? You... You can’t just... Fel, you can’t! I won’t permit this!” he yelled, his voice becoming more and more hoarse. His vision blurred, and the next thing he knew, tears were streaming down his face.

Varèse had thought about it, of course. His own death. Would he be taken out by an arrow? Would someone best him in one-on-one combat? He did not want to fall from disease, but he knew that was possible as well. It was something he had pondered time and time again, but not once had he pictured it like this—bawling miserably while clutching a bloodstained girl, immobile right before the enemy. What sort of end was this?

“Fel! You can’t die here! You can’t! Don’t die on me... Please...”

For what reason did this girl suddenly mean so much to him? He could neither understand nor explain it, but that didn’t matter—his emotions were real. Once he knew she was going to die, he could no longer hold his lance.



“Finish him already!” Ricks barked, prompting the Langobart cavalry to ready their weapons. Several spears were pointed right at Varèse.

“Hraaaaaah!”

The earth shook as yet more horsemen leapt into the waterless river. This unit numbered eight hundred, but they weren’t Langobart reinforcements—racing at the lead was Batteren, young head of the White Hare Brigade.

“Chaaarge!” the Belgarian commander yelled. “Scatter those Langobart dogs!”

“What?! Pull back!” Ricks turned his horse around and desperately tried to retreat, kicking up mud in his wake.

“Too late!” Batteren yelled as he threw his spear. The mighty projectile soared through the air, between Ricks’s guards, before piercing through the enemy commander’s back and out his chest.

“Gah?!”

“Sir Ricks! No!”

The Langobart horsemen quickly fell into chaos. They were not weak by any means, but they had merely been tasked with pursuing the escaped captives. Nobody among them had expected they would lose their commander, or that they would find themselves severely outnumbered by Belgarian soldiers. It wasn’t long before their brigade was in pieces.

Varèse clung to Fel, his entire body trembling. He hadn’t the strength to stand; he could only sit there and weep.

A man atop a chestnut horse walked up beside him. “Oi, you. Based on your uniform, I take it you’re a High Britannian soldier?” The only reason Batteren had asked was because this supposed soldier was clinging to a Belgarian child and sobbing heavily.

“Please...save her...” Varèse begged, raising his tearstained face. “Fel is—”

“Wh—? Varèse?! What’s happened to you, man?!”

The Varèse that Batteren knew was a man born to be a soldier, so for him to

be so emotional was completely out of character.

*Maybe this girl is his family,* Batteren speculated. *Does he have family in Grebeauvoir?*

Batteren pointed up the river banks. “Take her there! We have doctors!”

“Huh...?”

“The tactician sent us every doctor available for the civilians. Looks like she’s still alive. With some luck, she might be saved.”

Batteren felt nothing but animosity toward Regis, but even he had to admit—the tactician had foreseen this too.

“Rr-Rr-Rraaaaaah!” Varèse sprung to his feet, howling and weeping. His legs no longer trembled; on the contrary, he was now sprinting at full pelt, kicking up mud as he went. “Graaah! A doctor!”

His face was red and covered in grime, his eyes were wet with tears, and snot leaked from his nose. He was in a complete state of disarray...but once Felicia had narrowly escaped death, she said he had looked cooler than she’d ever seen him before.

# Chapter 5: Muddy Stream

It was five in the afternoon, and the sun grew ever closer to the mountainous horizon. The shadows of soldiers stretched across the ground.

In the Empire's main camp, a young messenger saluted. His lips were pursed, his expression firm, but there was a glimmer in his eyes and a flush on his cheeks. He was so overwhelmed with excitement that he spoke in broken sentences.

"Under the protection of the White Hares! The captives in Grebeauvoir! They've left the battlefield on the scheduled route! The mission is a success!"

The soldiers cheered. The battle wasn't over yet, but some were already screaming "Vive l'Empire!" That was simply how much importance this success held. Some had even believed it a greater challenge than recapturing the fort.

The imperial army had already shown it was capable of using sheer wit to toy with its enemies. The camp was alive with jubilation as if the battle were already decided, but the fortress remained untouched, and the enemy army still possessed more than half its original numbers.

Latrielle and Germain kept silent. They did not see this as an achievement of their own, nor did any of the other staff officers. They spoke up far less after having witnessed what it was like when Regis seriously took command.

When Regis heard the report, he responded with a slight nod, not even entertaining a smile. "My apologies, but we don't have time to celebrate; we are about to enter the most important stage of our plan. One wrong step and we will suffer a loss so tragic it will make history. Please, take care not to make any mistakes."

The relaxed atmosphere became tense once again. Regis had initially only been granted command for thirty minutes, but he had maintained that role even as the captives began their escape.

"Advance the White Hares to the center," Regis said. "I'm sure they're exhausted, so keep them out of combat. They can retreat if the enemy pushes

back.”

“Please wait!”

“Hm?”

“Sir Batteren has been working nonstop. Please leave that role to me.”

The man who volunteered himself was Zemault, new captain of the White Wolf Brigade currently being held as reserves. He was still a young knight in his late twenties, perhaps the same age as Batteren.

Regis paused for a moment, thinking back to the anniversary ceremony in April, when the relationship between Altina and Latrielle had grown complicated, to say the least. The Black Knights of the Beilschmidt border regiment had gone up against the White Wolves, who had subsequently lost their commander and half their comrades to Regis’s own scheme. Presumably, the ones on this battlefield who despised him most were not the enemy, but the survivors of that incident. Even with Latrielle allowing him to take command, would they actually obey his orders? This anxiety was what made him keep the White Wolves on guard duty.

Zemault closed one eye. He seemed particularly sleek, which was to be expected of a general from the capital. “If a battle this grand ends with us having only watched, there won’t be a place for us when we return to the capital. Won’t you give us a chance to restore our name and regain your trust?”

“We’re short on time, so I’ll speak bluntly: are you going to follow my orders?”

Zemault snorted in amusement. “You misunderstand the White Wolves, Tactician. Do you really think we’d seek vengeance?”

“Do you not...?”

“Those who died that day were replaced, meaning half our knights know nothing of this past dispute. I myself was recalled from the south with the rest of my men.”

Regis had read through his documents, so he knew Zemault was unlikely to have any personal grudges against him, but it was easy to get caught up in the

negative emotions of others.

"Were I in your position, Sir Zemault...I would feel the need to do *something* to earn the loyalty of the knights who joined the unit long before me."

Zemault shrugged. "You're right. That's why I'm asking for this opportunity. There's no better opportunity for me to prove I can lead those men, even under your command."

They couldn't waste any more time debating the matter. Batteren's White Hares were exhausted, that much was certain. Both humans and horses had their limits, so it would certainly be beneficial if the White Wolves were up to the task.

"You might be wiped out if you ignore orders," Regis noted. He was pushing the point further, and Zemault responded with a reverent nod, as if speaking to a general.

"I understand that."

Regis glanced over at Latrielle, who was watching from behind. The prince silently nodded.

*I assume he's saying it's down to me from here on out. Is he testing my abilities?*

"Then the White Hares shall remain on standby in the rear," Regis said, reissuing his orders. "White Wolves, please proceed to the center. You are to draw the enemy army's attention to aid our other units' retreat, but only until six. When the clock strikes six, you are to retreat no matter what the situation is."

Zemault crisply saluted. "Yes, sir!"

And so, the lines were reorganized around the White Wolves. It was almost sunset, and the enemy had not risked going on the offensive.

*At this rate, everything should go according to plan,* Regis thought. He went over the reports from each unit, nodding at how smoothly everything had gone thus far. At the same time, however, he couldn't shake the feeling that something was off.

“Colonel Oswald Coulthard... To think he left the entire battle to the king of Langobarti. Can we really expect nothing from him?” It was at that moment that Regis’s eyes suddenly shot open. He turned to Latrielle. “Marshal General, please lend me some troops!”

“Oh?” Latrielle gave Regis a doubtful glance. “Is there a problem?”

“If my assumption is correct, we can still make it in time.”

“We’ve come this far; I won’t refuse you now. What kind of soldiers, and how many?”

“Horsemen! If we can just gather a hundred...!”

But the White Wolves were already en route to the front lines, the White Tigers were currently playing a crucial role as support, and the White Hares had retreated due to exhaustion. There weren’t any horsemen to spare.

“One hundred,” Latrielle repeated with a nod. “In that case, my personal guard should suffice.”

“What?! But then who will protect—?”

“I shall accompany you as well, of course. If you need to squeeze out one hundred cavalry in this situation, there must be quite a bit of value in the operation. How about it?”

“Thank you! We need to hurry!”

Latrielle leaped onto his horse before offering a hand to Regis. “Then come with me! You can explain the details along the way!”

“Eh?! Ah, err... Y-Yes, sir...”

Regis trembled with hesitation for a moment before grabbing the hand presented to him. He was yanked up onto the horse, such that he was now sitting behind the second prince.

“Hyah?!”

Feeling himself already about to slip from the horse’s back, Regis inadvertently clung to Latrielle. To his surprise, the prince didn’t seem to be angered by this. What also came as a surprise was the horse’s composure—any

horse Regis climbed onto would always thrash and shake him off, but Latrielle's steed was as unmoving as a statue. As expected of the finest horse in the Empire.

"Germain!" Latrielle ordered. "I'm leaving you in charge!"

"Understood, sir!" Germain answered with a salute.

Judging by their exchange, it was natural for Latrielle and Germain to switch and adapt their roles where necessary. In that regard, their relationship was completely unlike the one Altina shared with Regis. The fourth princess tried to stay with Regis whenever she could and grew anxious when he was out of sight.

*As soldiers, their approach is probably the better one.*

Regis pointed at the fort. "General, to the northwest forest!"

"Hm... So we are taking a detour around the battlefield. If the enemy captures us, one hundred riders are as good as done for. Speed is of the essence. Onward, men! Any stragglers will be left behind!"

The knights answered in throaty cheers.

## At the Langobart camp— "Your Majesty, the White Wolves have left the enemy headquarters!"

"For the Empire to be sending in their rearguard, they must be running out of resources."

The deft movements of the imperial army had initially driven Paul into a corner, but he had since managed to rally his soldiers once again. His unit had gone from nearly being routed to becoming a united force, a sign that he was no fool when it came to leadership. He had already possessed superior numbers and equipment, and now he had supporting fire from the fortress.

"Hm... It's a close match, but it matters not, so long as our enemy is slain."

Paul cared only about results—the process didn't matter. *Though I intended to offer Margaret nothing short of absolute perfection.*

Those from Langobarti did not hold the High Britannian Army in very high regard. While it was a force to be reckoned with on the sea, where its ships

could outperform those of any other nation, it was not seen as much of a threat on land. Its soldiers were weak even with the latest guns, something that had already been proven in battle. Their poor training rendered them incapable of keeping up with enemy movements, and their lines were thrown into chaos time and time again.

...And yet, the Belgarian Army had suffered many a defeat at the hands of the High Britannians. Paul was consequently led to believe that the Empire had grown weak. He believed that he could win as long as he had the advantage.

In truth, the Belgarian commander was toying with him. Each measure Paul made was countered in its entirety, and while his main unit was alive and well, he had lost much war potential.

*And the captives have fled as well...*

Paul glared at the river—that is, where the river had once been. It had suddenly run dry, making the canals into escape routes. There hadn't been many lookouts stationed there.

