XI

Author: Yukiya Murasaki
Illustrator: himesuz



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the Sword Princess

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Knight Captain
Abidal-Evra
Sword-Wielding Princess
Altina
Fort Garrison Commander
Everard
“I’m going to go speak to Latrielle.”
All those gathered were in a panicked frenzy.
All eyes immediately turned to Altina, who was no longer seated in a daze. She had risen from her seat.


“Wow! This is delicious!”
Renard Pendu Arbalist
Franziska
Bibliophagic Tactician
Regis
“Yes, it’s been a while since I’ve had something this sweet.”
Second Daughter of House Tiraso Laverde
Fanrine
Regis took a bite himself, silently acknowledging that women really did have it rough.


"I see. That *is* quintessential. If you're looking to take inspiration from recent trends..."
"Bastian, this seems like a topic for another time. Didn't you have something important to discuss?"
Heir to the High Britannian Throne
Elize
"Not anything I'm satisfied with yet, mind you... I just can't envision the cool protagonist I'm looking for."
Third Prince of Belgaria
Bastian

ALTINA

the Swor ess





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.



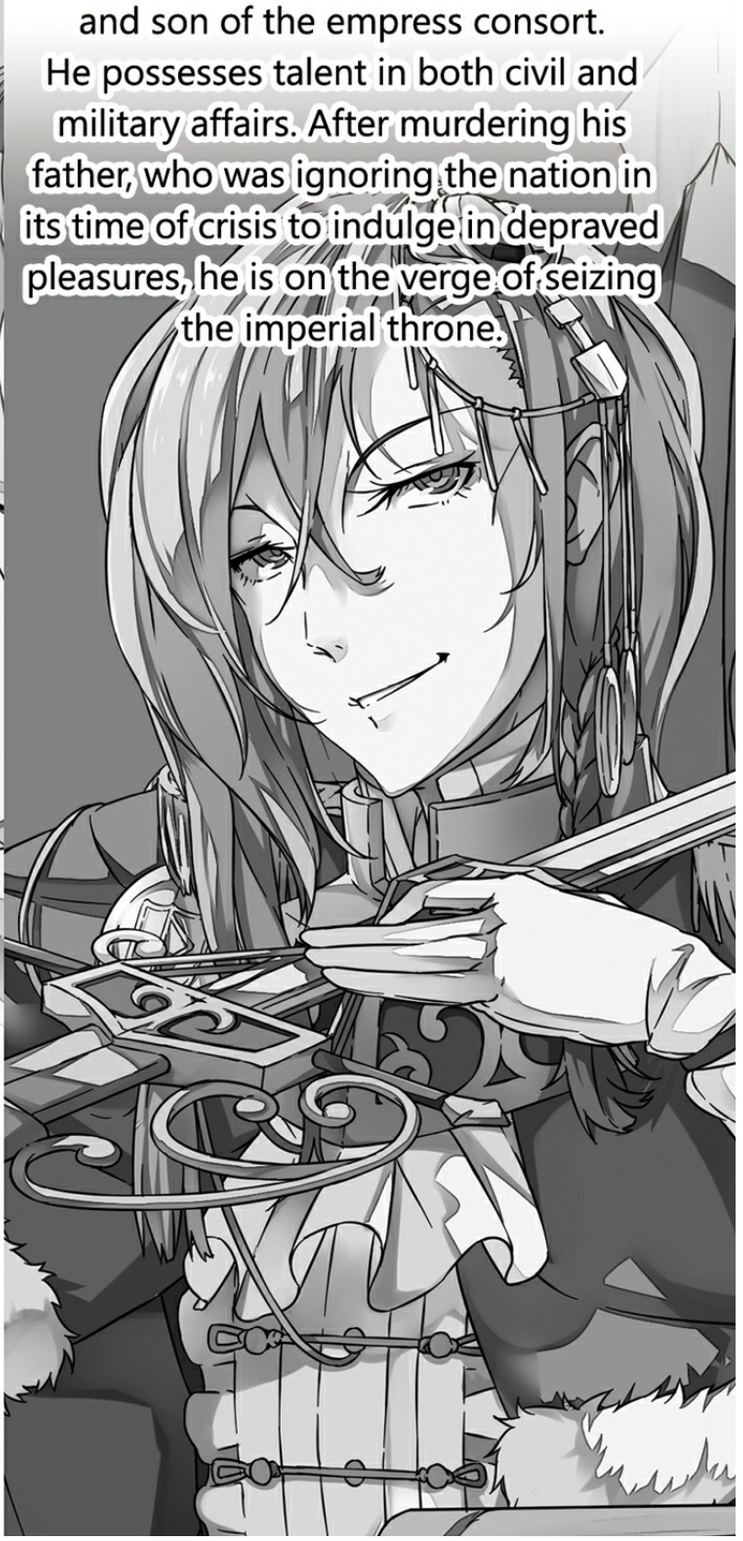


Heinrich Trois Bastian de Belgaria

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.




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

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The story so far—

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.

Conscious of the fourth princess’s achievements, Latrielle invites her to the capital to join the celebration commemorating the founding of the nation. But as the Belgarian Empire shakes under the weight of a vicious power struggle, High Britannia declares an all-out war.

Coinciding with this sudden invasion, the Grand Duchy of Varden launches an attack on Fort Volks. Regis’s scheme sends them running in a single night, however, and a month later, he finds himself assisting the Seventh Army’s retreat in the Battle of La Frenge.

Regis then 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.

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.

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.

Through another of Regis's plans, Third-Grade Combat Officer Varèse manages to infiltrate the captured city. There, he gains the cooperation of a girl named Fel and succeeds in freeing the civilians held captive there.

In the decisive battle, Latrielle entrusted Regis with command of the First Army. The tactician is quickly able to overwhelm the Langobart Army using the knowledge he has gained not just from books, but also from his personal experiences. With a large-scale trap, he floods Grebeauvoir and forces those in the city to surrender.

As the battle reaches its end, the movements of the enemy army suggest its commander has fled. Latrielle personally leads the charge, at last forcing the High Britannian queen into a corner. Oswald, the enemy commander, attempts to recover from his hopeless position with a one-on-one duel, yet he quickly falls to the prince's sword.

The war finally comes to an end, and the Empire is victorious...but Latrielle now knows just how much of a threat Regis's wisdom poses to his reign. It is with this knowledge that he makes a solemn declaration:

"Kill Regis d'Aurick."

The knights of the Empire's First Army draw their swords, but little do they know, another assailant has already appeared before the tactician.

Preface: The Corpse of Regis d'Aurick

Alain Deux Latrielle de Belgaria was surrounded by his imperial guard, all of whom had sworn absolute loyalty to him. They had similarly been there when he had murdered the emperor. Now, having received the order to assassinate Regis d'Aurick, they took up their arms. It was the second prince's adjutant, Germain Laurentiis de Beaumarchais, who had relayed the command, and it was naturally to be kept under complete secrecy. Even within the First Army, they wanted to avoid gathering the attention of any soldiers.

To that end, the imperial guard had only thirty men to work with. It was not a huge number, but they were among the most skilled in the entire Empire; and considering their target was a single tactician who couldn't even swing a sword, that was more than enough. So it should have been.

Most of the staff officers had pitched their tents near the strategic headquarters, as had Latrielle. The tent for Regis d'Aurick, however, was positioned quite a distance away. It was just as estranged as he was.

The way was lined with rows upon rows of the large tents the soldiers shared. They would usually be asleep at this hour, but they had just won a prolonged war; this was a night to toast to their victory. It was dangerous to raise fires near the tents, so their ruckus was contained to their bonfires by the river.

Even so, there should have been sentries.

"What...?" one of the prince's knights muttered. "Not even a single one?"

"Now that you mention it..."

So many of the men had grown lax now that the war was over—perhaps they had abandoned their duties to join the festivities. While this would have been a mere footnote under any other circumstances, those operating in secret paid close attention to even the minor details.

No order was spoken, yet the knights sped up in unison, approaching their target's tent like predators stalking their prey. The surroundings were lit only by

the flickering flames of their torches. Had it been daytime, perhaps the knights would have noticed the many footprints already printed into the earth, but these tracks soon became indistinguishable from their own more numerous ones.

Although the tent was notably smaller than the ones being used by the other staff officers, it was larger than what a third-grade would usually receive. There was enough room inside to house six, though it was used only by the tactician and one female official. Their maids camped out elsewhere.

The knights at the lead exchanged looks and then quietly drew their swords. They would kill not only the target, but also the lady officer, and the maids too if they were present. Once that was done, the tent would promptly be burned to the ground. It mattered not that the tactician had achieved enough to be called “the Savior of the Empire”; in fact, that competency was precisely what made him a threat to their lord. They had to deal with him no matter what.

They stormed into the tent.

“Say your prayers, Regis d’Aurick!”

Despite being on an assassination mission, the men announced their presence —they were knights first and foremost, after all.

The lights inside the tent were already out, meaning it was pitch black aside from the glow of the knights’ torches. They turned their attention to the two simple beds. The blankets were over just one, and the bulge underneath them suggested someone was sleeping there. Were they lying together? It was certainly possible.

One of the knights brandished his sword. “Up on your feet, Tactician!” he ordered.

This was not a display of mercy, nor did the knights intend to allow their target any last words; they simply needed to confirm that the person before them truly was Regis d’Aurick. The last thing they needed was to strike without warning and then discover they had slain the wrong man.

Despite their calls, the person hidden beneath the covers didn’t so much as stir. Considering everything the tactician had endured throughout this war,

perhaps he was just sound asleep.

“Oi, wake him up!”

“Y-Yes, sir!”

The lowest-ranking knight approached the bed. He sallied forth with a particular boldness, yet on the inside he was indescribably nervous, as though he were reaching toward some carnivorous beast. It was rumored that the tactician’s combat skills were worse than those of a child, plus he seldom carried a weapon or even wore armor on the battlefield; killing him would surely be easier than killing a rabbit. However, he had also come to be known as “the Wizard” and “the Monster.” He had brought about many miraculous victories, and just earlier that day he had led the enemy by the nose with his fearsome command. His defenselessness was more questionable than it was reassuring.

The young knight grew more and more hesitant. He felt as though a wall now stood between him and the bed. Sweat dripped from his brow. His mind raced with thoughts that this might be a trap, but he couldn’t turn back now; his compatriots were pressuring him from behind. He urged himself onward and gripped the bedcover with quivering hands. But when he pulled it back...

“Wha—?!”

Beneath the covers was a body soaked with blood. The young knight leaped back so suddenly that his feet tangled, sending him toppling to the ground, while his senior who had given the order watched on in wide-eyed shock.

“What is this?!” the senior knight shouted as he raced over in a flurry. The body was dressed in a green uniform so dark it was close to black—the uniform of the Fourth Army, formerly the Beilschmidt border regiment. Regis d’Aurick was the only one in the First Army who wore it.

This was surely their target, though they could not confirm it, for the head was nowhere to be seen. Blood seeped from the open neck and into the already saturated sheets, some oozing onto the floor. These imperial guards had experienced many battlefields and were well accustomed to the sight of corpses, but they still felt nauseous.

The men were astir. Their order was simply to ensure the tactician's demise—what did it matter if someone else had saved them the trouble? But there were still so many unanswered questions. Who was responsible? Why was the head missing? Did this corpse truly belong to the target?

There hadn't been any sentries posted around the tent, but there were supposed to be several stationed around the army encampment. There had not been reports of any intruders, so was this the work of someone within the unit?

"What about the woman?!"

"Ah!"

Her name, as the young knight recalled, was Fanrine Veronica de Tiraso Laverde. He couldn't imagine why she would have murdered the tactician; she was an inspector from the Ministry of Military Affairs whose house apparently belonged to the fourth princess's faction. It made more sense that she would support him.

But if she was gone, was it possible...?

All of a sudden, one of the knights searching the tent let out a small shriek.

"What is it?!"

"L-Look here!"

The knight tipped over a large water bucket, and out spilled another beheaded corpse. This one was worse for wear—it had no arms, and its torso was so brutally sliced up that it barely maintained its original form. Covering the flesh was an expensive dress understandably drenched with blood. This was presumably the woman in question.

Who would torment the dead in such a fashion? Had someone truly despised this woman so fervently? Perhaps someone else had received an order to assassinate the tactician and decided to take the heads as proof. Either way, the knights were too late, and they were ashamed to have raised such a ruckus.

"Secure the perimeter. We need to inform Beaumarchais."

"What about burning everything?"

"Excuse me?"

“I don’t know who did this, but the results stand. We can just burn down the tent.”

“That...doesn’t change anything.”

“Our prime objective was to assassinate the tactician, and we mustn’t allow any uncouth rumors to spread.” If so many knights were seen surrounding the tent before the adjutant made his decision, it was obvious what the other soldiers would think.

“Why not burn down the tent and then report our findings?” another knight suggested. The others nodded in agreement, considering it a sound idea.

“Right.”

One knight put his torch to a small table nearby, on top of which stood a candlestand. It immediately caught fire, and the blazing red flame quickly moved to the bed and the body resting motionless atop it. In mere moments, everything was ablaze.

The imperial guard watched quietly as the remains on the bed slowly burned away. “To think this is the fate of the man who saved the Empire... It’s somewhat of a pity.”

“We received a report that the plan was a success,” Germain said in a low voice. It was right before daybreak, and the tent he stood inside was dimly lit.

Latrielle let out a long breath. “I...see.”

“Do you feel it was a waste?”

“I...don’t know. Perhaps what I feel now is relief at having buried my most formidable foe. I certainly feel as though I’ve lost something...though I can’t tell whether it was a worthy adversary or a budding talent.”

“Is that so?”

“However, one thing is certain—I must count on you to be my tactician henceforth.”

Germain froze for a moment. “Did I, er...seem jealous to you?”

“I could sense you were anxious. Ever since my eyes began failing me...I get the feeling I’ve grown even more attuned to those unseeable things.”

“My—”

“Fret not,” Latrielle said, his fists clenched. “I’m not foolish enough to lose sight of who I should trust.”

“Y-Yes, sir. My apologies.” Germain spread out a blank sheet of parchment. “Sire, what shall we tell the Fourth Army?”

“Right... I suppose that is necessary.” Latrielle momentarily considered asking Germain to write the correspondence, but it was a depressing and painstaking task, and that was precisely why he needed to do it himself. “‘Due to my glaring inadequacies, we have lost Third-Grade Administrative Officer Regis d’Aurick on the battlefield. I am bereft with sorrow.’”

“I’ll put that down. We’ll send our fastest messenger to the Fourth Army, but what shall we do with his body and belongings? I can’t imagine that much survived the fire...”

“They will receive no special treatment.”

“Very well. So we shall send them to his family.”

“Did he have a wife or children?”

“I’ve heard about him having a sister who married into a house in Rouenne, but nothing more than that. I don’t know whether he had a lover.”

“Hm...”

“Considering his many achievements, one would assume he received at least a few proposals, but our intelligence shows nothing of the sort. He mostly spent his holidays holed up in his room, either working or reading, and whenever—”

“Enough. Send whatever remains to his sister,” Latrielle said curtly. He did not want to hear such personal details about a man he’d ordered to be assassinated.

Germain lowered his head. “Understood.”

So he spent all his time reading? the prince mused. *Is that what reared such a*

unique talent in him?

"He had no schemes in place to prevent his death... That bothers me," Latrielle said. "I don't doubt the loyalty of the imperial guard, but that tactician has thought up plans the likes of which we could never even imagine."

"Certainly. I'll give the order to be wary of any suspicious movement around the camp. We can search the mountains as well and remain on the lookout for anyone who tries to leave the group."

"Good. But we can't reveal that this has to do with our tactician."

"We can make out that some High Britannian captives escaped; it should be possible to threaten them into cooperating. We'll make it so none can leave the camp without permission."

"That sounds feasible enough. Good thinking."

"Thank you. I'll get right to issuing orders," Germain said, offering the prince a bow before swiftly exiting the tent.

Now alone, Latrielle leaned into his chair and watched the ceiling. "He's...dead. Would things have turned out differently had I done better? Once again...I've lost what I wanted most."

He pulled open a nearby drawer and took out a board just the right size to fit in his palm. It was a painting, though it was considerably smaller than one would usually expect. Depicted on the canvas, in a small frame, was a girl with black hair wearing a bandanna. She had on a loose-fitting smock, and in her hands were a slender brush and a palette.

"Beatrice..." Latrielle sighed. "I won't keep you waiting."

Interlude

It was August 6th, eleven days since Latrielle's report announcing Regis's death had been sent to Fort Volks. Eddie was sitting on the grassy plains that crowned the fortress.

"Haah..." Altina stuck her sword in the ground such that it stood upright. "Mm-hmm... When he moves like that, I just need to go and... Heh. Looks like I know what to try next."

"It sure is getting tough..." Eddie sighed.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you know... How should I put this? You're growing into an adult, I guess."

"H-Huh?!"

"You used to be like a bean sprout but look at those bulges!"

"Wh-What?!" Altina inadvertently stepped back, guarding her chest. Eddie didn't back down though; he clenched his fists, looking more determined than ever.

"Now you've got some *real* muscle on you!"

"Huh...? Oh, right."

"Must be around fifteen when girls start changing. I'm feeling more weight in your blows than before."

"I-I know, right? I'm not sure why that came as such a shock. It was coming from *you*, after all."

This man was, to be blunt, an idiot. He was also entirely devoted to Fifth Princess Felicia. The two got along so well that, even with Felicia currently masquerading as First Prince Auguste, strange rumors had started to spread.

"I won't be able to hold back much longer," Eddie went on, completely

oblivious to Altina's fluster. "Letting my guard down during our training sessions is gonna cost me an arm one of these days."

"It's rare to hear a compliment from you."

"It ain't a compliment; it's an appropriate estimation. They call me the Empire's Sword, and I recognize that you've grown strong."

"Hm? Well, I do think I'm doing quite well for myself."

"I guess it's only natural you're improving, considering that you're also sparring with the guy who used to be the Empire's Sword. And the Mercenary King too."

"Gilbert still only uses a wooden sword, though. Everard wouldn't have it any other way."

"I mean, you can't give a prisoner a real weapon."

"Why not? It wouldn't matter so long as I win."

"No, well... Maybe you could, as you are now. Looks like you're not worrying anymore, at least."

"I was worrying?"

"Quite a bit."



“Yeah, I guess...” Altina brushed aside her hair. “During the war, I was pretty much leaving everything to Regis, right? I could only cry when I heard Latrielle was going to become emperor.”

“I can’t blame you. Latrielle’s older, plus he’s got more achievements, backers, and a greater right to the throne. He’s a man, to boot. To be blunt here, you weren’t born the same.”

“Yeah. But Regis said he wouldn’t give up, so I’m not going to either.”

“And so?”

“And so, I got in a tizzy thinking, ‘What am I supposed to do now?’”

“You really are an idiot.”

“Hmph.” Altina puffed out her cheeks in response.

“Matter of fact, Latrielle’s smarter than you too, isn’t he?” Eddie said with a straight face.

“No, he just learned how to sound smarter! When you really listen, he’s always just saying to defeat some enemy or another.”

“Oh, c’mon... I hear he’s put some serious thought into reforming the military. He even summoned politics, finance, and religion specialists to discuss the future.”

“Right, right. So he’s relying on people who are more knowledgeable than he is. The thing is, I can study as hard as I want, but I’m not going to surpass people who are that smart. I’d need another year or two before I reach that point.”

“Hey now, that’s not true. I reckon you could take three years and you still wouldn’t manage it.”

“Y-You might be right, but...I’m studying properly! Anyway, my point is, I think it’s okay to borrow some knowledge for the time being.”

“So you’re going to leave everything to Regis?”

“Hm... I can’t leave *everything* to him, otherwise he’s going to collapse again. I’ll need to hire more people. I’ve already assembled some, for what it’s worth. Whether they’re actually useful, I can’t say; we’ll need to determine that when

Regis gets back.”

“Best to leave admin issues to our only admin officer, I guess.”

“Yep. So I’ve decided to focus on doing what only I can do!” Altina declared, proudly sticking out her chest.

“You mean swordplay?”

“I’m fighting for the sake of peace! If something can be resolved through conversation, I think Regis can handle it. He’ll need me when battle is the only option!”

“Oh, you have a point! Guess you really have put some thought into this, Argentina.”

Altina chuckled to herself, pleased with her decision. “That’s why I’m going to hone my fighting skills—I need to be strong enough when the time comes. And also because, as strange as it might sound coming from me, I want to protect Regis.”

The two shared a wry smile. “Well now,” Eddie said, “I suppose it *is* strange for a lord to put so much work into protecting their vassal.”

“Regis can’t even swing a sword; there’s no way he could protect me.”

“Guess so... Him getting stronger is even less likely than you getting smarter.”

“Which means there’s no need to worry about who’s higher or lower. I’m stronger, so I’ll protect Regis. He’s smarter, so he’ll offer me his wisdom. That should work out for now.”

“I see. And that’s why your hesitation went away.”

“Yep!” Altina nodded.

Eddie gazed up at the sky, a piercing blue with thin strands of white flowing through it. “That Regis guy... I don’t really get him. Does reading a few more books than the average person really make someone that impressive? I don’t know all that much about tactics, but I can tell he’s a genius.”

“I’ve asked him before—how he knows so much, that is.”

“And?”

“He normally dismisses it as nothing special, or says that he just happened to know something... But one time, his answer was a little more interesting.”

“What’s that?” Eddie drew closer, intrigued.

“Mm... What was it...? Right. You know how you gain knowledge by reading a book? If you read other books with that knowledge, you’ll make more discoveries.”

“And? And?”

“There’s more than one way to read something. Say you come across a book that covers information you already know, right? You might assume it has nothing to offer you and completely disregard it. But you could also use the fact you already understand the content to read the book from a completely new angle.”

“I see,” Eddie nodded, clearly not understanding.

“To put it simply, people who read a ton can glean more from a book than those who don’t read as much.”

“Is that how it works?”

“It’s the same with swordplay! There’s no point in practicing a triple thrust if you haven’t even learned how to swing properly.”

“Oh, I see. Like how learning to parry increases your potential to counterattack.”

“Right, right. Knowing how to follow up a leg sweep is pointless if your sweep is too short or slow.”

“I think I’m starting to get it. So he’s not just considering the books individually; he’s reaching a higher level by stacking them on top of one another.”

“Regis said that reading seems deeper and deeper the more you dive into it.”

“Now that you mention it...I get the feeling I understand Gramps’s strength more the stronger I get. Is it something like that?”

“Probably.”

Altina had just recently started to read, though she needed Clarisse to teach her in some regards. To equate her studies to swordplay, it was still too early for her to think about techniques or even practice swings; she first needed to build up basic endurance. Regis had granted them permission to borrow from his personal collection, so Clarisse had advised her to read through a book and then put down her general thoughts on it. That was all there was to it. Those with proper schooling would not have even called it studying.

Even so, Altina moved forward, step by step.

Eddie stood, gripping in his hand the seventh sword of the Empire, the *Défendre Sept*. “Now, how about another match?” he asked.

“You’re on!”

“I won’t lose this time.”

“Keep dreaming! I’m not tired yet!” Altina readied the massive *Grand Tonnerre Quatre* just as a soldier raced up the stairs.

“Your Highness!”

“Yes?”

“There’s an express messenger headed for the fortress! From the capital, I presume!”

“What could it be...?” Altina wondered. “I’ll be right with you.” She was wearing her training armor, but it didn’t seem she had time to change. She leaned her sword against her shoulder while Eddie tucked away his own.

“I’ll come with you.”

✧ ✧ ✧

Altina sat on a raised platform in the fortress audience chamber. Everard had fashioned the room himself, and it was quite crudely put together as a result, but this was well hidden by the ornamented ceiling and the red cloth hanging from the walls. It was just about wide enough to house thirty men.

A strip of red carpet stretched along the floor, on either side of which stood the officers of the Fourth Army. There was Eric, the escort officer; Everard, the captain of the garrison; Abidal-Evra, the leader of the newly formed Flying

Swallow Knights; and Eddie, the battalion commander. Balthazar was also present, despite being something of a freeloader, as were eight others who each led over a thousand men. The black knight Jerome had gone off with Benjamin and Justin, former commanders of the Second Army, to support the eastern front.

The express messenger rushed in and kneeled. “I bear a message from the marshal general,” he said, presenting a letter. Eric walked over, took it from his hand, and then delivered it to Altina. There was no mistaking it was Latrielle’s seal pressed into the wax, and it had been neither torn nor resealed.

Altina broke the wax and spread open the parchment.

Despite our army’s triumph over the enemy forces and our successful recapture of Grebeauvoir, Third-Grade Administrative Officer Regis d’Aurick fell on the battlefield. I am bereft with sorrow.

His remains and belongings were to be delivered to his sister in Rouenne.

Altina’s eyes slipped over the letters once again, unable to fully comprehend their meaning. She was frozen in place like a statue, the paper still in her hands.

Everard approached, noticing that something was awry. “What happened, Princess?”

There came no response.

“Princess?!”

“Huh...?”

“What does the message say?”

“R-Read...”

Everard took the letter she held out to him, and soon enough, he, too, was at a loss for words. “My apologies. I will read it aloud,” he eventually said. As a veteran soldier, he had prepared for the day this news might come. He conveyed the message with a completely sober expression, and soon the entire room was stirred.

“That can’t...! That can’t be!” Eric exclaimed, dropping to his knees. “I don’t believe it!”

“You sure it wasn’t murder?!” cried Abidal-Evra, speaking in a much more condemning tone.

The First Army had laid siege to Grebeauvoir and came out victorious; it was near impossible to believe a tactician would meet his demise under such circumstances. A number of the staff officers were already closing in on the messenger.

“How am I supposed to accept this?!” one man yelled. “Pray tell, what led to the death of our tactician?!”

“I-I don’t quite know either...” the messenger stammered.

Abidal-Evra drew his sword. “Sir Aurick was our nation’s hero! Do you think you’ll depart from here in one piece after telling us he died like a dog?!”

“H-Huh?!”

“Cease this nonsense!” Everard roared, grabbing Abidal-Evra by the shoulder. “All this man has done is drive his horse!”

“We—no, *this entire nation* survives only because of Sir Aurick! This treatment is unacceptable!”

“I understand how you feel, but shedding the blood of an innocent man will change nothing.”

“Princess!” came a shout from among the officers. “What are your thoughts on the matter, Princess?!” All eyes immediately turned to Altina, who was no longer seated in a daze. She had risen from her seat.

“I’m going to go speak to Latrielle.”

“Wha—?!”

All those gathered were in a panicked frenzy—except Everard, who shouted “Wait!” above the commotion.

“Are you going to stop me?” Altina asked.

