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Author: Masekinokatasa
Illustrator: Kaito Shibano
IMPERIAL REINCARNATION
I Came, I Saw, I Survived


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Dramatis Personae

Bundarte Empire

Opposed

Emperor's Faction



Rosaria

First Princess of the Kingdom of Belvére and Carmine's betrothed. Her natural intelligence allowed her to discern Carmine's true nature, and she has devoted herself to supporting him.



Carmine

Protagonist. Reincarnated as a puppet emperor doomed to be assassinated. Is acting the part of a fool to trick the evil nobility and survive, aiming to one day seize back political power.



Timona

Carmine's personal attendant. Though initially hostile toward the young emperor, a key turning point transformed his mistrust into unshakeable belief.



Count Palatine Vodedt

Rotahlian Watchman and Spymaster of the Empire. Has allied with Carmine, who is nevertheless wary of his underlying fanaticism.

Regency



Duke Agincarl

Became the Minister of Ceremony by utilizing his vast wealth derived from foreign trade to marry his daughter Acretia to the crown prince. Carmine's grandfather; orchestrator of the previous emperor's assassination. Plans to kill Carmine too if he becomes an obstacle.



Acretia

Carmine's mother and regent of the Empire. Has totally bought Carmine's act.

Opposed

Chancellor's Faction



Duke Raul

Chancellor. Throws his weight around as if he's the Empire's sovereign. Orchestrated the assassination of Carmine's father. Plans to kill Carmine too if he becomes an obstacle.

Opposed

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Second Era: The Self-Indulgent Tour

Prologue: Departing the Imperial Capital

This is a world of spell, gun, and cannon.

Upon the landmass known as the Eastern Continent, the Bundarte Empire is a major nation that vies for supremacy. However, a long string of ugly mistakes and ignoble accidents have set it on a steep decline, and it is currently in the midst of utter collapse.

Economic breakdown, the loss of its holdings to war, secession of the border regions, and the tyranny of its nobility plague the Empire. It was upon this sinking ship that I was reincarnated as the child emperor Carmine.

Two men hold the true power in this Empire. Duke Raul, the Chancellor, who is believed to have assassinated the crown prince, my father, and Duke Agincarl, the Minister of Ceremony, who is believed to have assassinated the previous emperor, my grandfather. With the imperial government under their thumbs, they lead their respective factions—named the Chancellor's faction and the regency—in a cutthroat political struggle, attempting to make me their puppet.

Every action I've taken since birth has been to ensure they remain clueless about the truth, and that is why I've managed to survive until now. If I want to keep living, I'll have to keep them convinced I'm their malleable plaything—that is, until the day I pull the rug from under their feet.

Naturally, an emperor with no authority or reputation who spends all his time hidden away in the imperial demesne pretending to be a puppet can change nothing. Seeking knowledge, I set things up so that I could depart the imperial capital on a tour of the Empire.

After all, as the emperor, it wouldn't do to know nothing of my own nation.

Of course, it goes without saying that I would only see what the Chancellor and Minister of Ceremony want me to see, and that the nobility would attempt to use me to polish their own prestige. Even so, I suspect I'll find an opportunity to obtain what I seek.

No, I *know* I will. I *will* find a tool to help me strike down the Dukes, and power enough to fix a steady hand on the reins of the Empire.

I'd decided I would live as the emperor, and I was not going to go back on my word.

* * *

After departing the imperial capital, my carriage—also nicknamed "the smallest fortress in existence"—trundled slowly along the highway and through the rural landscape.

Several years ago during the Founding Day jubilee, I thought I'd seen the exterior of the capital, but apparently I'd been mistaken. According to Timona and Count Palatine Vodedt, the "imperial capital" was a term used to describe two distinct areas, and opinions on the matter differed depending on who you asked.

The imperial capital of Cardinal was named after the Emperor Paterfamilias—the first emperor. It was he who declared that the land it would eventually stand upon should be used to establish a city, and construction was completed in the age of his successor, the second emperor. The city, being situated upon the meeting point of the Sey and Ramdedt rivers, possessed a natural moat, and it was enclosed on all four sides by tall, robust walls that once gave many cause to describe it as a proud city of the Empire.

The reason I used the past tense there was because cannons had since been invented and were steadily being adopted by a great many fighting forces, so the effectiveness of the walls seemed more questionable by the day.

In the present day, the term "imperial capital" was more commonly used to describe not the aforementioned "original capital," so to speak, but an area over twice its size. The root cause of this updated nomenclature was the city's growth; since focus had been

placed on its defensive capabilities over all else, over time, it had proven too small to serve as the capital city of the Empire. The crippling lack of usable land had led to the development of residences outside the city's walls, eventually leading to an expansive road network and an entirely new set of outer walls.

This "imperial capital in practice" experienced particular urban sprawl toward the east and south, absorbing the two cities that were originally there: Seydi and Dudet. Additionally, the capital's newer, second set of walls were not comprehensive, as there was a gap in the eastern section. Apparently, this was due in part to the inability to keep up with the city's rapid expansion, and partly because of the Empire's deteriorating economic situation.

Incidentally, while the construction to fill this gap had been *suspended* for a long stretch of time, it was now formally *repealed*. This was because Duke Raul had made the final call that the existence of siege cannons made it unreasonable to expect the walls to serve their purpose.

To be fair, he wasn't wrong. With siege weaponry around, a city's walls lost the majority of their significance. Of course, they were still necessary for regulating entry and egress, and Duke Raul wasn't a big enough fool to have overlooked that concern. I suspected the eastern construction was incomplete only because the Duke's holdings were located to the imperial capital's east. The conniving old bastard.

* * *

Now, regarding my tour of the Empire, the first destination would be the County of Baylor-Novei, located at our border with the Teyanave Confederation.

If seeing the front line against Teyanave had been the only goal, it would have been more straightforward to head for the County of Baylor-Torei to the east, which was also in the holdings of the Chancellor's faction. However, the reason we did not do this apparently lay with the highway—the Minister of Ceremony had strongly insisted that the "young emperor should not be forced to

spend too long on the common roads, no matter how comfortable his personal carriage may be."

Thus, in order to remain on the relatively less bumpy, stone-paved main highways, our route would take us north through the Marquessate of Mardrusa, west through the County of Baylor-Torei, then north again through the County of Kushad before finally reaching the County of Baylor-Novei. Quite the ophidian trek, when you sketched it out on a map.

Incidentally, Count Kushad was regency nobility. No doubt the Minister of Ceremony's "concern" for me had been an excuse to make me spend some time in the holdings of one of his cronies. At the end of the day, the meandering route was nothing more than both factions' attempt to take maximum advantage of me.

In any case, I wouldn't get any local nobility dropping by to greet me until we left the County of Pildee, within which lay the imperial capital. I was grateful for that, since it meant I could remain relatively relaxed for the time being.

"Everyone seems rather eager to get to the Mardrusa Marquessate...but as we have some time to go, you should be able to spend the day at ease." A faint blush colored Rosaria's cheeks, as if to say, *It's been a while since we've had some time alone.* Cute.

Wait, no. Begone, thoughts of cuteness. "Is my face that easy to read?" I asked. It'd be a death blow to my idiot emperor act if I couldn't maintain a decent poker face.

"Not at all, ordinarily. But you become more expressive when we're alone. I think it's quite delightful." Rosaria gave me a small smile.

I averted my gaze, recalling the time I melted the iron bars of Vera-Sylvie's window. Despite my mental age, it seemed that my physical age often managed to sway my actions. It was proof I wasn't being vigilant enough. I had to be more careful, lest I slip up in front of the nobility.

After a brief stretch of the carriage trundling along in silence, Rosaria asked a question. "Incidentally, I was wondering why this territory is called the County of Pildee. Is it not Your Majesty's direct holdings?"