"Why *did* the river suddenly dry up this time of year...?" his adjutant asked, cocking his head to one side.

"The scholars can look into that later. We aren't specialists, so there's no use in us trying to figure things out ourselves."

"Yes, sir."

Paul could sense that something sinister was at work, but he firmly believed that his duty was to lead the troops and defeat the enemy. He was faithful to his office; he drove from his mind everything that did not concern the battlefield to focus on his current situation. He hadn't realized the imperial army had set a trap upstream.

"Report! Report!" A messenger raced in.

"Speak!"

"Erk, well... Captain Ricks is dead. The White Hares got him!"

"What...?! Are you sure about that?!"

"He led a hundred horsemen to chase the fleeing captives and subsequently

engaged the Hares."

Paul gritted his teeth. "Absurd!" No matter the reason, why had the unit commander personally charged out into battle?

"Under his deputy's command, the remaining knights retreated to support the right flank."

"What of the enemy?! The bastards who got Ricks?!"

"They returned to imperial ground, along with the captives!"

In other words, the captives were now secured.

"Your Majesty," Paul's adjutant interjected, "we're going to be in a tough spot now that we've lost the strength of our reinforcements. I propose we retreat to the fortress."

"Don't be so foolish! This is our chance! The White Hares have dodged every which way, and now they've retaken the captives. The Empire's horsemen may be skilled, but their horses should now have reached their limit!"

The White Tiger Brigade, which had similarly raced about supporting the lines, was now moving sluggishly. Its forces were just as exhausted. The foot soldiers fought and rested on rotation, but after so many charges, they were no doubt at the end of their rope as well.

*The White Wolves are all they have left, and rumor has it that half their forces are fresh recruits.*

"Victory is upon us!" Paul roared. "Gather our remaining troops from the fortress, the High Britannians too! The enemy has used up all their strength! We'll claim victory if we push now!"

With still over ten thousand battle-ready soldiers on his side, Paul could feel a smile playing on his lips. "Heh. To think they would exhaust their soldiers before sunset. The enemy commander has wit, I'll give him that, but he's clearly still an amateur! You must consider the long-term when commanding troops!"

He turned his gaze to the western skies, where the sun was approaching the mountains' peaks. Two hours remained until nightfall.

"This battle is our victory!"

With new reinforcements from the fortress, the High Britannian-Langobart army increased its military strength. The imperial army sent out its White Wolves in response, but their movements were easy to read.

*Just as I thought. All those strange predictions were nothing more than coincidence,* Paul concluded. He was completely unaware that the man who had issued such splendid commands had departed from camp for another purpose entirely, and understandably so—it was an absurd idea in itself, and speculation was not the king's forte. He also hadn't realized that the enemy may have decided such special instructions were no longer necessary.

It was five to six when the king's adjutant called out. "The White Wolves are retreating! Their other units too! The imperial army is falling apart!"

"Just what I want to hear! Pursue them! Pierce straight through their main camp!"

On his order, the entire army commenced its charge. Paul was certain of victory.

All of a sudden, the ground started to tremble beneath him. At first, he thought it was coming from his own men as they marched onward, but that wasn't the case. He could hear a booming noise, like thunder, rumbling far and wide. His troops faltered, looking around in a fluster, and Paul joined them in their confusion.

"What's going on?" Paul asked.

"I-I don't know..." his adjutant replied, his voice quavering.

Paul gazed out at the imperial army. "They're...climbing the mountain?"

The fundamentals of combat stated it was advantageous to hold the high ground, but only within reason. Climbing up a slope too steep to even form a proper formation on would only drain the enemy's already exhausted soldiers. It wasn't a bad defensive move, but it would dull their movements when they inevitably returned to the offensive, and it would prove much harder for them to coordinate between their units.

"They're not even taking formation...?"

The unpleasant rumble grew louder and louder, and that was when Paul finally realized: *It sounds like a waterfall getting closer and closer.* But by the time he recognized the noise as that of cascading water, the muddy brown stream was already encroaching upon him, sweeping up the earth and plants in its path.

A retreat order was meaningless now; the soldiers immediately lost their will to fight and scattered on their own, screaming all the while. Most ran in the direction of the fortress, but with the wave already close enough to see, there was no way men clad in armor would reach safety in time.

The clever ones raced up the slopes. There was an empty moat west of the battlefield, precisely down the path the water was flowing. This left their only escape route as the eastern mountains...which was where the imperial army was already lying in wait. Those blessed with luck managed to flee up while maintaining enough distance from the Empire's bullets, but that was less than a tenth of the whole.

Paul tugged at his reins. "Run!" he shouted.

"Ah! Your Majesty! Where are you going?! The slope is over—"

"To the fortress!"

"Wh-Why?!"

"I can't leave Margaret!"

His soldiers were being swallowed up by the current even as they spoke. The river had dried up, and the captives had fled as though they had known what was going to happen. Then came the Empire's predictable movements, and of course this muddy stream. The enemy had planned it all, and there was no denying it—he had fallen into their trap.

"Urgh... Is this...truly the work of a mere man?!"

Horses were washed away, swirled about like chips of wood. The soldiers in armor were dragged underwater, their screams drowned out by the rush of the flood. The water alone was a threat, yet it carried with it great stones and the trunks of rotten trees. Neither armor nor spears showed any worth here; only the fastest runners would survive.

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“Paul!” The adjutant quickly caught up, walking his horse beside the king.

“Ah! You’re here!”

“There wasn’t enough water to fill the valley after all.”

Paul turned to see the flood was much calmer compared to when it had first appeared. The banks were still overflowing with water, however, and the overflow from the canals had presumably made a terrible mess of the city.

“What a terrible sight... At least the fortress is safe.”

“The horsemen too, so long as they haven’t fallen from their mounts...” Their numbers were down, but not enough that they couldn’t still put up a fight.

“Good... Good!” Paul exclaimed, his body trembling as he clutched his horse’s reins. “If we center our survivors around our cavalry, we can continue the battle! We’ll never fold to the Empire!”

“Yes, sir!”

“But first, we make sure Margaret is safe.”

His adjutant nodded, albeit with a grimace. “Of course. She is needed to command the High Britannian troops.”

✧ ✧ ✧

Leaving his vassals at the gates, Paul made for the queen’s private room in the depths of the fortress. When he arrived outside her door, however...

“What happened here...?”

A fair number of the royal guard were supposed to have been stationed here, yet the halls were empty. Enough water had assailed Grebeauvoir to flood the rivers, but the surrounding area was vast; while the city was flooded, the fortress had not suffered much damage.

“We can still fight. *I* can still fight. For you, Margaret...”

He threw open the door, not even pausing to knock, but...they were gone. Not just Margaret and the High Britannian tactician—Oswald Coulthard, was it?—but also the maids and guards were nowhere to be seen.

“What is the meaning of this...? Margaret! *Margaret*! Where are you?! It’s me! Paul Langschultz!”

The bed she had used at noon, the Belgarian sofa she had described as her favorite, the pure-white tea set from the east, they were all exactly as they had been during Paul’s visit before he had sallied forth. But she was gone.

“Where did you go...?”

“Your Majesty!”

As the adjutant raced over, Paul shot him a sharp glare, condemning the man’s lack of decorum. “What? This is the private room of royalty.”

“Not anymore.”

“...What?”

“High Britannia’s queen left with her associates through the western gate. I heard so from one of the maids who stayed behind.”

“What?! When did this happen?!”

“Around an hour ago. When the captives were escaping.”

The soldiers in Grebeauvoir and those fighting on both sides had undoubtedly focused all their attention on the captives, so hardly anyone had noticed the queen sneak away in the opposite direction.

“This can’t be...” Paul breathed, cradling his head in his hands. “Is it because I fought so pitifully?!”

“Perhaps she intended to run from the start, so that no one could pursue her. We, however, are now in an unprecedented state of crisis.”

Had Paul not opted to join the battle, he could have captured the High Britannian queen and sold her out to Belgaria, or at the very least charged the High Britannian Army a tremendous toll for safe passage. But the Empire’s gaze was now fixed on Langobarti, even with the queen having easily slipped away.

“But why...?” Paul asked through trembling lips. “Margaret...used me...as a disposable pawn?”

“I cannot speak to her intent, but that is where we have found ourselves. The

initial plan to use the civilians as shields... Thinking back on it now, that is what has rendered all peace negotiations impossible. Was it not Colonel Coulthard who proposed it?”

“Urgh...”

Under normal circumstances, it would have been possible to demand ransom for the release of the city and its civilians. After using those civilians as shields, however, the Empire would no longer accept any such transactions. Their emotions would not allow it.

“Grebeauvoir had proven to be impregnable for so long. We were not thinking rationally. We played right into the queen’s hands.”

“No...” Paul objected, staring blankly at the floor. “We...simply have to win. The fortress is still sound. The city is wet, but we can still fight...!”

His adjutant did not respond, merely looking at the king with a somber expression. Peace talks were no longer an option. They could only continue the battle, no matter how much they might have opposed the idea.

It was at that moment a Langobart soldier ran over. He stopped short of the door, unable to so rudely enter a noble’s bed chambers.

“I come bearing a report!”

“What is it now?” Paul asked, his voice thick with loathing. He could tell from the soldier’s face that he bore only bad news. He was gasping for air, his face deathly pale.

“The water!”

“Yes. We know.”

“No, sir! I don’t mean the sudden wave! The water isn’t going down!”

“Explain.”

“The enemy built a dam downstream to seal off the river.”

“A dam?! For what purpose?! What is the Empire planning?!”

The soldier remained silent. His adjutant, however, groaned out a response. “Your Majesty, the Belgarian Empire...plans to flood Grebeauvoir.”

“They *what*?!”

There was of course no way to submerge the entire city—the walls and the fortress stretched quite high—but flooding even just the lowest floors would make Grebeauvoir uninhabitable. Food stocks, cooking equipment, and stables were all on ground level.

Paul turned just as pale as the messenger. “Can we destroy the dam downstream...?” he asked.

“The water has already begun to pool, so the cavalry cannot approach. We will probably need to have the foot soldiers climb the slopes to reach it.”

“I see...”

“But we don’t have the soldiers to spare.”

They had lost more than half their armored foot soldiers in the flood, and it was questionable whether those who remained even had the will to continue.

“I’ll do it myself then!” Paul declared. “I won’t order you to follow me; I just need the ones who still want to fight on! This is the decisive battle!” He raced down the fortress staircase, drawing his sword and raising his voice. “Those crafty Belgarians are nothing to fear! I am Paul Langschultz, king of the Langobarts!”

By the time Paul arrived at the first floor, water was already climbing the steps, reaching up to his waist. While clad in his armor, even making it to his horse was a matter of life and death. He risked drowning if he so much as lost his footing.

The knights who were supposed to have been waiting for him were all gone, having abandoned their horses and evacuated to the second floor. Paul threw his armor off and screamed, bellowing words that he himself didn’t understand as he waded over to and mounted his horse.

“Open the gates!” Paul roared. “The king departs for battle! Come with me if you have the courage!”

“Paul...” His adjutant approached, having similarly cast aside his armor.

“Hah! Nice of you to join me! Mount your horse!”

“Paul.”

“What’s wrong?! Hurry up! The gate should open any moment now!”

“*Paul*. The device used to open the gate is already underwater. It’s useless.”