“Excuse my insolence, but our situation has changed. Regis may have been

deliberately murdered. To meet with the man responsible is suicide!” Everard exclaimed. Back during the festivities, Altina’s reputation hadn’t been too great, and Latrielle had been concerned about saving face. Now, however, there was a high chance the prince would cast aside his honor and shame to eliminate her.

“Yes, I’m aware. I’m not that stupid. But this scrap of paper isn’t enough for me. And more importantly, there’s no way I can believe this. I do not believe that Regis is dead.”

“I share the sentiment.”

“Everard, Eddie, this fortress is yours. Abidal-Evra, how many troops can you move this very instant?”

“Three...no, four thousand.”

“Then we’ll go with that.”

“Yes, ma’am! I shall have them ready to leave tomorrow at dawn—”

“I said ‘this very instant.’ The foot soldiers and supply units can follow behind. The horsemen are taking the lead.”

“R-Right now...?!”

“Our intentions are best displayed through our quickness!” Altina declared, raising her voice. “We need to show them that half-baked excuses mean nothing! I’m sure Latrielle acted for the sake of the nation or whatnot, but that doesn’t mean he can do as he pleases! I need to teach that stupid brother of mine a lesson!”

“U-Understood! At once, then!”

The officers around the poor knight exchanged looks. Departing to the capital without even half a day’s preparation... It would certainly be a strenuous march. To make matters worse, there was a very real chance it might culminate in a battle against the First Army.

The men were choked for words, yet they stepped forward nonetheless. “We have sworn loyalty to Her Highness and are greatly indebted to the tactician! We are prepared, even without preparations!”

“All right!”

Abidal-Evra began giving out detailed instructions. Eric, meanwhile, kneeled before Altina. “I don’t yet know how much use I can be, but please, Princess...take me with you!” he pleaded.

“You might die...” Altina cautioned.

“I don’t care!”

“...Can you promise not to?”

“Eh? Y-Yes. I swear it.”

“Very well, then. You can come.”

“Thank you!”

The Fourth Army moved swiftly. Five hundred horsemen departed from the gate less than an hour after the messenger’s arrival, and before nightfall, four thousand foot soldiers and supply carriers followed. Every soldier taking part had their misgivings over this haphazard campaign.

Chapter 1: Contracts and Mercenaries

Around the time Latrielle had given his order and the tactician's tent had been set ablaze, Regis was walking through the trees one mountain over from the First Army's encampment, his head and limbs naturally still intact. It was almost sunrise, but the range was still steeped in darkness.

"Hah... Hah... So tired..." he wheezed.

"Hurry up, wimp! You've barely walked thirty minutes! And you call yourself a soldier?!"

Franziska was to his right, walking with a crossbow in hand, while Fanrine was to his left, staring daggers at their capturer. Fanrine was also alive; in fact, there wasn't so much as a scratch on her body.

"You're being disrespectful, you are!" Fanrine complained. "Regis participated in a grueling battle just this afternoon. He's worn out!"

"Hah!" Franziska scoffed. "Fighting during the day and fleeing in the night—that's just par for the course! This is why I can't stand nobles."

"Oh dear. I had heard that you're a distinguished brigade, but you run away at night, do you?"

"I really shoulda killed this one! Hey, Sis? Can I? Can I, please?"

Jessica, the girl walking at the head of the pack, answered without even turning back. "What we need right now is Sir Aurick's cooperation. If we want to save our brother, that is."

Regis valued his own life, but the main reason he had reluctantly tagged along was to ensure Fanrine's safety—he had told the mercenaries that he would not cooperate in any way, shape, or form if she was at any point injured.

"Just hear me out here," Franziska said, her lips pursed. "This woman's really ticking me off."

"Do not make me say it again."

“Erk...” Jessica’s cold rebuttal was enough to make Franziska shut her mouth.

“Not that me being here guarantees everything will go smoothly for you...” Regis interjected, casually shrugging his shoulders.

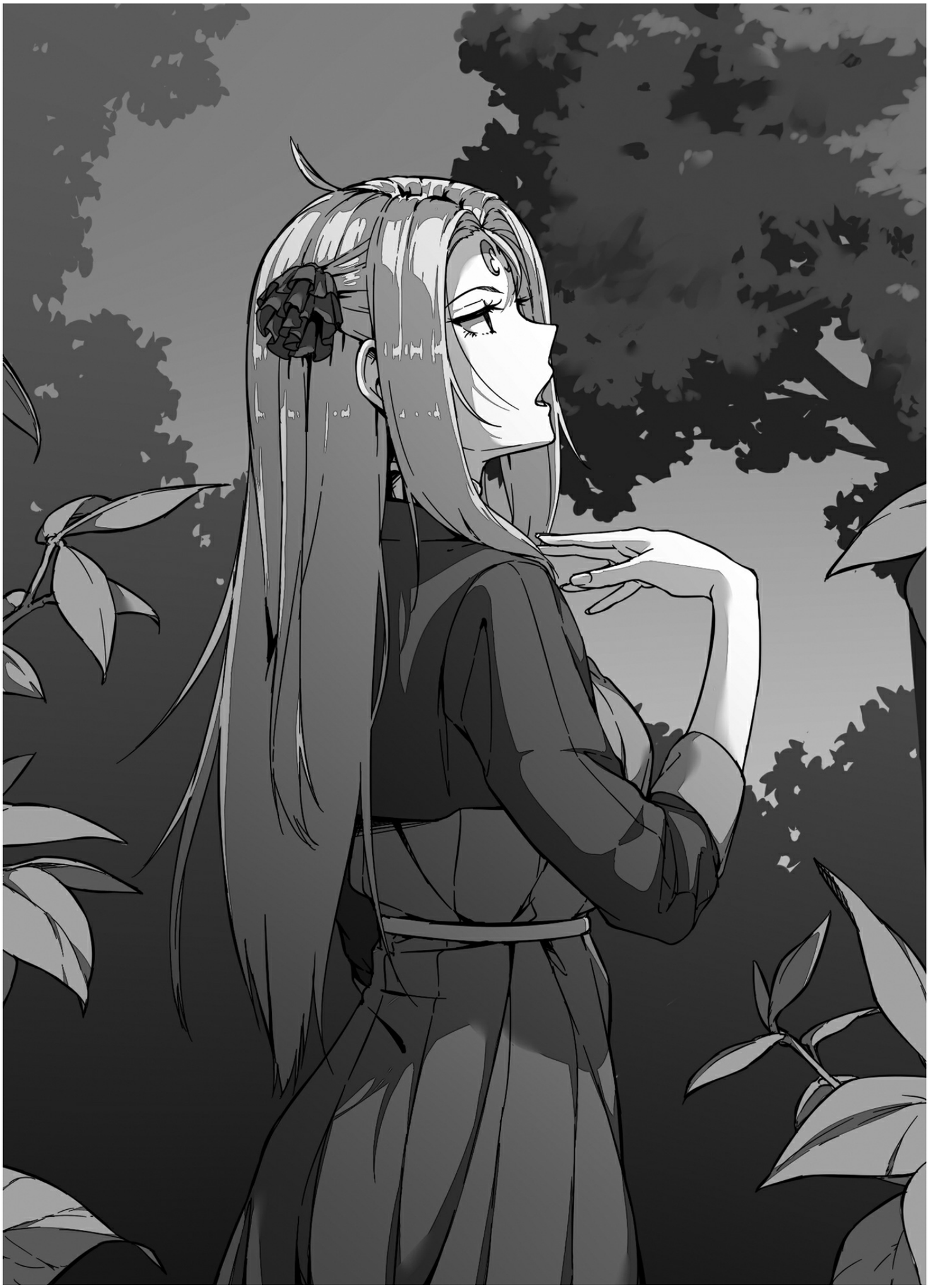
“It will,” Jessica replied. “I assure you.”

“Are you the confident type?”

“If we find ourselves unable to achieve our goal, then we will no longer have a reason to keep you alive. That is why you will cooperate, and why we will succeed.”

“I think you’re overestimating me.”

“I am simply making the best move I can. Such is what the stars have told me...” Jessica muttered, gazing up at the sky.



“I see.” Regis gave an impressed nod, while Fanrine quizzically echoed, “The stars?” from where she stood beside him.

They had hardly run into any sentries since their departure from Regis’s tent; in fact, they had come across so few sentries that it was almost uncanny. At this rate, they would be out of the army’s surveillance net in no time at all.

Regis looked around. Jessica had taken the lead, while Franziska and Fanrine were walking beside him. The men of the brigade, numbering only around six in total, were guarding their surroundings with the utmost caution.

“Isn’t my sis amazing?!” Franziska proclaimed, puffing out her chest. “They call her ‘the Magician,’ you know.”

“What magic did you use to get rid of the lookouts?” Regis asked.

“Bribery,” Jessica replied plainly.

“What a believable magic.”

“Reliable, and quick.”

“I’m not so sure about that. What was stopping them from taking the money and then capturing the fugitives anyway? Doing that would get them twice the rewards.”

“We have scouts who should pick up on any abnormalities.” While she had made the arrangements, it seemed she did not have complete confidence in them. Her methods were basic, but also careful and thorough; it was clear to see why she was the serving tactician of Renard Pendu. “Not to mention...we should have bought ourselves some time.”

“With the headless corpses?” Regis sighed.

The brigade had used the corpses of sentry soldiers as decoys, making it seem as though Regis and Fanrine had both been assassinated—the body used for Fanrine had of course needed to be severely mangled to disguise the dissimilar physique. It was Jessica who had arranged for all of this.

Regis was vehemently against such barbaric tactics, but at the moment, he could at most protect himself and the woman accompanying him. Acting too rebellious would only make the mercenaries more likely to kill him. They could

still use his corpse to negotiate—there were countless literary examples of ransoms being paid for hostages who were already dead.

“Even so,” Fanrine said, her voice pained, “did we really need to do something so inhumane?”

Had it really been necessary? Regis couldn’t say. There was a chance that nobody would have visited his tent until morning anyway, and even when they did notice his arbitrary disappearance, there was no particular reason for them to take issue with it—he had already completed his duty to the First Army by liberating Grebeauvoir.

However, upon taking an objective look at himself, Regis had realized that an attempt would most likely be made on his life. Fanrine and Jessica seemed to agree, with the latter even going on to proclaim, “I see no reason they would ever let you return alive.” That was why they had decided to use body doubles.

“The more we can delay their search, the higher the chance of our escape.”

“I’m not having the easiest time walking like this though...” Regis noted. He had ended up taking a First Army uniform from one of the deceased sentries, and it was at least two sizes too large for him. Fanrine had brought several dresses with her, so she had simply changed into another. Even so, it wouldn’t take much investigation to realize the bodies were just decoys—after all, one wasn’t even the correct sex.

“How many scouts did you send out?” Regis suddenly asked.

“Two.”

“I see...”

Then we haven’t covered all our bases, Regis thought to himself. Modest scout parties were useful in finding large-scale military units, but there was a chance they would overlook small, scattered teams of sentries. In fact, skilled sentries would have purposely hidden from the scouts and then tracked down whatever forces they were scouting for.

Regis didn’t need to wait long before his prediction came true.

“Oi. Halt!”

Imperial troops appeared from the shadows of the trees. They were only lightly armored foot soldiers, but they wore their uniforms crisply, as befitted men of the First Army. There were four in total—three standing in front, and one at the back who was readying not a sword but a whistle. It was clear to see that they were properly trained.

“Jackpot!” The man at the very front had already drawn his weapon, while his colleague beside him gave a nod. It seemed that these imperial soldiers had eluded the brigade’s scouts and headed straight for its main group. “Mercenaries, by the look of it. Identify yourselves! Why have you come from the camp, and where are you going?!”

“I could ask the same of you. You’re not supposed to be stationed here, are you?” Jessica answered nonchalantly. She was incredibly courageous; the surrounding mercenaries and even Franziska wore expressions that were tinged with fear. Regis was just as anxious, but when he turned to his left, he noticed that Fanrine was smiling.

“Y-You’re not scared...?” he whispered, startled.

“Of course I am,” she replied coolly. “But you’re with us, right?”

“Eep.” She had a point though—this really was his time to negotiate. He raised a hand. “Um, may I have a moment?”

The soldier gripping his sword turned to Regis with ample suspicion. “Hmph. So you do have a soldier with you. Where are you going with this strange lot at this hour? State your affiliation.”

“Um... My affiliation is with the Fourth Army, although I am presently accompanying the First.”

The soldiers’ faces turned grim. “Enough nonsense! Why would the fourth princess, a political enemy, lend us her soldiers?! What’s more, the Fourth Army’s made up of nothing but fresh recruits, losers, and hicks!” the leader exclaimed in an overbearing tone. That was certainly one way to put it.

“No, I mean, the commander personally requested my involvement.”

“The commander? The marshal general...?! What insolence!”

Regis scratched his head. The more he spoke, the more enraged the man seemed to become. *What a bother...*

“Insolence?” Fanrine asked as she stepped forward. “Then who might you belong to?”

“What do you want, woman?!”

“I am Fanrine Veronica de Tiraso Laverde, administrative officer of the Ministry of Military Affairs.”

“What?!” The soldier was taken aback by this remark. The Ministry followed a different command structure than the Belgarian Army, so being an administrative officer didn’t necessarily place her at a higher rank; still, it was the organization that decided on promotions and awards, so no soldier wanted to give a bad impression.

Regis took a step closer as Fanrine gestured him over; he then produced a sheet from the bag that was slung over his shoulder. It was the order he had received from Latrielle. “I don’t really want to flaunt this, but...” Just thinking about it did a number on his spirit.

Notice of Appointment

Chevalier Regis d’Aurick,

In honor of your numerous strategic accolades, you have been appointed to the rank of first-grade administrative officer.

Imperial Year 851, July 25th

Alain Deux Latrielle de Belgaria

Commander of the First Army

The soldiers stared at the paper intently. “Huh? Aurick...? No, that can’t be... The distinguished...? The outrageous tactician they say led our army to victory...?”

“My official position was strategic advisor.”

“I-Is this...real...?”

“Hm. I’m going to have to ask you to trust me on that one.”

“Are you saying you don’t believe it?” Fanrine asked, narrowing her eyes at the soldiers. “Now what insolence is this? You have apprehended us out of sheer ignorance; how do you intend to take responsibility once his identity is proven? A rank-and-file soldier impeding a staff officer—do you really think such misconduct will go unpunished?”

“Erk...”

“It would be one thing if we had nothing to prove our identity, but we have shown you a document signed by the marshal general himself. At this point, I am starting to doubt *your* identities and loyalty.”

“Err... We’re foot soldiers of the thirty-sixth infantry,” the leader mustered. He and his troops no longer carried themselves with the confidence they had appeared with.

“And why have you come here?” Jessica asked them again.

The soldiers looked flustered and anxious; Belgaria was strictly patriarchal, so it was rare for a woman to speak down to them like this. And if the man before them truly was Regis d’Aurick, they would receive a heavy censure.

The man standing at the back of the imperial group tucked his whistle into his pouch. “Someone in our unit told us we’d be rewarded if we caught any suspicious people around these parts,” he said, answering the question posed to them.

“For what sum?”

“Well, if we lucked out, he said that he’d write off all our gambling debts.”

They had evidently been sold out. Jessica grimaced for a moment and muttered, “Such a paltry sum. How absurd.”

In any case, it seemed that Regis, Fanrine, and the brigade would survive this encounter.

“My apologies,” Regis began, “but we’re on a special mission. Could you not tell anyone that you ran into us?”

“O-Of course.” The men saluted.

Regis saluted in turn. “Well then. Keep at it.”

“Understood, sir!”

The soldiers turned away, and the pressure that had been weighing on Regis finally started to dissipate. Fanrine appeared to be similarly relieved, as she patted a hand against her chest. Jessica, however, motioned toward the leaving men, while Franziska just as silently aimed her crossbow.

“What are you—?!” Regis inadvertently cried out.

There was a metallic *twang* as Franziska loosed a short bolt. It pierced through the air and into the nape of one man, and it was at this very same instant that the other mercenaries sprang into action.

“Hraaah!”

“Wh-What?!” the lead imperial stammered. “You bastards!”

The soldiers drew their swords and attempted to fight back. However, the mercenaries of Renard Pendu were elites, and the six men chosen for this operation were the crème de la crème. Coupled with them having taken their foes by surprise, even those of the Empire’s First Army were rendered powerless.

One imperial managed to block the first blow, but he was cut down before he had the chance to cry out. “I...trusted...you...” he choked, blood seeping from between his lips as he collapsed to the ground.

Jessica watched the dying man with cold eyes. “It is foolish to leave such things to chance. If trust is pure water, then doubt is filth—it takes but a drop to create an unpalatable slurry.”

“Why?!” Fanrine cried as she watched the bodies pile up. “Why did you kill them?! How could you—?!”

“Remain silent; we do not want any other sentries noticing us. Or do you want even more people to die?”

“That’s not what I...”

Fanrine faltered; Jessica had already pressed onward. The mercenaries compelled Regis to continue walking as well, making it clear that this was no place to stop.

Had they allowed the soldiers to escape and return to their unit, then what? Would they really have kept this meeting secret as Regis had asked them to? Unfortunately, it was not likely—the information would have presumably reached Latrielle in no time at all. The two men serving as their body doubles would have been mutilated for naught.

To make matters worse, had the imperial men made it back to the First Army, they would have most likely revealed the brigade’s escape route. Even on the slim chance that this did not happen, Latrielle would know they were taking a mountain route through the Empire. *I can see the importance of sealing their lips, but...*

Regis sighed. “You didn’t have to kill them.”

“So, that is who you are...” Jessica replied, fixing the tactician with a stare.

“What do you mean?”

“I had heard that you are not very soldier-like, Sir Aurick—that you do not want to kill anyone, not even your enemies. But is that not hypocritical of you? Supporting the fourth princess will inevitably lead to civil war.”

“I simply want to avoid unnecessary deaths.”

“And were those...*unnecessary deaths* to you?”

“They may have been.”

“To risk your life for a mere few you’ve happened across, when your actions will eventually lead to so many more deaths... It is pointless. It is unabashed hypocrisy.”

“I do agree that killing is unavoidable when it is to survive. There are some who maintain that they wouldn’t take a life even when their own is at stake—such people are always in safe positions where they would never have to kill anyway.”

“Then do you believe those soldiers would have kept their word—that they would have pretended they had never seen you? Hilarious. I am surprised you have survived this long with such carelessness.”

“I have no doubt in my mind that they would have reported it.”

“And then what?”

“In fact, I had wanted them to report it—it would have made a good diversion. Prince Latrielle would have moved under the assumption that we were taking this path, and we could have used that against him.”

“It is better for him to think we never left the camp.”

“I don’t know about that. What guarantee do we have that they haven’t seen through the body doubles?”

“We are acting under the assumption that they have.”

“I thought so, given how cautious you are. Then what difference would it have made if the sentries had reported seeing us?”

“Killing them provides added security. There is a chance that those in the encampment have failed to see through the doubles, in which case it is best that we take as many precautionary measures as possible.”

“Is that really true? Rather than heightening our chances of survival, weren’t their deaths just to put your mind at ease? I cannot approve of murder simply to calm someone’s nerves.”

For once, Jessica went silent. She picked up her pace, speeding ahead so that nobody could see her expression before she eventually spoke again. “To us mercenaries in Renard Pendu, there is absolutely no reason to leave *any* Belgarian soldiers alive. We kill any dangers—you included.”

“But you’re mercenaries who aren’t currently in anyone’s employ, right?”

“Yes, and that is precisely why *everyone* is an enemy. If you want to be our ally, then you will need to make a contract.”

“I see. Then I think I’ll do just that.”

“...I do not appreciate your jokes,” Jessica said firmly. “If you value your

safety, I would not attempt one again."

The surrounding mercenaries all wore grim faces, while Franziska took aim with her crossbow. "If you're a strategist, then remember this!" she exclaimed. "We mercenaries put our very lives on the line! Joking about contracts ticks us off even more than the threat of death!"

Regis scratched his head. "That wasn't quite my intention. And you speak as though I'm not risking my own life when I have a crossbow pointed at my face. I detest lies, and I'm terrible at jokes. I'm being sincere when I say that I want to hire you. I mean, you're currently the most reliable force available."

"You are our captive," Jessica interjected, promptly reclaiming the conversation. "We are going to use you *for* negotiation; we have no intention of negotiating *with* you."

"So you want to trade me for the Mercenary King?"

"Yes. And with your achievements, that should be possible. In a sense, I am grateful that you performed so magnificently on this battlefield—it means there was worth in helping you out." As she spoke, a smile began to play on her lips.

"Now that you mention it, your brigade pulling out did play a sizable part in turning the tide of the battle."

"The higher your evaluation, the more valuable you are in a negotiation."

"Are you insinuating that I'm in your debt? But that was also a means to save your brigade, was it not? Had the war continued as it were, you would have found it even harder to withdraw."

"The imperial army was at a numerical disadvantage; it would have struggled in a head-on engagement."

"I had a plan for that."

Jessica had to have been aware that Regis had a plan—she had frequented his study as a maid, and she surely hadn't spent all her time there just changing the sheets. However, it came as no surprise that she refused to speak her true thoughts on the matter. During a negotiation, while it was important to prove one's sincerity, intent could easily be kept a secret. Jessica was uniting the

brigade with her plan—she had to be unfathomable to all others, or at least act the part.

Even so, Regis didn't back down. The mercenaries flashed their swords at him, but he couldn't risk coming across as meek. "The credibility that you lost at Grebeauvoir won't be recovered so easily."

"Oh, really...? Does that have anything to do with you?"

"Of course it does, because I'm bringing it into the negotiations. There were many eyes on that battle, and at the deciding stage of the war, Renard Pendu withdrew from the line. It was a terrible betrayal, and one that many countries saw."

"What is your point?"

"Say that you are able to trade me for the Mercenary King. What are you going to do then?"

There came another pregnant pause as Jessica thought over her next words. "Our brother will think of something."

"Will any country hire such flagrant traitors?"

"You underestimate the strength of Renard Pendu. As long as we reclaim Gilbert, we can always—"

"You were driven from Fort Volks in a single night, and even with the latest guns at your disposal, you were unable to protect the High Britannian supply unit in west La Frenge. And to top it all off, your retreat at Grebeauvoir crumbled your own side's lines while the armies were at a stalemate. Once this notoriety spreads, interest in your services and the prices you can charge for them will both plummet lower than you have ever seen before."

Regis had revealed the bargaining chips at his disposal, earning him a sharp glare from Jessica. "That was all your fault, was it not?" she asked.

"I'm not going to deny it."

Even if she and the others in Renard Pendu claimed that they could win against anyone other than Regis, that would do nothing to repair the brigade's already crumbling reputation.

“I don’t think it’s a bad deal,” Regis said as they proceeded through the trees. “I’m looking for a means to return to Fort Volks, as well as guards to get me there in one piece. Meanwhile, you’ll need a new client once you’ve recovered the Mercenary King. You need an opportunity to restore your reputation, don’t you?”

He awaited a response, but one never came.

Soon enough, daylight began to seep into the forest. Franziska, who had remained silent for quite some time, raised a hand and cried, “There they are!”

The other mercenaries were visibly relieved; it seemed that they had successfully rejoined the main bulk of their brigade. They were situated surprisingly close to the Belgarian camp. Regis couldn’t make out their numbers through all the trees, but based on the information he had gathered before the rescue mission, there should have been seven hundred in total. They weren’t a particularly sizable force, but they were said to be the strongest mercenaries on the continent. They had stood at the center of the enemy’s formation, holding strong and supporting them like a sturdy pillar.

Now that we’re opposing Latrielle, I could really do with a force capable of rivaling the First Army. And for cheap, if possible.

Regis began fiddling with an abacus in his head; the Fourth Army’s finances were in quite a precarious situation. All of a sudden, someone tugged on the sleeve of his military uniform.

“Hm?”

“U-Um... Are we all right now?” Fanrine asked. She seemed far more anxious than when the imperial soldiers had appeared.

Regis offered a bitter smile. “Yes, we’re fine. Rather than using our corpses, it will be far easier and more reliable for them to negotiate with us alive.”

“I...hope so.” She let out a relieved breath.

I doubt they’re going to kill us—at least, not so long as their hostage exchange succeeds, Regis thought. He had his doubts, but he decided to voice only words of reassurance.

✧ ✧ ✧

It was August 10th, fifteen days since Renard Pendu had smuggled its hostages from the Belgarian encampment. The mercenaries had walked through the forests, taking large detours around the mountains to evade the First Army's persistent search efforts, so their journey had taken twice as long as it would have usually taken.

It was a nice clear day. From their position atop the hill, they had a full view of the capital.

"Haaah... Here at last. I can hardly move a muscle..."

"Just a little more, Regis. We can do this," Fanrine said.

"R-Right... And you're perfectly fine?"

"I'm tired, but I really want to wipe down my body and change my clothes." Fanrine looked down at herself. Mountaineering in a dress had proven too much of a struggle, so she was now wearing a pair of hemp trousers.

"I'd much rather be wearing something normal as well."

"Really? I think those clothes suit you."

"They're a bit on the heavy side."

Regis was no longer wearing a First Army uniform; instead, he was dressed as a mercenary. He carried a dagger at his hip and wore only a leather breastplate, since even light armor was too much for him to walk in.

"In that case...I can offer you something lighter," Jessica proposed, evidently having been listening in on their conversation.

"Oh? Do you have civilian clothes?"

"Yes. One can never be too cautious—after all, our lives are forfeit should the imperial army find you." At that remark, her lips curled into a sinister smile. Regis could feel his own expression stiffen in response.

✧ ✧ ✧

The Belgarian capital of Verseilles was a massive trade center, frequented by merchants and the mercenaries hired to guard them. Having all seven hundred

members of Renard Pendu roaming about the city would have drawn too much attention, so most had decided to set up camp on the outskirts, but Regis and a select few were able to enter with relative ease.

Regis was walking down the main road with Fanrine to his left. Jessica and Franziska were to his right, the latter having concealed her weapon in a leather bag. Three mercenaries had taken the lead while another three followed along behind, but both groups were far enough away that conversation would not reach them. As it were, no third party would assume that Regis and the others were being accompanied; had they been closer together, however, passersby would have recognized them as notable figures of sorts.

If anyone noticed that Regis was in Verseilles, Latrielle would likely send soldiers after him. The capital was dangerous—the last thing he needed was to be spotted—but it was a necessary risk.

“I need to do this. I get that, but...this is a bit...”

He looked down at what he was wearing and sighed.

✧ ✧ ✧

Two hours prior—

Jessica shook her head. “You wish to enter the capital, Sir Aurick? I must decline. There is no reason for us to take you; we are merely stopping here to resupply before we head to Fort Volks.”