Rosaria, asking a question of me, the boy famed as the idiot emperor. I doubted any of the nobility could conceive of such a thing.

"It's because the Bundarte Empire 'succeeded' the Rotahl Empire, and the names carried over," I explained. "In Rotahlian times, for example, House Mardrusa governed the Marquessate of Mardrusa." For the record, if a house went extinct, the holdings would be transferred to a different family of nobility—and of course, the name would change too. This was known as the landed title system. "Essentially, the Bundarte Empire inherited the landed titles and borders of the Rotahl Empire as is."

However, the *nobility* who had inherited those titles and lands were a different matter, and that was decided based upon factors including—but far from limited to—their track record. As a result, there were often divergences between the landed title and the house name. To use modern-day Japan as an example, it would be like if a prefecture called the County of Mardrusa had a prefectural governor called Mr. Alleman.

"That's why, with a few exceptions, nobility having the same title *and* house name indicates that they've owned the land since the time of the Rotahl Empire."

"What exceptions do you mean?"

"A simple example would be nobles who branch off of the imperial family: It is customary to apply new house names to their landed titles. The new titles of Duke Warren and Marquess Dozran were granted to the fourth and fifth sons of Charles I, the third emperor, and the same goes for the titles of Duke Agincarl and Duke Raul, which went to the houses of the third and fourth sons of Charles II, the fifth emperor. All the family names of the titles I just listed have 'Van' appended to them, which marks that they're of imperial pedigree."

There were other exceptions too, like in the case of reorganized territories or new titles established by the Bundarte Empire, but there was no need to get into all that detail here.

"Simply put, this land is the County of Pildee because Count Pildee governed it during the time of the Rotahl Empire. Of course,

since the imperial capital is located here, the generational title is inherited by the emperor."

While the throne could only be inherited by the eldest son—barring exceptional circumstances—the landed title could technically be given to any of his younger brothers due to how the Empire's inheritance laws worked. Nevertheless, the title of Count Pildee had remained with the throne and the emperor's main line for eight generations.

"I see," Rosaria said. "Hmm...but I don't believe I've ever heard of a landed title by the name of Chalongé."

Ah, she had to be referring to her house name, Chalongé-Cruveillier. "That's because it's not one. As you already know, the house name of Chalongé was that of the fourth son of Cardinal, the first emperor. However, said fourth son chose to become imperial court nobility instead of governing his own holdings."

He had actually declared familial independence and taken the house name of Chalongé *before* Emperor Cardinal took to the throne, to prevent a succession dispute. Apparently, the family was still around in the imperial demesne somewhere and still held a relative amount of power. I hadn't ever seen them, though.

Incidentally, "Cruveillier" was the Bundartian language reading of Crulére—the name of the Kingdom of Belvére's capital city. So essentially, Rosaria's name meant "the Chalongé family of Cruveillier."

In other words, it was a classic example of a branch family climbing higher up in the world than the main house. Not that I was in any position to comment, actually, being descended from a branch tribe of the Bundartian people.

Without the Dark Ages, Civilization Develops Smoothly

Around when the imperial capital disappeared from view behind us, the scenery outside the carriage windows became a panorama of abundant fields.

I was inclined to believe they were wheat fields, since bread was a permanent fixture of my meals...but was this the right season for wheat? Unfortunately, I was very much lacking in the agricultural knowledge department, so I honestly wouldn't be able to tell the difference between this world's crops and Earth's.

"Farmland as far as the eye can see..." Rosaria remarked, also looking outside the window. "As expected of the Empire."

Oh, right. I could just ask her. "Is that all wheat, do you think?"

"'Weet,' Your Majesty...?"

No dice, huh? Did that mean it had a different name here? Or was it a different crop entirely? "What is the base ingredient for bread?"

"Ah, you must mean whitegrain."

Whitegrain, huh? So that's what they called it here. My inherent knowledge was biasing me again; I was still falling back on old Earth reference points in my head. It was a habit I had to do away with—after all, it was *this* world that I lived in. Strictly speaking, I didn't know if this "whitegrain" was an exact match for the wheat that I knew. For now, though, I felt pretty safe tossing it under that description.

"My apologies, Your Majesty," Rosaria said, sounding dejected. "I cannot tell if those fields are whitegrain or blackgrain. Or even ambergrain or bluegrain."

I had no idea of the differences myself, but from the way she'd said it, it seemed safe to assume that all were commonly grown

crops that used similar farmland. Maybe even the same land, just in different cycles over a period of years. They called that, um, a "crop rotation," right? It appeared that agriculture had been relatively optimized here.

"Don't worry about it," I assured her. "I can't tell either."

"Yes, Your Majesty... Ah, but I *am* aware that the territories of Duke Agincarl and Duke Raul use the 'three-field system.' Perhaps we will have the chance to see it during this tour."

The three-field system... I'd heard of that phrase before. It was something akin to crop rotation, alternating summer grains, winter grains, and livestock grazing to prevent a field's soil nutrients from degrading. At least, I thought it was. Honestly, I couldn't tell you anything more than that, much less how it worked.

I knew what it *achieved*, though: a boost in crop yield and human population, as well as the *collapse* of the manorial system, serfs and all.

It seemed that, in a certain sense, I really had been born at a major turning point in history.

The Empire was one of the most prominent agricultural nations on the continent. When I had learned that tidbit from Count Palatine Vodedt, I'd simply attributed it to sheer volume of farmland, but now I knew that yield efficiency was also a contributing factor.

"Have you seen it before, Rosaria?"

I was pretty sure the three-field system was impossible in the emperor's direct holdings, so she must have seen it in the Agincarl region.

In order to implement the three-field system, a degree of agricultural zoning was necessary. In simpler terms, there had to be a noble around to order the farmers to move fields and designate the type of crops grown, which was why it would be impossible in this area. The noble best positioned to hand down such orders was the emperor—currently a puppet—and any local governors sitting around would be incompetent nobles who their betters hadn't considered worth headhunting away.

In the first place, there was no way that agricultural reforms would've been allowed to take place in the emperor's direct holdings,

as it could have reinforced the emperor's power.

"I have," Rosaria confirmed. "Since I traveled to the imperial capital by ship, I was able to see examples during the journey."

"Ah, you came over water?" Ships *would* be the fastest method of transportation in this era. And unlike Japan, the Empire's rivers were rather gentle-flowing. "I wish we were traveling by ship..."

Rather than wanting to ride a ship specifically, it would be more accurate to say I just wanted to feel the speed difference compared to this carriage.

"I...believe that would be difficult, from a security perspective. Of course, I'm aware Your Majesty could simply protect himself with magic in a crisis, but..."

Yeah, she was right. Still, was it just me, or was something off about this carriage in parti— Wait. *Magic?*

Hold your figurative horses. Had I ever shown Rosaria my magic? Had I ever even *mentioned* I could use it?!

* * *

After spending some time deep in thought and still being completely stumped about how she'd figured me out, I decided to just ask.

"How long have you known?" Even I could tell that I sounded peevish. Could you blame me, though? My magic was one of only a scant few aces up my sleeve.

"Since the time you showed me around the grand library."

The grand library? That was when I'd used Rosaria to get my hands on a number of magic books I'd wanted to read. True, I'd picked up a number of tomes on the subject, but my acting—playing the part of a clueless brat who wanted to show off the difficult books he could read in front of the girl he liked—should have been flawless. The fact that I'd grabbed the books alone shouldn't have been enough to suggest I could actually *cast spells*.

"Please forgive my impoliteness, Your Majesty," Rosaria prefaced, before she launched into a thoroughly detailed description of my mistakes. "If Your Majesty had been unable to read at that point,

you would have selected books based on thickness or gaudiness. And if you *had* been able to read to a certain degree, you would have selected books with long or difficult-seeming titles."