“Gah...”

“Let’s just raise the white flag...” his adjutant said, slumping his shoulders in defeat.

The king raised his sword above his head; then he sliced across the water’s surface with an agonized cry. “GAAAAAAH!”

# Chapter 6: Miscalculation

They cleared the vineyards and charged straight into the forest, along a path through the trees that continued across several mountains, eventually reaching Langobarti in the west. Stones and dead tree branches littered the way, and obstructive roots broke through the hard soil. A normal rider would surely have tripped and tumbled attempting to traverse such uneasy ground, but as expected of the finest picks of the First Army, the Belgarian horsemen raced as fast as the wind, completely disregarding the run-down roads.

Regis had initially shown some reservations about his riding situation. *Is it all right for someone like me to touch royalty?* he had wondered. *Latrielle's the marshal general of the army too.*

"Wah?!"

*Gonna fall! I'm gonna fall!*

He had thought it was terrifying to ride with Altina, but this was something else entirely. They had maintained a breakneck pace the entire journey thus far, so he was being tossed every which way. Soon, he no longer had the leisure to show restraint. He clung on with all his might. He would fall off otherwise, and striking the rocky earth at this speed would certainly leave a mark. And with a legion of knights racing behind them, if the fall didn't kill him, the stampede surely would.

Again and again, Regis accepted that he was about to die. His grip weakened as his hands grew weary.

*Erk... This might be...the end...*

Whenever he was riding with Altina, he was usually sitting at the front, where he could cling to the horse's neck or grab onto its mane. He would often wonder whether the horse took issue with him inadvertently tugging on its hair. Now, however, he was sitting at the back, where he had no choice but to wrap his arms around the prince.

*He's huge... Is it the armor, perhaps?* Latrielle seemed several times larger

than usual, such that Regis could actually feel the man's strength. *This... This is the man who will become emperor.*

And the man he would one day have to fight. They had a truce for now, but once Grebeauvoir was recaptured, Regis would once again be Altina's strategist. They would return to being enemies for as long as their politics clashed.

"Hwuh?!"

A sudden jolt threw Regis up into the air. He clung to Latrielle for dear life, having nearly fallen from the horse's rear. It wasn't as though he was exerting himself sitting atop the steed, yet his heart hammered in his chest, his breathing was ragged, and his body trembled.

"Don't fall off, Regis," Latrielle said, keeping his eyes straight ahead.

"Y-Yesh, shir!"



“There are several roads west of the fortress. One to Northern Langobarti. One to Western Langobarti. One that cuts through the mountains to the sea.”

It seemed that Latrielle had memorized the map of the area. *That’s reassuring. If only Altina would do the same...*

“Why do you believe they chose this path for their escape route?” the prince asked.

*The queen fled down this road. Of that I’m sure.*

“Th-This road to West Langobarti is the only one.”

“The only what?”

“The only road wide enough for her carriage.”

“The other roads are an appropriate size for a horse, but a carriage is a stretch —that much I can agree with. But are you sure they’re using a carriage?”

“Yes.”

“The queen had to use a carriage? I struggle to see why. Even if she doesn’t know how to ride, she can be transported as you are now.”

“Y-Yes, but...Queen Margaret will definitely have taken a carriage.”

“How can you be so sure?!”

“When we fought her with the Seventh Army, we had the Black Knight Brigade attack from behind. Even as the High Britannian main camp was in danger, the queen remained in her conspicuous carriage.”

“It might be different this time.”

“No...”

“Her advisors would surely have told her to escape by horse!”

“A queen willing to accept guidance from her advisors would not have joined this campaign in the first place, nor would she have occupied Grebeauvoir.”

“She could choose to ride on a whim.”

“Im. Pos. Si. Ble.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Even if she did choose to ride on a whim, that’s not the conclusion others would come to.”

“Mn?!”

“Anyone else would think she fled in fear of the imperial army—that she was so terrified that she left even the royal carriage behind.”

“So this is about her pride? She still ran nonetheless.”

“Perhaps, but she can always mask the retreat by adjusting her objective. Just as she did when she retreated from Fort Boneire, when the capital was a stone’s throw away.”

Latrielle fell silent.

Regis had a general grasp of the queen’s personality from their past engagements. There was no way she would flee alone, without using her carriage. And if she had with her any advisors capable of persuading her, she would have returned to High Britannia instead of occupying Grebeauvoir.

“If she’s wanting to save face, isn’t there a chance she’s still in the fortress? That she simply left command to the Langobart king?”

“If such is the case, then we are going on a wild goose chase, but we are losing nothing in the process.”

“Hm. So you would risk sending me on a wild goose chase?”

“Does it really matter, so long as we catch the queen either way?”

“I suppose not.”

A sudden rumble came from behind them.

“Huh?! What was that?!” Latrielle exclaimed, glancing back for a brief moment.

“I believe our final contraption has been activated.”

“So they released the water. How effective will it be? Does it really have enough might to decide the battle?”

“...Probably.”

Regis had only read about the method in books; this was his first time actually putting it into practice. There was a chance the dammed water would not be enough to defeat the enemy army, but that would mean every volume he’d read on the matter contained information that simply wasn’t true. Such a case would mean the Empire’s knights had a tough fight ahead of them, but that was why they had taken the high ground and why he had prepared a dam downstream. It was impossible for an army to stay long in a fortress once its bottom floor was ruined. The fortified city would no doubt be liberated.

There came a shrill whistling from farther down the path—a signal used by the First Army.

“They’ve found them!”

Their scouts must have sounded it.

Latrielle sped up his horse. The road swerved right, and so they leaned right to make it, veering so close to the side of the path that a branch nearly struck Regis on the shoulder.

“Wah?!”

Another leafy branch smacked Regis across the face. He nearly recoiled to the side in terror, but doing so would only make him lose his balance, so he instead gritted his teeth and tensed up. It was as Altina had taught him: “If you don’t want to die, then don’t move a muscle.”

Regis’s field of vision suddenly expanded, but what he saw made his breath catch in his throat. Beyond the narrow path stood a mass of soldiers, all with rifles at the ready.

*High Britannian sharpshooters!*

“Break through!” Latrielle shouted, drawing his sword and accelerating even faster.

The royal guard roared as they rushed to the front; then came the gunshots.

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“Haah...” Oswald Coulthard let out a short breath, gripping the sword that

gleamed in his hand. The Empire's cavalry were clad in armor and wore helmets, but there was a convenient gap beneath the armpit. He would take advantage of this to pierce through their hearts.

"Gah?!"

One of the Belgarian knights slumped forward and dropped from his horse. Without missing a beat, Oswald tugged on his own horse's reins, urging it toward a black-painted carriage.

"This way, Queen Margaret!"

Margaret Stillart rode not in a box carriage, but in a light carriage for two. It was closer to a sofa with a roof and wheels, and while it was small enough to be drawn by a person, it was currently attached to a horse. This was a two-wheeled wagon known as a cabriolet, inside of which sat the High Britannian queen, one knee clutched to her body. Her skirt billowed in the wind.

"Oh my, Oswald..." she said, irksomely brushing aside her winding hair. "Won't you do something about this? My hair is a mess. Do you know where my handmaid is?"

"My apologies, O elegant Queen Margaret. I ask for but a moment of patience."

"It's always like this with you. Always. You're becoming a little fish again."

"I apologize for repeating myself, but the knights who just attacked were most likely scouts. Their main force should not be far behind."

"Oho... What a bother. Have we been driven into a corner?"

"It is as you say, my wise queen. Please, join me on my horse."

Margaret smiled sweetly, folding her arms beneath and then pushing up her abundant chest. The thin fabrics she wore left very little to the imagination. "I refuse."

Oswald paused for a moment before conceding with a polite "Very well." He had expected such a response. There was no guarantee they would even get away on horseback. Oswald was not wearing any armor himself, and Margaret was probably lighter than the full plate armor the enemy riders had on, but

Belgaria's horsemen were simply much too fast—their horses were far better than even the finest steeds he had obtained upon capturing Grebeauvoir.

*This much is to be expected of the First Army though*, Oswald thought.

He heard gunshots ring out behind him. The soldiers he'd stationed along the path must have started opening fire.

*So they're already that close.*

The sharpshooters were but a means to buy time. Oswald needed to slow the Belgarian riders for just a moment, or make them wary enough to proceed with more caution. That was his only hope of getting away, yet those hopes were quickly dashed as the hoofbeats continued to grow nearer.

"I've always known war can be unpredictable. It seems this is it. Please slow down, everyone."

Oswald braced for the inevitable. He knew they weren't going to escape their hunters, but he refused to surrender. No matter what, he could not risk anything happening to Margaret. If she continued fleeing at full speed and the horse drawing her cabriolet was abruptly slain, there was a chance she would suffer more than just a few injuries.

With their escape now but a pipe dream, Oswald determined it better to keep things so that the guards were still able to hear his orders. He sent out commands one after another.

"The twenty men of our rearguard, you shall dismount your horses and enter the forest! Open fire on those you see approaching Her Majesty, but you mustn't shoot their commander!"

Following these orders, the High Britannian back line dismounted and concealed themselves in the forest with their guns.

"Everyone else, start setting up pavises in teams of three!" Oswald continued. "When you see our pursuers, aim for their horses' heads!"

It was then that a knight in heavy armor, First Lieutenant Glenda Graham, lined up next to him. "Sir Oswald! I'll buy us some time!" she declared.

"Thank you, Glenda. Don't do anything drastic though."

“Understood, sir! But how was the imperial army able to notice us?”

After catching on to Belgaria’s plan, Oswald had estimated the moment the civilians would escape and taken that opportunity to withdraw. This was the one instance when their enemy’s attention would not be on the fortress.

Oswald and the others in his escape unit had traveled quite some distance before the Empire’s horsemen began their pursuit, so the chances someone had spotted them were low. They must have been noticed after the fact. That said, there were several paths from the fortress’s west side; how had the enemy known which one they had taken? Or had they perhaps sent soldiers down all of them?

*If there weren’t too many of them, we could intercept, but...*

The Empire’s horsemen had appeared from behind and rode in single file, so it was hard to get a grasp on their numbers. Even so, the thundering hooves made it clear there were far too many—more than ten or twenty, at least.

*It seems they anticipated I would take this path.*

The enemy cavalry were closing in. They thrust out their spears, attempting to turn this into a close-quarters battle.

“Hraaaaaah!”

High Britannian guard soldiers moved to intercept, with Glenda already firing from horseback. Even though she wore heavy armor, she had numerous rifles on her back. There was also a cavalry spear on her horse.

“You bastards...will never get anywhere near...Sir Oswald!”

Her bullet pierced an imperial soldier’s breastplate, knocking him from his mount with a scream, but this did very little to stop the other horsemen streaming in from behind. She discarded the gun in her hands, grabbed another that was already loaded, and then fired again. Once more, her bullet struck its mark, but the enemy didn’t so much as falter. They grew closer by the second, their spears out at the ready.

“Raaah!”

“Gh...?!”

Glenda threw down another rifle, this time taking up her spear. She thrust at once, twisting her body to avoid the attack of an oncoming knight, and tore straight through her opponent's flank.

*One down!*

"G-Glory to the Empire..." the dying man mustered in a breathless voice. He grabbed onto Glenda's spear as a new Belgarian rider appeared from behind him.