“I know we’ve already spoken about this, but it’s important to consider what comes after you reclaim your king. You didn’t give me an answer before, but haven’t you already come to a conclusion?”

Jessica silently tried to intimidate him with a glare, but Regis took it head-on. He would have winced not too long ago, but for better or worse, he could feel that he had grown thicker skin.

The mercenaries had set up camp on a hill overlooking the capital, though they didn’t have any tents. They had merely put together impromptu stoves and had been just a little more thorough than usual in removing the pebbles from where they planned to sleep. Under a bower a short distance away, Regis

was speaking with Jessica alone; they had asked Fanrine and Franziska to give them some space.

“I... You see... I’m pretty sure Prince Latrielle is after my life. I don’t know how he planned to go about it, but what I do know is that you saved me. I feel indebted to you, and I won’t treat you poorly.”

“So you want me to trust you?” Jessica asked.

“I do.”

“You must be joking. No one in their right mind would jump at a proposal from a captive.”

Regis offered a wry smile. “There are plenty of stories that prove the contrary. I could regale you with them all the way to Fort Volks, and I still wouldn’t be done—taking my visit to the capital into consideration too, of course.”

Jessica grimaced. “I refuse to place my faith in made-up stories.”

“But don’t you rely on them already?”

“...I have no idea what you are talking about.”

“In order for the mercenaries to completely trust in your plans, you call all your conjecture ‘the guidance of the stars.’ Even when the situation is unclear, you act as though you have some greater insight that you simply refuse to disclose.”

“How rude.”

“I’m trying to show some consideration here,” Regis said, seeing as there shouldn’t have been anyone in earshot.

Jessica hung her head. “It matters not what anyone tells them; the mercenaries will believe me. But with you...I am not so sure. After they have battled against you...perhaps you might be able to convince a few. And perhaps some might come to doubt me.”

“I think you overestimate me. Then again, maybe that works in my favor.”

“I do find it ridiculous, but these men and women need a magician. The church has turned its back on all mercenaries; they need some other kind of

paranormal assurance so that they can fight with confidence."

"I get it."

Jessica fixed the tactician with a cold glare. "I really should have just killed you."

"L-Let's not be hasty now. Renard Pendu's might is only fully exhibited under your competent command. I'm not going to do anything that would weaken the mercenary brigade I'm trying to ally with. Please calm down."

"You are a terrible person under that blasé face of yours, Sir Aurick. You call it negotiation, but what you are doing right now is blackmail. To think I would be threatened by a captive..."

"No, no. This *is* negotiation. The right to choose ultimately lies with you...though I believe the conditions I've presented are favorable enough that you have no reason to refuse."

"Allying with the Fourth Army...? There is hardly any money to be made there."

Regis scratched his head. "You could tell, huh?"

"Naturally. I have done my due diligence."

Regis gave a gentle smile. "Then how about something that isn't money? I doubt you've heard this one before."

"Just say it already," Jessica replied, looking thoroughly put off. "What are you plotting?"

"If your brigade assists Princess Argentina, when the time comes that she rules the Belgarian Empire, we shall grant you territory and recognize you as a nation in the name of the empress. Not a vassal state or an autonomous zone, but a nation of equal standing."

"I see... So you take me for a fool. I care not how much trust the princess places in you; she would never grant you so much authority. You expect us to dance for you over an empty promise?"

"Not at all. This is what the princess told the Mercenary King. I was summoned to the capital before the discussion reached its conclusion, but he

seemed quite up for it. If you think I'm lying, then you can just ask the man himself."

Jessica widened her eyes in disbelief. "Her Highness will give Gilbert...a-a country for Renard Pendu...?" she murmured, actually appearing to consider the idea.

"You really are alike."

"Pardon?"

"The Mercenary King made the same face when we discussed this with him."

Jessica's cheeks reddened, perhaps out of embarrassment. She hung her head and mulled things over for a moment before speaking again. "That is indeed an extraordinary reward... Regardless of our brigade's military exploits, we could never hope to raise a nation ourselves. But with the Empire recognizing us... No, this can hardly be called realistic. Given imperial custom, once Latrielle takes the throne, Argentina will lose her inheritance rights. Even if she defeats him through armed might, she will only be seen as a false emperor."

"Right."

"And Latrielle is to be enthroned in three days."

The scouts they had sent ahead had reported that the capital was preparing for the ceremony. This was common knowledge among the populace—there were large billboards in town, and the weekly newspaper had put out an extra.

Regis folded his arms. "Yeah... It might culminate in an armed conflict, but I'd like to avoid that if possible. I don't intend to take the Empire by force."

"You mean for Latrielle to concede...?"

"That would be ideal."

"Impossible. He has the makings of a king. The stars themselves tell me his body and soul were forged in the intense flames of war. No, I need not phrase it like that...not around you, at least."

"I actually quite like your character."

Jessica averted her gaze; she appeared to be sulking. "Well, doing it in front of

someone who recognizes it as an act is... embarrassing.” Her profile, as well as the way she was pursing her lips, made her closely resemble her sister Franziska. They were siblings, after all.

Regis had to stifle a laugh. “Given Latrielle’s speech and conduct, he is fixated on maintaining the throne and wishes to bring about an age of military conquest—is that what you think?”

“...Yes.”

“I agree.” He deeply nodded.

Jessica sighed. “I, for one, despise the act that *you* put on.”

“Huh? What are you talking about?”

Is this revenge for my saying she was playing a character?

“Sir Aurick, you postpone revealing all the important details. I am no fool—I have already managed to piece most of your argument together. Rather than voicing an opinion directly, you speak in small hints so as to make your listener discover your viewpoint for themselves. Could you not do that around me?”

“Well, you’ve got me there... I’m not doing it intentionally.”

“Hmph.” Jessica turned away. She seemed to hate Regis quite a bit, but she was rational—she knew well that this was a necessary conversation. “I have not yet been able to pin it down, but given your confidence, I assume Prince Latrielle has some kind of chink in his armor—one big enough that he would voluntarily relinquish the throne if you targeted it.”

“That’s what I’m counting on. It won’t be easy, though.”

“There is no value in having Latrielle abdicate, even immediately after he becomes emperor—Argentina will still lose her right to the throne.”

“Yeah.”

“So will you put a stop to his coronation?”

“No, I... Ah, right. You asked me to be more direct. Allow me to give a proper explanation, then. I can’t give you specifics until you promise to cooperate with me, but to speak more generally, it is just as you’ve surmised: Prince Latrielle is

hiding a dark secret. The issue is, I do not yet have any definitive evidence—that is why I need to go to the capital. If we can prove he really did commit the sin, it is heavy enough to nullify his enthronement."

Jessica narrowed her eyes. "The only chink that large would be... Yes... Was he truly responsible?" There was no denying that she was a clever woman—she had already surmised the truth from their conversation. Her lip began to quiver; the sin in question was grave enough to fluster even a foreign mercenary.

Regis responded only with a nod.

Jessica gazed up at the heavens—perhaps it was something she was used to doing whenever she contemplated a matter. Her eyes traced the noon sky, searching out stars that were impossible to see. "Then...it may be possible."

"How about it, then? Will Renard Pendu sign a contract with the Fourth Army?"

She lowered her eyes back to Regis. "No. I refuse."

"Ah. How unfortunate."

They had a chance at victory, but it would require them to oppose the new emperor of Belgaria. It was easier to imagine the losses upon their defeat than it was to picture the reward upon triumph—that much was natural.

Regis placed a hand on his forehead and groaned; being unable to go into the capital meant he would need to rethink his plans, but his alternatives were painfully limited. "This is troublesome," he said plainly. "What if we put all matters of mercenaries and contracts aside? Would you allow me to stop by the capital...?"

"Do you not understand, Sir Aurick? You are either already considered dead, or there are assassins out to end your life—there is nowhere at all for you to run on the streets of Verseilles."

"I understand that—I mean, I can't even ride a horse. But this is something I can't avoid, no matter how dangerous it may be. I made a promise."

"A promise...?"

"To the princess. A promise to change the Empire."

It wasn’t enough to clear away the falling shower of sparks—unless he jumped into the flames himself, it would be impossible to change their situation.

Jessica’s eyes remained locked on Regis. “I see...” she replied. “Tell me one thing.”

“Yes?”

“Why go to such lengths to back Argentina?”

“She’s the one who best embodies my ideals.”

“Yes, I heard that you prioritize ideals over your own life.”

“I do.”

Latrielle had sought Regis out as a tactician, but Regis had ultimately refused, unable to bear the prince’s militarism. As a result, he had lost his chance at a promotion that would have been unprecedented for a commoner—and as if that weren’t bad enough, his life was now in danger.

“You are using the princess to actualize your ideal of pacifism,” Jessica commented.

“Using her? Well, I can see why you might interpret things that way... I view it more as the two of us putting our strengths together for a shared goal.”

“And what would you do if someone more suitable than Princess Argentina came along—someone who could better help you achieve your ideals? Say Prince Latrielle decided to walk the path of a pacifist—would you toss aside the princess and turn coat?”

“In that case, the three of us could work together.”

“Say his one condition is for you to serve under him.”

“I see... I’ve never considered that. I think it a bit outlandish, but I don’t hate the thought experiment. If my staying in the capital would bring us closer to the princess’s ideal, I would not even hesitate.”

“Are you serious? You would throw away your own life for an ideal...?”

“I’ve been betting on it from the start.”

When Regis imagined parting with Altina to serve the emperor, he felt a peculiar pain in his chest—one that he couldn't quite explain. It was similar to what he had felt when his sister had married and left the house, but even heavier. It was an emotion he had never experienced before; in fact, he hadn't felt it even as he said his farewells to the Fourth Army and headed to the capital alone.

Regis shrugged. "Perhaps I'll feel...lonely. I don't really understand it. This might be a sense of loss, but I can't say for sure."

"And you are all right with that?"

"As long as it brings us closer to our ideal. And as long as I have my books, I'll manage just fine. That's just the sort of man I am," Regis said with a chuckle. He wasn't speaking any deliberate untruths, but he wasn't quite so confident in his assertion either. On the whole, he was terrible when it came to answering questions about himself—it wasn't as though there were any books about his own personal feelings that he could draw from.

Jessica lowered her eyes. "At times, it seems as if you see through everything like God above. At other times, you are as ignorant as a child."

"A-A child, eh?"

"It is rare to find someone so disinterested in themselves. Most people would put their own lives and interests first."

"I'm just a boring commoner with no redeeming qualities. Why focus on myself when there are so many far more interesting stories to be read?"

"You are a weirdo."

"Urp."

She had certainly been blunt in her evaluation.

"When I turned down the contract," Jessica said, "I was referring to a contract between Renard Pendu and the Fourth Army. I cannot decide the future of our brigade on my own."

"I see. Then do you have another idea?"

"Perhaps... If not with the brigade, then maybe you could make a contract

with me personally.”

“Really?!”

“You were right when you said we will endure our share of troubles once we regain our brother. It is not a bad idea to have the Empire in our debt.”

“I see. By forming a personal connection with me, you can draw out my support once the brigade starts anew. Even with your leader back, you don’t have any footholds to regain your standing...but to receive funding from the imperial army in your time of need would be magical, to say the least.”

“It will raise morale—that is the important part.”

“I agree.”

Jessica gave a smile that made her seem like one of the demons the scripture spoke of. “Do you think I am a bad woman?” she asked.

“I’ve already given you my opinion—I like the character you play. If you were acting out of self-interest, you could have easily become the consort of some prominent lord. The reason you haven’t chosen this path is because you care about the brigade and your siblings, correct?”

She swallowed her breath. “What...are you talking about...? I am a mercenary. How could I possibly deal with nobles...?”

“Any provincial lord would jump at the chance to form a familial relationship with the strongest mercenaries on the continent; in fact, I’m sure you’ve received a proposal or two already. You are quite pretty, after all.”

Regis had carelessly brought up a woman’s appearance. Jessica’s eyes sharpened. “I am a mercenary,” she said. “I may sell my might, but never my body.”

“Th-That wasn’t what I meant! Not at all!” Regis exclaimed, completely dismayed. He had recently gotten to thinking that he had fostered some degree of composure and was no longer thrown off by such minor things, but perhaps he had just imagined it.

Jessica took a step back. “You men are all like that...”

“No, no... Well, I’m sure being attractive comes with its share of problems,

but please don't misunderstand—I am completely uninterested."

"I get that a lot."

"No matter the era, your average soldier spends his days off partaking in ale, gambling, and women. That's not just true in stories either—I know quite a few men who are actually like that. Me personally, though? If I had the time and money, I'd shop for books instead. I'd much rather be immersed in my reading."

"Are you being serious...?"

"As serious as can be! Those soldiers just haven't been introduced to the joys of reading! I find books far more wonderful than all those other forms of entertainment."

Jessica gave a wry smile; then, for once, she actually laughed. "You really are a weirdo."

"I get *that* a lot..."

"I also enjoy reading."

"I knew it! Have you read anything lately? Ah, and are you only referring to books on tactics and finance?"

"I will read anything—it is already rare enough to come across a book on the battlefield. The last one I read was, as I recall, *The Crescent Knight*. Do you know it?"

"Oh, by Baron Vigeville!"

"That may have been the author, now that you mention it. One does not see many books in which a female knight plays such a large role."

"I know, right? That was a nice one. I was on the edge of my seat in that duel with her brother's sworn foe. That said, the baron went back to his usual pattern, and at the end—"

"Stop!"

"Hm?"

"*Ahem*... I have not yet reached the end."

"Ah, sorry!"

“Good grief... This is your fault—you know that, right?” Her tone had softened up quite a bit compared to her previous tenseness. Perhaps Jessica was her true self when she spoke about books, but otherwise played the part of a hard-to-approach beauty.

“‘My fault’?” Regis asked.

“Precisely. I was reading in my tent on the night a certain someone attacked us under a veil of manifested fog. We had to discard most of our belongings to escape, and my book was no exception. Whether it has been burned, discarded, or sold off...it is not coming back.”

Regis thought back to the Battle of La Frenge, when the Fourth Army fought against Renard Pendu and the High Britannian supply unit they were guarding. The fog had rendered the enemy’s long-range rifles and cannons powerless, allowing the Belgarians to drive back their opponents.

And, as it turned out, Jessica had been enjoying *The Crescent Knight* at the time.

“Urgh... I see. I’ve done something unforgivable...” Regis murmured, his shoulders slumped. He could feel the tears welling up in his eyes.

“Eh?! Why are you crying?!” Jessica asked, unable to mask her panic. “That was the battlefield, so...I was just a little frustrated, is all.”

“I would have cried in your position. To have my book taken from me halfway through the story, and then being unable to read the rest! How terrible! That’s practically hell.”

“The issue was not... Well, fine. Whatever. I can just buy it again some other day. And you’ll be paying handsomely enough for that, correct?”

Regis wiped his eyes. “Yes, of course. Then I’ll be counting on your personal cooperation for the time being.”

“Right. I will cooperate with you until we have our brother back. As for our reward, how about enough funds and equipment for our brigade’s next job?”

“I promise that they’ll be as well-supplied as the soldiers of the Fourth Army.”

“As standing soldiers? I certainly take no issue with lavish clients,” Jessica

said. She held out her right hand to Regis, and the two exchanged a firm handshake.

“It’s a pleasure to be working with you.”

Chapter 2: Lady Regis

As Regis was busy complaining about his leather armor and dagger being too heavy, Jessica came to him with a proposition: “In that case...I can offer you something lighter.”

“Oh? Do you have commoner clothes?”

“Yes. One can never be too cautious—after all, our lives are forfeit should the imperial army find you,” she replied with a devilish grin.

The civilian clothes she brought out were definitely lighter than leather armor and far more inconspicuous—neither too lowbrow nor too high-class. The craftsmanship was remarkable too; in these, Regis would look right at home walking the streets of Verseilles, and the chances of any soldiers recognizing him would be extremely low.

Even so, Regis made no effort to hide his distaste. “In a sense, this is perfect...but there seems to be one major thing that you’re overlooking.”

“And what might that be? I was certain that I got the right size.” Jessica answered in her usual level tone, but she was clearly concealing her amusement.

Regis pointed at the clothing. “This is a dress!”

“Aha ha ha ha!” Franziska relentlessly burst into laughter. Jessica seemed to be nearing her breaking point too—her voice trembled as she offered a perfectly sound opinion.

“Pfft... But if you wear this, you can move about completely undetected... Aha...”

“I’m a man...”

“And the last thing they will expect is for you to be cross-dressing.”

“Please, be serious here.”

“Oh, Sir Aurick... Do you truly value dignity over your ideals?”

“Erk... Is that really the problem here?!”

“I see no others.”

Regis folded his arms in thought. “No, but... Hmm... You only ever see cross-dressing from drunkards and in comedy shows...”

“Which is precisely why this is such a good idea. Worry not—your face is rather adequate, so a little makeup should do the job. You also have very slender limbs.”

“That doesn’t make me happy at all.”

“You are risking your life for your ideals, are you not?”

“U-Urgh... Fine...” Regis conceded, raising the white flag. The very moment he did, however, he was approached by Fanrine, who had been silently listening up until that point. There was a concerning sparkle in her eyes.

“Regis! You simply must leave the makeup to me!”

“Huh? Aren’t you going to be disillusioned, seeing a man like me dressed as a woman...?”

“Not at all! In fact, I’ve thought that you’d look wonderful in a dress ever since we first met!”

“Glad to hear it...”

“Makeup skills are part of the repertoire of any noblewoman worth her salt, and I’ve been learning from specialists ever since I can remember. I’ll make you into a lady so beautiful that she turns the head of any gentleman!”

“No, no, no!” Regis cried. “Please, at least let me go unnoticed!” Much to his dismay, however, it seemed that his pleas fell on deaf ears.

Franziska began spreading out her tool kit. “Well, cross-dressing and whatnot... In short, it’s a disguise. Remember how we dressed as maids to slip into the imperial army?”

“Oh, now that you mention it—you did a splendid job. I hadn’t suspected you in the slightest.”

“Right?! Eh heh!”

“I noticed your strong Germanian accent, but we’ve contested land so many times in the past that I thought it only natural. I’m not sure the same logic would hold water in an island nation like High Britannia, though...”

The girls’ position as maids had certainly contributed toward Regis’s lack of suspicion. Servant jobs were most commonly taken by those swept in from foreign lands rather than pureblooded Belgarians—so much so that hardly anyone even stopped to think about the inflections of a maid.

Franziska looked at him doubtfully. “I-Is my accent that noticeable?” she asked. “This sounds pretty normal, right?”

“Hurry up,” Jessica interrupted, urging them onward. “We are not here to sightsee.”

“Yes, let’s start at once!” Fanrine declared. She seemed unusually motivated, and as she carried out her work, Franziska would weigh in on this and that. It wasn’t long before Jessica joined the fray, and the next thing Regis knew...he had become their plaything.

✧ ✧ ✧

Regis walked down the festive streets of the capital, where celebratory decorations were strung up all around. They had won a war against a neighboring country, liberated Grebeauvoir, and captured the enemy’s queen. Latrielle’s coronation would soon be upon them, and the people of the Empire looked forward to his rule—to the introduction of a young, strong, and wise emperor—with great anticipation.

Scattered about were stalls, decorative flowers, and minstrels playing their instruments. Many had come to see the ceremony, so business was booming. The whole city was even more lively than usual.

As Regis walked these streets, he looked down at himself and sighed.

“I need to do this. I get that, but...this is a bit...”

“You look lovely, Regi— Regina.” Fanrine corrected herself with a smile. “You look very cute.”

There was no point in him using a disguise if everyone continued using his real

name, so he was now going by “Regina.” Their cover story was that he, Fanrine, Jessica, and Franziska were all wandering the capital as friends. He understood that the disguise made it safer, but...

“It really gets me down when you say I look good in this,” Regis said, slumping forward. Franziska gave him a hefty slap on the back in response.

“It just goes to show how skilled we are! You’re pretty cute, but not as cute as me!”

“Ow... In any case, I’m grateful that we can walk the streets safely, if nothing else.”

“We can only hope it does not become a habit,” Jessica noted, looking as nonchalant as usual.

“Please, give me a break.”

It was certainly lighter than his leather armor, but his legs kept getting caught on the skirt, and he was struggling to ignore how breezy it was down below. The amount of skin exposed around his neck was also rather unsettling to him.

“So, where are we going?” Jessica asked.

“I know someone who’s quite well-informed. We’ll start from there.”

“You have an intelligence network so far away from your base of operations? Nicely done.”

“I really don’t mean to disappoint, but I’m nothing special; I just happen to know some incredible people.”

“I see... Then I will procure our supplies.”

They were leading seven hundred people to Fort Volks, and while there were a few towns situated along the way, they were better off procuring as much food and as many tents as possible. Horses and carriages were also desirable, assuming they could get them for a reasonable price. Renard Pendu was a legion of elites, but only Jessica excelled in negotiation.

Franziska’s face clouded over. “You sure you don’t need me with you?” she asked.

“I have guards,” Jessica replied. “That should be enough. I do not intend to attempt any reckless trades while in the base of our pursuers.”

“Take care, Sis.”

“You are going to be more at risk than I am...”

“Yeah, but I’ll make sure Au— *Regina* doesn’t outmaneuver me. The instant he tries to run away, I’ll shoot him down.”

What a precarious conversation... Regis mused. *I’m also starting to think this fake name was a pointless addition.*

It seemed that Jessica felt much the same. “Take care not to carelessly reveal a particular someone’s identity,” she said.

“O-Of course! I’m too smart to make a mistake like that!” Franziska declared, confidently sticking out her chest.

“You are much too loud...” Jessica said, and with that remark, she headed for the street lined with trading firms. Three mercenaries went along after her, maintaining a good distance.

✧ ✧ ✧

After seeing off Jessica, Regis pointed down the main road. “All right, then. On to Mrs. Carol’s bookstore—”

“Regina!” Fanrine suddenly took him by the hand.

“Huh?”

She glanced to the side, a stiff expression on her face. Regis followed her gaze to see that two imperial soldiers were approaching them.

Franziska reached her hand into the bag where she kept her crossbow, looking as carefree as could be even as her finger gripped the trigger. She was surely accustomed to these situations. Regis had seen his fair share of plays, and even he was impressed by her acting.

With a sociable smile on her face, Franziska greeted the soldiers. “What’s up, boys? Did you need something from us?”

“Oh, not you... I want a better look at...” The soldier who answered turned his

attention to Regis.

I'm not cut out to be an actor—that was what Regis believed from the depths of his heart. He had broken into a heavy sweat, his breath kept catching in his throat, and his eyes were wandering all over the place.

"Ah... Err..."

Fanrine stepped out in front. "Pardon me, gentlemen. Have we done anything to rub you the wrong way? My friend here can be a little unusual."

"Hm... Can you look up for me?" the soldier asked, still focused on Regis.

"Umm... W-Well, you see... She's not very accustomed to dealing with men."

The soldiers broke into warm smiles. "Ah, just as I thought! That was the feeling I got from the moment we locked eyes. You rarely find ladies so pure these days."

"We're from the capital garrison," the other man explained. "We're standing soldiers."

What...? Regis failed to grasp what that was supposed to mean.

"She's no good with things like this!" Franziska interjected.

"Even better! C'mon, let's talk a bit."

The soldiers pushed Franziska out of the way and closed in on Regis. Fanrine attempted to intervene next, but she, too, was brushed aside. Had two lone soldiers approached him on the battlefield, Regis wouldn't have even needed a strategy to drive them off...but he had never anticipated being approached right in the middle of town, and so he didn't have a plan to deal with the situation.

Why am I getting hit on?! If they stare at my face up close, I might get exposed! And if that happens, I'll practically die of embarrassment! In fact, given my current situation, I'll die whether I'm embarrassed or not!

Had Regis thought calmly, he might have been able to put together a countermeasure from the books that he'd read...but he was in a complete panic.

“Eep...”

The soldiers seemed to grow even more excited at that. “H-Hey, what’s your name? Where are you from? To make a face like that when all we’re doing is talking... You must be incredibly innocent. Almost like a newly bought sword that’s never tasted blood,” one said.

“Not quite,” said the other. “I’d say she’s more like a newborn rabbit.”

Wait, what’s going on here? Are they perhaps attempting to woo me with poetic language? There were quite a few men of culture among the Empire’s soldiers, but as far as Regis was concerned, these two were rather lacking. *A sword and a rabbit...?*

“I see... A poem extolling an innocent young girl...” Regis said, the words inadvertently spilling from his mouth. “Then what of that passage from *Laure’s Traveling Spirit*? ‘Your crimson lips glisten like the rays that thaw the snow, for now, my heart has seen Spring.’ I believe it was something along those lines.”

“Urk!”

The soldiers retreated a step, while Fanrine placed her fingertips to her mouth to hide her smile. “Oh dear...” she said. “This girl reads books whenever she has any free time. Do you enjoy talking about poetry? Then what about plays?”

The two men grimaced; their proud attitude had suddenly turned rough. “What, a smart aleck, are you?!” one cried.

“Just go already,” the other said with a tut.

They shooed away the girls as one would do to try to get rid of a stray dog. This was an era when it was generally desirable for a woman to wait upon a man; those who exhibited such intelligence were generally kept at arm’s length.

Once they were a considerable distance away from the soldiers, Regis let out a deep sigh. “Okay. I’m safe...”

Fanrine giggled; then she teasingly stuck out her tongue at Regis. “You know, Regina, that was actually a little refreshing.”

“Right, right!” Franziska agreed with a nod. “Did you hear that groan after

they were acting so stuck-up? Talk about pathetic! They were weak and stupid, so why were they going around looking like they owned the place? It seriously ticks me off."

"My thoughts exactly. Thinking they're always above us just because they're men. They need to get with the times."

For once, it seemed that Fanrine and Franziska agreed on something.

"Don'tcha agree, Regina?!"

"Isn't that right, Regina?"

Of course, Regis was one of those "weak and stupid" men himself...

"Hmm... Yes, that may be right. I knew a family where the eldest sister became a maid, and she was far stronger than her brother who became a soldier."

Surely Fanrine and Franziska understood his situation, but perhaps owing to his clothes, they were speaking as though he were also a girl.

All of a sudden, Franziska pointed at something. "Wait, what's that? Doh-nuts? Sweets?!"

"Doughnuts," Fanrine noted. "Sweetened and fried dough—kind of similar to a cake."

"Wow! Let's get some!"

"Come to think of it, we haven't had sweets in quite some time. How about it, Regina?"

"Me? Well... That should be all right. We haven't had lunch, and— Whoa?!"

Franziska began her march toward the doughnut shop before Regis could even finish his sentence, all while maintaining a firm grip on his hand.