Um, what was this feeling? Was this how a frog felt locking eyes with a snake?

"Back then, Your Majesty also selected a number of books other than the volumes pertaining to magic—all of them with long titles or ostentatious covers. The books on magic were the *only* exception. Instead of being tools for deception, they included pragmatic volumes on infusion magic and defensive magic, as well as a collection of purely theoretical research reports."

So my attempt to deceive had actually backfired on me, huh? Well, that was fine as long as the dukes' factions hadn't noticed...right?

"Of course, it was possible that Your Majesty had simply wanted the books on magic out of curiosity, as personal reading material. But in that case, there would have been no need to use me. Given that, I concluded that you were capable of performing magic, and that you wished to keep that fact a secret." Rosaria smiled gently.

I had pretty much figured that she'd noticed I'd been using her, so I wasn't surprised there. Still, she deserved an apology for it. "I'm sorry about that," I said.

Rosaria's expression became surprised, then bewildered. "Pardon me, Your Majesty, but what are you apologizing for?"

"Hmm? For using you like that, of course."

Rosaria blinked several times at me before her smile slowly returned. "My. That simply won't do, Your Majesty. You mustn't apologize for such trivialities—it is my pleasure to be of use. No, rather, it is my desire that you make *more* use of me."

I was grateful that she wasn't bothered by it, but, uh, there was a hint of rapture in that smile of hers that was *really* throwing me off.

"Unfortunately, I'll probably make similar mistakes in the future," I said. "When they happen, I'd be thankful if I can count on your help."

"Of course, Your Majesty!"

Being completely frank, Rosaria scared the bejeezus out of me. In

the same way Timona did, come to think of it. “Does anybody else know?” I asked.

“Only Salomon. You may keep me under surveillance if you wish—I don’t mind. And naturally, I will not speak of my conjecture to anyone.”

I’d have preferred if she hadn’t told anybody at all...but then again, there had been no need for her to tell me all of this, since I hadn’t noticed that *she’d* noticed. The fact that she had gone out of her way to reveal she knew was a gesture of good faith.

I sighed. “You know, I’m glad it was you I got betrothed to.” I’d have been done for, if she’d been an enemy.

“The joy is mine, Your Majesty!”

Faced with Rosaria’s radiant smile, I couldn’t help but think that I could spend my entire life trying to one-up her, and she’d still get the better of me every time.

A First in Ten Years

The carriage rattled along without pause until around about high noon, when our procession came to a sudden stop.

Well, I say that, but it didn't feel particularly jarring. Nobody had hit the emergency brakes, exactly, so I figured we weren't under attack—had some kind of accident happened, maybe?

After a while, a voice spoke from outside the carriage. "Your food is ready, Your Majesty." It was the voice of Timona le Nain, my attendant.

Seriously? All that wondering, and it turns out it was just lunch?

After alighting from the carriage, I ate my meal in the shade of a large tent. The food was warmer than my usual fare, but only just. Still better than the practically gelid fare I ate in the imperial demesne, though. *Those* made me nostalgic enough for the hot meals of my old world to make me teary-eyed. Three cheers for the invention of the mighty microwave.

Incidentally, the contents of my meal were no different from my usual victuals. Yep, you heard that right: There was *no difference*.

In the imperial demesne, the emperor ate three meals a day. If I wasn't mistaken, this differed from the Medieval Europe of Earth, where I was fairly certain it had been common practice to only have a light snack for breakfast, or not eat it at all.

As the etymology of the word "breakfast" would suggest, most folk in medieval Europe would observe the religious rite of fasting for a portion of the day. Here, however, the First Faith had no such concept. Rather, it was thought that taking three square meals a day was proper conduct.

This thought process originated with the Illuminatus Ein: After being driven from the Central Continent, he had taken his followers on a lengthy journey by ship. It went without saying that maritime travel back then had been nowhere near as developed as it was

today, so death by starvation had been a serious risk. However, it was said that the followers who were deemed true believers were able to receive three meals a day by the grace of God, only losing this privilege if it was deemed that their faith had wavered.

In the modern day, debating the historical veracity of this teaching was considered utter poppycock. It was simply a core truth—part of this world's body of common knowledge.

According to Rosaria, the reactionary belief that those who did not consume three meals a day surely had a guilty conscience sprang from this teaching. Man, why did religion always trend toward extremes?

In any case, that was why lunch was a full course meal, carried in by a train of chefs. By the way, this was also when I figured out why there was a strange bowl within the carriage—turns out it was a sick bag.

"It is time to depart, Your Majesty."

After lunch, it was expected that I would be stuffed back into the carriage so we could get moving again. *Right*, I thought, *Rosaria had mentioned something about everyone seeming keen to leave the emperor's direct holdings, hadn't she?*

"No!"

"Y-Your Majesty?!"

Of course, I couldn't have cared less. Faced with the possibility of throwing up in my carriage, I would rather walk!

* * *

My sudden bout of childish tyranny resulted in me being plopped atop a horse (not the ones pulling the carriage) for a leisurely ride while surrounded by a full escort of guards. Rosaria was house-sitting in the carriage. She'd probably be fine—her meal had looked much healthier than mine. Actually, on that point, why was only *my* food so greasy and fatty?

While I doubted this little detour of mine would have been allowed if the Chancellor or Minister of Ceremony had been with our procession, the former was dressing up the front line for my arrival,

while the latter was holed up in the imperial capital. Their absence was a key contributor to my current relaxed state.



"Hmm. There's nothing here."

"Your Majesty, there are no sights particularly worth seeing in this area. We should return to the convoy soon."

Count Buhnra, the imperial guard captain, had tagged along under the pretext of guarding me. But despite his urging to return, I wanted to give Rosaria a break from the bumpy carriage ride. Plus, he was being so blatant about trying to lead me that I was starting to suspect he was hiding something.

Our surroundings were still nothing but fields, but I could see a number of farmsteads here and there—enough to qualify this place as a dispersed settlement of sorts. Conveniently, I spotted a number of farmers eating their lunch by a field, and headed in their direction.

"Please wait, Your Majesty. You mustn't draw near those of vulgar birth—they would sully you."

Wow, talk about a walking medieval noble stereotype. I didn't think I'd ever heard someone say a line like that out loud before. Of course, that was likely because I'd never had a chance to involve myself with commonfolk before.

"Is that so, Count Buhnra?" I asked. "Are you calling us dirty?"

Before he could attempt to explain himself, Count Vadpauvre—the aide-de-camp who had also weaseled his way into my leisurely ride—cut in. "Perish the thought, Your Majesty. It is well-known that Your Majesty is inviolable, no matter the circumstances. No matter how lowborn those peasants may be, they would never sully Your Majesty's person."

"Yes, we see. Then there should be no problem." I figured there wouldn't be an issue with siding with Count Vadpauvre for my own purposes here. It *was* ostensibly held in the Empire that the emperor was an untarnishable being.

That aside, I was excited to find out what the aide-de-camp—who was of the regency—wanted me to see that the imperial guard captain—who was of the Chancellor's faction—didn't. I relaxed in my saddle and allowed Timona, who held the reins to my horse, to walk ahead and guide me along.

The men having their lunch had apparently set up a fire in an

empty plot beside the field for cooking purposes. They were boiling something in a pot—a porridge of some kind, perhaps?

Naturally, they had noticed us. Nervousness and awe filled their eyes in equal amounts, and they were clearly wary. Who could blame them?

They probably didn't realize that I was literally the emperor yet, so I figured I could approach them as casually as the situation allowed. I stepped down from my mount and spoke to the men, who were either sitting on the ground or on convenient nearby rocks.