*I can't pull it out.*

Glenda let go of the spear in an instant and instead drew the sword resting at her hip, swinging at the new challenger with a resounding "Die!" She would brush aside the soldier's spear and stab through his windpipe—or at least, that was her intention. She struck the encroaching weapon so hard that she nicked her own blade, yet its point was still coming straight for her. The strength of each individual member of the Empire's First Army was greater than she had anticipated.

"What?! G-Gah!"

A sudden heat spread through her flank. Her intestines were on fire.

*But...I can still fight!*

She readied her sword to take him by the neck again. And then, all of a sudden, her foe was growing distant.

"Huh...?"

It wasn't that her foe had moved; Glenda herself was falling over, tumbling headfirst. Her field of vision shifted rapidly as she dropped to the earth, her sword still in hand. There came a sickening crack from her neck as she landed, after which she moved no more.

The horsemen of the Belgarian Empire trampled the fallen bodies as they approached the carriage of Queen Margaret Stillart.

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Latrielle's horse was at the center of the group, and it was from there that Regis issued his orders. "There should be an ambush in the forest! Please stop

them before they can snipe at us!”

A portion of the cavalry leapt from their horses and sprinted into the forest. There were gunshots and screams, and in no time at all, the enemy soldiers in hiding were suppressed. All that remained was to capture the High Britannian queen; then the mission would at last be over. And yet, they had already lost twenty imperial soldiers.

Latrielle spurred his horse to the vanguard.

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The forest path grew dim as the sun began to sink away. Every last High Britannian soldier hiding among the trees had been taken out, and the high-class black carriage was now trapped in the center of an imperial encirclement. It had already come to a stop with nowhere to go.

Lying in front of the carriage were the bodies of many dead imperials. Among them stood a single man, defending his queen.

“Phah... Phah...”

He no longer had a horse. His sword was chipped. And yet, there he stood, the shadow commander of the High Britannian Army: Oswald Coulthard. There was a faint smile on his face.

Latrielle emerged from among his subordinates, gazing down upon the man from atop his horse. “Interesting...” he said. “To think you could take out so many of my elites. High Britannia has its share of excellent knights, I see.”

“Are you perhaps Belgaria’s marshal general and second prince, Alain Deux Latrielle de Belgaria?” Oswald asked.

“I am.”

“An audience with someone of your stature is far more than I deserve. I am Colonel Oswald Coulthard, a mere petty officer in the High Britannian Army.”

Regis was still riding behind Latrielle. He leaned slightly to one side, poking his head out to look at the man standing before them.

*So this is Colonel Oswald Coulthard.*

He was far smaller and thinner than expected; in fact, he was hardly any taller than Regis. He didn't look particularly strong—perhaps owing in part to the gentle smile on his face—but there were many of the Empire's elites dead at his feet. He was, no doubt, a man of unnatural skill.

Latrielle nodded. "Oswald Coulthard. I have heard your name plenty of times during this war. I've also heard you are Queen Margaret's confidant and, in essence, the commander of the army."

"Nothing of the sort, sir. Someone as perfect as Queen Margaret needs no confidant, and she may not be a soldier, but someone as incompetent as me could never possibly command the army of an entire nation."

"I see... Then who was it who proposed all those immoral schemes?"

"'Immoral'? Is that what you call it? Then I assume true justice is the strong taking up swords and spears to slay soldiers far weaker than themselves. Indeed, it must be wrong, evil, *inhuman* for the weak to even dare work their wit in opposition. Is that what you are implying, Your Highness?" Oswald asked. He sounded notably disinterested, yet he seemed to speak without end.

Latrielle shrugged. "I am not decrying the use of tactics. I am simply calling it immoral to blow up your own men and use civilians as cannon fodder."

"Then what about ordering them to charge? You are sending men to their demise either way. What about taxing the civilians so heavily they starve to death? Is that immoral also?"

"You don't understand," Latrielle answered without a moment's hesitation. "If someone dies in a charge, all that means is that they were not good enough. Perhaps they weren't trained, talented, or lucky enough. Civilians are the same, for you see, the world isn't sweet enough for every single hardworking soul to pass peacefully of old age. Farmers and merchants live not unlike soldiers—they give it their all, using their knowledge to innovate and adapt, yet poor fortune alone is enough to cut their lives short. That is simply what it means to live as a human being. But you... You would deny them even a chance at survival, sending them on suicide missions, binding the civilians and forcing them to take bullets... What else can I call this but immoral?"

"I see... As expected of the wise Prince Alain Deux Latrielle. I'm impressed."

“I answered your question; now you may answer mine. Are you the one who devised those immoral schemes?”

“Indeed. They all came from the head of this petty officer.”

Latrielle paused. “I see. You know nothing of justice, but your ingenuity does show promise. To kill you here is a waste. Would you consider being of use to me?”

The surrounding soldiers were immediately astir. It was apparently rare for Latrielle to reach out to the commander of a hostile nation like this.

Oswald smiled. “I am fortunate enough to serve the eternal Queen Margaret. I am blessed with far more happiness than I deserve—happiness that I would never even consider giving up.”

At the mention of the High Britannian queen, Latrielle and the other soldiers turned their gazes behind Oswald, to where she was sitting in the cabriolet. A carriage of that make would normally have had a driver, but there wasn’t one in sight. Maybe he had fled for his own life, or perhaps he had died in battle. Whatever the case, Margaret now rode alone.

“I see...” the queen murmured, turning to Latrielle and cocking her head. “So you’re the young lion, Prince Latrielle.”

“Queen Margaret. I stand before you today as the commander of the Belgarian Army.”

“What a scary face you have there,” Margaret said with a giggle. “I’m going to be killed then, am I? Oh, I’m very dead. Very dead indeed. I’m getting chills just thinking about it.”

“If we wanted you dead, we would already be firing arrows. You shall be our captive. That should make High Britannia a little more inclined to negotiate.”

Margaret wore a sullen expression. “Oh dear. A nation as great as Belgaria is going to take a hostage? How small-minded. You’ve disappointed me.”

“I consider it a compliment to have disappointed a fool.”

“‘A fool’? Are you perchance referring to me?”

“High Britannia has an overwhelming technological edge compared to all its

neighbors. You have such an advantage at your disposal, yet look at the result. Your name will forever be listed among history's greatest fools."

Margaret attempted to stifle a chuckle. "You think so?"

"Surrender now if you value your life, or if you want an honorable death. Should you oppose us, I promise you a miserable end, one befitting the foolishness you have displayed."

"Aha... Aha ha... Aha ha ha ha ha ha! AHA HA HA HA HA HA HA!"

In an unexpected development, Margaret suddenly burst into laughter. Even Latrielle was taken aback. "What...? What is she...? Has she gone mad...?" he muttered.

The knights backed away as if dealing with some sort of monster.

"No, this looks to me like névrose narcissique," Regis whispered from behind. "Narcissistic neurosis."

"Hm?!" Latrielle turned.

*It's rather dangerous to look away when you're facing a master like Oswald,* Regis thought. "May I dismount now?"

It took some help from the imperial guard, but Regis was back on the ground soon enough. He was around ten paces from Oswald. It was a little far for a conversation, but considering the fallen knights littering the ground, he didn't want to chance getting any closer.

"Queen Margaret so desperately desires to *be* special that she has become convinced she *is* special," Regis explained. "Even in this situation, she believes that nothing bad could possibly happen to someone as extraordinary as herself —not in the truest sense, at least." He was rubbing his behind as he spoke, having had so many rough landings over the course of an hour that he could feel the tingling all the way in his bones.

Margaret looked at Regis with a wry smile. "Oho ho... You say some funny things, don't you? Who are you?"

"It's a pleasure. I am Fifth-Grade Administrative Officer Regis Au—"

"Tactician Regis d'Aurick," Latrielle interrupted, correcting him.

“Err...” Regis scratched his head, slightly ashamed. “I suppose that’s true in a sense. I’m a tactician in the Empire’s Fourth Army, currently accompanying the First Army.”

Oswald was taken by surprise at this remark, evidently just as shocked at Regis’s appearance as Regis was at his. Rumors about the famed tactician of the Belgarian Army must have resulted in him picturing someone more valorous.

“I see...” Oswald said. “So you were able to figure out we would take this path.”

Regis paused for a moment before offering his response. “That’s right. I thought this was just about right, what with the personality of your queen.”

That didn’t mean it was completely impossible for them to have taken another path, of course, so Regis had sent a few men down those as well. That effort had ultimately been for nothing.

“Oh, really?” Margaret sounded amused. “We’ve never met before, yet you claim to understand me?”

“High Britannia is currently united enough to wage a war, so its policies should at least somewhat reflect the personality of its leader. The movements of the troops should as well, particularly during this war.”

“Hm. So? Who am I then?”

“Your words and actions are founded in a bloated sense of narcissism. You believe you are special, that you are unique from everyone else. People like you tend to be overconfident in everything they say, seeking out nothing but praise from others. They might keep someone close who showers them with excess compliments, for instance.”

Margaret silently glanced at Oswald.

“Since this praise is all you need from others, you are wholly indifferent to their feelings,” Regis went on. “You are an extreme idealist who tends to set unrealistic goals, such as besting the strongest empire on the continent with the forces of a small island nation.”

“Aha ha... Interesting. Very interesting. Are you trying to tell me I’m sick?”

“In short, yes. Queen Margaret, in scholarly terms, you can best be described as remarkably unremarkable. You just coincidentally happen to be royalty.”

“What...?” For the first time, the smile disappeared from Margaret’s face.

Regis shrugged. “It’s still an emerging field; it might be some years before it’s accepted as an actual science,” he said. The fact it hadn’t yet been acknowledged meant it wasn’t included in noble or royal curricula.

“You’re calling me—*me*—unremarkable?!”

“Well, you might be a little ill, but not enough to require treatment. I’m only talking about your sense of values and slight tendencies in your behavior. They can apparently hinder one’s livelihood if serious enough. I’ve only read about them in a book, but if the discrepancy with reality is too great, it becomes impossible to even hold a proper conversation.”

“I’m thirsty,” Margaret said, averting her eyes. “I could do with some tea.”

“...Pardon me?”

Margaret had abruptly changed the subject. “You’ve been going on for so long that I simply can’t stand it anymore,” she said with a giggle. “Haven’t you said enough? We all know your conclusion.”

“Actually, I haven’t even reached my conclusion yet. You know, contrary to popular belief, losing focus partway through a conversation does not indicate brilliance or quick-wittedness. It simply means you are not exercising your ability to think. You’re only skimming the surface without making any new discoveries. All you’ve done is reduce the stimulation to your brain.”

“What?!”

“If your intellect were greater, a single event might lead to far more discoveries, and you would notice that there is much more to take into consideration. If you’ve grown sick of the conversation when we’ve barely even started, that is merely a sign you need to study more.”

“You’re calling me a *fool* again...” Margaret breathed, her voice quavering. She had previously been relaxing on her sofa with an air of elegance, but now her teeth were gritted, and a frustrated crease ran across her brow. Even so,

Regis did not hold back.

“You’ve kept your distance from all those who don’t affirm your beliefs, seeking out cheap, unearned praise rather than putting in any actual work. You’ve also given your people an unrealistic ideal, instigating them with a fantasy that started a thoughtless war. As I’m sure you know, many lives have been lost as a result.”