"Just look at them, Regina! Hey, which doughnut should we go with?! They've got three types!"

"Can't we just get one of each...?"

"I have some money saved for such occasions," Fanrine announced as she produced a gold coin from some unknown location. Franziska's eyes lit up as

she cheerfully placed their order:

“One of each for each of us, then!”

What?!

“So, nine doughnuts in total,” the clerk said with a smile.

Isn’t that a bit much? Regis thought, but he had heard that girls could eat any number of sweets. *Now that I think about it, Altina never forgot to eat a scone after every meal. Is this to make my disguise more convincing?*

Franziska bit into her first round treat. “Wow! This is delicious!”

Fanrine nodded in agreement, smiling from ear to ear. “Yes, it’s been a while since I’ve had something this sweet.”

Regis took a bite himself, silently acknowledging that women really did have it rough.

✧ ✧ ✧

They soon arrived at Carol’s bookstore. It was a large shop, the sign for which was green and emblazoned with white text, and there was a great display in the window containing books on ceremonies and historic emperors. Among them were more books on Latrielle than Regis had anticipated, though most were very recent publications.

Fanrine appeared calm, but Franziska was looking around awkwardly.

“Hey...” Regis called out to the woman skimming through a ledger at the counter. Her black hair was styled in a bob cut, and she wore an indigo-blue apron over her clothes. She was Carol de Talleyrand, the owner of the establishment.

Carol quickly looked up from her ledger. “Yes? What can I do for you, madam?” she fastidiously replied.



“Umm... It’s me...”

“Oh?” She tilted her head ever so slightly.

She usually greets me with a smile... Regis thought. He could sense that something was off, and then he remembered what he was wearing. *How do I explain this? The disguise worked too well—not even a good friend of mine can recognize me! I doubt she would even consider the possibility of a man who never returned from the war suddenly reappearing in women’s clothing.*

Regis thought over his next move. There were other customers in the shop, so openly revealing his true identity wasn’t an option.

“U-Um... Mrs. Carol. It’s me...”

“Pardon?” Carol asked, looking quite genuinely perplexed. “My apologies, madam; I don’t believe we’ve met.”

“I guess not. Oh, of course!” It hadn’t been in anticipation of these particular circumstances, but Regis remembered that he and Carol had decided on a simple code for when letters and words were exchanged. “Mrs. Carol... I’ve been hearing about a certain book, and I was wondering if you knew the title. It’s about a young tailor who takes the throne after being found to be the bastard of the previous king. He takes an incredible beauty of noble blood to be his wife.”

“Eeh?!” Her eyes opened wide. “D-Don’t tell me... Is it about how outrageous of a woman his queen is...?”

“Indeed. She even calls the king disgusting straight to his face.”

“And truth be told, the queen hides a certain secret, correct?”

“*C’est vrai*.”

It seemed that this exchange had been enough for Carol to deduce Regina’s real identity. She stared hard at his face.

“R-Really? How could this be? It’s astounding...”

“I’m ashamed to admit it...” Regis mumbled. He could feel the blood rushing to his cheeks.

After staring at Regis for another moment, in a complete daze, Carol snapped back to her senses. “Please, follow me. I’ll show you the book you’re looking for,” she said, leading him along the lines of shelves and farther into the store.

Carol had brought them to the bookstore’s café space, where they settled into some seats in the corner. The bookstore had originally been a café, and it was arranged so that customers could enjoy reading their purchased books over a cup of coffee.

Carol exchanged a look with the staff, and they were immediately brought enough coffee for four. It had been a long time since Regis last came to the store; he could feel a warmth spread through his chest as he took in the feelings of nostalgia.

After confirming that nobody else was around, Carol leaned in. “You really are...R-Regis, right?”

“I should preface this by asking that you please don’t make any assumptions,” Regis said. “There are certain circumstances behind my attire—circumstances deeper than the sea and greater than the tallest mountain. There are reasons so convincing that anyone would have accepted them.”

“I guess that roundabout way of speaking leaves little room for doubt.”

“I’m not so sure about your argument, but I’m glad you believe me.”

“You’re still alive...” she breathed, tears welling up in her eyes. Regis hadn’t expected her to be so moved, and the sudden wave of emotion caused him to panic.

“Aha... Well, it took some luck...”

“You’re safe—that’s what matters. So what should I call you now?” she asked with a wry smile as she attempted to dry her eyes.

Regis scratched his head on instinct...and then slapped a hand on his dome just in time to stop his wig from falling off. “I’m, uh...Regina...” he answered.

“Very well, Regina.” Carol seemed to be enjoying this a little too much. She turned to Fanrine. “You were here with Regis last time. From House Tiraso

Laverde.”

“Yes, I am Fanrine Veronica de Tiraso Laverde. I was tasked with observing Regis as an official of the Ministry of Military Affairs...but I am currently a fugitive alongside him.” She stood up momentarily and offered a very elegant bow. The two girls had met just once over a month ago, but it seemed that they remembered one another.

“And this is Ms. Franziska,” Regis said, introducing their last member. “I’m assuming this is your first time meeting her.”

The moment her name was mentioned, Franziska’s expression became a stern glare. “Hey, who’s this woman to you?” she asked.

“Someone to whom I am greatly indebted. A collaborator, and someone who understands me best.”

“Huh. So I don’t need to hide my identity?”

“That’s correct.”

Carol extended her introduction first. “I am the owner of this store, Carol de Talleyrand.”

“That so? I’m Franziska of Renard Pendu. I’m watching and guarding this gal on my sis’s orders. Nice to meet you.”

“My! From that prestigious...?!” Carol trailed off. She was gazing at Franziska in total surprise.

“It seems you know about Renard Pendu too,” Regis observed, nodding to himself. “Just as I would expect from you, Mrs. Carol.”

Carol chuckled. “It’s nothing but surprises with you, Regina. A week after I hear you’d died in battle, you return dressed like this with the daughter of a duke and a member of a renowned mercenary brigade.”

Regis leaned closer. “I died in battle?”

“Yes, that’s what I was told. It spread through the capital as a rumor, and I confirmed it with a soldier I’m acquainted with. There can be no doubt about that.”

This means Latrielle did try to assassinate me after all... Was he fooled by the fake corpse? No, surely not. Is he acting this way to make me drop my guard...?

"Do you know my cause of death?" Regis asked.

"No, I don't...but I heard the remains were sent to your family."

Was the replacement corpse sent to my sister then? This is going to get a bit complicated...

"Has a report been sent to the Fourth Army?"

"I can't say for sure, but I would assume so."

"Yes, I see..." Regis crossed his arms. He didn't want to worry Altina—he really didn't—but it was much too risky for him to make contact with the Fourth Army now. There was a high chance that Latrielle would intercept the message somewhere along the line.

"Regina. I understand how you feel, but you mustn't do anything hasty," Fanrine warned.

"Yeah, I know."

He was more worried that Altina might jump the gun.

"I have other information," Carol said. "Would you like to hear it, Regina?"

"Yes, that's actually what I'm here for."

"This is going to take a while, so let me offer you some snacks first. We've started selling these recently..."

At those words, a waiter brought to the table a plate of sugar-dusted doughnuts.

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Regis sipped from his second cup of coffee.

"Phew..."

It was quite the delicacy. The doughnuts were rather sweet, and there was a fluffy texture hidden beneath the fragrant burnt sugar and crispy fried dough. That secret ingredient spreading across his tongue was most likely honey.

For a brief moment, Regis indulged in the thought of reading into the wee morning hours, drinking delicious coffee and snacking on doughnuts as he sat among the shelves overflowing with books. Unfortunately, he didn't have the time to kick back and relax.

"Mrs. Carol, do you have the information I asked for?"

"Yes, right over here."

Carol warily handed over a book. There weren't any customers at any of the nearby tables, but there was no telling who might have been watching. Regis began thumbing through until eventually he came across a sheet of paper sandwiched between two pages like a bookmark. It was a report on the matter he had asked her to investigate—the emperor's death.

"I see... As I thought."

"There isn't any definitive evidence, but considering the circumstances surrounding the death... There was the doctor who examined the bodies, and the fact that the sixth consort's doctors were denied access... Plus, a number of the maids and attendants involved have gone missing..."

"What?!" Fanrine cried out, her eyes wide open. "How did you come across this information?!"

Carol immediately clapped a hand over the woman's mouth. "There's someone in the imperial court who likes to gossip," she explained.

"This is a bit much, even for that..."

Regis quickly read through the report and then stuffed it into his skirt pocket. He had initially been surprised to learn that there was a pocket hidden among the frills, and his first thought had been that it existed for some kind of covert activity...but it was apparently just used to carry handkerchiefs and the like.

"The Ministry of Military Affairs and the army top brass are all under Latrielle's control, so information seldom leaks from there," Regis said. "However, information also spreads through the court. This was only possible thanks to Mrs. Carol's connections, of course."

Carol let out a pleased chuckle. "I wouldn't have gone to such lengths for

anyone but one of my regulars, Regis. Ah, no—Regina, was it?”

“You have my utmost gratitude. Truly. Your actions may have changed this country’s history.”

“It’s really that serious, I take it.”

“To be blunt—yes. He’s taken quite an overbearing stance, after all.”

“Given all the mysterious disappearances, I was unfortunately unable to find anyone who could testify.”

“We have circumstantial evidence, but that’s not strong enough on its own,” Regis mused aloud—not that the testimony of a few maids would have been enough to overturn Latrielle’s position.

“Our best bet would be to get our information straight from one of the second prince’s close associates...” Carol noted.

“Latrielle’s officers wouldn’t confess even at the risk of death—that’s how loyal they are. I’ve seen it firsthand.”

“That complicates things.”

“Even so...the prince is acting too impulsively. It’s hard to say he was thorough by any means. The way I see it, there are far too many people who know the truth. At this rate, the seams may spread from those who aren’t even associated with him.”

“Precisely. Then what are your thoughts on this man?” Carol asked as she handed over a second book. Once again, Regis flipped through and then scanned the small sheet of paper stuck inside.

“Beclard, the grand chamberlain? He was a trusted retainer to His Majesty. He’s been regarded as the living will and testament of the late emperor and has already recognized Latrielle’s enthronement.”

“Word has it that he entered the emperor’s chambers around his time of death.”

“Then he should know everything. The very reason Prince Latrielle is managing to climb the steps to the throne without any public suspicion is because he has the support of such an authority figure.”

The official ceremony would take place in three days.

Fanrine looked at Regis quizzically. “Marquis Beclard? None of the rumors surrounding him are pleasant. I’ve seen him at a few parties, but...is he any different from Latrielle’s associates? Is it possible to make him speak the truth?”

Franziska lightly tapped the table with a clenched fist. “Well, what are these rumors?! If you’re going to speak, speak clearly. Or is this the sorta thing that you can’t really talk about?”

“Hmm... It’s quite vulgar to speak about someone behind their back, but, well... In this instance, it would be pointless for me not to spell it out. *Ahem*. Beclard is a great lover of money and valuables. Our house runs a large-scale enterprise in the south, and in order to receive permission for our enterprises, we were tasked with not only the legal procedures, but also a few sizable bribes. Of course, he wasn’t the only one who demanded money. There were a few others in positions of power...”

“Hah! Curse this rotten empire!” Franziska spat.

It really was terrible, but Regis knew that the system had been operating that way for a very long time. He was putting so much work in specifically because he wanted to change that.

“I apologize for not being able to say any more on the matter,” Fanrine concluded. “It was my sister Elenore who handled the negotiation.”

“No, thank you. That’s a good reference point,” Regis said. His praise made Fanrine’s eyes crease in a smile.

“So what now, Regina?” Franziska asked. “Do we try to bribe that greedy old man with more money than the second prince gave him?”

“That would certainly be a peaceful way to resolve this, but I’m as poor as a commoner can be, the Fourth Army is severely lacking in resources due to the war, and Princess Argentina’s mother is a commoner. Latrielle, in contrast, serves as the marshal general of the Belgarian armed forces and has countless noble backers. It’s safe to say that he has several times more funding than we do.”

“Now listen here—your tactics might be impressive, but wars are ultimately decided with money. Do you really stand a chance?”

“The Fourth Army’s grown stronger, but not enough to beat the First Army. The ideal situation is for us to win without fighting.”

“Is that an ideal situation or a delusional one?”

Regis chuckled and gave a bitter smile. “Whatever it is, I think the situation will change considerably if we manage to secure testimony from the grand chamberlain.”

“That’s for certain,” Fanrine said with a nod. “The problem is how we’ll go about doing that.”

“Kidnap him?” Franziska suggested, not even attempting to hide her cocky grin. Carol shook her head in response; it was much too dangerous of a proposal.

“Beclard understands his own position. I’ve heard that he rarely leaves his estate these days, and there are so many soldiers stationed there that some compare it to a fortress. He won’t even meet with newspaper reporters. Abduction seems quite impossible.”

Franziska crudely clicked her tongue in response, eliciting a grimace from Fanrine.

“Did you get that information from a reporter?” Regis asked.

“Yes, from a newspaper aimed at laborers that’s quite critical of the present regime,” Carol replied. “It’s called *The Weekly Quarry*.”

“Is that what they’re printing these days?”

“From what I’ve read. It’s been that way for half a year now.”

“Hm... Well, the number of anti-establishment articles *was* on the rise the last time I was in the capital...”

Regis naturally read the papers—he was drawn to anything that contained the written word. *The Weekly Quarry* was run by a cynical staff and often used rather extreme terms to criticize the establishment. It also included the scandals and private conversations of nobles. One noble in particular had flown

into a rage about their articles and furiously barged into the publishing house to intimidate them. The very next day, the papers printed their exchange in full, and the noble ended up fleeing the capital.

"*The Quarry*'s sales are on the rise," Carol continued. "More people are talking about liberalism these days."

"They're more activists than they are journalists."

"And they wanted to meet you, Regis. You're a common-born war hero."

"Please, not—" Regis instinctively went to refuse, but then it occurred to him—perhaps this wasn't such a bad idea after all.

"That journalist may be able to introduce you to someone with strong connections to the imperial court," Carol noted.

"Who might that be?"

"Err, have you ever heard of one Morgane Bourgine?"

"Hmm? I think I've heard the name before..."

"At the plaza, three years ago..."

"Oh, the woman who proclaimed that this nation is rotten to the core? Does she have a connection to the court? That really shouldn't be the case; in fact, she should still be on the run from the law."

"Why is that?" Fanrine asked.

Criticizing the emperor was considered blasphemy but criticizing society on the whole was permitted as an act of political activity. That was the official stance, at least.

"Hah!" Franziska scoffed. "Who cares what the law says? You're screwed if you go against those in power."

"You can't mean..."

"Unfortunately, Franziska's right—even if there aren't any legal problems, you won't get off lightly after publicly criticizing the system of nobility. Morgane wasn't complaining at the pub; she was addressing the plaza in front of the palace," Regis explained. It had been akin to drawing a bow at the noble class.

Fanrine hung her head, her expression clouded. “I am no more than an ignorant little girl. As an official, I’ve seen my share of the Empire’s dark side, but...I can’t overlook what I’ve seen and heard these past few days. To think things are this terrible...”

“We’re fighting to change that,” Regis said.

Fanrine nodded in agreement, but Franziska merely shrugged; she had never considered the idea of actively trying to better a nation.

“I’m personally acquainted with Morgane,” Carol said, getting the conversation back on track. “She often came to my shop back when she was still a teacher.”

“Does that mean I’ve seen her before?” Regis asked.

“I think so.”

There weren’t many female customers, so perhaps he’d recognize her if they met. Thinking back on it now, Regis realized that he’d hardly ever paid any mind to the bookstore’s other patrons.

“So you’re saying Madame Morgane has connections to someone knowledgeable about the palace?”

“That’s what a reporter from *The Quarry* told me. I don’t know her current location, but he said that he could contact her for me.”

“I see...”

“He also said that you’d find this a very appealing proposal, Regis.”

“Then he’s quite sharp,” Regis observed. He couldn’t deny that he needed to get in touch with someone who knew the palace well. The cooperation of a newspaper would also increase the number of options available to him.

Franziska stood. “Well, no point hanging around. The early bird gets the worm!”

“That’s right. Mrs. Carol, could you tell me the reporter’s name?”

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Carol was going to stay behind—she had work to do, and as a central actor in

Regis's information warfare, she was better off not acting conspicuously. The last thing he wanted was for Latrielle to have his eye on her.

Once Carol had written up a letter of introduction, Regis went to meet the reporter with Fanrine and Franziska in tow. The directions they had been given led them to a building facing the main road. This was supposed to be the base of *The Weekly Quarry*, although they couldn't say for sure—it was a bit too large to be a private house, but there was no identifying sign out front.

Fanrine tilted her head. "Is this really the place?"

"The address is correct," Regis replied. "Let's give it a go."

He knocked on the wooden door and waited. There was no response for a moment, but then it cracked open, and a man with large ears and dark, sun-tanned skin peeked out. He wore a leather cabbie cap, which was pulled down low, and regarded Regis with a fiery-eyed glare. His dry lips parted.

"I don't remember hiring a maid. And if you're not one, I don't want what you're selling. I also pay my tithe to the church every month. In fact, I just haven't got any money, full stop. Try someone else."

Noticing that the man was about to close the door, Regis hurriedly spoke up. "Do you know where I could find a reporter named Claude? A certain someone referred him to me."

"Hmph... If you've got any complaints, please put them down in a letter. If you want to support us, please purchase our papers."

"Wait. Please, wait. If you're interested in Regis Aurick, I have some information I can offer."

Upon hearing those words, the man finally paused his attempts to shut the door. "We get enough rumors around here," he said skeptically.

"Then what if you could speak with the man himself?"

"So, what, you'll bring him here for a fee?"

"I was hoping to trade one referral for another. There's someone I want to meet..."

"Who sent you?"

“I came here from a bookstore. Does that answer your question?”

“A bookstore? Not sure what you’re talking about.”

“Um, then maybe this will clarify things... A certain someone wanted me to pass on a message: ‘Thank you for the roses.’ It was her birthday, apparently. I didn’t know myself.”

“Pfft!” The man evidently couldn’t believe his ears. “Carol told you to come here?!”

“Y-Yes.”

The man poked his head out and then glanced all around, making sure that the three of them were the only ones there. He then beckoned them inside with a hasty, “Come right in!”

Regis, Fanrine, and Franziska stepped into a room with around eight tables, each one crudely stacked with books and unbound manuscripts. There were five people at work, restlessly moving their hands, and a mixture of unpleasant odors—mostly ink, tobacco, and sweat—lingered in the air.

The man led them across a crude screen partition to an area where two two-seater sofas were facing one another. He delivered a hard kick to one of the seats. “Go home if you’re going to sleep!” he barked.

“A-Ah...” A man in rags rolled off of the sofa with a groan, falling flat onto his hands and knees. He glanced up to look at Regis, and then his eyes shot open. “Wowee! Y-You’re a cutie! Who are you?!”

“Eeh?!” Regis immediately winced; he could feel a faint sense of danger in the wind.

“Is that really how you speak to a client?!” The man with the cap kicked the apparent deviant in the rear. “Get some coffee or something!”

“Ow...” Rubbing his behind, the sleepy man hobbled farther into the room, looking as though he might fall over at any moment.

Fanrine had gone pale; such a rough atmosphere was evidently taxing for a noblewoman such as herself. Regis’s own room was quite similar when he was busy, so he wasn’t too surprised—not that anyone was ever kicked in the

bottom there. Franziska the mercenary didn't seem at all perturbed either.

The capped man sat on one sofa and then motioned to the other. "Have a seat," he said.

"Of course. Pardon me."

Regis likewise took a seat. Franziska dropped into the space beside him, looking as though it were only natural that she should, but Fanrine remained frozen on her feet. It was in her nature to treat commoners as equals, but that wasn't the problem here—just moments ago, a man who looked as though he hadn't bathed in days had been using the sofa as a bed. Regis didn't comment on her hesitation; there wasn't enough room for three to begin with.

"So, where's this Claude fellow?" Franziska asked, scanning the office.

"You're talking to him."

Regis nodded. "I see. That explains things."

"Sorry." Claude held out his left hand to show the slash running down his palm. "There was a time I was stabbed the very instant I introduced myself."

"That's quite something..."

"So you're here on Carol's recommendation?"

"Yes. I've been entrusted with this."

Regis reached into the pochette hung over his shoulder and produced the letter. The bag was so tiny that even the small piece of stationery had needed to be folded four times to fit inside; it would hardly serve as more than a gunpowder pouch on the battlefield.

Claude took the letter. "So, what's your name?" he asked.

"Regis Aurick. Although I was recently granted the more exaggerated name 'Regis d'Aurick.'"

"Huh?" Claude looked doubtful, and for good reason—the supposed man before him was still dressed as a woman. As Regis mulled over where to start, Fanrine chimed in.

"There are reasons preventing Regis from walking around the capital as

himself. That's why he has come dressed like this. Oh, and don't worry about us. We're just here to accompany him."

Claude's eyes widened as he read through the letter. "You're actually the real deal...?!"

"Mrs. Carol may like joking around, but she does not lie."

"You've got a point..." He looked at Regis again and again. "And you're seriously a man?"

"Yes." Regis offered a curt response; it was needlessly embarrassing being inspected so closely.

"Our disguise skills are pretty darn good, right?!" Franziska boasted with her chest proudly puffed out.

Claude nodded. "Yeah, incredible. This really is something."

The makeup had mostly been Fanrine, but before the matter could be discussed any further, the man in rags returned from the back. He was now wearing a proper jacket, and he had slicked back his bedhead.

"Here you go, mademoiselle," the man said with a chuckle as he placed the single cup he had brought out in front of Regis.

"Why only one drink?!" Claude shouted. "Ah, just get lost, would you?!"

"Th-That's no way to talk to your editor-in-chief!"

"Editor-in-chief?!" Regis repeated. That position would make him even more important than a reporter; he was supposed to be the top dog here.

Claude sighed. "If you have any competency as an editor, then go check my article already. Get to work."

"Good grief, Claude...what a slavedriver you are. Especially when you're just going to be sitting around, chatting up a cute girl..."

"He's a guy!"

"What?! Even better!"

"I've got a boot with your name on it!"

The man claiming to be the lead editor grumbled as he took a seat at the largest table. It seemed that he really did hold such an important position.

Claude shrugged. “He’s odd, but he knows a good article when he sees one.”

“Now that you mention it, your readership *has* been on the rise.”

“Ever since we hired him half a year ago.”

“I see. So, anyway...”

The ragged man humming a tune to himself as he spread out some paper and started to read was the spitting image of a homeless, unemployed person—clear evidence that one couldn’t judge a book by its cover.

Franziska made off with Regis’s coffee and took a long sip. “Ah, this gal goes by Regina now,” she said. “It’s super dangerous to call her by the other name outside.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard the rumors,” Claude replied. “You died in battle, eh? Must have been rough.”

“Oh? You don’t seem all that surprised about my being alive,” Regis said. “Not to mention you trusted me immediately...”

“Word came in that the corpses didn’t have heads. The moment I heard that, I knew you hadn’t kicked the bucket. Regis d’Aurick is a genius tactician; there was no doubt in my mind that he’d have taken some precautions. Headless corpses are as basic as body doubles go.”

“I’m not a genius. I just happened to get lucky.”

“That said, it seems the notice of your death was sent to the Fourth Army...and I doubt your princess is going to accept it. Worst-case scenario, we might have a civil war on our hands.”

“I really hope she doesn’t act too hastily.”

“Well, when all’s said and done, I never imagined you’d come visit me as such a lovely lass.”

“L-Lovely?! Um, for what it’s worth...I’m a twenty-year-old man...”

Sure, Regis knew he was a tad baby-faced, but the term “lass” was saved for

little girls who hadn't yet come of age.

"I know, don't worry. Besides, I only care about what's inside—and I happen to like intellectual women who laugh a lot and are good to talk to. I'm not interested in men, but I *am* incredibly interested in you, Regis d'Aurick."

"Hah... Well, ask me whatever you want. I'll answer anything that wouldn't make the princess yell at me."

"Is an introduction all you want in exchange?"

"If possible, I'd also like a little assistance. I want Grand Chamberlain Beclard to testify."

"About what?"

"The emperor's death."

Claude shook his head. "Not happening. I want it too, believe me, but I can't even meet with the guy."

"Not even if you ask your lead in the palace?"

"Ah... Well, you may be able to meet with Beclard through him. Thing is, right now, Beclard has the backing of the soon-to-be emperor; he's not going to testify against him."

"It's a little old now, but there's a series called *The Great General Gordon*—quite the masterpiece, if I do say so myself. It went on for twenty volumes before publication came to a halt. The story was never concluded, mind you; I've been waiting for the continuation for a long while now."

"I've at least spotted the title in the bookstore. I'm not too interested in fiction, though."

"It's based on historical events that really did happen close to two hundred years ago."

"Hm? All right, so what about it...?"

"There was a plan in that book that perfectly applies to our current situation."

Claude's brow twitched. "You mean to say...I'm going to be taking part in one of *the* Regis d'Aurick's famous schemes?"

“The scheme comes from the book. I just happen to have read about it.”

“Let’s hear the details then.”

“First, will you cooperate with us?”

Claude fell silent...and it was this hesitation that made Regis certain he was trustworthy. Had the man been nothing but talk, he would have immediately agreed; after all, there was nothing stopping him from listening to all the details and then dropping out for any which reason. Through this pause, Regis could deduce that he was most likely not a man to go back on his word—he had to mull over the matter even before he decided to hear it out.

“All right, we’ll cooperate!” This swift response came not from Claude but from the editor-in-chief, who was all of a sudden resting one hand against the partitioning screen. “Heh heh... Our papers’ll be selling like hotcakes if we get this testimony! And on top of that, we’ll get to see one of the Wizard’s plans up close! An opportunity like this doesn’t come ’round every day.”

“There’s no such thing as a free meal,” Claude said. “If we do this, we might end up picking a fight with Prince Latrielle. Right?”

“Well...that is a possibility,” Regis admitted.

The editor-in-chief gave a broad smile. “A little late for that! *The Weekly Quarry* is already despised by the establishment!”

“Don’t go mixing up your wasps and your flies,” Claude snapped. “They’re just pushing us down right now. If we get Beclard to spill the beans, though, they might get out the hammer.”

The editor-in-chief chuckled at this remark. “You scared, Claudy-boy?”

“Of course not! I’m hopping on board, even if that means having to quit my job here. I just can’t decide whether I should drag the company in or not.”

Regis placed a contemplative hand on his chin. “Ah, yes... I’m sure you all have families to worry about.”

“Nah, none of the men here have parents, children, or siblings. No wives or girlfriends either, I should add.”