"You gentlemen. What is that?" Now that I'd gotten a closer look, it seemed my porridge guess had been on the mark. They also had a number of wooden bowls and spoons they were using to eat their meal. Of course, the most important detail was that, at least to my eyes, it looked like *rice* that they were eating.

"This is thousandgrain porridge," one of the farmers said nervously. "Y-Your lordship."

"Hmm. We have not seen it before. Give us a spoonful." It was the first time I'd seen rice since reincarnating in this world. How could I *not* try some?

"*Your Majesty!*"

Count Vadpauvre seemed desperate to stop me. As for Count Buhnra, he was standing at a distance with a look of disgust on his face. Their reactions pretty much tracked for what I expected from a time period like this one.

"Allow me, Your Majesty." Amid the hubbub, Timona neatly stepped forward, took a bowl, and brought it to his mouth. That's my poison tester for you. "There should be no issue."

"Your Majesty, that is fare for *plebeians*!"

"We are trying but a mouthful. What's the harm?" I dipped the spoon in the porridge and brought it to my mouth.

There was a faint tang of some kind of animal product in the broth and a very slight sweetness that was probably a vegetable, but aside from that, it had no flavor. Also, the broth smelled bad. All in all, it was about as far from "tasty" as one could reasonably get without it doing something actively malign. I suspected even the vegetables they'd used were leftovers.

Most importantly, the rice itself tasted terrible. It probably hadn't been polished properly. Despite the dish being a porridge, the rice's flavor hadn't permeated the broth at all—which was probably a mercy, because the grains themselves were just *yuck*. Utterly incomparable to Earth's rice.

Yet, despite all that...why did I so badly feel like crying?

"Eugh! This is awful!" Naturally, I couldn't let myself start bawling here of all places. The tears were easy to stop with a bit of willpower—just as easily as I could make myself "cry" these days with a dash of magic. "Just awful! Still, we find this interesting—it is different from the grains we know. Gentlemen, strive your utmost to improve the taste."

Man, Japan's rice had tasted so good. Back then, I'd chowed down on it without a thought, taking decades of selective breeding and hard work for granted. There was no use in crying over spilled milk, but it was hard not to wallow in regret regardless.

"Your Majesty, they would not possess the jurisdiction to see to such matters," Timona explained. "I believe your request would be best made of the area's local governor."

"Ah, we understand. Lead the way, Timona." Leaving the farmers looking dumbfounded behind me, I hopped back on my horse and allowed Timona to drag me away.

"Your Majesty! Thousandgrain is peasant food! It is not fit for the palate of nobility!"

Come to think of it, rice has an overall higher yield than wheat, right? In that case, it makes sense that whea—uh, whitegrain—is treated as noble food. So we take all the lower yield food for ourselves and leave the piles of rice for the commoners?

"You mustn't consume such base viands!"

Count Vadpauvre, my guy, do you ever shut up? "Ah, is that perhaps a teaching?"

"Pardon? Well...no. There is no such teaching..."

In this case, "teaching" referred to the doctrine of the First Faith. Quoting religion was a pretty effective way of getting people to shut up at times like these.

"Then what problem is there?" I asked. "All of nature's bounty is

given by the grace of God, is it not?”

* * *

Afterward, Count Buhnra began to get visibly fidgety, and the local governor that came out to greet us—a viscount—looked terribly flustered. Initially, it was all enough to make me suspicious they were hiding something big...but it turned out to be basically nothing. They were simply nervous about me finding out that the governor was of the Chancellor’s faction, despite this being the emperor’s direct holdings.

My entire *government* had been politically misappropriated, so I’d already long since assumed that my direct holdings had been infested with lapdogs. As if I would’ve been surprised. In fact, I would’ve gone so far as to say that I was let down by what an anticlimax this was. Not so for the aide-de-camp, who had a satisfied smirk on his face.

Exhibiting my true feelings, however, would not be the correct response in this scenario.

“What? Why has one of the Chancellor’s men stolen our land?!”

All of the Chancellor’s subordinates around me began sweating up a waterfall, while Count Vadpauvre’s expression could be best described as smug with a capital *S*. If the Chancellor himself had been here, I had no doubt he would’ve affected a perfect facade of calm, all the while weighing up in his mind whether he should have me killed.

“Please, Your Majesty. A moment, if you will.” The interruption came from...none other than Timona. “By assisting with the Empire’s governance in Your Majesty’s stead, His Excellency the Chancellor is protecting the nation until the day of your coronation. Distributing his subordinates throughout your holdings is but an extension of that. Without a governor, who else would safeguard this land while Your Majesty is occupied?”

“Hmm... Very well, then. We suppose it is fine.”

Thus, despite internally not agreeing with the matter at all, I agreed with Timona’s opinion, which in turn held zero sincerity. That

was our best resolution to this issue.

As a result, the Chancellor's faction now owed Timona one, and as debts went, it was pretty clear-cut. *Use it well, my faithful subordinate.*

Huh? Match-fixing? Profiting off my own troublemaking? Well, yes. You got a problem with that?

The Chapelier Earring

After ordering the viscount acting as governor to improve the quality of the local "thousandgrain," my little party returned to the main travel column. Our destination for the day was an estate in Marquess Mardrusa's marquessate, but—perhaps because of my detour—we did not arrive until quite late into the night. I was received with a quick greeting, then dinner, and afterward I was herded into my guest quarters for the night.

The estate we were staying in did not belong to the marquess himself but a subordinate viscount. As it belonged to "lower nobility," to use the common term, it lacked any mana-sealing wards. That was no issue, however, as we'd apparently brought some along from the imperial capital. They were smaller, more portable versions of the ones used in the imperial demesne, but they'd do just as good a job at preventing an assassination by magical means.

Of course, since I currently wished to use the magical communication tool that Vera-Sylvie had given me, they were also getting in the way. There was a chance the earring would work within the wards, but I didn't want to risk it malfunctioning. If possible, I wanted to test it outside.

"Timona, how many guards are there?"

My guest quarters were incomparably smaller than my quarters in the imperial demesne, but personally, I found them much easier to relax in. Currently, only Timona and I were present.

"Two before the door, and a number of agents in the garden."

Hmm. Then there was probably no issue with me hopping out the window to try the earring out. "Are the latter under your command?" I asked.

"No. A young agent by the name of Henri de Murrow is managing operations. His family has served House Vodedt for generations."

Timona's use of the word "young" almost had me thinking the

agent in question was a little boy, but he was probably just talking about the man's experience as a spy. "Very well," I said. "Then...no, never mind. They're fine as they are."

I'd thought for a moment about asking them to fall back, but the Count Palatine's people already knew of my relationship with Vera-Sylvie. Plus, I could just throw up a soundproofing barrier to maintain some privacy.

"I'm stepping out for a moment. Keep everyone on standby."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

* * *

Once I was outside, I threw up a barrier. It only blocked sound, allowing magic and mana to pass through. Then I channeled mana into Vera's earring. After several moments, the emerald began to glow.

"Oh. It lit up."

Shortly afterward, Vera's voice filtered out of the gem.

<Can you...hear me?>

"Yeah, loud and clear."

<I'm glad to...hear it...works.>

Hmm. That was all well and good, but I was starting to wonder *how* it worked. Radio waves or something? To begin with, where was her voice even coming from? The emerald merely seemed like any old gem.

My curiosity was itching—I wanted to disassemble it. Uh, not that I actually would.

Instead, I just decided to ask. "Hey, you wouldn't happen to know how this thing works, would you?"

<I'm afraid...not. Father said...it has to do with...the fact that...they were originally...one gem.>

Originally one gem? Is that what qualified it to function as a magical tool? I had no clue—which suggested it was a branch of magical theory I'd never stumbled upon. That was kind of exciting.

"So would the count know more?"