“What about it? Everyone dies someday, but this is a war that will go down in history.”

“In history? At most, you might get a sentence or two.”

“Eh?” Margaret was looking at him doubtfully.

“Have you ever properly read a history book before? I don’t mean recent history, mind you; I mean the ones starting from the founding of your nation. High Britannia changes its calendar system every time the ruling house changes, and you’ve had around three hundred years under your current system. Are you aware how many wars were fought in that time span? There was a war exactly one hundred years ago too. Do you remember the nation you fought against?”

“I-I don’t have to remember every little detail.”

“It was Belgaria.”

“...? What...?!”

“At the time, the Empire was expanding its war fronts, and its troops crossed the sea to go to war with High Britannia. Our nation ultimately retreated when the situation worsened on the eastern front. No one gained or lost any land, and the king did not change either. It was an event no one concerned would ever forget, but now, most history books here hardly even touch on it. It gets a sentence, or a paragraph at most. Oh, I haven’t read too many High Britannian history books, so I don’t know how much recognition it gets in your country, but it stands to reason that if the queen herself didn’t know about it...”

“S-So you’re saying this war will...be treated...the same...?”

“You wouldn’t even have to ask if you had properly studied your own history.”

“But... That can’t... I mean, I’m—!”

“This is no more than an unremarkable event in the uninterrupted thread that is history. If we look at this from a military standpoint, the fact that High Britannia lost is even worse—it weakens the impact of the shift from the era of swords and spears to the era of guns. Even with your apparent advantage, the Empire won—that is what most leaders will take away from this. They will need something a little more convincing to change their current values.”

Margaret finally went silent.

“You’re quite harsh, you know...” Oswald commented with a sigh.

“And you already knew all of what I just said, didn’t you?” Regis asked. “You knew everything and manipulated your queen. Was it to rise through the ranks?”

“Absolutely not. Everything this petty officer does is for the sake of the great Queen Margaret.”

“How can you say that? Surely you knew that fulfilling her misguided wishes would only worsen her immature mentality.”

“I adore even her most broken parts,” Oswald said plainly, his smile not faltering in the slightest. Regis found this whole situation strangely uncanny. The mere thought that someone like this was leading an entire nation sent a chill down his spine.

“How could this be...?” Regis groaned.

It was then that Latrielle came forward. “I understand now. I’d considered it a waste of your military talents, but I have no need for a deviant who would knowingly ruin a nation. Move, or I will show you no mercy.” He jumped down from his horse and drew his sword, immediately sending his guards into an uproar.

“We can handle it, Commander!”

“He’s far too dangerous!”

“Leave it to us!”

Latrielle took one more step toward Oswald. “My inept command has cost me many good men in this war. I’m not going to lose any more.”

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“This is what you desired, isn’t it?” Latrielle asked, his attention focused on the High Britannian shadow commander.

“You know that, yet still you’ll indulge me with this duel. As I thought, the Belgarian royal family is quite fascinating.”

Regis sighed. Latrielle acted calm, collected, and mature, but he was still Altina’s brother. He would not run from a challenge. Oswald must have known that and deliberately cut down the imperial guard, having foreseen this very situation.

*Well, even if Oswald was aware this would get Latrielle’s attention, actually cutting down so many knights is an amazing feat to manage.*

Latrielle began swaying his longsword back and forth impatiently. “What’s wrong? I’m granting your wish. Are you going to keep me waiting?”

“Oh, not at all. I’m simply so grateful that you would serve up victory to someone as meager as me.”

“Nonsense!”

It was the second prince who kicked off the ground first, shooting forward ten paces in the span of one breath. His movements were as swift as when he had dueled Altina on the night of the celebrations in April, and just as he had then, he swung at his opponent in the blink of an eye.

Oswald twisted his body such that the sword merely glanced his shoulder, cutting through cloth but not skin. He then used Latrielle’s speed against him, focusing an attack on the prince’s left shoulder.

“You’re slower than expected,” Oswald goaded. “Is that armor weighing you down?”

“You and your bag of tricks!”

Latrielle also managed to dodge at the last second, but there was blood spilling from the gaps in his armor. He had evidently been injured, and now his left arm hung limply. Perhaps he couldn’t put any strength into it.

The knights surrounding the pair started beating their chest plates, their

swords and spears at the ready. But this was a one-on-one duel—interfering now would only disgrace Latrielle.

“Hm! Hah!”

Oswald attacked again, this time with a flurry of thrusts. Most glided across the prince’s armor, but the ones that made it through the gaps bit into his arm and flank. The imperial guard was astir.

“H-He’s strong!”

“What speed...”

“Is the commander all right?!”

Latrielle glared at his foe. “I can tell you’re not trying to kill me. You mean to take me captive?!”

“Aha. An appropriate hostage is necessary to save the radiant Queen Margaret.”



“Hmph. You might want to check your calculations! Me, for the measly queen of High Britannia?!”

“I suppose I’ll have to demand a ransom as well then.”

Oswald picked up speed as he continued to attack. Latrielle swung his sword for what it was worth, but his opponent was always just barely out of reach. To make matters worse, he could no longer move his left arm. His wounds were slowly getting worse, putting him at a clear disadvantage.

“Grrk!”

“I see, I see. I thought it was strange that you tried to end our duel early with that reckless approach. Yes, how interesting.” Oswald chuckled, eliciting a slight grimace from the second prince. “Your eyes are losing their light, aren’t they?”

“Grr...”

The guards were in an uproar at this development, but Regis wasn’t surprised. He had considered this possibility on a number of occasions, but Latrielle certainly hadn’t been acting as though there was an issue with his eyesight, so Regis had concluded that the prince had already recovered. Sight was clearly a large factor in a battle between masters.

*So he really does have an eye affliction*...

Oswald continued to laugh, his shoulders trembling in amusement. “It’s getting dark. Can you even see my sword anymore?”

“Silence.”

“Ha! Aha ha ha! Of course! I knew it! Queen Margaret *is* special. She is beloved by God! See what luck we have been blessed with as we take our last stand! The wonderful Queen Margaret is the chosen one! What else could she be?!”

“Quit your yapping.”

“Oh, I’ll yap all I want! This is wonderful. Truly wonderful! I’m even struggling to hold back the tears! It’s a miracle! A true miracle! The radiant Queen Margaret truly is without equals! The one and only of her kind in the world!”

“Fool!” Latrielle shouted as he took a stance and thrust. “I might be struggling to see, but that doesn’t mean I won’t win!”

“I don’t see how you *could* win.”

Oswald’s blade closed in on Latrielle’s chest, only to change course at the very last moment. It was too fast for Regis to follow with his eyes. Perhaps the second prince might have been able to anticipate the attack had he been in perfect condition, but he was in no state to dodge. The blade pierced through his right thigh.

“It’s over.”

“Thinking that is why you’re a fool!” Latrielle barked. His dangling left arm suddenly sprung to life and immediately gripped the High Britannian’s right wrist.

“What?! But I wounded you!”

“That tiny blade of yours ain’t enough to break me!” Latrielle declared, using his free hand to swing his sword with as much force as he could muster. Oswald could no longer take distance; it was a guaranteed hit.

“Aagh!”

Oswald held up his left arm as a last-second shield. The blade dug into flesh before severing the limb entirely. Within moments, the *Armée Victoire Volonté*, the second treasured sword of the Empire, had eaten its way from the shadow commander’s left shoulder to his chest.

“Gh?! Aah! Gaaaaaah!” Oswald screamed as blood spouted from the fresh wound, and then he collapsed. His hand no longer clasped his sword, its tip now stuck into the ground at the second prince’s feet.

Latrielle had moved so shrewdly that it was easy to forget, but he had at the very least taken heavy injuries to his left arm and right leg. Still, he maintained his composure, raising his blood-coated sword into the air.

“We are victorious!”

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There were cheers and cries as Latrielle’s remaining men gathered around

him.

“Vive l’Empire!”

“M-More importantly, we need to get your wounds looked at!”

“Hurry back to camp, Commander!”

“He can’t ride a horse with those wounds! Someone get a doctor!”

“What are you saying?! They’ll take at least a couple hours to get here!”

Latrielle could not give orders due to his injuries, and Oswald had managed to take out the guard captain, so the men currently lacked a commander. Their lack of unity was beginning to surface, and there were arguments abound.

Regis stuck out his finger. “Why don’t you use that carriage?” he interjected, pointing to the cabriolet in question. The knights all turned their eyes to where Margaret sat in her carriage. Barely a moment passed before they started closing in, swords in hand, out for blood.

“Yeah, that’s right! Let’s use the carriage!” one man yelled.

“What about the woman?” another asked.

“Just kill— Wait, we were ordered *not* to kill her, right...?”

All of a sudden, one of the guards cried out.

“Ah?! T-Tactician!”

Regis raced over as a flustered voice called to him. The carriage’s fine black sofa was covered in blood, and the woman inside allowed a wry smile to play on her lips. On her left side, he could see the hilt of a knife sprouting from her flank, just above her slender waist. It was a fruit knife.

“Ha... Aha ha ha... I’m...not going to be your captive. I’m not afraid of death...nor am I going to plead for my life.”



“What...?!”

“Aha...ha ha... Are you surprised now...?” she asked weakly. Her face was whiter than paper.

Regis felt a sudden heat rise up from within him. “You idiot!” he snapped. It had been a while since he had gotten angry.

The dying queen stared up at him in silence.

“I... I didn’t think you were this stupid. You have a duty to take responsibility for this war. If you want to die, you should at least die by the Empire’s hand. You’ve made even your own death completely worthless now!”

“That’s...not my problem. I’ve lived as I pleased...and I shall die as I please too.”

“Hate to disappoint, but you’re going to survive!”

“Wh-What do we do, Tactician...?” the guard knights asked, notably flustered. They were expert killers, not healers.

“Spread that flag out over the ground and place the queen onto it! It seems she’s been stabbed in the flank. Strip her until the wound is exposed. Also, get as much water as you can!”

“Understood!”

Margaret glared at the knights as she was dragged from her carriage. “O-Oh, you’d like that, wouldn’t you...? But it’s so painful... So very, very painful... I’m sure I’m...going to die...”

“If you can still talk like that, you’re going to be fine. I’ve seen plenty of people die so far, and I can tell you now, you’ll survive if we take the appropriate emergency measures.”

“Aha... Appropriate measures? Aha ha... How do you figure? I don’t see any doctors around...”

Regis began rolling up his sleeves. “No, but I read a few medical books at the military library.”

# Chapter 7: The Plot to Assassinate Regis d’Aurick “Vive l’Empire!” cheered the soldiers. “Vive le général d’armée!”

Daybreak was approaching by the time Regis returned to the main camp. The bonfires blazing all around created a celebratory atmosphere, burning so brightly that they seemed to outshine the stars in the sky.

Latrielle had already undergone treatment and was now seated in a chair toward the rear end of the camp. “Finally back, Regis?” he asked.

“Commander! Should you really be out of bed?!”

“I’ve left enough to you already. Plus, the soldiers are singing songs of victory; it would be quite deplorable for me to lie down on such a festive occasion.”

“Ah... But I thought your wounds were quite serious.”

“They’ve already closed up. They still hurt, mind you, but the doctor said the pain is a sign that nothing’s gone rotten.”