“O-Oh. I see.”

The lead editor took a seat beside Claude and then started leaning toward Regis. “So, Mr. Regis... Oh, excuse me! You go by ‘Regina’ now!”

I don’t mind you calling me by my actual name here... Regis thought, though he made no effort to correct the man. Fanrine seemed to be cowering before the editor’s intensity, while the complicated nature of the conversation seemed to have made Franziska give up on even trying to follow along.

“I’m the editor-in-chief of *The Quarry*,” the ragged man said, finally introducing himself. “Ottoman’s the name. A fake name, mind you.”

“That’s fine with me.”

“Regina, we raise the flag of rebellion against the nobles who take life’s riches for their own—against the current system, where one’s standing in life is decided the moment they’re born!”

“You’re liberalists, then.”

“We’re not *that* extreme—we don’t want to go as far as to topple the administration. However, it’s hard to tolerate a portion of those in power abusing the ignorance and indifference of the populace to monopolize all the wealth.”

“I have to agree with you there.”

“What do you think’s necessary to change the current regime?”

“Based on what you just said, I would assume making the populace more knowledgeable and interested.”

“You’re not wrong. But that’s not enough.”

“Hmm?”

“Don’t you get it?!”

“Well, again, this is just something I’ve read, but... Why are most civilians ignorant of and uninterested in politics? It’s because they believe that nothing they can do will change things—that the structure of the nation will simply remain in its current state regardless of their knowledge or involvement. To that end, what the people need most right now is *hope*.”

“Incredible! As expected of a hero!”

“No, no, no. As I just said, I’m only paraphrasing someone else’s work—Professor Boutter’s *Thesis on Reform*, to be precise.”

“Yes, but Regina—there are countless works published on reform, each purporting to be the best idea imaginable, and *that* is the one you chose. Yes, how fantastic! I’d expect nothing less from you!”

“Oh, err... Thanks...” Regis replied. It seemed that he would receive incessant praise no matter what he said, so he decided to move the conversation forward. “I’m going to be blunt—can you go along with my plan, knowing full well of the danger? I’m planning to disrupt Prince Latrielle’s coronation, after all. In return, I can offer you a story that will garner quite a bit of interest.”

Claude nodded. “I’m in! Beclard is one of the vile monsters building a nest in our empire. If we can expose him for who he really is, there’s some worth in me risking my life.”

“Hee hee!” Ottoman chuckled. “That’s what *The Weekly Quarry* is for!”

The other men of the office had taken a break from their duties and were now gathered around the sofa, no doubt hoping that something interesting was going on, but Claude dismissed them all at once. “I’ll tell you later, so get back to work!” he yelled.

And so, Regis began unveiling his plan.

Chapter 3: Regis and Bastian

Now with Claude's referral, Regis went to meet the man who had connections to the palace. He had gone to the farthest outskirts of the capital, where commoner residences lined the streets, and down a narrow back alley. From there, it took only a few turns before he reached a pub—a brick building around twice the size of a common house.

The sun was sinking toward the western horizon; it was almost time for dinner. The surrounding buildings were shuttered, and very few people wandered the alleys...but the pub's windows were wide open, and from them leaked the light of several oil lamps.

A small sign out front read "Provence."

This time, Regis and Franziska were being accompanied by Claude rather than Fanrine. Their destination was the haunt of the liberalists, where those hostile toward the nobility gathered; there was no telling what would happen if they brought with them the daughter of a duke, no matter how impartial she was. After all, not everyone listened to reason. It was because of this that Fanrine had gone back to Renard Pendu's camp early. She needed to tell Jessica that the others would be returning later than scheduled.

In truth, Franziska was in danger as well. Regis had wanted her to return also, but she was both his guard and his monitor—she certainly wasn't going to leave because of any potential danger.

And so, Regis, still disguised as a woman, sat on a pub bench sandwiched between the mercenary and the reporter. They were at a round table behind a partition, with a two-seater bench across from them. Even farther back there were barrels, along with spare bricks and lumber. It was quite a disorderly place.

Claude stuffed some leaves into his pipe and then held it up to a candle. Slowly, smoke began to waft from the chamber. Tobacco was considered a luxury product—it went for more than most medicines did.

“I have to,” Claude explained, “otherwise the headaches don’t go away.”

“I see...”

“I sent a messenger around noon. Don’t know if they reached her or not, though. She might not come today.”

“I can wait. Everyone from your newspaper is already working hard for my sake; the least I can do is be patient. We do have a three-day time limit, though.”

Franziska yawned. “Sleepy...”

“You can go back if you want to,” Regis said.

“Without you? Sis’ll be livid.”

“I’ll come back; I assure you. I need you as much as you need me.”

“Says the guy who essentially halved our brigade. Yeah, I don’t trust you. Can’t imagine why.”

“...Understandable.”

A ruckus started brewing across the partition, and then she appeared—a stern-looking woman holding a cane. She appeared to be older than Regis but younger than Claude. Her brown hair was tied into a ponytail that hung across her chest, and she wore a navy-blue blouse with a long skirt underneath. One of her legs must have gone lame, as it dragged along the floor when she walked.

“It’s been some time, Claude,” the woman said.

“Hey! You’re looking better than expected, Teach!”

So this is Madame Morgane Bourgine, Regis thought. She was supposed to be around thirty, but she had a certain presence to her.

“Ever since the kid came around, I’ve been able to enjoy my meals in peace. Well, not always enjoy—the High Britannian cuisine his friend makes isn’t so promising.”

“Isn’t it all fish and fried potatoes over there?”

“Not exactly. What I had wasn’t quite...edible. I’m currently teaching her Belgarian cooking.”

Claude chuckled in response.

“I hear you want to introduce me to someone,” Bourgine said.

“Oh, he’s actually got business with your disciple—it’s about the palace, see—but I thought you might be interested in him. Despite how he’s dressed, this bloke here is the famous strategist, Regis d’Aurick.”

“A pleasure.” Regis stood and courteously lowered his head.

Bourgine reciprocated. “I see... Quite a hobby you have,” she remarked.

“I-It’s not a—!”

Bourgine chuckled. “I jest. There’s a good reason for the way you’re dressed, right? I think you’ll find that most of the people who visit this pub also have...*special* circumstances. As for my disciple, I’ve already called him; he should be here soon. If your interest is in the palace, you’ll need to speak to him.”

“Thank you.”

“But since we’re here, how about a little chat?”

“If you don’t mind.”

Bourgine needed Claude’s assistance to sit down, although once she was on the bench, her back was straight and dignified. “Despite hailing from a common household, you are a peculiar individual with deep ties to both Prince Latrielle and Princess Argentina,” she said.

“Well, now that you mention it...”

He’d also occasionally played chess and rummy with Fifth Princess Felicia. He’d grown so used to it that he hadn’t considered it anything special, but now that he stopped to think about it, he didn’t know anyone who could say the same. He was also the only person who had ever served on the staff of both Altina and Latrielle.

“That is precisely why I want to ask you...what sort of nation do they each desire?” Bourgine asked.

“Latrielle’s intentions are exactly as he has announced publicly—he intends to

conquer all the surrounding territories to enlarge the Empire. Assuming he does become emperor, every nation we're familiar with might end up under imperial rule."

"So he's a hegemonist. Do you really think he can manage such a feat?"

"I've heard his plan in detail."

"And from the viewpoint of an esteemed strategist, will he be able to achieve his ideal?"

"Please, I'm just an ordinary administrative officer. But that aside...it would be possible, if every single commander in the Empire were as competent as Latrielle himself."

"The Empire is vast and powerful, and still you say there aren't enough people?"

"Unfortunately." To be more precise, it wasn't exactly the numbers they lacked, but Regis wasn't going to get into that now.

"Then what ideal does Princess Argentina hold dear? I have heard of her simple lifestyle, perhaps owing to her commoner mother. She has many commoners who support her for that reason, but how is she really?"

"She doesn't live an extravagant life, to say the least. I wouldn't go so far as to say she lives like a commoner, but she would never host an unnecessary party, and I can't even imagine her splurging on art pieces and dresses. I must admit, though, Latrielle is just as much of an economist. Neither person is a fool. Now, as for Argentina's ideal..."

Bourgine was listening silently. Claude was slouched back, trying to pretend that he didn't care, but there was a seriousness in his eyes that suggested otherwise. Franziska, meanwhile, looked as though she was struggling to stay awake.

"The princess is aiming for world peace."

Bourgine looked at Regis quizzically. "Is that her public stance?" she asked. "Or is she serious?"

"It would be pointless for me to discuss public stances with you. The princess

aims for world peace. She does not simply hope or dream for it—she moves toward it. As do I."

Claude's eyes widened.

"And what do you mean by 'world peace'?" Bourgine asked. She was no longer looking at Regis; her gaze was lowered to the floor.

"We mean pacifism—to form peaceful relations with the neighboring powers so that, if some nation invades, we can put up a joint defense. Likewise, if a nation faces tragedy, we will offer our support."

"Does the princess sincerely believe such a thing is possible?"

"On some level, it's already in practice. I don't go out stealing other peoples' property, and Madame Bourgine, I doubt you've ever taken someone's land by force."

"Right... If you equate it to personal morals, then only contemptible bandits snatch that which belongs to their neighbors."

"Indeed. Our military may excel, but say we were to steal another's land and arbitrarily claim it as our own—that would be seen as inexcusable if done on a personal level. We would receive only criticism from those around us, severely hindering our ability to earn trust or friendship."

"Are you sure this ideal isn't an empty one?"

"It's certainly optimistic, but without such optimism, humanity will eventually bring about its own destruction."

"I see. So that's what you think."

"The wars thus far have been fought with bows and spears. Casualties never account for more than half of a unit—even when one is annihilated, the majority have normally fled or are merely injured. Now, however, we have entered the era of the gun. Bullets are sharper than any spear and can travel farther than any arrow...and above all, they offer no opportunity for retreat. Soon, we will find ourselves in a world where annihilation truly does mean that every member of a unit has been killed. Civilian deaths will similarly be more cruel and thorough than they ever were with horsemen."

Claude gulped. “Seriously?”

Bourgine nodded, her expression grave. “Past wars have been a competition of sorts,” she said. “You mean to say that combat will shift toward slaughtering the enemy first and foremost?”

“I think so. I’ve been stunned by how much the gun has developed over the past few years alone, and if my predictions are correct, these advancements are only going to continue. There are already ideas for how to achieve consecutive fire.”

“Consecutive fire?”

“You automate the loading process. These systems are currently too large for one person to realistically carry, but it’s only a matter of time. When we speak of politics, we must also think of what will come after we draw our last breath.”

“Indeed. You’re right about that.”

Franziska scoffed from beside him. “Those ideals are all well and good, but there are loads of countries that despise Belgaria and all its stands for. And now, after hundreds of years of war, you’re going to turn around and cooperate with them? Hah. If any one of them invades the Empire, they’re all going to join in and tear you to shreds.”

“I agree that establishing the necessary peace treaties won’t be easy,” Regis conceded. “That is part of what makes this an ideal, but I think it’s much more than just a dream.”

“It’s impossible. How could it not be?!”

“If every statesman gave up and chose only to fight, humanity would crumble before long.”

“Hah? But in any battle, someone always comes out on top—there’s always a winning side who keeps on living.”

Regis shook his head. “Say, for instance, that an empire of one million manages to best all other nations—new wars will simply start originating from within its borders. Five hundred thousand may remain when the dust settles, and then another battle will commence among those.”

“How can you be so sure?!”

“Isn’t it obvious? Because the group that was victorious over all other nations was the same one that chose to fight and plunder.”

Franziska stared at Regis for a moment; then she offered a quiet, “Oh...”

“One group chose to brute force its way to victory—why would it suddenly change its ways? No matter what system they might have set up after the fact, its leaders will grow old, disasters will strike, and new weapons will be developed. The balance of power will eventually change, and once someone perceives a chink in the metaphorical armor—even if one doesn’t actually exist—war is inevitable. People will once again be gunned down.”

“...Yeah.”

“And again, only the victors will remain. Their way of thinking brought them victory before and allowed them to monopolize the available wealth, so why should they change? One million becomes five hundred thousand, that becomes two hundred and fifty thousand... From there, the populace will only continue to decrease. The ultimate outcome of hegemony is clear to see—there is only one future for those who see war as the only means of survival.”

“A-And that is?”

“They’ll fracture their civilization until they’re no longer capable of war, and then that’s it. Whether it’s a natural disaster or a wild beast... I couldn’t tell you what would bring about their final moment, but in the end, they’ll cease to exist. Perhaps all that will remain are savages with no more than vague, fleeting memories of a civilization that once was.”

“Aren’t you reading too much into this?”

“This isn’t just my imagination—there are plenty of species that went extinct after they failed to coexist with their environment. There are countless examples of nations weakened from civil wars that in turn fell to foreign powers. You should know a few yourself.”

“That’s...”

Franziska hailed from the Germanian Federation, a nation of constant civil

war where countries often faded and new ones sprung up in their place. Assuming this continued after guns became more widely accessible, Germania would soon fall in its entirety.

“Those who support hegemonic conquest do not truly understand this new era,” Regis said with the utmost certainty. “No matter how many battles they might win, they will rule only over a land of corpses.”

Franziska was at a loss for words.

Bourgine nodded. “I’ve never seen the new guns that High Britannia uses, but for you to make such a conclusion, they must be terribly capable.”

“It’s also worth considering that the High Britannian Army wasn’t using them to their full potential.”

“Really? But I heard that countless imperial soldiers were lost.”

“That’s our small consolation. Had they used them more efficiently, we would have suffered even graver losses. Perhaps the capital would have been taken too.”

Claude wiped his brow. “I’m glad you weren’t on High Britannia’s side...”

“I’m actually quite sure their commander realized this problem, but there was nothing he could do—his suggestions simply didn’t mesh with his queen’s aesthetics.”

“Are guns really that amazing?” Claude asked, leaning in closer.

“Even a child could take down the finest knight with the squeeze of a trigger. We’ll need to rethink our understanding of war.”

“Ah...” His body trembled at the mere thought.

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Claude glanced toward the partition; a second commotion was starting to grow beyond it. “Is your apprentice here?” he wondered aloud. “Hm? No... This is...”

Yells overlapped with screams and a metallic clatter.

Franziska rose from the bench so suddenly that it slid back a short distance,

and she swiftly produced from her bag her crossbow. “That’s the sound of armor!” she called.

Claude stood as well, clicking his tongue as he reached behind his waist and drew a knife. The partition was kicked down a mere beat later to reveal a group of soldiers clad in black armor.

Ten, Regis counted. *No, twenty?*

“We’ve found them!” one of the soldiers cried.

Wait... They’re not from the capital garrison. And they’re not from the First Army either!

Regis had never seen their armor before, but their uniforms were emblazoned with the crest of the Empire. They had to be part of the standing army.

The man leading the soldiers was glowering at them, but a cold smile played on his lips. “Oh my... We’ve hit the jackpot,” he said. Unlike his comrades, he wasn’t wearing any armor; his chest was instead decorated with various medals and gems. He was short and slender, with a crooked nose and narrow, fox-like eyes.

Regis recognized the man in an instant—he was the inspector who had come to the Beilschmidt border regiment eight months prior, carrying the directive for them to capture Fort Volks. Regis had caught him just as he was about to assault Clarisse, although it was Eric and Altina who had ultimately salvaged the situation...

“Inspector Becker?!” Regis inadvertently cried out.

The narrow-eyed man glared at him. “Huh? A woman? Have we ever met before...? And you know, I’m not just some measly inspector; I’m regiment commander of the Public Order Corps!”

“Wha... But how? Weren’t you arrested and tried for attempted assault and soliciting bribes?!”

“Nonsense! I’m the nephew of Marquis Beclard and the second son of a count. Why would some trivial issue with a godforsaken regiment have any effect on me?!”

“So you were never tried...?”

“You have no right to mouth off at me, commoner. Oi, arrest her! Make sure she’s taken alive, and be especially mindful not to damage her face.”

The black-armored soldiers approached with their swords drawn. Their blades were already stained with fresh blood.

“You animals!” Bourgine yelled. “If you so much as harmed the patrons here —!”

“Hah! We have intel that this pub is a watering hole for rebellious elements. We merely eliminated them to preserve the Empire’s public order!”

“How could this be? And without so much as a trial...”

“We are the law! If you have any complaints, then you can bring *me* to trial. If you’re still alive by tomorrow, that is!”

“Commander! That’s Bourgine!” one of the soldiers reported.

“I see. Cut her down, then!”

“Eh?! But...the minister said to capture her.”

“Did you not hear me?! Why should I have to endure some gratuitous trial?! The dead can’t sue, nor can they run. They can’t argue back either! And that makes them exemplary, virtuous citizens, goddammit!”

“Y-Yes, sir!”

“All right. Now, let’s clean up the populace!”

The armor-clad men raised war cries as if they were on the battlefield...but Regis was by no stretch of the imagination a soldier.

Claude rushed to protect Bourgine. “Run! We can’t have you dying here, Teach!”

“Don’t let them get away, no matter what!” Becker ordered. “If a single one of them leaves this building alive, you’re all getting a beating!”

The soldiers charged toward their prey. The pub was by no means spacious; there was nowhere to run, nor was there even a window to jump out of.

We'll be killed at this rate!

"Hold on!" Regis cried out. "Let's make a deal!"

"Ignore her!" Becker screamed in response.

Regis knew that he had to buy time, but it seemed the same method wasn't going to work on the inspector twice. The soldiers, however, seemed to hesitate slightly at his words. He was sure he could get through to them; he just needed to hold firm.

"Are you sure about this, gentlemen?! Your commander is a big shot, so he'll get off scot-free, but is he the sort of man who'll stick up for his subordinates?! Why do you think the minister conveyed the order to you and not just to your superior?! Are you really going to ignore the order to capture Professor Bourgine?!"

"Silence!" Becker snapped. He then turned to his men. "You'll kill when I tell you to! Any who oppose me are rebellious elements! You'll be killed along with them!"

At that, the soldiers' momentary hesitation was gone—perhaps the inspector truly had put his own men to death in the past. They brandished their swords as they were ordered.

So that didn't work out...

Much to his dismay, the soldiers were fearful and loyal. Regis couldn't even delay them enough to come up with a plan.

All of a sudden, there was a sharp *twang*—the metallic snap of a crossbow. A bolt fired from close proximity bit into the neck of one of the black-clad men.

"Gah?!"

"We've got to fight!" Franziska declared. The phenomenal speed at which she was able to reload her weapon meant three more soldiers fell silent in the blink of an eye. She had a proficiency that was perhaps to be expected of a mercenary of the renowned Renard Pendu...but unfortunately for her, she was too heavily outnumbered. The soldiers closed the distance in no time, and a sword was thrust in her direction.

“Hah! I’m not gonna be done in by such a slow attack!” Franziska yelled as she evaded the first stroke. But next came three slashes at once, and then four. The soldiers were properly trained and coordinated, leaving her with increasingly little room to dodge.

Franziska used her crossbow to block one of the oncoming attacks, hoping to open up an escape route, but this move came at a cost—there came an audible *ping* as the string snapped in two, making the weapon unusable. To make matters worse, its slender frame had come apart too; she could no longer use it as a shield.

The space was simply much too narrow for Franziska to exhibit her might. Her heels bumped against the bench, providing enough of an opening for a blade to sink into her flank.

“Guh?!”

Her slender body crumpled and collided with the ground. Then, with a loud retch, she spat up what had been accumulating in her throat—a vivid red liquid.

Regis was frozen halfway out of his seat. The soldiers had already readied their blades again, this time approaching Claude and Bourgine. Despite Claude’s best efforts, the knife in his hand wasn’t even a threat to them.

“Kill the man too!” Becker ordered. “Whoever he is, I’m sure he’s in cahoots with the rebels!”

“You’re a piece of trash!” Claude shouted.

“S-Stop this at once! You’re all making a huge mistake!” Regis spread out his arms in a desperate attempt to intervene, but he couldn’t even slow their advance.

Just as the soldiers went to attack, however, something flew over their heads. For a moment, they wondered whether it was a bird or a beast, but when the shadow landed, it became clear there was a dagger in its hand.

Blood sprayed through the air as one of the black-clad soldier’s arms was abruptly severed at the elbow. A beat later, a young man with brown hair descended before Claude and Bourgine.

“Phew. So, what’s going on here?” the new arrival asked. “I’m used to you almost getting captured, but ain’t it strange that you’re about to be killed instead this time?”

The brown-haired man wore dark glasses with lenses of smoky quartz. The dagger in his hand was wide at the base, with both sides narrowing to a triangular point. It was about four palms (thirty centimeters) in length and as thin as paper. Regis immediately recognized it from paintings, but he had never seen the real thing before.

Isn’t that the Vite Espace Trois*?! That means this man is...*



“My apologies,” Bourgine said. “It seems I’ve had to rely on you again, Bastian.”

“I should be the one apologizing for showing up so late. If only I’d noticed a bit sooner, then... Wait. You?!” Bastian’s eyes widened as he spotted Franziska on the floor. “Aren’t you Franka?!”

She looked up with a groan and opened one eye. “Ah... Bastian?”

“What are you doing here?! Ah, no, that can wait! This’ll only take me a minute! Don’t go dying on me now!” Bastian removed his glasses to reveal his crimson eyes, a trait said to belong only to Belgarian royalty. “I am the Third Prince of Belgaria, Heinrich Trois Bastian de Belgaria!” he declared, fixing the soldiers with a glare. “For what reason do you point your blades at Professor Bourgine? You even wounded my friend while you were at it.”

The soldiers backed away, but this earned them a scolding from Becker.

“You idiots! Why the hell would a prince be here?! He’s clearly a fake, and someone with the gall to impersonate royalty is only going to disturb the peace! Kill him! I want him dead! Cut him down, or I’ll have you all cut down instead!”

“Oh, my old man did say something about the new Public Order Corps,” Bastian mused aloud. “I thought that was a while down the road, but I guess they’re already in action.”

Once again, the soldiers hesitated, but just as when Regis had tried to stall them, they soon folded to Becker’s screams and brandished their swords.

Bastian gave a light sigh. “Sorry about this. When I’ve got something to protect...I refuse to hold back.”

For a moment, his form blurred. Regis couldn’t tell what he had done, but then three soldiers collapsed at once. There was blood gushing from their sides —from cuts that had been made through the gaps in their armor. Those behind them swallowed their breaths.

Bastian flicked the blood from his dagger with one smooth motion. “My brother is...faster than this... So I must...become even faster... I have to...”

“H-Huh...?” One of the soldiers began to falter, only for the inspector to

impatiently kick him forward.

“What are you falling back for, trash?!”

“C-Commander?!”

Becker now had a pistol in his hand, the muzzle of which was pointed at Bastian. “So he’s a prince, huh? Who cares? It won’t make a difference when he’s dead!”

“A-Are you serious?!”

Becker was grinning so hard that it looked as though his cheeks might burst at any second. His eyes were bloodshot, and with his right index finger he squeezed the trigger.

There was no gunshot—only a soft *thud*.

“Eh?”

Becker looked down to see what had caused the noise; then he screamed. Sitting on the floor was his right index finger.

“MY FINGER?!” he wailed. “M-My...finger?!”

“Something tells me we’ll get a lot of worthwhile information from you in court,” Bastian said. “Let me say this first—no funny movements. The way I see it, injured beasts are always the most dangerous ones. Next time you pick up a gun or blade, I’ll aim for your heart.”

It seemed that Bastian had thrown a knife with the hand that wasn’t holding the *Vite Espace Trois*. Regis hadn’t even seen him holding it, nor had he seen it move through the air...but there it was, stabbed into Becker’s now four-fingered hand.

“It’s not too late,” Bastian addressed what remained of the Public Order Corps. “Leave now, and I’ll consider this a problem with your superior. Alternatively, if you want to fight, I won’t show any more mercy. What will you do?”

There was a clamor as, one by one, the soldiers cast down their swords. Then they dropped to their knees, removed their helmets, and lowered their heads.

“My apologies, Y-Your Highness!” one of the soldiers stammered. “We were simply—”

“Glad you understand. Throw that idiot into a holding cell. I’ll have a good chat with my brother and the minister about him. Killing innocent civilians... How reckless can a man be?”

“I-If I might be so bold... That woman, Bourgine, is a rebellious element.”

“On what basis? Because she’s a liberalist? Because she made a speech in the palace plaza? Neither goes against the word of the law.”

“W-We weren’t told the specifics...”

“If you want to avoid this country falling into ruin, do some research yourself and form your own opinions. Now, go already. I’m in a hurry.”

The soldiers bowed and then made for the exit, dragging Becker—who was kicking and screaming—with them.

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Franziska was stripped down and laid on the bench. Her clothes had been sliced through at the flank, but the chainmail beneath was intact. She had shifted along with the blow to mitigate the damage—a move that had successfully kept her injuries to a minimum.

Regis touched the large, dark bruise that had formed, causing Franziska to grimace.

“Ngh...”

“Answer by nodding or shaking your head,” Regis said. “Are you having any difficulty breathing? Do you feel nauseous? Is there a ringing in your ears? Any throbbing in the pit of your stomach? Does it hurt here? How about here? Here?”

Franziska winced.

“Oh, looks like it does hurt there. I see... It seems you’ve fractured maybe two ribs. As much as I want to rush you to a doctor, for now, I don’t think your life is in any danger. You vomited blood earlier because the blow got you in the stomach. You need to rest for now. Limit your meals to soup for the time

being.”

“Ghh... How could I have made such a...?”

“I’m glad you’re still alive. Thank you for protecting me,” Regis said, taking her by the hand. Franziska clicked her tongue but didn’t attempt to pull away.

“Was I...?”

“Pardon?”

“Was I...useful? Do you think Gil will...praise me?”

“I don’t know what he thinks, but we’re both better off alive, for the Mercenary King’s sake.”

“I see... Then it’s all good.”

“I don’t think you’ll get much sleep due to the pain, but lie down whenever you can. I’ll call a doctor.”

“Mm...” Franziska nodded and then shut her eyes, her teeth gritted as she endured it. The store owner called for a carriage, and they soon put the pub behind them.

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The Bourgine estate consisted of a cheap apartment, located on the second floor of a building that was in such a sorry state it was surprising to learn anyone lived there at all. They had to climb a flight of partially destroyed stairs around the back just to reach the entrance.

Inside, they were greeted by four wooden chairs and a table. The floor was almost completely covered with stacks upon stacks of books.

It was night, but Bourgine called a doctor she knew to have Franziska looked at. The mercenary’s bones were set with boards and bandages. Her condition was just as Regis had diagnosed; it would be a month or two before she made a full recovery. The condition of her internal organs was as of yet unknown, and there was nothing more the doctor could do for the time being. He said for them to call him again if she coughed up any more blood, and then he left the apartment.