<No, I...don't think so. It's an old...family heirloom.>

Huh? Heirloom? In the Empire, that was the word people used for items so precious that you'd die in a fit of shame and anger if an enemy managed to steal one.

"Are you sure giving one to me was okay, then?"

<Yes. It's...what I wanted.>

As cute as that reply was, I figured I'd have to make sure to return it when this was over. To think I'd even considered disassembling it...

"All right. I'll be sure to bring it back in one piece." That aside, was Count Chamneau going to kill me if he found out I had one half of a family heirloom...? "Ah, so, how are things on your end? I imagine not much has changed, since it's only been a few days."

<Um, well, today's meals were...really big.>

She sounded pretty happy about that. "Yeah? That's great."

<Mm-hmm. I hope it's...the same...tomorrow.>

"I'm sure it will be."

So, the size of her meals got *noticeably* bigger, huh?

When Vera had started learning magic and her physical growth had resumed, I had ordered Count Palatine Vodedt to ensure the size of her meals increased. You see, my hypothesis was that she'd actually been magically halting her own growth—subconsciously—because of the malnutrition she'd experienced. Now that she'd gained control over her magic and that subconscious roadblock had fallen apart, she was growing again—but that meant the malnutrition problem would resurface.

Of course, suddenly upsizing a captive's meals was suspicious to say the least, and we didn't have the resources to switch out *every* one of her guards with our spies. Thus, it had been done in unnoticeable increments.

However, if the difference was now visible, that meant the Count Palatine had judged the coast was clear. In other words, the surveillance on Vera had weakened.

In the first place, Duke Agincarl, the Minister of Ceremony, had no interest in keeping her confined. After all, if not for that, her father Count Chamneau would still be regency nobility. As far as the duke was concerned, there was no merit in Vera-Sylvie's

imprisonment.

Thus, you would assume it was the Chancellor's faction surveilling her, right? However, since the "official" state of events was that the *regency* had unjustly imprisoned her, the Chancellor—who had won Count Chamneau over to his faction because of the whole thing—couldn't be seen to be blatantly watching her. It was highly doubtful that he'd bothered dedicating enough resources to infiltrate her tower.

So, circling back to the surveillance on Vera, who was responsible? There was only one answer: the person who'd had her imprisoned in the first place. The old hag.

And that surveillance had weakened—only a day after I'd left the imperial capital, no less. Interesting. It seemed the short time frame had still been enough for the regent's influence to falter.

Since the Chancellor was currently absent from the city, it was hard to imagine his faction would be making any big waves. In other words, the one stirring the pot right now had to be the Minister of Ceremony.

Now that I—the regent's shield—was gone, he had to be trying to reconsolidate his fracturing power base. No *wonder* he'd been so willing to make so many concessions to the Chancellor regarding my tour itinerary.

Still, I could let things be for now. Unlike the Chancellor, the Minister of Ceremony had multiple sons, but they hated each other's guts. That left me with any number of cards to play against him whenever I wanted—not that they'd have a high chance of success so long as he was keeping an eye on things.

In fact, it was good for me that he was bringing the regent in line. She was a bad matchup for me because of how unpredictable she was. I was glad we'd managed to get the ball rolling for this tour before she'd had a fit or something.

Using the earring, I chatted with Vera for another five minutes or so before we said our goodbyes. The whole thing had me feeling a little sentimental, since it reminded me of my previous world's mobile phones. Ah, nostalgia.

* * *

It took another week's travel for us to come out the other side of the Mardrusa Marquessate. Nothing particularly troublesome or interesting happened. Even my meeting with the marquess himself felt old hat, since he'd popped by the imperial court a few times in the past.

It only took us a day to cross the County of Baylor-Torei. It seemed we had no business there and truly were just passing through. Evidently Count Baylor-Torei had a taste for taxes, though, because there were no fewer than three checkpoints on the meager stretch of highway that passed through his holdings, all of which collected tolls from traveling merchants.

In my eyes, it was both greedy and disgraceful. If that weren't enough, I suspected it cut down the number of traders heading for the capital too. I wished he'd stop it.

Finally, today, we arrived safely at the County of Kushad. More specifically, one of Count Kushad's villas near his holdings' border with the County of Baylor-Torei. Good thing too. I'd been getting worried we'd have to settle for camping outdoors.

Why, you ask? Well, because there had been a big kerfuffle about crossing the border—in other words, when the Chancellor's faction had to hand over our convoy's pole position to the regency. The main culprits, of course, had been the two counts whose lands we were traversing.

They'd argued about everything from our late arrival, to the difference between our convoy size and the prereported number of people, to how some members of the other faction had run up various expenses that needed to be accounted for. If you ask me, the entire debacle only stemmed from two key points: Count Baylor-Torei was a stingy money-grubber, and Count Kushad was an oversensitive fusspot. Their constant bickering over tiny details was enough to give anyone a headache.

I mean, we'd only arrived less than an hour later than planned—it was their quarrel that had exacerbated the delay. I'd taken a nap in my carriage because I couldn't keep watching their verbal slap fight,

and they had *still* been going when I'd woken up. Everyone, Timona included, had looked visibly exhausted by the ordeal.

Me? After my nap, I was as bright-eyed and bushy-tailed as could be. You ever tried using a girl's lap as a pillow? That stuff really works wonders.

Anyway, I'd finally made it to my guest quarters in the villa. They were surprisingly roomy this time around.

"Timona."

It was a good time to take a break, so I figured I'd give Vera a call. But when I called out to Timona there was no response.

Deciding he was probably outside the door, I attempted to cast my heat detection spell—and that's when I noticed the familiar sensation of the frozen mana...*wasn't there*.

"Don't tell me..."

Just as a test, I tried focusing on the mana beyond the door, but I couldn't manipulate it. In other words, the wards were still up out there. Had they been disabled solely for this room? I was fairly certain they couldn't be adjusted to do that.

Next, I ran mana along the walls and discovered...some kind of *inward-facing* magical barrier? One that worked against both magic and physical objects, at that. Someone had clearly set it up in advance.

Suddenly and without a sound, a young man dressed like a butler appeared in the center of the room.

"It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Your Majesty," he said. "I realize this is abrupt, but I'm afraid that for the sake of my lady's future, you must die."

Yep, this was an assassination attempt. Saw that one coming.

Alumni Meeting

I suspected the young man dressed in a butler's attire who'd suddenly appeared in my room was a mage. And judging by his entrance, he could probably manipulate space—something that was still beyond me. Or maybe he'd been there the whole time and could alter perception or thoughts.

Either way, he intended to assassinate my imperial self. Yet, no assassin would act without one: a client; and two: a motive.

The simplest assumption would be that he was working for the Chancellor's faction or the regency, but I was fairly certain they still hadn't seen through my act. Additionally, the Chancellor's faction would've waited until none of their people were around to be incriminated, while the regency would have done it while I was still in their opposing faction's territory.

In that case, was this a foreign nation's attempt to stir up chaos within the Empire? That didn't make sense. A dead puppet's shoes would simply be filled by another puppet, or by one of the two dukes. In either event, foreign nations would have no control, so it was obvious that leaving me alive was the more convenient option.

So who was behind this, and why? Wait, what had the man said just now? Something about "his lady's future." Okay, so the assumption was that my future self would pose a threat to his mistress in some way. But the question was: *Which* one of my selves?

Very few people knew about the true "me," so it seemed safe to assume that the "harm" would be brought about by my public face: the foolish puppet. Hmm. In other words, this man had come to kill me because he couldn't leave me alive to be a puppet for the nobility. That meant there was some room for negotiation here.

"I *do* sympathize," the man said. "It is not your fault you were raised a puppet. I shall endeavor to make this as painless as

possible."