Germain, who was standing beside the prince, let out a sigh. “He also said you should’ve endured enough pain to make any normal person scream their lungs out. Good grief... You accepted a one-on-one duel while surrounded by capable soldiers...” he said, slumping his shoulders.

Regis felt strongly sympathetic to Germain’s plight. This was an everyday occurrence when he was serving under Altina.

Latrielle folded his arms. “Fret not, I will make a complete recovery. Not even a scar will remain. Though it seems the process will take a couple months.”

Germain heaved a second sigh. “At the very least, don’t overexert yourself.”

“I acknowledge your concern.”

Regis gave a wry smile, recalling a past exchange with Altina. It was then that Latrielle suddenly changed the topic.

“Now then, Regis... I have not seen the situation with my own eyes, but

Germain has been keeping me informed."

"It seems our plan went off without a hitch," Regis noted.

"Our officers are in awe—not that anyone still doubted your abilities after you took command."

Regis bashfully scratched his head. "Thank you, sir."

"What's more, I hear you saved the High Britannian queen when she tried to take her own life."

Margaret had done a great deal of damage during her suicide attempt; by the time Regis reached her, she was losing blood fast, and the pressure from her abdomen had nearly pushed out her organs. Had Regis pushed too hard on the wound, he would have risked causing a rupture or even necrosis. Stopping the bleeding in such a delicate area had required a great deal of medical knowledge.

"I...just happened to pick up a few things from a book or two."

"Hm." Latrielle smiled. "She will make fine diplomacy fodder."

"Depending on what our damages add up to, High Britannia may not be able to cover the costs, in which case they'll need to offer up their queen's life instead."

"And when that happens, I'll make sure everyone knows they chose money over their own ruler as she's sent to the chopping block."

Regis was under no illusion that every death was a pity. "She should receive the appropriate punishment for her actions," he said with a shrug.

"Indeed. Be it good or bad, every action has a consequence. And on that note, I need to reward you."

"Pardon?"

"You led the First Army in my stead and magnificently breached the enemy's forces. Your plan saved captured civilians and garrisoned soldiers alike. You rendered the enemy fortress helpless to the point that they raised the flag of surrender, and then you realized the queen would use that opportunity to flee and contributed greatly to her capture. With so many achievements to speak of,

not preparing a suitable reward would see my character called into question.”

“I see...”

As a temporary transfer from the Fourth Army, it was only natural that Regis would need to be given a reward great enough to satisfy all those who knew about his accomplishments. Otherwise, they would slander Latrielle as a man who relied on the strength of others while giving nothing in return.

Regis exhaled as quietly as possible. *Honestly, being able to return to Fort Volks is enough for me,* he thought, watching as Germain spread a sheet of parchment over the table at the prince’s order.

“First, Regis, you are to be elevated to first-grade admin officer,” Latrielle declared. “A messenger has already been sent to the Ministry of Military Affairs. I made it an official edict this time, so they won’t bother you about paperwork and exams again.”

“Wh-What?!” Regis exclaimed.

“Is that not enough?”

“No, no, no! I just mean, I was about to take the third-grade exam...”

“The alternative is that I make you a major general.”

“I, Regis d’Aurick, do humbly accept my promotion to first-grade administrative officer!” Regis sputtered, his voice cracking in the process. It was rare enough for a commoner to reach first-grade, and one becoming a general was entirely unprecedented. He had never seen mention of a commoner general across all the official records he had read—at most, they existed in fairy tales that walked precariously between legend and pure fiction. The mere thought of what might happen if something like that came to be made his knees tremble.

Latrielle nodded. “Good. Next, I’ve prepared two documents for you to choose between.” Two new sheets were placed on the table. “To preface this, as you proposed, I am pulling back our line to the fortress atop the mountain.”

“A wise decision.”

“Should you choose this paper here,” the prince said, gesturing to one of the

sheets on the table, “I will appoint you as the commander of that fortress. I haven’t yet gotten it past the Ministry of Nobility, but once that matter is settled, you will rise from a chevalier to a baron. Of course, that means you will also be granted the surrounding land.”

“Fwah?!” Regis inadvertently cried out.

“An understandable response. I didn’t think you would be satisfied with land out in the middle of nowhere.”

“No, hold on! I don’t even feel like a real chevalier yet! I’m only just starting to remember to add the ‘d’’ to my name! A baron?! Isn’t that full-fledged nobility?!”

“Given your achievements, it would be a detriment to our great nation for your family not to share in your noble title.”

“No, I... I don’t have any family...” Regis replied. With his sister having married into another house, she was no longer considered a member of his household.

“I’m sure you’ll find a partner in no time at all once you’ve made your debut in high society. But before then, allow me to explain the other option. I assure you, it is far more appealing than a frontier fort and a minor position among the nobility.”

“Wh-What might that be...?”

“I want to formally welcome you as a strategist in the First Army. In fact, I can personally guarantee you a position as chief of staff.”

“I respectfully decline.”

What followed was a long silence. Regis had replied so immediately that Latrielle was at a complete loss for words.

“M-My apologies,” Regis added. “It’s just, I was actually somewhat expecting that proposition—or rather, I was ready for it. I thought you might extend such an invitation if my plan succeeded, but...I must keep my promise to Alt— to the princess.”

“Have you thought this through? No, I suppose that goes without saying. I still don’t understand, though. I know I shouldn’t be the one to say it, but...I’m going

to become emperor.”

“I’m aware.”

“That surprise attack may ultimately cost me my sight, but I can still see for the time being. I also have Germain by my side. I intend to defeat our neighbors and make the Belgarian Empire a nation that will prosper for a thousand years.”

“...I’m aware,” Regis repeated.

“I am confident that, during my reign, I will successfully lay the foundations for my new system of governance.”

“Perhaps you will.”

Latrielle paused. “Regis. In your eyes, am I an unrealistic dreamer? Am I no different from that High Britannian queen?”

“No, I would not go as far as to say that. I do not think your plan is necessarily impossible; in fact, I think the world is already headed in that direction.”

The prince cocked his head to one side. “Then why would you distance me and choose Argentina? Do you fear earning the ire of the Fourth Army?”

Regis shook his head in response. “The princess is simply the one most likely to realize my ideals.”

“Do you mean your sugar-sweet dream of making war a thing of the past...?” Latrielle asked, his eyes narrowed.

“I do.”

“What nonsense. And you insinuate my ideals are unrealistic... Say a madman takes the throne in one of the many nations that surround us. What would you do if they attacked us?”

“I would fight back. We wouldn’t have any other choice.”

“See, Regis? Your goal is unattainable.”

“No, not quite... I strive for a world where, when an enemy invades, we do not have to fear other countries joining them. I want to create a nation in which we would instead work together to fend off such attacks. That is what the princess has her sights on, and the ideal that I am willing to wager my life

upon.”

“You speak of nations helping each other in their time of need...?”

“Yes.”

“Absurd.”

“It seems so, what with the current state of affairs. The process will take time—enough that I presume it won’t come together within my lifetime. But perhaps we can lay the first stone.”

“Do you honestly think anyone will carry that banner of dreams into the next generation?” Latrielle asked. His tone was harsh, but Regis smiled nonetheless.

“Even if no people remain, the books speaking of our work will.”

A heavy silence fell once again, eased only by the victory songs seeping in from outside. The men were hailing Latrielle and the Empire. Some even chanted the name “Regis,” well aware of the great role he had played in their triumph.

Latrielle’s face twisted in anguish. He had smiled through pain intense enough to have made a normal man scream, yet Regis’s decision made him break into a cold sweat. “Is there any room for negotiation?” he asked.

“I’m sorry.”

“If you strive for Argentina’s ideal, you will need to seize my position. Her goal is irreconcilable with my policy of conquering the neighboring nations.”

“I understand that. To be honest, I feel our political struggle with you is going to be more of a challenge than forming peaceful relations with the other nations.”

“I’m already on the cusp of taking the throne, and the moment I do, Argentina will no longer be able to become empress.”

“So it seems...”

“Then your dream is over. Why fixate on it now?”

“Hm... Again, I’m sorry. I do not believe this conversation has anything to do with the Grebeauvoir rescue operation.” Regis took only the paper appointing

him a first-grade admin officer before offering a deep bow. “There is much I’ve learned during my time with the First Army, and I am very grateful for your help with my exams.”

Latrielle closed his eyes, allowing a deep sigh to escape him. “I have obtained...so much...but it seems the ones I chase will always turn me away.”

“Huh?”

“No, I’m just talking to myself...”

“Right. Now, if you’ll excuse me, Prince Latrielle...”

“Yes. Farewell, Regis. You were a fine tactician,” the prince said. His expression was serene, but Germain beside him watched with colder eyes than Regis had ever seen before.

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Regis started making his way back to his tent, able to hear the voices of soldiers raising another toast. He wondered whether they would continue until morning. When he arrived outside, he spotted a woman with black hair standing beside a nearby bonfire.

“Hello, Ms. Fanrine.”

“Regis!”

Fanrine immediately began racing over. *Has something happened to her...?* Regis wondered. The next thing he knew, she was right before his eyes, and she showed no signs of stopping there. He was suddenly enveloped in a soft sensation—a warm embrace.

“Wh... Uh... Huh...?!”

“You’re alive!”

“U-Um... I’m covered in blood, so...”

“Blood? Regis, were you injured?!”

“No, I’m just fine. I just got some of the queen’s blood on my sleeves and whatnot.”

“Oh my! So you slew the enemy commander?!”

“No, no. The opposite, actually. Oh, more importantly—what are you doing here at this hour? Do you need something?”

Fanrine stared at Regis with wide eyes before making a lonesome face. “I was waiting and praying that you would return safely,” she said after a short pause.

“Huh...?”

“I mean, I heard that you led a small group of soldiers to chase the fleeing enemy commander.”

“Yes, well... Perhaps.”

She was somewhat correct, but not entirely. For one, it was Latrielle who had taken the lead, with Regis simply being one among the group. It was also more accurate to say the king of the Langobarts was the enemy commander, and since he had surrendered in the flood, Regis had never actually confronted him.

As Regis dwelled on the details, Fanrine squeezed him even tighter. “I was...scared. Incredibly so. Even just the thought that I might lose you was...”

“I was just giving orders from the main camp. I sent men to kill and to die, but I was never in any danger myself.”

“But you were still on the battlefield. There’s no guaranteed safety anywhere, is there?”

“Oh, yes... You have a point.”

“So to finally have you back... To hear your voice again... I’m so happy, I could... Ah!” Fanrine suddenly leapt back, her face bright red. “H-How indecent of me! M-My apologies, Regis!”

Regis shook his head. “There’s no need to apologize. Really.”

“You must be so tired, yet I... I didn’t mean to offend you.”

“No, not at all. I’m not offended. In fact, it...it felt rather nice.”

*What am I even saying...?*

“Ah...” Fanrine grew more sheepish by the second, the red now spreading to her ears. There were lookouts standing a short distance from the tent, and she had spoken so loudly that she had attracted their attention. They looked at her

—and at Regis—with great intrigue. Him conversing with the young daughter of a duke was already enough to incite rumors, but she was also unmarried. Then again, perhaps it was better that she hadn't yet taken a husband; the last thing Regis needed was a made-up scandal making the rounds.

"Yes, well, this was a lovely chat. I'm all right now, so...err...thank you for worrying for me."