Franziska was tucked into bed while Regis and the others gathered in the living room.

“Phew...” Regis exhaled as he took a seat.

“You look tired. Please, have some.” A girl with blonde hair and blue eyes held out a cup of coffee. She had a gallant, gentle air to her, and even Regis, who usually had no interest in women’s looks, found himself quickly entranced.

She was Elize Archibald, a friend of Bastian’s. Her petite build made her look about thirteen years old, but she was actually sixteen, the same age as Bastian. Regis considered himself very lucky that he hadn’t broached the topic before finding that out.

Regis accepted the cup with a thank-you and then took a sip. “Mm. Quite nice.”

“Haah. That’s a relief.”

Also gathered in the room were Bourgine, Claude, and Bastian.

“You have my utmost gratitude for saving us back there. I am Regis d’Aurick, strategist to the fourth princess.”

“Huh?!” Bastian looked at him quizzically.

“A-Ah... Ha ha... There’s a good reason why I’m dressed like this.”

Both Claude and Bourgine vouched for Regis’s identity, but Bastian was looking more doubtful by the second. “Regis d’Aurick... The tactician who tore through the High Britannian Navy, right?” He had apparently heard the rumors while sheltering in a noble’s mansion in High Britannia.

Regis scratched his head. “I suppose I did take command as admiral proxy...”

“The hero who led the Empire to victory?!”

“Not through strength, though...”

“The person who did all that...is this flimsy-looking thing?!”

“Sorry to disappoint...”

“I was expecting a rough and tough bear of a man, but...you’re a woman?”

“I’m not!”

Somewhat accustomed to this exchange by this point, Regis explained the situation—that he had to don a disguise because Latrielle was pursuing him.

Bastian observed Regis all over, rather impressed. “Now that you mention it, your hair is a bit...lopsided.”

“Ah. You’re right. I must have moved around a bit too much. I should straighten it while I can...”

Regis removed his wig for a moment, but then he hurriedly put it back on. Without it, he was no longer a person in disguise; he was just a man wearing a dress.

“Hmm?!” For some reason, Bastian was now looking at him with wide eyes.

“I-Is there something on my face?” Regis asked.

“Makeup. And a lot of it.”

“Oh, err... Yes, well...”

“Hey. I get the feeling we’ve met before.”

“Eh?” Now it was Regis’s turn to observe the prince—namely, his crimson eyes and brown hair. “You’re Third Prince Heinrich Trois Bastian de Belgaria, correct...?” There was little room for doubt—after all, the prince had already introduced himself during the fight in the pub.

“Yeah, but that’s not it! I mean, at that library in the palace! Ah, you might remember me better like this...” Bastian put his glasses back on.

“Eh?”

“You seriously don’t remember me?! Even after you said you’d read my future masterpiece?!”

“Ah... Wait. Are you perhaps the kid who borrowed *Of Swords of Sleet and Enneadic Wings*? It surprised me how you left without properly checking out the book, but the minister of ceremonies told me to act as though I didn’t see anything.”

“Don’t worry, I returned it properly after that. After I’d read it cover to cover,

of course.”

“That’s good. To think the boy from back then was the third prince... That’s surprising.” Regis gazed at Bastian, immersed in a sense of nostalgia. The prince, meanwhile, seemed rather perplexed.

“You’re a weirdo.”

“Huh? Well, I get that a lot...”

“People usually start acting all humble before royalty. Man, I can’t stand all those stiff formalities. It’s not like I have a problem with how you’re acting right now; in fact, I actually prefer it like this.”

“Certainly. I’ve had many opportunities to speak with other members of the royal family, so this casualness just came naturally to me. My apologies.”

“It’s fine, I tell ya. Forget about it. I just thought it was rare, that’s all. Since you’ve been both Argentina’s and Latrielle’s strategist by this point, I guess it makes sense that you’re so used to royalty.”

“Right. If I hadn’t served as the princess’s tactician, I probably would have addressed you more politely.”

“Hah... We have more than enough of those formalities in the palace. Just call me Bastian. You’re like a teacher to me, after all!”

“A-A teacher?”

“You taught me about books. I’ve read so many since then... I’ve written a little too.”

“My, that’s wonderful!”

“Not anything I’m satisfied with yet, mind you... I just can’t envision the cool protagonist I’m looking for.”

“I see. That *is* quintessential. If you’re looking to take inspiration from recent trends...”

“Go on.”

Just as their book-focused conversation started to heat up, however, Elize intervened. “Bastian, this seems like a topic for another time. Didn’t you have

something important to discuss?”

“Oh, right...” Regis said.

“Hah. Just can’t help myself...” Bastian cleared his throat. “So, Latrielle’s after your head, is he?”

“I declined his request for me to continue serving as his staff officer. It seems he did not take kindly to that.”

“He never changes, does he?”

“Has something similar happened before...?”

Regis attempted to pry into the matter, and much to his surprise, Bastian offered up what he knew just like that. He didn’t propose an exchange, nor did he demand a fee of any sort.

So this is what it’s like to be truly wealthy... It never even occurred to him to request something in return.

“Latrielle, he...killed my old man...” Bastian said.

“Such is the rumor going around the court.”

“So, you figured it out too. Thing is, there’s no evidence. It’s the same as what happened with Auguste. In the end, he’s got all the nobles behind him, so it won’t come to light no matter what we do.”

“No... I’m not so sure about that.”

“Eh?”

“It’s a mistake to assume that authority can conceal the truth. We need to teach Latrielle that a new era is upon us.”

“R-Really?” Bastian seemed at a loss for words.

Bourgine chuckled. “The man is due to become emperor in three days, and you intend to teach him a lesson? And this isn’t even a barroom bluff. You’re serious, I take it.”

“I’m aware that I may be talking big...but I want your cooperation to make it a reality.”

Bourgine nodded. “As long as our ideals align.”

Elize lined the table with sandwiches; she had gone as far as to prepare a midnight snack. “So, what are you planning? Oh, do go ahead,” she said, gesturing at the food.

Thinking back, Regis hadn’t eaten dinner. “Thank you,” he said. “I think I’ll take you up on that.”

Bastian reached for a sandwich too. “Ah, fine! I’ll tolerate a bite myself.”

“It doesn’t taste that bad...” Elize murmured, her brow furrowed.

They must get along well, Regis thought, a knowing smile playing on his lips. This didn’t last long, however—any such thoughts were quickly blown from his mind when he bit into the sandwich. *Is this...rotten?*

In fact, the closest smell that came to mind was kitchen waste. Between the two pieces of bread were vegetables boiled until they had lost all semblance of shape, texture, and taste, topped with rough, sand-like...meat, perhaps?

“Hrk.” Regis almost vomited, but he managed to hold it in.

Bastian swallowed the sandwich in one gulp. “The trick is to hold your breath and try not to taste it. It might be a bit much for a noble.”

“O-Oh, no, I’m a commoner. Though I was granted the title of chevalier not so long ago.”

“Oh, I knew it. You were wearing a commoner uniform back when I met you at the library.”

“Y... Yeah...”

Regis took a great swig of coffee to wash away the foul taste lingering in his mouth.

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“Professor Bourgine is a renowned liberalist,” Regis said to Bastian. “If you’re her disciple, does that make you a liberalist too?”

“Do you think that’s strange?”

“Not at all. The princess I serve is also opposed to the current establishment—

though she doesn't want to go as far as abolishing the nobility."

"Well, why not?"

"At the moment, the common folk aren't capable enough to speak on politics. If the nobles are simply done away with all at once and such matters are left entirely to the people, I can see a seditious conman taking power."

Claude raised a hand. "Sorry for butting in, but...what exactly do you mean by 'seditious'? Could you give an example?"

"A simple one would be someone who provides the public with a clear-cut enemy," Regis replied. "The facts of the case don't matter—for instance, you could leak false information saying that the emperor mocked the commoners."

"Surely the emperor could just refute those claims."

"They could, but the populace will assume they're making excuses. Proving a negative is no easy task. That level of deceit is enough to cheat people, especially because the public *wants* an enemy. They are deceived because they want to be deceived."

"I see..."

"Another example would be someone who claims that the actions of a foreign nation are unjust. It doesn't matter what those actions are; the people are once again given an enemy to fight, and they will dedicate themselves to opposing it. This means more followers too. In summary, the people are currently too easy to incite. I cannot entrust them with politics."

"Hah... History may have changed if you were born in High Britannia, Regis. The people have authority there, right?"

"Yes, and they were thrown into a reckless invasion as a result. An incited group always tends toward naive and aggressive behavior. Only a tragic end awaits them."

"That wouldn't exactly be true if they'd won, though... No, let's not. I apologize for getting the conversation off track," Claude said with a shrug.

Regis raised his second cup of coffee to his lips. "Don't worry about it. In any case, I think it's too early to do away with the nobility."

“What about in the future?”

“The pacifism I strive for will need the people in power.”

Bastian nodded. “I had a good friend who was taught by Madame Bourgine. He wanted to bring freedom to Belgaria. That’s...what I hope to do. Someday.”

“I see.”

“Those born into nobility lead extravagant lives, while those born to commoners live to be exploited by them. Isn’t that unfair?”

“So you’re hoping for freedom of work. As well as equal rights and equal taxes, perhaps.”

At this remark, Bourgine silently nodded. She took a step back, like a professor watching a debate between students.

“But...Latrielle said that unfairness is inevitable,” Bastian went on.

Regis was a little taken aback. “You spoke with Latrielle about liberalism?!”

“Yeah. I smacked him with it...and was utterly defeated.”

“What did he say?”

“That nobles learn how to manage land, people, and armies from infancy. Only the most exceptional commoners can hope to match this.”

“That would be educational inequality.”

“But he’s right—it’s impossible to give every citizen in the Empire the same education those in the nobility receive. I looked into it myself, and it’s just impossible!”

“I worked as a teacher before, but my students were all the children of affluent houses,” Bourgine added, her tone level as if she were attempting to calm Bastian.

The schools that were run on the contributions of affluent commoners and nobles required exorbitant tuition to attend. The church ran classes too, and these were free to attend, but they were only held on Sundays after prayer.

Powerful nobles hired home tutors, all of whom were paid handsomely. Incidentally, the teaching profession was often filled with nobles who weren’t

heirs to their houses, and it was exceedingly rare for a commoner woman to take up the mantle.

Regis nodded. “Latrielle is speaking from the facts—nobles are given special education and are thus able to better foster their talents. This system is what has allowed the Belgarian Empire to grow as large as it has.”

“So you think my brother’s right too?”

“He *was* right. But times have changed.”

“Huh?” Bastian cocked his head, while Regis picked up one of the many books stacked throughout the room.

“I’m talking about books. Books will change the world. It’s impossible to have a home tutor for every commoner, and sending them all to schools won’t be much easier, but they can at least be taught to read and write. Once they have those basics down, they can learn the rest themselves by reading. Books are expensive at the moment, but that cost will go down as technology advances. Soon, even children will be able to buy them with pocket change.”

Bastian stared at the book in Regis’s hand. “So this is going to do it...”

“Prince, haven’t you taken in many different viewpoints from reading books? They have the power to change people—to change the world. At least, that’s what I think.”

“So...anyone can become like you?”

“Ah, no... If you filled the streets with people like me, the nation would fall to pieces. I am a commoner, though. That made it hard for me to obtain books, but as long as I economized on food, clothes, and shelter...it wasn’t impossible.”

“I’m starting to see the problem here. But if we can make books even cheaper—if we can make it so that even more people read them—you’re saying the nation could change?”

“Yes. If we can meet all of those conditions, things will definitely change.”

“I see. So, with books, his dream...can come true.” Bastian wiped away the tears that were blurring his vision. Regis could make an educated guess as to why from the prince’s behavior, but he intentionally refrained from bringing it

up.

“I, too, think books can change the world,” Bourgine muttered. “The people who have lived their lives serving the nobility have started to read, to share opinions, to demand freedom and equality... We’re getting more and more liberalists.”

“So it seems,” Regis said.

“But these discussions are being suppressed.”

“Indeed. We were almost killed back there.”

“Regis d’Aurick. You are an excellent tactician, well versed in politics, economics, and science, and of good moral character. I want to hear your opinion on the matter—what can we do to change the nation?” Bourgine asked frankly.

Regis found himself at a loss for words. He knew the answer—an answer, at least—but not whether he should actually voice it. The most he could do was remain silent.

Claude leaned in. “Hey, how about this? Regis, you want to give Latrielle a good wake-up call, right? You’ll need Prince Bastian’s help for that. How about their cooperation in exchange for an answer to Madame Bourgine’s question?” It was exactly the kind of proposal one would expect from a reporter. His was a trade that dealt in information.

Bastian shrugged. “I’ll help out either way, so long as I think it’s the right thing to do.”

“And I personally think there’s something wrong with putting a price on the act of sharing opinions,” Bourgine added.

Regis sighed. If Claude had been aiming for this, his conversation skills were abnormally astute. Perhaps he was more suited to being a diplomat than a journalist. Now that Bastian and Bourgine had said they would cooperate even without compensation, Regis could no longer refuse to share his opinion. He took a moment, organizing his thoughts.

“Books will change the world. They will change this nation too. However,

expanding the views of the populace is not enough to change the establishment. They will simply be oppressed. I am a pacifist. I despise war. I don't want to see anyone die. It is for these reasons that I don't want to admit this, but...ultimately, for the people to change this nation...an armed uprising seems to be the quickest option."

An armed uprising. Regis was proposing that the Belgarian people take up arms and attack their oppressors.

Bourgine frowned. "Attempts have already been made in too many towns. The result is always the same: the army storms in, many die...and not a single thing changes."

"Yes, because even if an amateur picks up a bow or spear, they can't hope to match a knight. It's questionable whether a hundred commoners could take down a single rider."

Bastian raised his right index finger. "So you're going to suggest they use guns, right?"

"Precisely." Regis heaved another sigh. "I personally hope it never happens. I aim to have the princess become empress, to better our relations with foreign powers, and to incrementally level the playing field between commoners and nobles. In other words, my goal is for bloodless reform. However, if you want the most effective way...it would be for commoners with a bare minimum education to stage an insurrection with guns."

"Will that do away with the nobility system?"

"If you demanded that, the nobles would rally all their forces to fight. If you really want to win a war, you should keep it so that your enemy isn't giving it their all. Demand the formation of a parliament so that commoner representatives have a voice in politics. That sounds more realistic to me."

"Is that really enough though?"

"If the people have a say in politics, they can make schools, allowing commoners on the whole to become more knowledgeable. In turn, we will be able to increase the number of commoner commanders in the military. Once the common man has a stronger voice, some nobles may be swayed to their

side. A parliament will serve as the hole in the bottom of their ship."

"Sounds great. I'm all for it," Claude said as he rose enthusiastically from his seat. Bourgine, however, was quick to interject.

"Don't be ridiculous. The High Britannian Army had guns, and not even they could defeat our nation's cavalry. It's not going to be as easy as it sounds."

"I mean, we only won because we had Regis d'Aurick on our side, right?"

"A gun's weakness is its supply chain," Regis explained. "The new guns serve little purpose without bullets, and there aren't yet any facilities in Belgaria to produce the required ammunition. Even if one is built, its production would go straight to the army rather than being made accessible to the common man."

"Is there no other way to make them?"

"The blacksmiths in Rouenne are racking their brains over it, on Latrielle's order. But it's going to take time."

"The blacksmiths, eh? I see..." Claude nodded a few times; then, he stooped down in front of Regis. "So? You're Regis d'Aurick. That can't be it, right?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Books will change the public consciousness. Guns and bullets can raise the success rate of an armed uprising. These are things anyone could have figured out. But nobles aren't going to build schools for commoners, and there's no easy way to obtain guns and ammo. There has to be more to this."

"That's precisely why I'm set on making the princess empress."

"But you need a more realistic plan to make an armed uprising succeed. That's why you were speaking so hesitantly."

"Mr. Claude...I get the feeling that you've noticed already."

"As a reporter, I've got a good nose for secrets. But I'm only asking these questions because I really haven't figured it out."

"Hah... Can you promise not to put this in an article? This goes for everyone else here too—please keep all this between us. Far too much blood would spill if what I'm about to say ends up getting put into practice."

Bastian and Elize nodded their assent, while Bourgine said, “I’ve always been against violence.”

“Fine, fine. I won’t jot it down,” Claude said, placing a hand to his chest as he swore to God. “It’s a real shame though.”

“It seems that Prince Latrielle intends to conquer the surrounding nations within the next couple years,” Regis began. “He is preparing a large number of guns to achieve this, and a great number of commoners are no doubt going to be hired to fill roles in the production process. Artillery is still seen as being beneath the knights, so a majority of the foot soldiers using such weapons will be common-born.”

“Hmm? Wait. You don’t mean...”

“Yes—the production and the handling of guns is going to be left to commoners. My question is, what if such a body were to be infiltrated by the sort of individuals who could become the core of a rebellion...?”

“Of course... If we could seek out like-minded fellows as we make and train with these new guns...”

Regis shook his head. “But many will die in the process. Not to mention, civilians staging an uprising are a far throw from a unified army. They have a tendency toward cruelty and excess. What we speak of is a tragedy that must never happen.”

Claude returned to his chair, slouched over in defeat. “Thank you. You’ve provided a good reference point. I won’t put any of this in an article, as promised...but I’ll be looking at my newer stories differently because of what you’ve said.”

“All right.”

“Well, that’s not to say the current nobles aren’t cruel and excessive—at least, as far as I see it.”

“That may be so...”

Bourgine nodded. “I can definitely see how your plans can improve our chances of success. However, if we were to suppress others with military might,

we would be no different from the nobility. I don't think that will make Belgaria a better nation."

"That's right!" Bastian exclaimed, evidently sharing the sentiment. "I think we should fight if necessary, but we should think of other ways first. Civilians using guns to fight against knights? Let's keep that to fiction, eh?"

"Then would you like to hear another plan?" Regis asked. "It's a bit of a roundabout method, but it *is* somewhat more peaceful."

To this, there were nods all around.

Chapter 4: The August 12th Papers

Regis walked down the main road, still dressed in women's clothing. He was also wearing a reporter's leather cap, while Bastian beside him wore his usual sunglasses.

Elize wasn't with them that day. It was dangerous, so she hadn't intended to accompany them to begin with, but this was coupled with her having to attend to a visitor from the south who had arrived that morning. Elize was a mysterious girl; she spoke in perfect, unaccented Belgarian, but knew a great deal about High Britannian cuisine. She presumably had her own set of circumstances.

Bastian pointed. "This is the place."

They had reached the estate of the grand chamberlain, Marquis Beclard. It was conspicuously large, even for the district lined with the houses of noblemen, and the fence surrounding it resembled a long row of pikes. There were around twenty heavily armored foot soldiers in front of the gate, and perhaps another eighty patrolling the perimeter. How many were guarding inside the premises, they had no way of guessing.

The insignia on the men's armor wasn't of the capital garrison, but the First Army. Latrielle understood that Beclard was one of the key individuals vouching for his legitimacy, which also made him a potential weak point. Though that was obvious enough.

Bastian stared at the mansion while scratching his head. "Let's hope my name is enough to get us through..."

"I doubt it," Regis replied. "You're a political rival and a known liberalist."

"Should I have kept quiet about that?"

"It wouldn't have changed our plan."

The two approached the gate, and as expected, the soldiers pointed their spears at them. "Halt!" one man cried.

Bastian held up his hands with a knowing smile. “Don’t get your knickers in a twist. We’re not suspicious,” he said. Of course, no suspicious individual would proclaim themselves as such, so the soldiers vigilantly kept up their guard.

“Identify yourselves!”

“Third Prince Heinrich Trois Bastian de Belgaria,” the prince said as he removed his glasses. The soldiers immediately began to stir; they properly recognized the faces of the royal family, as expected of men of the First Army.

“M-My apologies, Your Highness!”

The soldiers lowered their spears at once, but that didn’t mean they were going to let their unexpected visitors through. They all remained firmly in place.

“With all due respect, sir—we were ordered not to let anyone through these gates without permission!”

“Can’t say I didn’t see this coming... Well, whatever. Could you hand this to the marquis for me then? You’re not going to say letters are banned too, are you?”

“Well...”

Perhaps they would have refused under any other circumstances, but this was a letter from royalty—they couldn’t simply disregard it. Had they been bumpkin soldiers from the outer reaches, it would have been harder to foresee their reactions, but the soldiers stationed in the capital were men of culture. Those charged with guarding noble estates were the most refined of the lot, meaning there was no way they would make light of such a letter. At the very least, they wouldn’t be rude about it.

As expected, the soldiers took the envelope.

“Very well. If that’s all you need.”

“Thanks for that.”

The thick envelope was subsequently taken into the manor. Regis and Bastian waited patiently for the result, while the soldiers fixed them with disapproving stares. Regis secretly grew anxious that his true identity would be exposed.

“Are we good?” Bastian whispered in his ear.

“I-I’m not sure. Maybe we really should have come in the evening... Maybe my makeup is a little thin...”

“Hey, what are you worrying about? I’m talking about if we’ll be able to enter the mansion.”

“Oh, that should work out just fine. I have another move prepared just in case, but it shouldn’t be necessary. Beclard isn’t the type of person to ignore what we’ve just sent him; he would have left the capital by now otherwise.”

“He may be old, but he was still grand chamberlain to the emperor.”

“You can tell if you look into his past accomplishments. His only real skill was reading the old emperor’s complexion. That’s precisely why I decided to launch my plan of attack through him.”

“Is that how it is?”

There were other individuals associated with the emperor’s death, but Regis hadn’t set his sights by pure coincidence. A butler soon walked from the door to the gate, and the soldiers began discussing something or another.

As expected, Regis thought.

The gate opened, and the butler—who hadn’t a hair on his head that wasn’t white—offered the two a courteous bow. “Pardon me. I am an attendant of Marquis Beclard. I take it you are His Highness, Heinrich Trois Bastian? My master wishes for an audience with you.”

“Sure. I’ll humor him if he wants to see me so badly.”

They had moved so many pieces just to enter the mansion, and yet Bastian still showed such composure. Perhaps this was to be expected of royalty.

The butler’s eyes turned to Regis. “May I inquire as to the identity of this young lass?”

Regis was glad that his disguise was working well enough to disguise his gender, but... *Am I really that baby-faced...?* He shuddered at the thought—not that he would have been any happier if “young lass” had been replaced with “lady.”

“She’s with me,” Bastian replied with a shrug. “I brought her along because I

thought Beclard might want to meet her, but if he says she's not allowed, that's no skin off my nose."

Regis politely lowered his head. He had added something extra to his already fake name. "I am Regina Ottoman, a reporter from *The Weekly Quarry*."

The butler's brow twitched. "I see... Please come inside."

Their letter had evidently been effective.

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They were led into a parlor lined with expensive-looking ornaments. Bastian immediately plopped down onto a leather sofa. "I never used to think anything of it," he said.

"Of what?" Regis asked. His eyes had been taken by the books lining the shelves. Most were merely decorative pieces—works that showed almost no signs of ever having been handled—but among them were a variety of rare books that couldn't be found in any bookstore.

"This luxury. I'm starting to hate it now. I end up wondering how many commoners could have gone to school on these expenses—not that it means much coming from the guy who was always running from his home tutor."

"It's never too late, Prince Bastian."

"Hmm?"

"The human brain continues to develop no matter how old you are. Memory and calculation speed are influenced by regular practice."

"Don't you start forgetting things as you get older though?"

"Barring those with illness...it is more that you become less resistant to forgetting. Your anxiety about losing memories fades. There was a study conducted on occupations that require one to use their memory daily—observing merchants and butlers, specifically. It found that age has very little impact on memory retention—that the strength of one's memory is on a purely individual basis."

"Hmm."

“If you regret that you once neglected your studies, then you can just try again. It’s never too late.”

“Yeah...you’re right. I think I’ve heard about that too! Muscles don’t get any worse with age, they say. An old man can still train and get buffed.”

“Y-Yes, perhaps...”

“Then, if you train, I’m sure you could at least learn to swing a sword.”

“Oh, no... I never refrained from learning because of my age. As I said, these things need to be considered on a purely individual basis...”

“So, you’re just giving up?”

“Well, I *could* start swinging swords around, but then I’d have less time to read, right?”

“R-Right.”

A knock on the door heralded the master of the estate. Regis had seen him before during the national celebration, but he looked quite a bit older than Regis remembered.

“Your Highness.” The old man reverently bowed his head. “It has been too long.”

“Yeah. And I see you’re still clinging to life, Beclard.”

“The papers I just saw... I believe they came from you.”

Beclard placed a stack of papers on the table. They were creased, likely from having been crumpled up, but they were undoubtedly from the weekly paper they had prepared.

The Weekly Quarry

12-08-851 Edition

The Emperor Assassinated?!

The rumors have been on the wind for a while now. A great many of the maids who used to look after His Majesty were suddenly dismissed, only to go missing or suffer an untimely demise a short while later. It is abnormal that we are

unable to reach even a single one of them.

Juhaprecia is alleged to have followed the emperor to his death, but her own physician was barred from examining her. Everything we know about the matter has come solely from Prince Latrielle's personal doctor, and relations with the consort's home country of Estaburg are worsening as a result. This has become a major diplomatic issue, and yet the Ministries of Diplomacy, Military Affairs, and Ceremonies all remain silent.

Based on the official announcement, the emperor was already deceased when Prince Latrielle visited his chambers. However, we looked into the matter ourselves and finally obtained testimony from someone with an extraordinary position in the imperial court.

According to Marquis Beclard, the grand chamberlain himself, the room had been stained with blood, and the second prince had been standing with his sword drawn.

What is the truth of the matter? Prince Latrielle's August 13th coronation is soon approaching. We ask that someone from the palace provides a clear explanation for these disturbing rumors to put the public at ease.

From our hearts, we pray for the enthronement of a just and blessed emperor.

"What is the meaning of this?" Beclard asked. His voice was calm, though he spoke through gritted teeth.

Bastian nonchalantly shrugged. "I thought you might be interested, so I brought it in. That story's going out tomorrow morning."

"Absurd! This is completely groundless!" Beclard exploded. His respectful politeness from a moment ago was nowhere to be seen.

Regis nodded. *This is about what I expected.*

"Might I have a word...?" Regis asked.

"Who in God's name are you?!" Beclard roared. "This is no place for a woman to speak!"

"My name is Regina Ottoman. I'm a reporter for *The Weekly Quarry*. You can

check my staff ID if you don't believe me." He had asked the editor-in-chief to throw one together for him earlier that morning.

Beclard mussed his white hair and screamed, "From that idiotic, third-rate paper?! Don't think you'll make it out of this in one piece!"