If I could simply clear up the misunderstanding and prove that I was a proper and respectable emperor capable of bringing the nobility in line, then I might even gain a new ally here. But to do that, I had to get this man to sit down at the negotiating table first. I needed to overwrite his mental image of me as a dancing marionette with the impression that I was strong enough to stand my ground against people like the Chancellor.

All of which was to say: I needed to make a show of force.

"*Custor.*"

My magical barrier halted his knife mid-flight. The man had barely moved, but I had keen young eyes to count on.

That being said, there'd been a lot more force behind the projectile than I'd expected. There was a crack in my barrier. I decided to discard it and set up another—no, I set up *multiple*, of varying types. Then I teed up an offensive spell so I could put an end to this.

"Impossible. Are you a body double?"

Nice. The fact that he'd drawn that conclusion pretty much proved I had him dead to rights about his take on me.

"*Glacies Lapis,*" he incanted.

It looked like I was right: He *could* cast spells. A number of sharp, pebble-sized chunks of ice flew straight at me. Ice magic was well suited for assassination, since it would simply melt into water once the job was finished.

I decided to match it with my specialty. I converted mana into heat energy, compressed it, and infused it with the aspect of fire before unleashing it.

"*Flamma Lux.*"



A scorching white beam shot from my fingertip, melting the ice chunks and heading straight for my opponent...who dodged so neatly out of the way it was as if he'd teleported. Another piece of evidence that it really was space or perception manipulating magic he was using.

"Seriously?!" the man dressed as a butler exclaimed. It seemed my attack had flustered him. "A laser?!"

Wait. Did he just say *laser*?

Hadn't that word originated from an English acronym? It shouldn't exist in this world. That meant...the guy must have *also* reincarnated! If that was the case, I had no doubt he'd applied his prior knowledge to his magic as well. I couldn't let my guard down.

"Change of plans—I'm going all out," I said. I called up my mana to prime my next shot, only instead of generating it from my fingertip, I generated it from all over my body. "If a concentrated shot doesn't work, let's go with a full bombardment. *Flamma Lux. Viginti. Perdere.*"

* * *

The most important thing in war, or in combat in general, was to always be ahead of your opponent—to always hold the initiative.

Ordinarily, you would expect a full fusillade of twenty heat lasers to be enough to settle a fight. However, my opponent could deform space-time with his damn mind, meaning a frontal assault was of little use.

"*Sapiens Carcere!*"

Some manner of *dimensional doorway* opened up before my eyes, swallowing my beams. More ice chunks hovered in the air thanks to the man's *Glacies Lapis*. No doubt he was about to use them for a counterattack.

However, with the hole in space between us, he didn't have a solid line of sight to me, meaning this was the perfect chance for a counter of my own. I wouldn't let this moment go to waste—and the setup of the room itself was going to help me.

My *Custor* soaked the ice projectiles flying at me as I prepped to

fire another spell. But instead of aiming it at my opponent, I aimed it at the barrier I'd set up behind him.

"*Flamma Lux. Viginti. Perdere.*"

The beams hit the barrier and fizzled out. Well, that's what they *would* have done, had it been an ordinary barrier.

"What?!"

My spell bounced, aimed straight for the young man's back.

I had set up four kinds of barriers earlier. One was an orthodox *Custor*, to protect against physical and magical attacks, but the one I'd made use of just now was a *Reflo Datio Custor*, a mirror-like, reflective barrier. As its name suggested, it had reflective properties, which had allowed me to set up an attack from my opponent's rear.

Unfortunately, the young man managed to wrench his body to the side and dodge the barrage. They splashed harmlessly against my own defensive barriers instead as I fired another volley at one of the other, smaller barriers I'd set up earlier: *Spec Datio Custor*, a refractive barrier.

These barriers were something I'd cooked up myself. The weak point of my *Flamma Lux* was that, as a beam, it only fired in a straight line. Ordinarily, its sheer speed would compensate somewhat for this weakness. However, my opponent was a gifted mage, and this was a relatively close-quarters fight. It wouldn't be that difficult for him to read the flow of my mana to gauge my firing angles.

Long story short, if you knew how to watch the "barrel of the gun," you could dodge the spell with a pretty trivial effort. I did my best to disguise this weakness of *Flamma Lux* by compressing the heat energy into a smooth spherical shape, but it seemed like that wasn't enough.

That was where *Spec Datio Custor* came into the picture. Once the beams hit it, their trajectories would refract, making them harder to predict. In essence, it changed my one-directional offensive into an omnidirectional one.

My opponent seemed to decide that even he wouldn't be able to dodge this one. He allowed several of the beams to connect, taking the hit so he could pull some kind of teleportation trick and close the

distance. It was the right call. I didn't think he knew it, but my beams actually lost some potency once they were refracted.

He pulled a dagger from out of nowhere and stepped in close.

"*Glac Scuti.*"

"*Kugh!*"

A bulwark whose only purpose was to defend was difficult to use in close-quarters combat; even if it kept you safe for the moment, it still left your opponent with the upper hand. *Glac Scuti* was meant to cover that flaw: It created a spiky wall of ice before me, allowing for combined offense and defense. Incidentally, this wasn't a Carmine original—the spell had a well-established pedigree.

While my inherent biases still made magic that did anything with water difficult for me, I was actually good enough with ice to call it a specialty.

The young man leaped back, no doubt intent on trying a different attack vector. I could sense mana gathering behind me.

"There's really no point."

The last of the four barriers I'd set up was a *Rebellia Custor*, a counterattack barrier. Through a little clever infusion magic, I had set it up to automatically counterattack with *Flamma Lux* when triggered. It intercepted the blades he'd summoned out of nowhere, knocking them aside.

That was a neat trick, though. He must've used that pocket dimension of his somehow.

"Damn it!"

With even his Hail Mary rendered futile, it looked like he was about to cut his losses and retreat, likely with the same gimmick he'd used to make his appearance.

That was smart of him, but I couldn't let it get out that the infamous puppet emperor was a magical whiz kid. I had to win him over or silence him permanently—letting him escape wasn't an option.

Thankfully, I had set the room up in advance to prepare for this exact situation.

I pumped more mana into the ordinary *Custor* around me, boosting its defensive capabilities before chanting my next spell.

"*Flamma Lux. Viginti. Totorum!*"

Heat beams flew in indiscriminate directions, slamming into the room's walls...*and bouncing off*.

"*Guh! Ngaaah!*"

Even I didn't know where the beams would come from. The man threw up a *Custor* of his own at first, but my suspicion as to why he hadn't used one until now proved correct: Just like I was bad with water magic, he had a poor handle on barrier magic. He was taking a pretty harsh beatdown.

To be fair, the whole point of *Flamma Lux* was extreme penetrating power. Unless you reinforced your defenses with magic or optimized your barrier's angles to deflect the beams, they would tear through your business like tissue paper. In that sense, my opponent had held his own pretty well.

"H-How..." he grunted amid the random bombardment.

"How did I set this up? I used the inward-facing barrier that *you* set up over this room."

No doubt he had only intended for its purpose to conceal his assassination attempt from the outside world. Who could've guessed that I would *attach* my own set of *Reflo Datio Custor* barriers to it, all at different angles, thereby overlaying it entirely?

Ordinarily, maintaining so many specialized reflective barriers in midair was impossible. This wasn't because of mana issues—without the mana-sealing ward in this room, I had infinite ambient mana to work with. However, maintaining a spell required a certain degree of constant concentration. The amount differed depending on the spell, but a suspended reflective barrier required all sorts of mental math—such as a constant grasp of its position in a three-dimensional plane—and these calculations all ate into the fixed amount of concentration that I could dedicate.

But with a stable barrier *already* established around the room, I could simply "paste" my barriers onto it. The positional data would remain fixed, meaning all I needed to maintain the spells was the bare minimum of attention. Thanks to that, my focus was freed up to cast other magic.