"B-But of course. I'm glad it, uh, felt nice."

"R-R... Right," Regis stammered. He could already feel the blood rushing to his cheeks, and so he turned to the tent in a desperate attempt to flee.

"U-Um... Regis?"

"Yes?"

"Are you going to sleep now? I, er...don't imagine you've eaten anything. I've made some brioche. Though maybe it's a little late for sweets..."

*I see. That must be at least part of the reason why she waited for me.*

Regis had indeed intended to go straight to bed. He was sure one of the soldiers would have given him some food had he asked, but it would almost certainly be dried meat, which he wasn't in the right mind to laboriously chew on. Brioche, however, was a whole other story. It was a luxury for a commoner, and practically a dream to be able to enjoy some on the battlefield.

"I'd love some! Ah, no... It might get a little dangerous around here. I think you should get going."

"Dangerous? What's wrong?"

Regis sighed. "This and that happened...with Prince Latrielle."

"Oh, really?" Fanrine asked, narrowing her eyes. "If you're not going to sleep right away, perhaps you could spend some time talking to me." Her tone was as gentle as if she were offering him some tea with his brioche.

Regis hesitated for a moment. *Is it really okay for me to drag her into this mess?* he wondered. But if something happened to him, she was unlikely to escape unharmed no matter what.

“I don’t see any harm in a conversation.”

“Thank you,” Fanrine said with a smile. “I do have some tea as well, though it’s gone cold.”

“Perfect. Truth be told, I’m incredibly hungry. I just wasn’t in the mood for meat.”

Fanrine giggled, making no attempt to hide her delight. “Seems like everything worked out then.”

✧ ✧ ✧

Inside the tent, Regis sat at his desk chair, allowing Fanrine to sit on the slightly more cushioned bed. From there, he briefly explained the details of the battle, as well as his conversation with Latrielle. Fanrine nodded all the while with a serious look on her face.

“And so, it might get a little...” Regis bit into some brioche. “Wow, this is delicious!”

“I’m glad you like it.”

“This must be the best brioche I’ve ever eaten. Did you really make this here, on the battlefield...? That’s incredible.”

“The butter and eggs I used arrived from the capital just this morning. That said, the ingredients shouldn’t be too different from what the pâtissiers around these parts use. I doubt the end product is that much better either.”

“I see. Either way, it’s astounding that you made this with an impromptu stove.”

“If you want, I’ll make it for you every morning.”

“I do like the sound of that...”

“Ah. I...” Fanrine suddenly went silent, her cheeks flushing with color.

Regis munched on his brioche a short while longer before getting the conversation back on track. “So, as I was saying... Perhaps I should have asked for some time to think—at least until we were back in the capital. Judging by how the prince reacted, I’m not sure I’ll even survive the night.”

“But there are plenty of people here, and you, my dear Regis, are the star of the show.”

“On the contrary, I’d say Sir Batteren of the White Hares has the most achievements to his name.”

“But regardless of what he accomplished, based on what you’ve told me, he wasn’t the one who captured the enemy general. It was because of your plan to flood the city that the king of Langobarti surrendered, and it was thanks to your wit that the High Britannian queen was unable to escape.”

“Yes, but...the floodgates succeeded only because of the sappers, and Queen Margaret was captured because our commander came out victorious in a one-on-one duel. Putting aside who takes center stage, though, I do think I’ve done enough that people would notice my sudden disappearance.”

“Correct.”

“Plus, I’m just a loan from the Fourth Army. If anything happens to me, Latrielle’s reputation will plummet to rock bottom.”

“I think so too.”

“So there’s no way he would go to such lengths over someone like me. That’s what I’ve always thought, at least.”

“Now that just sounds like negligence on your part,” Fanrine plainly declared. As well as having the skills of a professional cook, she could also speak on military and political matters. She was a fair bit more capable than the average civil official, enough that one could safely assume the Ministry of Military Affairs hadn’t just taken her on due to her lineage.

Regis nodded. “I’m starting to understand, I think... Considering the prince’s current position, there’s a chance he would even risk being branded a coward to get rid of me. I’m, uh...ashamed of how presumptuous that sounds, now that I’ve said it aloud. Yes, I shouldn’t have mentioned it. Is such a thing even possible...?” Regis babbled, his voice growing fainter the longer he spoke on.

“Regis. Get a grip on yourself,” Fanrine chided, her fists tightly clenched. “You’re the one supporting the fourth princess.”

“Th-That’s not necessarily—”

“The way the prince sees it, your wit might be the one thing capable of diminishing his current advantage over her.”

“Hm... Well, I’ve already made my move to diminish his standing, but...”

“And you really think he’s going to let you run free? That’s sickly sweet optimism right there, even sweeter than the brioche.”

Regis took another bite of the incredibly sweet bread. “Slightly tarnishing his own reputation to put a complete stop to his political enemy... It certainly isn’t a bad move.”

“Precisely. So keep your guard up—no, in fact, you need to take some measures of your own.”

“You may be right.” Regis stood up and sighed. “Prince Latrielle’s moving forward much too fast. He’s seeking results in such a limited time frame. Is he anxious about his vision?” He recalled what the prince had told him when revealing the Fusil 851: *“I intend to use this gun to conquer all our neighbors within the next two years.”*

Fanrine nodded. “That might be it. But no matter how strong his will might be, that is no reason to obediently go along with his plans.”

“My thoughts exactly.”

“Regis, please make preparations to keep yourself protected.”

“I’ll certainly try, but...this is rather troubling.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Any good plan needs to be prepared in advance. They don’t just suddenly spring to mind the moment I think I’m in danger,” he said. To be blunt, he hadn’t yet thought up a solution to his predicament.

Fanrine slumped forward. “So you honestly never even considered that you might be targeted. I see.”

“What to do...? What to do...?” Regis murmured, thoughtlessly scratching his head. His fatigue was catching up to him; it was like a dense fog had rolled over

his mind. *This is the same feeling as when it's late at night and my eyes are slipping off the letters...*

Despite his efforts, he was unable to come up with anything concrete.

"Huh...?!" Fanrine abruptly shot to her feet, her expression sterner than before.

Regis cocked his head. "Is something the matter?"

"The soldiers... They're not laughing anymore."

"You're right. Do you think they've fallen asleep?" Regis asked. His question was tongue in cheek, of course; not even he could think with such blind optimism. There were footsteps approaching the tent, as well as the clanking of metal armor. "This isn't good... Ms. Fanrine, please hide under the bed."

"Even as an order from you, I won't accept. I very well intend to share the fate of whomever I've sworn my future to."

"Huh? 'Your future'?"

"As I said, I intend to cook for you every morning."

"Wait!"

Before Regis could say any more, however, the cloth hanging over the entrance was unceremoniously torn away.

✧ ✧ ✧

As one would expect, the tent wasn't nearly as sturdy as a normal house; the entrance was yanked away with one clean movement.

Regis put his hands up in the air. "Let's hope there's some room for negotiation..." he spoke under his breath. He wouldn't have given in to any threats had he been alone, even if that meant being cut down, but he wanted to get Fanrine out safely. Contrary to his expectations, however, the ones who entered through the ripped cloth were not imperial soldiers.

«He's here!»

"Eh? Mercenaries?" Regis wondered aloud. The intruders spoke Germanian, but the armor they wore wasn't of a country he was familiar with.

«Oi, do we have the right guy?!»

«Yep. Jackpot. Good work. Now go wait over there and start holding the perimeter.»

«Understood. You've got three minutes.»

«Won't even take that long.»

Around six mercenaries had entered the tent, all exuding the fierce aura of tempered veterans. Behind them stood two women.

"Wha—?!" Regis inadvertently cried out. They were no longer wearing their maid uniforms, but the women were clearly Franka and Jestina.

"Wh-What are you trying to pull?!" Fanrine exclaimed, her expression grim. Instead of providing any response, however, Franka simply drew a crossbow.

«Can I kill the woman?»

Regis hurriedly stepped forward to shield Fanrine. "W-Wait!" he stammered. "I remember now. You're Franziska of Renard Pendu!"

"Correct," Franziska replied. "Took you long enough."

"I never noticed. Why were you working as my maid?"

"Don't ask! It pisses me off so much I might just pull the trigger!"

"Please contain yourself," spoke the woman standing beside her, evidently prepared to answer instead. She had previously introduced herself as Jestina, but that was surely a fake name as well. "Good evening, Sir Aurick... Allow me to introduce myself once more: I am Jessica Schweinzeberg, Gilbert's younger sister."

"I see... So that's what's going on..." Regis said, nodding to himself. "You're the ones who raised the smoke signal to recall your comrades from the High Britannian Army."

"You catch on quickly."

"Are you here for me?"

"Correct. But you pieced that together too late. Much too late."

Franziska took aim with her crossbow. “It’s only gonna sting if you resist. So, anyway... Sis, I can kill the woman, right? She’s always lecturing me.”

“Ngh...” Fanrine’s shoulders trembled.

The drowsiness had since been blown from Regis’s mind. His heart pounded, his skin completely slick with sweat. He desperately searched through the bookshelves in his mind.

*But are there any stories about a situation like this...? Ah...*

✧ ✧ ✧

Two shadows distorted in the orange glow of a flickering candle. One, belonging to the second prince, was leaning back into a chair.

“Is killing him really the only option...?” Latrielle asked, his voice escaping him like the growl of a dangerous animal.

Germain nodded. “It’s unfortunate, but Regis is simply much too dangerous.”

“To make the Empire eternal, I need strength. To that end, I must obtain his wisdom, no matter what it takes.”

“You mustn’t. That’s like setting a whole forest ablaze because you need a light. Mighty as it may be, an uncontrollable power is not necessarily a shortcut to your goal.”

Latrielle fell silent for a moment. “You may be right.”

“Just look at this plan—Grebeauvoir’s civilians were rescued, we’ve captured both the Langobart king and the High Britannian queen, and the enemy has been driven from imperial territory. These are splendid results. At the same time, however, the base on our front line was completely flooded. We are going to need to wait quite some time before it can be put to use once more.”

“Right...”

“The Empire has also been forced to pull its line back to the mountaintop. This is exactly in line with the fourth princess’s policies.”

“I intended to use him, yet he used me. How is that possible?”

“Even if we don’t rely on his magic-like command, our new guns and cannons

are enough for the Belgarian Army to reclaim its glory. More than that, even—the Belgarian Army will soon become a force of unprecedented strength."

"Indeed. My army isn't so weak that it needs him to come out on top."

"More so, we should remove any causes for concern."

"...You're right." Latrielle snatched up the two sheets of paper on the table, tore them to shreds, and then crumpled up the pieces. He gave his next order with all the aggression of a beast baring its fangs. "Kill Regis d'Aurick."