"I'm personally more worried for *your* safety, Lord Beclard."

"What?!"

"After all, anyone who sees this paper will think that you offered up information."

"Nonsense. There's no way I would ever leak anything!"

"Will the prince believe that, though? Can you say that with all certainty?"

"Naturally!" Beclard said without thinking. Then, he grimaced.

Bastian snorted. "You being serious? After all the bribes you've taken? The only reason you're working with my brother is the money—do you honestly think you've got any credibility?"

"Urgh. I-I haven't taken any..."

"A bit late for that. I already know a fair share of nice folks you've extorted money from."

They had already gotten more than enough evidence of this through Fanrine and Carol. Of course, Beclard wasn't the only one who accepted bribes, but this didn't make him any more trustworthy.

"Prince Latrielle is known to be very severe," Regis said, trying to speak as calmly as possible. "I doubt he will show any mercy to traitors."

"I haven't betrayed anyone!"

"You're not the one who gets to decide that. Latrielle is."

"H-How could this be...when I haven't even done anything?!"

"Perish the thought. Your past actions are what have destroyed every ounce of credibility to your name."

"Gah?!"

And this was Latrielle's weak point—that he had to use someone like Beclard to secure his own legitimacy. He had acted much too impatiently. To compare the situation to a game of chess, he had been so hasty to mate that he had made his own king vulnerable.

Regis simply couldn't ignore it. Latrielle had sent Altina's unit on seemingly impossible missions and then ordered Regis's assassination; he was going all out to destroy them. There was no reason to hold back against him.

"Latrielle will dispose of you," Regis declared. "You will be sent to the countryside for rest and recuperation, only to face an unfortunate *accident* along the way. You must be aware of just how many of the servants have already met that same fate."

Beclard paled. "Th-There was nothing I could have done!" he protested, quivering as though a sword were being pressed to his throat. "Had I declined, I would have been killed too! That's right! Please, believe me, Prince Bastian! I served your father in earnest for forty years!"

"Don't you mean you served your personal interests?" Bastian asked. "To be blunt—if you were an honest man, the Empire wouldn't have become this rotten."

"You can't be serious!"

"Honestly, I've got no interest in you. I'm leaving this whole thing to Regina here. If you don't want my brother to cut you down, then you'd better listen to her."

Beclard turned to Regis with pleading eyes. This personification of selfishness and self-interest didn't come across as particularly favorable, but...Regis had plans. And those plans didn't involve this man being killed by Latrielle.

"At this rate, the Empire is headed into a hopeless war," Regis said to Beclard. "I need your cooperation to stop it."

"Can you guarantee my life...and my assets?!"

Assets? He's worrying about his money here?

"I have made arrangements to get you out of the capital...but you can't take

too much with you. Or would you rather stay in the manor?”

“Urk... Urgh...” Beclard groaned for a while in deliberation. “Very well...” he muttered. “I will cooperate. I will give up...a certain extent of my assets.”

“I guarantee your safety. A carriage will be here in thirty minutes. Prepare to leave.”

“W-Wait! A carriage?! That’s not going to work, then!”

“Why?”

He shot an irked glance out the window. “Those soldiers aren’t there to protect me... They’re there to ensure I don’t get away.”

“I figured as much.”

“Don’t you have anything more?! Any schemes?! Any assurance?!”

“I assure you, I’ve already taken that into account.”

And yet, Beclard buried his face in his hands. “Aah... On second thought, I can’t do this!”

Regis sighed. *Is there something else...?*

“In a detached annex...” Beclard said. “My granddaughter is in there. I can’t leave without her.”

“I’ve looked into that as well. You hadn’t mentioned her thus far, so I assumed you didn’t care.”

“I don’t want to make her life difficult.”

“In that case, rather than assets, you should have sought out trustworthy allies.”

“Urghh... There are soldiers in the annex too. Can you do anything about them?”

Regis let out another sigh and then cast his eyes to his right. “Looks like I’m going to need your help after all.”

Bastian stood up from the sofa. “Aight, I’ll be off then! How many are we talking?”

“There are around ten armored soldiers keeping watch over the annex—at least, that’s what I heard from a trader who stopped by.”

“Only ten, right?”

“I’m sorry about this. I didn’t mean to expose you to danger.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding me. A number that small doesn’t even register as danger.”

“Take care not to let your guard down.”

“I know. I won’t drop my guard ever again.”

Bastian confirmed the annex’s location from a window in the corridor and then took off. Beclard, meanwhile, made for his study. Regis went with him, though not for any particular reason; there simply wasn’t much to be gained from waiting around in the parlor.

Once they arrived, Beclard immediately began stuffing documents from his treasury into a travel bag with silent assistance from his butler. “Dammit. Dammit... Why do I have to...?!”

“Certificates...? Won’t the prince impound those assets once you’ve run away?”

“I have them hidden under fake names! Do you think I’d keep cold, hard cash in my treasury? That’s dead money! Money that won’t birth anything new! It’s all about investments. Money is worthless if it’s not in circulation!”

“I do agree on that point.” Regis pinched up one of the contracts scattered across the floor. “This is...a loan to a merchant?”

“Lending money is the best way to make money. I’ve lent cash to more merchants than the late emperor ever did!”

“Money you received as bribes, though.”

“Plenty of businesses have started and expanded on that seed money. I’m putting it to good use, don’t you think?”

“You’re more cut out to be the minister of finance than the grand chamberlain...”

“Don’t be ridiculous. What’s so fun about raising money for some nation? Surely I’m better off raising that money for myself. Hey, what are you doing?! Stuff those papers into the next bag!”

“Eh...?”

“You said you were going to stop the Empire from going to war, right?! You honestly expect me to believe you’re an ordinary reporter?”

“Y-Yes...”

Beclard was surprisingly calm; it seemed that he became a dynamo of sorts whenever something of monetary value was concerned.

“It doesn’t matter what your standing is—if you want something, the first thing that you need is money!”

“Oh, really...?”

“Money is money—it’s not dirty or clean! I’ll give you a cut! Just get those hands moving! We should have more space if you’ve got a carriage!”

“Yeah... Well, I suppose anything we leave behind is only going to aid Latrielle...”

A travel bag of money wasn’t a significant sum to a large organization, even if it were packed with gold livres...but these bundles of contracts were a different story entirely. Perhaps Regis could earn the assistance of the merchants Beclard had invested in.

✧ ✧ ✧

“Hraaah!”

“G-Gwah?!”

Even after Bastian had made his identity clear, the soldiers had shown no intention of allowing him into the annex...and so he had decided to incapacitate them. He had sworn not to show any mercy when he had someone to protect, but when he was alone, he tried not to kill when possible.

Once the soldiers were dealt with, Bastian kicked down the locked door and entered the annex. “Hello? You there?” he called out. “Guess I never asked

what your name is, huh? Oi, uh...Beclard's grandkid. If you're there, say something."

Bastian proceeded down the hall until, soon enough, he heard singing coming from one of the rooms. Again he called out, but he received no response; there was little else he could do but force his way through this door too.

"Oi, kid. You there?"

Inside, a woman who looked to be around twenty was leaning against a barred window, blaring out a high-pitched song. Most would surely describe her as a beauty, but her nose made her look much too similar to Beclard for Bastian to agree.

"Oh! Papa!" She broke into a smile the instant she saw Bastian. "What are you here for today?"

"Erm... Are you Beclard's granddaughter?"

"Gramps is here too?!"

"We're leaving. Right now. You're not gonna be coming back here, so grab as much as you think you're gonna need."

"Aha! A trip? Hooray!"

In the end, all the woman took was a single stuffed bear.

✧ ✧ ✧

"Hey! What's this article about, huh?!"

"Get the marquis out here!"

"We know you're in there! Come show your face, coward!"

There were civilians gathering outside the estate, clutching the same paper Regis had shown Beclard—the one containing a very damning testimony about Prince Latrielle. The soldiers weren't allowing the upset crowd onto the premises, but after having seen the article for themselves, they were hesitant to ready their spears. As one might expect, they also wanted an explanation; the second prince, to whom they had shown their utmost devotion, had murdered the emperor, his own father. That was what the grand chamberlain maintained,

at least.

This was going to be a mess.

“The marquis never left the mansion, nor has he met with any reporters! Stand down! This is clearly some sort of mistake!” one of the soldiers shouted, raising his voice above the commotion. It was a valiant effort, but not enough to quell the growing frustrations.

“So, what, all those maids never went missing?!”

“And what about the sixth consort’s doctor? Was that a lie too?!”

“How should I know?!” the soldier exclaimed. “Ask the press or the Ministry of Ceremonies!”

“If all this turns out to be untrue, I’ll never forgive Beclard!”

“Hear, hear!”

“Drag him out from his hiding place!”

It was clear to see that the gathered civilians were enraged—even with spears pointed at their faces, they didn’t so much as falter. In fact, the soldiers were the ones who wound up flustered.

As the furor continued, a lone carriage started approaching the estate.

“Move! Move! We’re with the First Army! You know what’s coming if you get in our way!”

Such were the claims made by the driver, but the vehicle certainly wasn’t of military make. Even so, its presence spurred the soldiers to finally drive away the mob, allowing the carriage to reach the front gate.

The driver leaned out. “Orders are for me to bring Marquis Beclard to the capital.”

“Orders from whom?! The marshal general?!”

“From his chief of staff!”

Without missing a beat, the driver presented the commander of the estate’s soldiers a sheet of parchment. The directive wasn’t even sealed, but it had definitely been signed by the second prince’s adjutant, Germain.

If we keep the grand chamberlain here, the crowd is just going to get bigger, and even more people are going to try to force their way inside. The chief of staff must have realized this and taken the initiative... the commander mused. “All right, open the gate! Just don’t let any commoners get in!”

The gates swung open. Before the carriage could proceed inside, however, one of the soldiers addressed the cabman. “Hold on—why aren’t you using a military carriage?”

“About that...”

“You’re driving a standard hackney.”

“The chief of staff requested it. I don’t understand why either.”

“I see...”

The carriage passed through the gate and made for the Beclard estate.

✧ ✧ ✧

As the carriage started on its return journey to the palace, not a single soldier questioned why Third Prince Bastian and one other person were tagging along. They didn’t have much of an opportunity to—there were even more civilians crowding around the gate now, so they had their hands full driving them away.

Meanwhile, inside the hired coach, Beclard’s granddaughter was singing a cheerful melody completely unsuited to their current situation. She was the sort of woman who would crouch down to inspect each and every flower she saw, and who would disappear the moment somebody took their eyes off of her.

“Hah...” Bastian sighed; one could tell at a glance that he was dead tired. “Getting her to the carriage was more of a hassle than dealing with the soldiers...”

Beclard was hanging his head, keeping his identity hidden from those outside with the aid of a black hood. “Wh-What’s all this ruckus?” he fretted. “Have you already circulated that paper?!”

“Of course not,” Regis replied. “All the people you see gathered outside your estate are the comrades of a certain madame.”

Bastian smacked the carriage seat with such enthusiasm that he almost drowned out the tactician's words. "Still, though! I'm surprised those soldiers even let the carriage through in the first place!"

"You make a good point... For what reason would they have allowed us to pass?" Beclard asked. It seemed that he was beginning to question the situation as well.

Regis went to scratch his scalp, but then he remembered how precariously his wig was balanced atop his head and promptly returned his hand to his lap. "Well, um... I created a directive from Sir Germain ordering that you be brought to the palace at once."

"It must have taken more than that, surely. I could understand such naivete from conscripted farmers, but from an officer of the First Army? How could he have been fooled into believing a forged directive?"

Regis let out a weak chuckle. "Because of a bad tendency of the First Army. Orders sent directly from Latrielle are all properly sealed and treated with the utmost care, but Sir Germain often issues them in his stead. He also moves quite a few pieces on his own."

"Oh, really?"

"Latrielle trusts his men and thus permits it, but Germain's directives tend to be surprisingly careless—so much so that anything might be accepted so long as the signature looks genuine."

"What do you mean?" Beclard asked, his head cocked to one side. "Do you mean to say that you forged his signature? How?"

"It wasn't anything special; I just used an order I'd received from him in the past as reference. I knew the exact pen it was written with, so with the assistance of the craftsmen at the publishing company, creating a forgery was a simple matter."

"What?!" Beclard was completely taken aback, while Bastian couldn't help but laugh.

Regis shrugged. "I was quite nearly killed. It's the least I could do in return."

The grand chamberlain stared at him in amazement. “Just who *are* you...?”

His question had perhaps come a little late, but Regis saw no reason not to answer him. “You’ll have to excuse my attire, but...my name is Regis d’Aurick. I’m not with her at the moment, but I work as a tactician for Princess Argentina.”

“Y-You’re...the fourth princess’s tactician?!”

“Well, she’s the only force opposed to Prince Latrielle, isn’t she?”

“Nhh...”

“Oh, and—while I imagine this goes without saying—we aren’t headed to the —whoa?!”

Just as the Beclard estate disappeared from view, the carriage jolted. They were suddenly moving much slower than before. The driver opened a small window at the front so that his voice could reach them.

“There’s an army up ahead, boss!”

“A what?!”

Regis and Bastian stuck their heads out of the side windows and stared ahead, while Beclard hugged his granddaughter, who was still singing a misplaced tune. Covering the main road from end to end were rows upon rows of armor-clad knights. They numbered around three hundred in total, and they flew a prestigious flag.

“The White Hare Brigade...” Regis grumbled. “Erk. And they even have Sir Batteren with them.”

Bastian withdrew back into the carriage and folded his arms. “This ain’t good. It won’t be easy going up against so many knights.”

“Yeah... They moved faster than anticipated. Perhaps they foresaw some unrest.”

“What are we going to do?!” Beclard shrieked.

“Now, now, Marquis... They won’t expect you to be riding in a hackney.”

“But this one’ll make us stand out like a sore thumb.” Bastian gestured

toward the grand chamberlain's granddaughter; even as the knights approached, she continued to sing by the window. Unless something was done, they were bound to attract some unwanted attention.

"Hey, umm... Would you like to hear a story?" Regis asked the woman, speaking as tenderly as he could muster.

"Hmm? What is it, Mama?!"

"M-Mama?! Ah, no... I mean... Have you ever heard the tale of *The Three Bear Brothers*?"

"Bear? Yay! Myyy. Bear!"

How bizarre a sight, to see a grown woman cheering like a child. Regis didn't know the reason for her odd behavior, but he started to tell the story as slowly and as thoughtfully as he would have told an infant. Just as he had hoped, the woman's eyes lit up, and she fell silent, allowing the carriage to slip past the army.

The clatter of armor and the rhythmic clomping of the horses could be felt even inside the carriage. A number of the knights stared through the carriage's windows as they passed.

Bastian was wearing his sunglasses, while the cross-dressing Regis was enthusiastically telling Beclard's granddaughter a story. Beclard himself was pretending to be asleep, sitting with his hood pulled down over his eyes. All the while, the travel bags resting on the roof jostled and creaked.

Nervous anticipation hung thick in the air until, soon enough...the White Hares continued in the direction of the estate. They launched no attacks on the carriage, merely intimidating and driving them away.

We did it... Regis let out a deep breath, earning him a quizzical stare from the grand chamberlain's granddaughter.

"Phew..." Bastian removed his sunglasses. "So, we're headed straight for the printer's, yeah?"

"Yes, exactly as planned. There, we'll have Mr. Claude extract the marquis's testimony and write up a genuine article. There will be no falsehoods...and that

will give it the perfect punch.”

“So, we’ll get one up on Latrielle!”

“We’ve entered a new era. Authority can no longer conceal the truth, and he’s going to need to learn that the hard way.”

“Right!”

Even with the immediate threat having passed, Beclard kept his hood up. Regis could hear him sobbing quietly, but whether he was relieved to have escaped or mourning his lost status and wealth, he wasn’t sure.

“This is where it all begins...” Regis muttered. “We can finally mount an offense.”

“Mm? But what about Mr. Bear?” the woman asked, urging him to continue the story.

Final Chapter: The Wedge

It was the 12th—a Monday, the day before Latrielle's coronation, and the release date of most of the city's weekly papers. Almost every publication extolled the prince, but one in particular hadn't been quite so welcoming. It was also the one garnering the most attention.

The Weekly Quarry.

Marquis Beclard had given a meticulously detailed testimony of that fateful day, even going so far as to identify those still in the palace who had assisted in the cover-up. There was no material evidence, but it was an undeniable fact that the grand chamberlain—an authority appointed by the emperor who had initially supported him—had disappeared from his estate.

Of course, this news immediately reached Latrielle's ears.

Inside the second prince's office—

Germain placed a sheet of parchment on the table and then lowered his head. "My deepest apologies. It seems that someone appeared at Marquis Beclard's manor, having forged a directive from me."

Germain's signature could certainly be seen on the directive, but Latrielle paid it no mind; instead, he was glaring at the order itself. It was an impressive forgery, but he could tell it had been written by someone else's hand.

"The orders you give aren't exactly formal," Latrielle observed. "At least, not compared to my own."

"I have no excuse."

"Our culprit here is someone who knows our inner workings and can imitate your signature. No, not imitate—this is almost a perfect reproduction. Traced, I assume. There aren't many people capable of such a thing."

"Indeed."

“And when we consider that they must also be from a faction that opposes my enthronement...” Latrielle didn’t speak the name, but there was no mistaking who was on his mind.

“We learned something strange after interrogating the knights we ordered to assassinate him.”

“Oh?”

“According to them, he was already dead when they entered the tent. The body was decapitated, though.” Germain hung his head; the operation had been a complete failure.

“Hah...” A cold smile played on the second prince’s lips. “A body double, then.”

“I am wholly to blame for this. I have betrayed your trust. Not once, but twice now...”

“No. Even if we’d received the report that night, would we have done anything differently?”

“Eh? W-Well, we would have...been more thorough in our search...”

“We were already as thorough as could be. Our supplies were intact, and considering the fact that he couldn’t possibly have crossed the mountain without food or the necessary gear, we thought it best to focus our efforts along the roads. The fact we were unable to find him means he must have crossed the mountains after all.”

A detour through the mountain would take a couple weeks, plus he’d need food, water, and equipment, Latrielle mused. *I hadn’t thought he’d be able to prepare all that completely unnoticed.*

“C-Certainly,” Germain stammered. “Nor did I expect him to go after Beclard.”

“I was prepared for it. I stationed a hundred soldiers on his estate, but who could have foreseen him using a false directive to take advantage of the chaos he himself caused?”

“Ngh...”

“It is my folly to have left Beclard alive that day. Of course he would strike at

our weak point.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I can sense his intent—he wants me dead.”

“I won’t let him touch you.”

“Indeed. I refuse to die like a dog. He did outmaneuver me this time, though. How bad are the damages that have resulted from this?”

Germain groaned. “A portion of the commoners are crying out in protest...although we can safely say that most are more confused than they are incited.”

“What of the nobles?”

“We don’t know yet...”

“No secrets.”

“Ah, no! I’m not trying to hide anything—we truly haven’t grasped their movements yet. There is, however, a strong possibility that some will demand an explanation.”

“Is there anything else?”

“The whereabouts of the empress consort are unknown.”

“Oh?”

This news came as a genuine surprise; Latrielle had thought she would be preparing a flashy outfit for the ceremony or some such. If news spread that he had murdered the emperor, his own father, then perhaps the blame would extend even to his mother, the empress consort. Did she intend to run until the situation had calmed down? It didn’t seem like a very meaningful decision, considering that his coronation was just a day away.

Latrielle clenched his fist. “Once I prove my innocence, this matter will cease to be an issue.”

“Yes, sir.”

“So remain calm. No matter what accusations are made against me, my word is absolute.”

“Of course!”

“However...should the nobles turn against me, we risk the situation escalating into civil war. I can’t lose time or soldiers here.”

“I’ll strengthen our surveillance!”

“Indeed.”

Once Latrielle became emperor, there would no longer be a need to worry about factions; the entire nation would be subject to him. However, among the nobles were some who valued morals and legitimacy over personal interest.

“He’s driven a wedge between our walls...” Latrielle muttered.

“Huh?”

“No, that doesn’t change my superior position, nor does it change my goals. The road ahead is a long one—it’s only natural that we’ll need to endure the occasional storm.”

“But we cannot let that stop us.”

“Naturally. I’ve finally taken the first step,” Latrielle said with a nod. *Tomorrow—yes, tomorrow—I’ll finally sit on that throne.* “Try as they might, it’s already too late.”

There was an abrupt knock at the door. Germain exchanged a look with the prince before calling out, “Enter!”

The door opened, and a soldier locked his heels together in salute. “I come bearing a report!” he announced. “The Fourth Army has been spotted on the eastern roads!”

“The eastern roads? Are they headed for Verseilles?”

“It seems that way! They have a vanguard of around five hundred horsemen, with four thousand foot soldiers marching half a day behind!”

Such numbers were a manageable threat, but half of the Fourth Army was supposed to have gone to assist the eastern front; there was a chance that they might also arrive as reinforcements.

To think she would arbitrarily march an army on the capital...

“Argentina... What is she thinking?”

“Is this about the tactician?”

“Hmm...”

Given the newspaper incident, there was a high chance that the man in question was still alive. That was mere supposition, however. Argentina must have marched with her forces, unable to accept the report of his death.

How...childish!

Latrielle was growing frustrated, but he needed to avoid a civil war. He had only just received Germain’s report on how the nobles’ movements were still unclear.

As well as the First Army and the capital garrison, Latrielle had the independent armies of the nation’s nobles at his disposal. The problem was, it was much too dangerous to mobilize them when he had no read on their commanders. If they turned on him, he would lose, even with an army twice the size of Argentina’s. But at the same time, he couldn’t make his suspicions too apparent; arranging the noble commanders’ formations in a way that came across as too cautious was no better than him openly declaring his distrust.

Latrielle clenched his already balled fist even tighter. *You’re telling me she launched this attack while taking their treachery into consideration? Absurd. If I deplete my forces here, I’ll be unable to invade the other nations! What is she thinking?!*

“M-My lord.” Germain gulped. “What shall we do?!”

“We’ll meet her! Send out the First Army!”

“Yes, sir!”

✧ ✧ ✧

“A knight brigade has emerged from Verseilles!” Abidal-Evra reported. “It’s the First Army’s White Hares!”

Altina nodded and raised a hand. “All troops, halt! We set up formation on this hill!”

The bugles blared, and the horses came to a stop. The foot soldiers would catch up in half a day. They normally would have matched pace, but Altina's impatience had produced an irregular march.

"Do you think they'll charge at us...?" Eric muttered, nervous. In this situation, it was unlikely that hostilities would commence without a period of negotiation, but the Empire's First Army carried such intensity that these anxieties grew nonetheless.

Altina reached toward the treasured sword hung at her horse's flank. "If they do, we'll give 'em hell!"

Eric leaked a dry laugh, not quite sure whether that stance was reassuring or foolhardy. The White Hares were one of the Empire's strongest knight orders—not only were they larger than most other forces, they were also better trained and equipped. But Altina was no longer as reckless as she had been in the past. Now, she exuded the sort of calm intensity that only came from the strong.

August 12th, evening—

The Fourth Army had taken formation on the eastern hill, numbering five hundred horsemen and four thousand foot soldiers.

Meanwhile, the First Army had deployed at the base of the hill, waiting to intercept. Composed of one thousand horsemen and ten thousand foot soldiers, they were at an undeniable advantage...but every man, woman, and child knew of the Fourth Army's achievements in the war against High Britannia.

Despite the festive day ahead, a strained atmosphere stretched over the capital.

Short Story: Altina's Part-Time Job

"Let's learn about economics today," Clarisse suddenly said.

It was morning in the commander's quarters at Fort Volks. Regis had headed to the capital alone, while Altina had led the army back to base. Since then, she had decided that she was going to broaden her mind, reading books in her own way and training with her sword quite a bit more rigorously than before.

Clarisse, the princess's maid, was acting as her teacher. Unlike most servants, she had received an education so excellent that Regis recognized her ability to speak on economics and religion.

As she sat in her chair, Altina gingerly poked at the books stacked on the table. "Am I supposed to read all of these?" she asked.

"Are you not up for the challenge?" Clarisse replied without missing a beat. "Let's give up on studying then."

"Huh?"

Clarisse chuckled to herself. "You just said that you wanted to. It doesn't really bother me either way...although I think you'll suffer in the future as a result."

"Urgh..."

"It's all up to you. You're precious to me, no matter what sort of princess you are."

"Fine! Economics! I'll read however many books it takes! Now come at me, coward!"

"Easy, now. The books aren't going anywhere. Besides, I can foresee your study session becoming naptime again. Let's do some practical training instead."

Altina's cheeks flushed as she was reminded that she had fallen asleep before finishing a single book the last time she had tried. "I-I'll leave my schedule up to

you," she conceded.

"All right. In that case..." Clarisse clapped her hands together for effect. "Today, you will conduct business in Fort Volks."

"Hmm... Business..." Altina leaned closer; it wasn't a subject that she had much of an attachment to, but she was quite interested in the concept. "Come to think of it, I've never earned my own money before."

"Er, Princess... As a lieutenant general of the Empire and commander of the Fourth Army, you earn one hundred and fifty thousand denier a month. In comparison, Mr. Regis was paid two hundred denier per week as a fifth-grade admin officer."

"O-Oh, right."

Incidentally, following his promotion to third-grade, Regis was expected to take on subordinates. He would be responsible for paying their wages, and so his salary would increase to eight thousand denier per month. Those who reached first-grade were given forty thousand deniers per month—fifty times that of a fifth-grade.

Altina shook her head. "I might be earning a salary as a lieutenant general, but it's not like I put any effort into becoming a soldier; Latrielle simply forced me into the position."

"True."

She held a position that most would never obtain no matter how much they yearned for it, having initially been granted the rank of major general simply for being born a princess of the Empire. It was unfair, yes, but such was the current system under which the nation operated.

That said, her rise to lieutenant general had been through her own efforts.

"It just doesn't feel like I've ever really worked for money," Altina explained. "I became commander because I needed to."

"Yes, the military is a little...special. It would probably be best for you to experience other jobs if you want to learn economics."

Altina's face lit up at the suggestion. "That sounds kinda fun! Now this is the

kind of studying I like!”

“Then let’s start with being a maid,” Clarisse said, a broad smile on her face.

✧ ✧ ✧

Fort Volks, the officers’ dining hall—

“Ta-da!”

Altina pinched the hem of her frilly skirt and spun in place, allowing the fabric to float around her. She had a childish grin on her face.

“Oh, Princess...” Clarisse’s expression practically melted. “You’re so cute. Adorable, even.”



“I rather like these maid clothes! They’re quite a bit easier to move around in than fancy dresses!”