As the light show continued, the man's expression made way for

a resigned smile. “When...did you have the chance to...?”

“When you lost sight of me due to that *Sapiens Carcere* of yours, or whatever it’s called.”

Since it had only been for a moment, the individual *Reflo Datio Custor* barriers I’d thrown up had been oversized by necessity. Owing to that, the complicated bounce patterns I’d intended to create were instead relatively predictable. My opponent seemed to have realized that too; he’d gained enough breathing room to speak.

Still, as a measure to *buy time*, I figured I’d done a pretty good job.

I ended my *Flamma Lux*, letting the light show end. I’d need my full concentration to *protect* myself against my finishing move.

“Why’d you stop?” the man asked warily.

“You got used to it, didn’t you? More importantly, if you can guard yourself against this next spell, we can talk. Prove to me you’re worth negotiating with.”

“Negotiating? What?”

Hey, come on, man. I have, like, hardly any allies. I’ll be in trouble if you won’t even talk to me. Plus, having to kill you would create so much work.

This was all just a show of intimidation to give myself the upper hand in our eventual negotiations. I didn’t actually want to kill him. So...

“Defend with all you’ve got, okay? You’ll die otherwise.”

I shot a table-sized barrier toward the man, then *released the magical coating covering it*. I figured now was my one perfect opportunity to reveal the trick.

“By the way. Do you know what a back draft is?”

“You have to be kid—!”

Boom.

At the Very Least, It's One Crucial Step

Back drafts are phenomena that occur during fires when combustible gas—primarily carbon monoxide—builds up in an enclosed space, unable to properly burn due to the lack of oxygen. The moment a door or window is opened, the carbon monoxide undergoes a rapid chemical reaction, binding with the oxygen to become carbon dioxide, resulting in an explosion.

That was the general definition of back drafts that I'd learned during my time on Earth. The phenomenon required an enclosed space, an incomplete combustion, a spark, a sudden influx of oxygen, and enough time for a carbon monoxide buildup.

Of the chemical reactions I knew about, this was one of the easier ones to replicate with magic.

First, you enclose a magically generated flame with a *Perfectus Obex*—a complete barrier—and force the flame to keep burning, thereby draining the oxygen and creating an incomplete combustion. Once the barrier is full of carbon monoxide, you launch it at your target and release it. The sudden reaction with the ambient oxygen will explode, and there you have it: an artificially made back draft.

The real draw of the spell is that the explosion itself is purely a chemical reaction.

Take my *Flamma Lux* as an example. Since it's nothing more than a compressed beam of pure heat energy, you would expect it to be unaffected by *Custor* with solely antimagic properties. But I generate the heat energy by converting mana, which *is* affected, meaning a solely antimagic barrier wouldn't actually be as useless as you'd think.

However, the explosion generated by an artificial back draft is a pure chemical reaction, meaning antimagic *Custor* would provide no

defense at all. This made it an effective weapon against this world's mages, whose prevailing combat doctrine prioritized defending against magical effects.

Mind you, my real reason for developing the spell lay elsewhere.

There's a bit of a hitch in the spell's design: a slight lag between dropping the barrier and the carbon monoxide reaction. After all, the "rapid" in "rapid chemical reaction" doesn't mean "instant." However, this was precisely why I'd singled out this phenomenon: I needed my opponent to be able to defend against it.

I'd even straight up *told him* that a back draft was coming. Though he might've only had an instant, everything he'd shown me suggested he was capable of reacting fast enough to defend himself.

When the flames died down, the man in butler's garb—which now looked rather worse for wear—was kneeling with his hands in the air.

"I surrender. You've got no openings, and I've got no strength left. No options either."

"Really? It looked like you guarded perfectly against that explosion with that dimensional pocket of yours."

"Unfortunately, that requires advance preparations...and that was all I had left in me."

I wasn't buying that. He had to have at least one more shot tucked away.

"Today's really not my day," he continued. "To think the emperor's body double would be from home."

"Heh. Close, but not quite. Toss your premise away and try again."

The man's eyes widened. "You're...the *actual* emperor?"

"Yeah, it's a long story. I've been playing the idiot since I was born. Gotten pretty good at it, if I do say so myself. You still need to assassinate me?"

The man thought for a moment. "No. If you're telling the truth, this changes things. Ah. No wonder you brought up negotiations."

Oh, good. My guess about him only needing to kill me if I was an idiot was right. "Then let's begin," I replied. "Well. Not that you have a choice."

* * *

"So, can you tell me your mistress's name?"

"I'm afraid that's the one thing I can't say. Even in exchange for my life."

Yeah, it figured he'd be the ultra loyal type. That was fine—it made him more trustworthy.

"All right. Then let's proceed under the assumption that this 'lady' of yours is imperial nobility." Even with that premise, I'd have to narrow down her position. "First off, someone central to the regency or Chancellor's faction wouldn't consider me being a fool to be a bad thing. That suggests she's either neutral, a fringe faction element, or that her family's central to a faction but she herself isn't the successor to their title."

Of those three options, the Count Palatine should have been aware of her movements in advance if she were neutral, while pulling this attack off would have been particularly difficult if she *wasn't* a central faction element.

"Thanks to those idiots' bickering, our arrival today was greatly delayed," I continued. "Your magic would allow you to have infiltrated this manor well in advance...but that would also bear the risk of discovery. It follows that you—and by extension your lady—are in a position that would know of our late arrival. Additionally, unless this was a suicide mission, you would have to know who occupies this manor and where they would be in order to plan an escape. In other words, your lady must be a noblewoman of a house central to one of the dukes' factions, but she's not the title successor. Am I getting warmer?"

There was simply no way that his mistress had sent such a magically adept agent on a suicide mission. Incidentally, since any sign of backup had yet to appear, I figured it was safe to assume he was working alone.

If he had been the servant of low-ranking nobility, it would have been difficult for him to even find out where I was staying. Since it would be disadvantageous for the Chancellor and Minister of Ceremony if I died when they weren't ready, the detailed itinerary

for my tour would have been kept strictly confidential.

"And in that same vein, I think it's highly likely your lady's goals differ from those of her house. Am I right?"

The man in butler's clothing gave a wordless shrug. Hmm. Yeah, I wasn't getting anything from his expression.

"She considered a foolish emperor to be a net negative for the future and planned an assassination," I mused. "In other words, she wants the emperor to be someone respectable. No wonder she thought the current status quo needed an upset."

"But you wish to maintain it? I doubt that's because you're satisfied with how things are, so, what—you're simply waiting for the right moment?"

"Of course I am. If I half-ass things, those cockroaches will scuttle off to live another day."

There were ways I could seize back political power right this moment, if I wanted. The problem was what came *after*. Without any military strength to my name, it would take everything in my power just to hold the imperial capital and its surroundings, and taking down Duke Raul and Duke Agincarl would become a pie-in-the-sky idea.

I couldn't allow that to happen; it would only weaken the Empire further.

"So here's a proposition for you," I said. "How about allying with me?"

"You? The person everyone calls the 'foolish emperor'?"

"Hey, it's not like I'm saying you have to drop everything and do it now. I'd rather you didn't start making waves either, since I'm still biding my time. What I *am* asking for is this: Once the imperial court is mine and I hold control over the capital and its surroundings, the next thing to come knocking will be a civil war against the forces of Duke Raul and Duke Agincarl. When that happens, I want your lady to usurp her house and throw her lot in with me."

The man frowned. That was a fair enough reaction; taking over one's own noble house was quite the risky endeavor. "And what benefit would we see by agreeing?" he asked.