# A History of the Belgarian Empire

## La production de fer 2

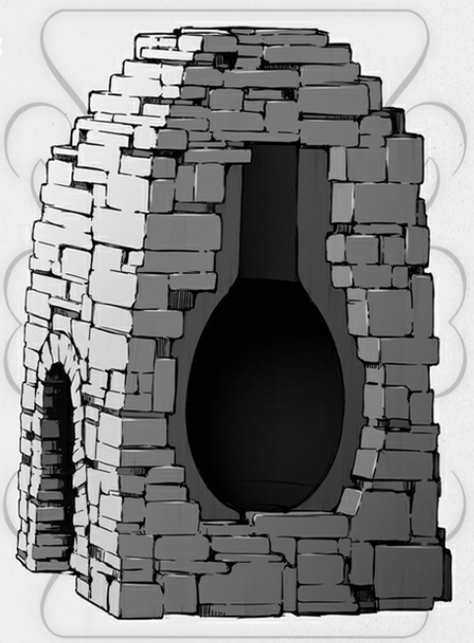
After being extracted from mines, iron oxide goes through a reduction process that strips it of oxygen, leaving behind purer, more refined iron. In the previous volume, it was explained how this process would come to use coke, a derivative of coal created through dry distillation.

In this instance, “dry distillation” refers to the heating of coal in the absence of air, which was achieved using a specialized, airless kiln called a coke furnace. Coal would normally ignite when heated, but due to the lack of oxygen, it is instead distilled of any impurities. This process is known as thermal decomposition.

Coke is harder to burn than coal, which means the furnaces using it need to burn at an even higher temperature, and the combustion reaction from which this extra heat is derived generates more heat when there is more oxygen present. Age-old inventions such as man-powered bellows and waterwheels were unable to provide enough air to achieve the required temperatures, and that is where the steam engine came into play.

Incidentally, steam engines were first invented to drain water from flooded coal mines. The boilers initially used for this purpose could not withstand very high pressures, which made them terribly inefficient—so much so that a large portion of the excavated coal had to be used to fuel them.

It is through the interaction of countless factors that civilization advances, and as the steam engine allowed for more powerful furnaces, it became possible to obtain high-quality iron in much larger quantities. Boilers were made that could withstand greater amounts of pressure, which in turn led to even more efficient steam engines.



The introduction of powerful furnaces meant that molten iron could be produced on a scale never seen before, and this had a tremendous impact on the lives of many. Iron tools were used to cut through forests and made farming a great deal easier, and the population exploded as a result.

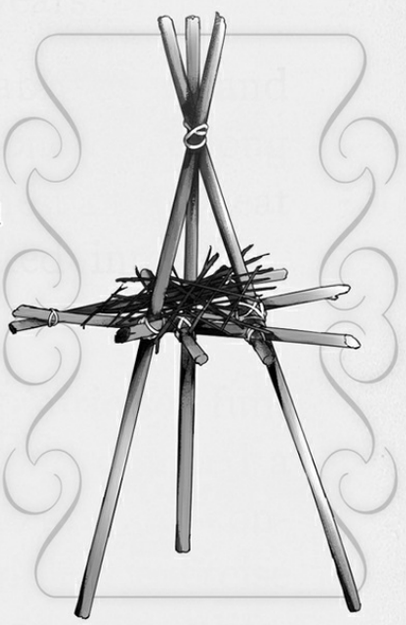
Unfortunately, there was still an issue with iron produced in a blast furnace... (Continued in the next volume.)

## Signal de fumée

Whether to transmit orders to detached units on the battlefield or notify central authorities of aberrations on a distant border, information relay speed has always been crucial. The most reliable method was once to send a messenger on a speedy horse, since this allowed messages to be conveyed without omitting any detail. For simpler reports, however, it was sometimes even quicker to communicate using bells or carrier pigeons. Bugles and drums were used on the battlefield in particular for this reason.

Information could also be sent through smoke signals, a method known as "wolf smoke" in Japan. This name came about soon after the art was learned from China, when word spread that adding wolf feces to the flame would cause the smoke to rise straight up. In Belgaria, the method is instead called "signal de fumée" (which has nothing to do with wolves).

The smoke from smoke signals rises because the flames heat the surrounding air, and hot air has a tendency to float upward. When producing smoke signals, a beacon was first made by stuffing hay into a wooden frame. This hay was then ignited, after which different plants or powders were sometimes added to change the color of the emitted smoke.



A battlefield smoke beacon, as pictured on the right, did not need to be complicated by any means, but more complex beacons were constructed in places like the border where lookouts were expected to be stationed for longer periods. These could be furnished with roofs and chimneys, allowing them to be used in the rain, or set up so that allies could still see the flame at night.

Chains of smoke relay stations made it possible for information to span great distances in a matter of hours—distances that would have taken an army several days to march. The telegraph was only invented sometime after the railroad system, and until that point, beacon towers were humanity's fastest means of communication.

# Afterword Thank you for reading *Altina the Sword Princess X*. This is the author, Yukiya Murasaki.

Now that we've reached the tenth volume, the numeral notation should feel somewhat familiar. Is it a little easier to understand now?

The war between Belgaria and High Britannia is finally over. Both Varden and Langobarti were involved as well, which dragged things out quite a bit. In-universe, it took around three months, but with the third volume having been published in July 2013, it's been over two years for me.

This volume has been a turning point for the series, and the episodes to come should become even denser. There are some things in particular that part of me wants to wrap up. I've always valued scenes that bridge the gaps between events, but they also slow down the story progression. For this volume, I tried skipping a few to focus on the highlights. I can only hope you enjoyed it.

Since the main story zoomed forward, however, I barely had a chance to include any side stories. I'm hoping I can find another opportunity to write them.

I usually write a preview for the next volume, but...Regis is in quite the situation here, and writing about it is easier said than done. What I can say for certain is that the Belgarian Empire has been thrown into turbulence. Regis would describe this war as a perfectly normal act in the course of history. In which case, the next one is going to be quite the historic event, I think. I'll do my best not to leave you hanging.

Now for a little self-promotion— We've now released *Altina*, a gorgeous hardcover book based on the first two volumes of *Altina the Sword Princess,* with a few edits and revisions. I've written close to thirty books over the past three years, and I've decided to use those experiences to tidy up the settings and episodes for the readers. Regis's age has been altered slightly, and perhaps he takes another approach to catch the bandits. A character might even appear before they're supposed to... Only a limited number are being made, so it might

be hard to find, but if you do spot one, why not try flipping through?

The first volume of the manga adaptation, with illustrations by Aomine Tsubasa-sensei and Kagimushi-sensei, is also on sale. Its developments also differ slightly from the novel, and I would be incredibly grateful if you gave it a try.

I'm working on these other series as well: *How NOT to Summon a Demon Lord* (Kodansha) *Isekai Cheat War* (Overlap Novels) *After-School Gamefriend: A Season with You* (MF Bunko) *Kantai Collection KanColle: Zuihou of the Skies and Seas* (Kadokawa Sneaker)

My thanks—

To my illustrator, himesuz-sensei. Your cover this time was even more detailed and wonderful than usual. Thank you!

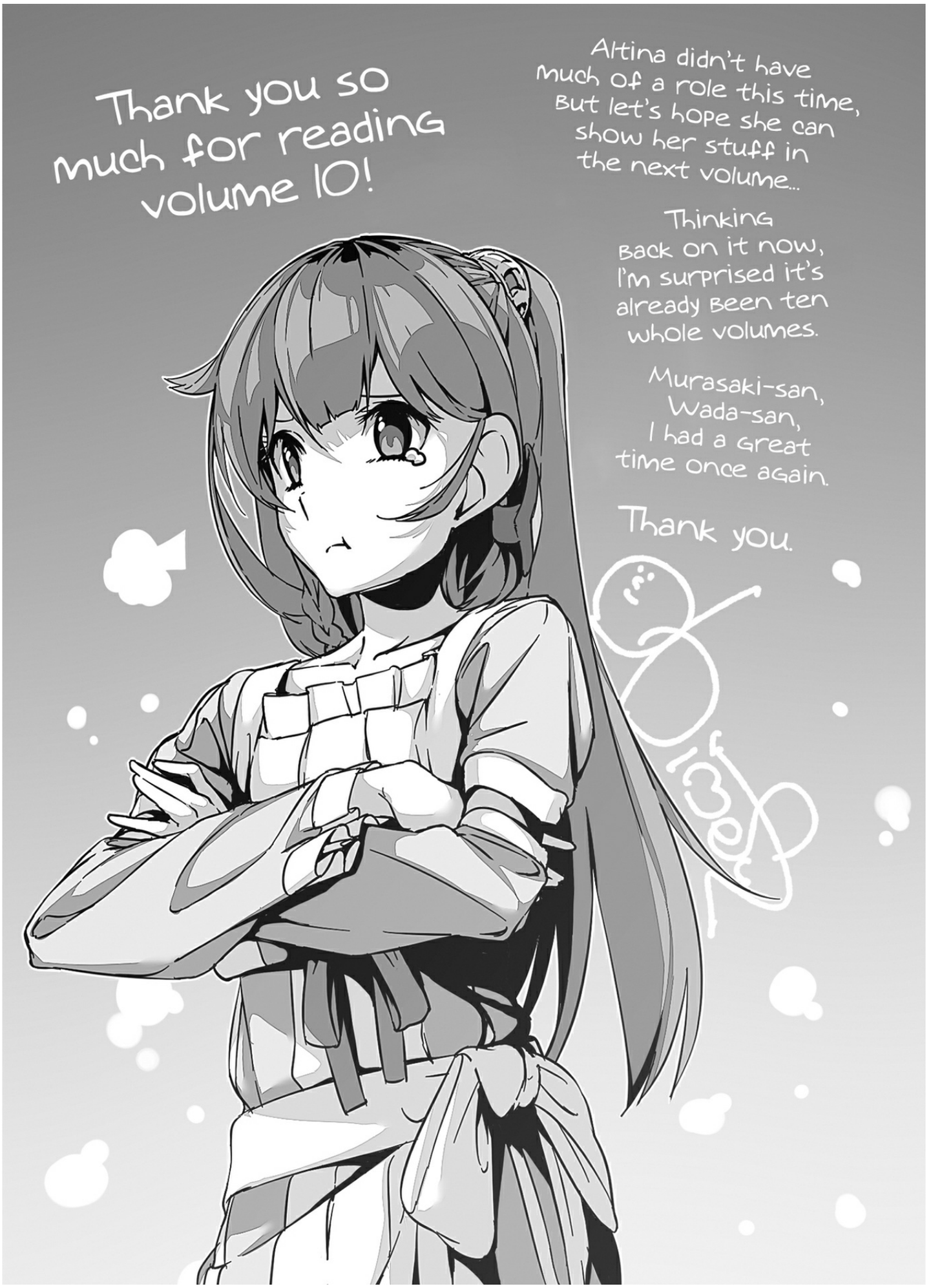
To Yamazaki-sama and Nishino-sama from Afterglow. You're always looking after me, and you have my thanks for that.

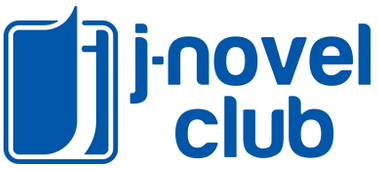
To my editor, Wada-sama. It's thanks to you that this book is finally out. You have my sincere gratitude for all your assistance.

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 10!
Altina didn't have much of a role this time, But let's hope she can show her stuff in the next volume...
Thinking back on it now, I'm surprised it's already been ten whole volumes.
Murasaki-san, Wada-san, I had a great time once again.
Thank you.
Shiba




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Altina the Sword Princess: Volume 10

by Yukiya Murasaki

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HAKEN NO KOUKI ALTINA Vol. 10

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Ebook edition 1.0: August 2021

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# ALTINA
## the Sword Princess