“You look wonderful in them.”

Altina let out a bashful giggle. “You really think so?”

“It’s a shame Mr. Regis isn’t here to see this.”

“I know, right?” Altina replied without thinking. She then froze in place and promptly started to backpedal. “W-Wait, what does Regis have to do with any of this?! Why should what I wear matter to him?!”

“I think we can leave that topic of conversation there.”

“Grr...”

“Now, now. First, let’s clean the tabletop.”

“Leave it to me!”

“Oh, but before that—take this.” Clarisse held out a wig that she had prepared in advance—one with long black hair, with bangs that hung over the face and were sure to impede one’s vision.

“Hmm? What’s this?” Altina asked.

“Having the princess cleaning the dining hall in that uniform might impact your dignity as commander, so I went through the trouble of preparing a disguise for you.”

“Ah, I see... Well, I’m doing this for my studies, so anyone who makes fun of me is getting a good smacking. You’re right, though—I wouldn’t want to startle anybody.”

“Newly hired maid Aleena—how does that sound?!”

“Anything is fine with me. Let’s start cleaning stuff already.”

Clarisse looked at the princess quizzically. “You’re Aleena, the newly hired maid, aren’t you?”

“Hm?”

“And I am Clarisse, the mighty veteran maid.”

“Hmm...?”

“Aren’t you forgetting to say something?” Clarisse asked. Although her smile remained just as bright, there was something a little scary about her.

Altina tended to be a little slow on the uptake when it came to these matters, but she noticed soon enough. “Oh, I see. Um, it’s a pleasure to be working with you...?”

“Well done. You must take care to speak formally to all the officers as well.”

“Yeah, I get it—I mean, understood, ma’am!”

I see. I must start by watching my words and minding my manners. Altina nodded to herself. Now that she thought about it, she had never come across a maid who spoke to her casually. *This is a learning experience*.

Altina drew a bucket of water from the well and used it to dampen an old rag that had clearly been sewn back together a number of times. It was on the verge of completely falling apart; it even tore when she started cleaning too vigorously.

Of course, Clarisse scolded the princess for the ruined cloth. Altina took only a moment to collect herself, and then she went back to wiping the table.

“It sure is filthy...”

“Dining etiquette is the least of everyone’s worries here.”

“True enough.”

The officers’ dining hall was where heaping plates of meat were regularly served, and despite the large portions, there were never any leftovers. It was a different world here from the imperial palace, where meals were presided over by elegant table manners. This was a scramble to snatch the last morsel, with people at times even coming to blows.

Just as Altina was around halfway done, a boisterous group entered the hall—perhaps ten knights in total.

“Pheeew! Bring out the grub, maid!”

Clarisse curtsied with a blank expression; she never smiled when others were

around. “Isn’t it a little early for food?” she asked, shooting Altina a quick glance as she kept her head down. Altina hurriedly followed suit, lowering her head too.

The knights plunked down into empty chairs. “Sir Abidal-Evra told us to go scout out Faurenberg territory, see. No lunch or dinner. We need to stuff ourselves now, or we’ll be starving!” their leader said, and the others shrugged.

“We’ll probably be back past midnight.”

“Ptooey! Already throwing his weight around like he’s captain of the knights. Dammit. Next to Everard and the general, I’d say Krueger used to be at the top!”

As general, Jerome had led the Black Knight Brigade to assist the eastern front. Everard was head of the fort’s garrisoned soldiers, but he didn’t personally lead any cavalry. Meanwhile, the Black Knight Krueger, an old hand who was widely held in high regard, had died in battle. Under the current command structure, the newly formed Flying Swallow Knights reported directly to Altina, with Abidal-Evra having been appointed to lead them. They numbered around five hundred, consisting of a mishmash of new recruits, the remnants of defeated armies, and former mercenaries. Their loyalty and coordination were both questionable at best, and to make matters worse, they seemed largely dissatisfied with having the less accomplished Abidal-Evra as their captain. It was nothing but trifling complaints.

Altina found herself clenching her fists in irritation. *Hold these feelings in. They’re not like me. My ideals to be empress and create a peaceful country are all my own; at no point have I forced it upon my men.*

Regis was special to Altina as her trusted confidant, but she couldn’t depend on the other soldiers in the same way. These men weren’t her arms and legs; they were individuals with their own fears, desires, objectives, tastes, and standing. She made sure to rebuke herself. Although she may have been immature as a commander, she wasn’t a fool. She accepted values that weren’t her own. It was her role not to be enraged by their complaints, but to look for a way to resolve them.

That said, this is a tough situation. Jerome’s the one holding the Black Knights

together, after all.

Jerome was one of the Empire's strongest heroes—a man who commanded respect through intimidation. It was a bit much to expect the same from Abidal-Evra, who was more of a man of common sense.

Will they be more willing to follow Abidal-Evra if I get my act together? Or is there another way around this? It was at times like these that Altina wondered what Regis would have done in her situation.

"Aleena. Please quit dazing out."

Altina jumped at the sudden whisper. "Eh?! Me?"

"Yes. Now, hold this," Clarisse said as she shoved a large plate into the princess's hands. "There are plenty more where this came from."

"Wowowow... I see. I have to carry these out..."

Altina was presently acting not as a commander, but as a maid. She carried the massive platter to the knights, who were making themselves busy on another topic. It seemed they were talking about the shops they had visited on their day off.

"That place was a bust!" one of the knights spat. "Not a decent woman in sight!"

"Hah! You must've gone at a bad time. There's this girl, Jenny—she's just the best!"

"Huuuh?! That broad who's as heavy as a horse?!"

"That's what makes her so great, dumbass! You just don't get it."

"I really don't. I prefer my women on the slimmer side. Ah, like this one here." The knights turned their attention to Altina as she brought in the platter.

Are they talking about a café or something? Altina wondered. She imitated Clarisse by silently setting the plate on the table. She was always issuing orders, so perhaps someone would realize her true identity if she spoke.

"Hey. You a new hire?" one of the knights asked. "I've never seen you here before."

What should I do? Altina asked herself. She glanced back toward the kitchen to see that Clarisse was giving her a thumbs-up. *She wants me to do my best. We're studying economics today, and I need to experience the industry firsthand. This must be part of the job.*

Altina nodded and gave a quiet, "I am," trying to answer as tersely as she could. She usually spoke much louder and with more enthusiasm, so she determined that a modest voice would serve as fine cover.

One of the knights licked his lips. "Not half bad. You're just my type. Hope to see you around."

"...Indeed."

"Maybe even after dark."

"Hmm?" Altina wasn't sure what he was talking about—dinner, perhaps? She tried to figure out what he had meant, when— "Eek!"

The knight had reached out and, with a self-assured snicker, slapped Altina on the rear. It had been over her skirt, but that made no difference—the princess felt a chill run down her spine, and then an intense heat burning in her chest.

"You... The *hell* do you think you're doing?!"

She swung her foot up into the air, throwing the knight into the wall with one swift kick. Upon impact, he let out a guttural croak like a crushed frog and started foaming at the mouth.

The other knights rose from their seats in a frenzy and reached for their swords. "Wh-What's up with this maid?!" one man cried.

Altina tore the wig from her head and threw it aside. "Fools! How indecent can you be, touching a pure woman's body?! God may forgive your sins, but I won't!"

But forgiveness seemed to be the least of the lecherous knight's problems—he was already out cold. His associates, meanwhile, were utterly dumbfounded. Of all people, the maid just had to be...

"Red hair and crimson eyes... I-It can't be... The princess?!"

"That's right! If you're struggling to remember my face, maybe I should give

you all a beatdown that you'll never forget! Draw your swords!"

"W-We wouldn't dare!"

The knights dropped to their knees on the spot. Altina was their commander and royalty; they would be tried for treason and lèse-majesté if they turned their blades upon her. And even had that not been the case, she had defeated the Black Knight Jerome in a duel and triumphed over the Mercenary King one-on-one—feats that seemed nigh impossible given her slender frame. Rumors had even begun to circulate that she was trading blows with Eddie Fabio de Balzac, the Empire's Sword, on a daily basis. What could they do but prostrate themselves?

"O-Our humblest apologies!" one of the knights pleaded.

"Hmph." Altina crossed her arms. "Are you always so vulgar to the maids?"

"Not us! Never in a million years! No, that was just... Something must have come over him! Or rather, his hand slipped. Or... In any case, his behavior was unbecoming of a knight! P-Please, spare his life at least!"

"It seemed you had several complaints about my unit."

"Perish the thought! We're resolved to lay down our bodies and souls for this army! We've sworn so on our swords!"

"I see. If you're really that insistent, I think it's only natural that I should hold you to your word. Make up for your pathetic behavior with results."

"Th-Thank you! This is most gracious of you!" the man exclaimed. He and the other knights then bowed their heads so low that it looked as though they might topple forward.

Altina sighed and returned to the kitchen. There, she found that not just Clarisse, but all the maids gathered were watching her with dubiously furrowed brows.

"Princess..."

Altina shrugged. "Their attitudes changed the moment they realized who I am. How troublesome."

"You're the real troublesome one here, Princess. What kind of maid attacks

someone over a simple grope?”

“Eeh?”

“It’s a standard form of greeting here,” Clarisse explained. The maids behind her all wore resigned expressions; perhaps it really was a common occurrence.

“D-Don’t say that!” Altina protested. “It’s unfair for you to receive that kind of treatment! I’m not going to stand for this!”

“It’s part of the job.”

“That can’t—”

“*But*, well...” Clarisse winked. “It was incredibly refreshing to watch.”

The other maids giggled and started offering words of agreement.

“It was. Thank you, Princess.”

“To think you’d get so angry for our sake...”

“It almost brought tears to my eyes.”

They were evidently unsatisfied with the way they were being treated, and so Altina promised to ban any “impoliteness toward maids” going forward. Upon hearing this, Clarisse stroked the princess’s head and chuckled.

“You did your best, Princess.”

“Hey... That tickles. Cut it out, Clarisse.”

“But you’re a failure of a maid.”

“Eh?”

“You’re fired.”

“Eeh?!”

Altina was urged to return her attention to the dining hall. The one knight was still unconscious, while the others continued to prostrate themselves; nobody had laid so much as a finger on the platter of meat. It was impossible for her to carry on as a maid after that.

✧ ✧ ✧

Under Clarisse's watch, Altina next ventured out to Fort Volks's marketplace. It was a somewhat wide room with a number of shelves, each tightly packed with all manner of goods.

"Did you know they sell luxury goods here?" Clarisse asked. "Like sweets, accessories, and those books Mr. Regis likes so much."

"Hmm."

"This is also where I buy the leaves for your black tea."

"Oh, it is?"

"If you're working to earn money, it only makes sense that you'd need somewhere to spend it."

"I see..."

Fort Volks was on the farthest outskirts of the Empire; even a round trip to Theonveil, the nearest town, took an entire day. There inevitably had to be some form of marketplace at the fortress, and there were more store clerks there than expected.

"We receive goods from the Theonveil Guild of Commerce and the southern trade alliance," Clarisse explained. "They send clerks to manage the goods as well."

The "southern trade alliance" referred to the Gaillarte Garden Party, a gathering of newly established nobles in the south. They were, in short, merchants with strong ties to House Tiraso Laverde. Considering that Fort Volks had a population great enough to rival a town—there were several thousand troops currently stationed there, as well as all the servants who supported them—there was more than enough interest in doing business there.

Regis had previously decided on who was permitted to enter, as well as the regulations on trade, so the princess didn't know much in the way of specifics.

Clarisse led Altina to the back of the marketplace. "Next, I'll have you try manning the counter," she said.

"Oh, sure. Sounds good."

"Selling goods is the cornerstone of any business—the very core of

economics. Please study well.”

“Gotcha.”

“That means no kicking customers.”

“You’ve got nothing to worry about! The next time someone reaches for me, I’ll swat their hand away before they can touch me!”

“Well, whatever works...”

Altina changed into the store’s uniform—a vertically striped shirt that was worn by the male and female employees alike, and a cap made from the same material. It was clear at a glance that she was a shop worker.

I really do feel ready for anything wearing this.

“I’m Aleena, a new hire! It’s a pleasure to be working with you,” she said enthusiastically to the senior employee in the store. Once again, she was wearing a black wig to disguise herself. She was starting to get used to this.

The senior employee pointed at the entrance. “Ah, look, Aleena. We have a customer. Please greet him like this: ‘Welcome!’”

“Got it. Welcome!”

A soldier took two sweets from the shelf and brought them to the counter. “What’s the difference between these?” he asked.

How am I supposed to know...?

Altina froze. Not only did she know nothing about the merchandise, she hardly had any experience shopping at all. The clerk beside her ultimately stepped in and answered the customer in detail. The two sweets were apparently different flavors.

“Then I’ll go with this one,” the soldier said, pointing at one of the sweets.

“That will be one denier,” the clerk replied.

After leaving a copper coin on the table, the soldier picked up his purchase and left. The clerk respectfully bowed his head, said: “Thank you for your patronage” to the man’s back, and then returned the unbought sweet to its place on the shelves.

One denier?! He greeted the customer, offered them an explanation, told them the price, saw them off, and then made a trip to the shelf...all for one measly denier?! That's one one hundred and fifty thousandth of what I make in a month!

Despite her best attempts to ignore it, Altina found her eyes being repeatedly drawn to the lone coin. "Business really is something!"

Lunch break came and went, and in the afternoon, a sloppily dressed man entered the shop. Altina was busy stocking the shelves when he ambled over to her and held out a piece of candy.

"I'll take this," the man proclaimed.

"Um... That'll be one denier," Altina replied. *You're supposed to take it over to the counter.*

"Too expensive. Make it two for one denier."

"Hmm?"

For a second, Altina thought she had remembered incorrectly—that is, until she looked over at her senior, who was making a small "X" with his fingers. It was then that she realized what was happening—this was what was called *haggling*. It was the very same thing that Regis had often done with the merchants.

"Err... I don't think I can do that," Altina replied.

"No, no, no. Just think about it. You can only do business here because we soldiers are out there on the front lines. What's wrong with knocking down the price of a sweet or two?"

"But..." She turned to the clerk once again, who was now gesturing even more insistently. Perhaps that went without saying. Agreeing to this man's suggestion would mean giving away a candy for free, and she couldn't allow such a loss. "No means no."

"What's with you, woman?! I'm a soldier, you know! I'm protecting this fort! And you *really* think you can just..."

His rant continued from there, peppered with all sorts of obscene words that

Altina wasn't familiar with. If that weren't bad enough, after his stream of verbal abuse, the man threw the product down onto the floor.

"I'm never shopping here again!"

Altina finally snapped, and another soldier was sent flying into the wall—this time with a punch. She received a lavish amount of thanks from the store clerk, and it was then that she promised another law: "No haggling with or insulting the shopkeepers."

Again, Clarisse stroked Altina's head with a chuckle. "You did your best, Princess."

"Urgh, but... Wasn't he terrible? I think I did the right thing."

"So do I. But that doesn't change the fact that you're fired."

"No way."

After saying her farewells to the grateful staff, Altina headed to her next location.

✧ ✧ ✧

"Now we're moving on to clergy work," Clarisse said.

"Doesn't that come under religion, not economics?"

"The Empire's churches both look after and lend out money. Now, this may come as a surprise, but there are some troublesome people who don't return what they borrowed. This job involves going to those people and making sure they give that money back."

"They can't be bothered to give back what they've borrowed, huh? How curious."

"Here's a list of the worst defaulters. Oh dear, it seems there's even an officer among them. Shall we start from the top?"

"All right. I'll see what I can do!"

As was to be expected, a fool who tried to drive Altina away with violence was promptly tossed into a wall.

Altina slumped her shoulders and sighed. Clarisse was stroking her head once again.

“The priest was very grateful, Princess.”

“Right...” Altina had promised the church that loan repayments would be deducted in installments from the soldiers’ salaries. She shot the maid a reproachful glare. “But I’m fired, aren’t I?”

“Correct.”

✧ ✧ ✧

When dinnertime rolled around, Altina returned to the officers’ dining hall and collapsed into a wooden chair. “Phah! I’m exhausted!”

“Oh my. That’s rare for you, Princess.”

“I’m leagues more tired than when I’ve been crossing blades with Eddie or Gilbert!”

Clarisse chuckled. “Dinner should be served soon. Would you like some tea in the meantime?”

“Please. Ah, actually—no. I’ll settle for water.”

“Hmm?”

Altina gave a bitter smile. “Tea leaves are incredibly expensive. I’ve always known how much they cost, but it never felt real to me, I guess. They were so easy to come by in the palace, and... No. I think what I didn’t understand was the value of money. Or how hard it is working at the lower levels. To think someone would go through so much trouble for a denier...”

“Certainly.”

“Thank you, Clarisse. You’re always putting up with so much for my sake, aren’t you?”

“I’m used to it.”

“Earning money is outrageous.”

“You need to do good enough work to be sought after. Otherwise, any potential employers or customers will simply look elsewhere.”

“Yeah. Being needed by somebody, though—it’s amazing!”

“I’m glad you learned something.”

Altina gave a firm nod. “I think this was my best lesson so far! I need to make myself useful enough that people need me!”

“Aha ha... You’re already needed as a commander, Princess.”

“I hope so. But what do the soldiers of the Fourth Army think...?”

“You should consider more than just the soldiers. People all around the Empire hope and pray for you to play your part.”

“Ah, right...”

In the war against High Britannia, they had needed her to stop the enemy invasion. And now, they needed her to protect the Empire from the Germanian threat.

Altina looked down at her hands. “I always thought about becoming empress and changing the Empire—those were the only things I had my sights on. But even my current role is crucial for a great many people.”

“Right.” Clarisse stroked Altina’s head again—not with the same mischievousness she had shown on every other occasion that day, but with tender kindness.

“Ah, for God’s sake...” Altina purred. She found the show of affection a little ticklish, but it was comforting enough that she gave into it completely. “You’re treating me like a child again.”

“Aha ha ha.”



All of a sudden, the floor began to tremor, and a stampede of no fewer than twenty officers barged into the dining hall. It was dinnertime, so their arrival wasn't strange in itself, but they headed straight for Altina with such serious and intense expressions that there was no mistaking something had happened.

"P-Pardon us!"

"Hmm? What's up?" Altina asked. "Wait, don't tell me Germania's moving?!"

"No, ma'am! The region around the fort is peaceful as can be! Truth be told...we heard that you've started up a business, Your Highness!"

"Eh...? A-Aha ha... Well, I was doing a few jobs. For learning purposes. Right...?" But no sooner had she responded than the officers abruptly began stripping off their coats. The sight came as such a shock that she recoiled on instinct. "Wh-Wh-*What*?!"

All at once, in a cacophony of throaty voices, the half-naked officers proclaimed: "Your Highness! We heard that you'll beat the crap out of us if we give you money!"

"I-I'll what?!"

Clarisse clapped a hand over her mouth, trying so very hard to stifle a laugh that her eyes had begun to water. "Pff... How about that, Princess? See how sought after you are?"

"Punch me, please!"

"What kinda business do you think I'm running here?!"

A History of the Belgarian Empire

La production de fer 3

After being extracted from mines, iron oxide goes through a reduction process that strips it of oxygen, leaving behind purer, more refined iron. In previous volumes, it was explained how this process would come to use coke and, at a later stage, steam engines to better facilitate production.

The substance obtained from a blast furnace is called pig iron. The coke used during its production gives it a high carbon content of around four percent and a lower melting point, which makes it easier to process and well suited to being poured into molds and casts. This made the mass production of iron roducts both easier and cheaper, allowing iron weapons and farming tools to spread far and wide, changing the way that people lived.



There was, however, a major flaw with pig iron—it was very brittle compared to other metals, which meant it couldn't be used to make anything too large. Cannons made of pig iron were produced, but bronze cannons were sturdier and more reliable. The main advantage of pig iron over bronze was simply that it was cheaper.

Incidentally, the cannons used by the Belgarian Empire were made from bronze casting. Its swords and armor were another matter, though—these were made by blacksmiths rather than smelters, and black-smithing followed a different history from mass-produced iron.

For more reliable production, a method known as "puddling" was devised to extract the carbon from pig iron. This is done using a reverberatory furnace. Coke is burned in a firebox, and the radiated heat reflects off of the furnace ceiling—which was in this era made of brick—before being pulled over the pig

iron. This allowed the carbon to burn away without any more being added by the burning coke, thereby decarbonizing the pig iron.

As the heat came from above, there was no convective heat transfer. The bottom would end up colder than the top, and because of this, a long bar was inserted into the hearth to stir the molten metal like a boat paddle and ensure it was heated evenly.

The emergence of puddling slowed production rates but produced wrought iron with a much smaller carbon content of around 0.02%. Mass-produced wrought iron would go on to be used for the foundation of tall towers, steam locomotives, steamships, and railways. Cannons made of wrought iron performed even better than bronze ones.

Wrought iron served as the backbone of the developing industry for around a hundred years, until a new innovation allowed the reintroduction of a moderate amount of carbon to mass-produce steel (0.02–2.1%).



Afterword

Thank you for reading *Altina the Sword Princess XI*. This is the author, Yukiya Murasaki.

I'm sorry to have kept you waiting for so long. The previous volume covered an intense clash between Regis and Latrielle, and in this one, we start to explore the differences between the futures they each seek. The volume is mostly just people talking—and talking about history, at that—so perhaps it won't excite the younger readers...

I don't know if it's any compensation, but I decided to include a short episode about the princess. I can only hope you enjoyed it.

I did intend to see the intense glaring match between the First and Fourth Armies through to its conclusion in this book, but I didn't have the space. I hope I can release the next volume soon so that I don't keep you waiting.

Now, on to a little self-promotion—

The manga adaptation of *Altina the Sword Princess* done by Aomine Tsubasa-sensei and Kagimushi-sensei is soon to publish its third volume. I'm also working on *How NOT to Summon a Demon Lord*—which is also receiving a manga adaptation—with Kodansha, as well as *Millennium War Aigis: The White Empire Arc* with Famitsu. *Aigis* is the novelization of a game, but I've enjoyed writing it as a military record. Please give it a read if you like the game. And if you haven't played the game but enjoy the book, I think you'll enjoy the game too!

My thanks—

To my illustrator, himesuz-sensei. Thank you for yet more wonderful illustrations.

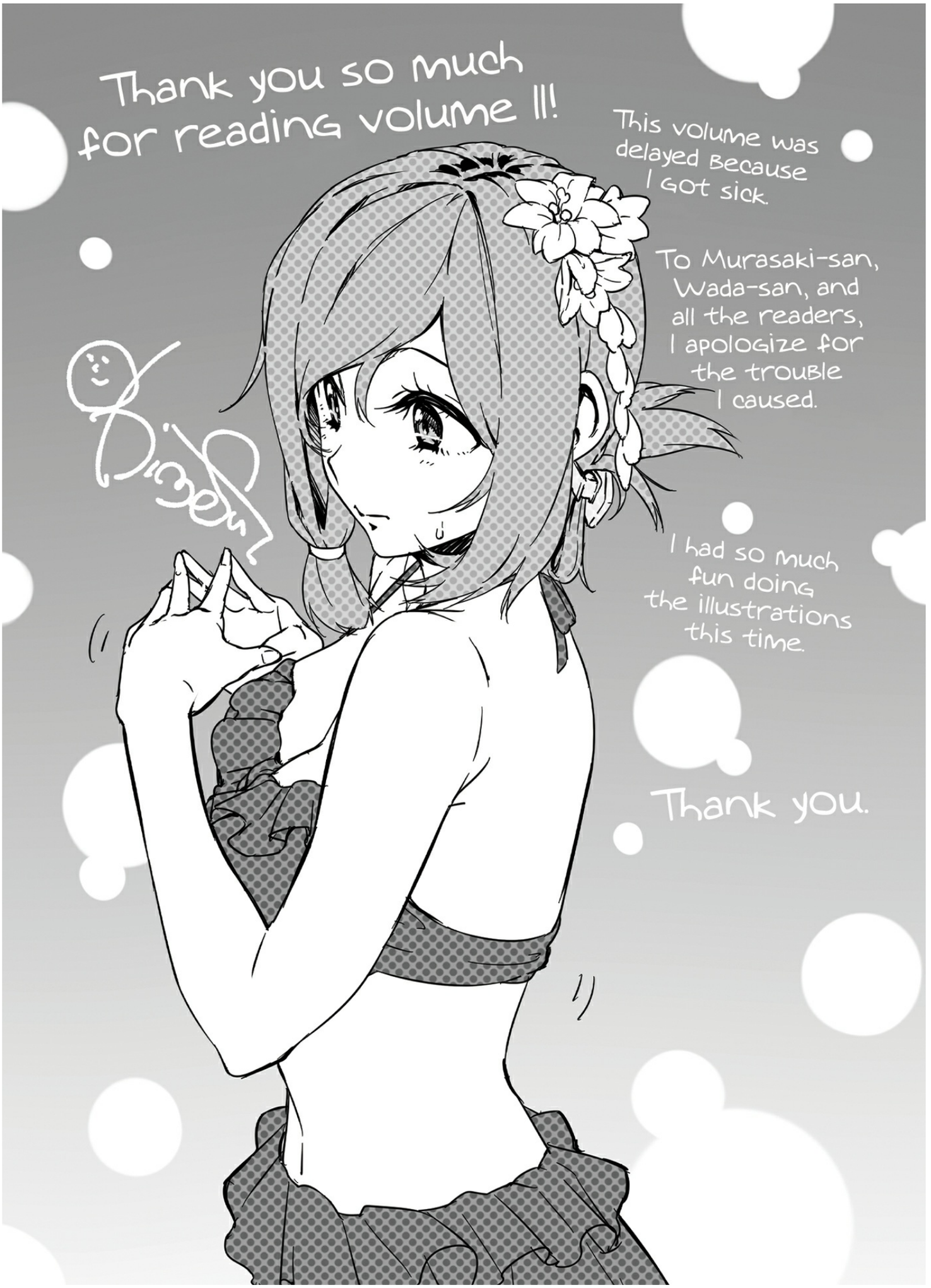
To Yamazaki-sama and Hishino-sama from Afterglow. Thank you as always.

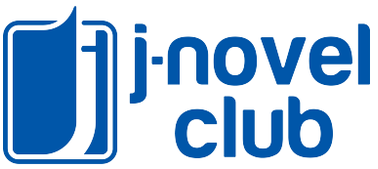
To my editor, Wada-sama. It's thanks to you that we have a book at all.

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 11!
This volume was delayed because I got sick.
To Murasaki-san, Wada-san, and all the readers, I apologize for the trouble I caused.
I had so much fun doing the illustrations this time.
Thank you.



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by Yukiya Murasaki

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