"The survival of your house's name. I'll overlook the fact that you

were faction nobility, as well as your takeover, and leave the punishment of your people in your hands. You'll have full liberty to pardon or execute them as you please. Long story short: I won't even care if you solely execute your rivals and leave everyone else alive. The pardons can all be swept under the rug as 'a reward for your devotion to the emperor.'"

Using that pretext would ensure the gratitude of the surviving vassals of their house would be directed at their lady rather than me, making it easier for her to keep everyone in line. After all, it would only mean trouble for me if my allied noble houses were in disarray. Making concessions like these was a necessary expense.

"An elevation in peerage would be desirable too," the man in the butler's clothes said. "Can you guarantee our house a higher rank?"

"That'll depend on how well you do. Sorry, but I've got no positions to hand out to incompetents. On the flip side, good work *will* be rewarded. Plus, I'm going to purge pretty much *everyone* at the top, so there'll be plenty of opportunity for anyone left standing who might be looking to do some social climbing." I was even willing to grant this guy full independence, if that was what he wanted.

"Ah. I see you're giving the aftermath your due diligence, then."

"Yeah. Don't worry; I'm not planning to bog the Empire down with something as inefficient as a patriarchal system. Man or woman, I'll be needing to squeeze everything I can out of all the talented people I can get my hands on."

If I wasn't wrong, this particular condition was both what his lady needed, and the most attractive possible incentive for her. This world wasn't quite so unequal gender-wise as the one I'd come from, but it was still not a great place to be a woman.

The man considered my words for a few moments. "I'm sorry, but I can't give you an immediate answer. I'll be sure to inform my lady of your offer, however."

"That's fine. It's not like I even know which house you're from yet. Ah, and one more thing. The conditions I offered you aren't exclusive—after political power's in my hands, I'll be granting them to every house in my camp." I was better off letting him know this now, lest he or his lady kick up a fuss down the line.

"Oh? But then it would be difficult to call them an exclusive benefit for our house, no?"

"What do you mean? There's a world of difference between *knowing* and *not* knowing. You'll have a head start on everyone else."

By all rights, him and his lady being first in line was information I would've preferred to keep to myself. That would have allowed me to tell multiple parties the same thing—it was the sort of buttering up that made for a better sales pitch. However, we weren't agreeing to an alliance on the spot, but one "when the time was right." On top of that, they would be the ones deciding the timing.

In a nutshell, that meant they could overtake their house even while I was in the midst of attacking their holdings and it still wouldn't be too late. All they had to do was explain it away as the timing they thought would be most successful.

That was why I figured revealing and emphasizing the part about being first in line—in other words, exclusive information—posed no issue here.

"Yes...you're right," the man conceded. "I suppose one could even say that you overlooking this assassination attempt is already a rather hefty advance payment."

He wasn't wrong; from my point of view, silencing him was a totally fine option, now that he'd seen my magic. Still, on the contrary, what would he even do with that knowledge if I let him go?

Even if, hypothetically, he went straight to the Chancellor or whoever, the testimony of a single man wouldn't be enough to earn me an immediate assassination. I'd come under suspicion, of course, but all I'd have to do to shake that off was lie low for a while.

"It's a deal, then. Now, the problem is..." I looked around the room. While I'd made sure to keep the more delicate furniture from harm, the walls, ceiling, and carpet were looking badly charred. "What are we going to do about this room?"

"Ordinarily I could repair it to some degree with my magic...but I'm afraid we've left the room mana-burnt."

"Mana-burnt?" But there should've been plenty of ambient mana just waiting to be used.

"Yes. When mages do battle, the sudden, drastic consumption of local mana leaves the area temporarily bereft, reducing spell potency or even preventing casting outright until new mana flows in from elsewhere. It's more commonly seen on battlefields...but our exchange *was* rather intense."

"Ah, I see. Yeah, from what it looked like, your spatial manipulation magic is a real mana guzzler."

"As much as it embarrasses me to admit it, yes."

Now that he'd mentioned it, the ambient mana *was* harder to get a hold on. *No, wait, is it?* I could manage it just fine with some effort. *Natural talent and aptitude must be factors, I guess. Whatever.*

"Hmm. Give me a moment." Using my usual process, I began expelling my internal mana.

"May I ask what you're doing...?"

"I'm releasing the mana I compressed and stored internally into the air. I can't match the amount we used in our fight, but it should be enough for you to do some repairs."

"You are, are you?" The man smiled self-deprecatingly. "No wonder I was no match for you."

"I wouldn't say that. It's not like you were in top condition. You isolated this room from the rest of the manor, tricking the mana-sealing wards into thinking it was a different building, right? Plus, there's whatever work you put into making sure no guards could enter. If you hadn't expended effort on those things, I think you would've had a decent shot at me."

What was more, some of his attacks had posed real danger to me, like the blades he'd flanked me with from behind. Back then—well, more accurately, from the start of the fight—I had been winding up my back draft spell. If his attack had pierced the barrier component, there was every chance my spell could've exploded on the spot.

Additionally, if he had kept a calmer head during the fight, he would've noticed a number of irregularities. My *Rebellia Custor* had defended me from the surprise attack, but I'd actually only set it up to protect my back draft spell. He'd also overlooked why I hadn't

moved a step during the fight: I hadn't been *able* to, since my table-sized barrier had been behind me. Finally, the reason I hadn't made a follow-up attack to my *Flamma Lux, Viginti, Totorum* was because it had taken all I had to defend myself against my own scattering lasers.

In other words, the best choice for him to have made would have been to just keep laying on the surprise backstabs. Of course, I wasn't about to just tell him that.

"All I did was surround the room with a thin other-dimensional space," he explained. "Besides, you're of the imperial family, who've had mage blood for generations, while I'm just a commoner. Our base physical specs are simply different. I should've considered the possibility that you could use magic."

As the man spoke, his spell repaired the room at a steady rate. I found myself unwittingly captivated—his mana control and attention to detail were just that meticulous.

When the room had returned to more or less how it was before his attack, he ended his spell and turned to me. "One last thing," he said. "A warning from me personally, as thanks for letting me live."

"Sure, go ahead."

"You *mustn't* drink any wine. Please don't forget that."

The man bid me farewell, then melted into thin air just as quickly and soundlessly as he'd appeared.

I *knew* he'd kept an escape up his sleeve. Good thing I'd brought up the idea of negotiations in advance; he probably would've hightailed out of here otherwise.

"Wine? I'm still a kid..."

I wondered what he'd meant by that. Well, it wasn't like I had any plans to indulge in alcohol anyway, so I'd just shelve the warning for now.

Sharing a Bed

Some time after the man in butler's attire had left, there was a knock at the door.

I called for them to enter, and just as I'd suspected, it was Timona. He'd barely finished shutting the door behind him before he smoothly turned the movement into a flat-out prostration on the floor.

"To my eternal disgrace, I have allowed an assassin to reach Your Majesty's person. There is no apology I can offer. Please, give me the order and I shall cut myself to ribbons with my own blade. I beg of you."

Wow, as apologies went, that was pretty graphic. Wait, he wasn't being serious, was he?

"And who would clean up the odd-looking corpse you left behind...? There's no need for apologies. It's unreasonable to expect you could've done anything against such a skilled mage."

In the first place, spatial manipulation was a just plain unfair ability. I was pretty envious, since spatial magic was beyond me. I'd seen no success by picturing it like how it worked in games, so I was fairly sure I either needed more theoretical knowledge or a more detailed mental image.

As Timona's liege lord, you could argue that it behooved me to reprimand him, but in this case doing so didn't feel fair.

Truth be told, if the assassin had come while I was sleeping, I would've been a sitting duck. Wait, no, in that case, Timona would've been on night watch. I had little doubt he would've given his all to defend me, so, yeah, there really *was* no need to criticize him.

"Still...the whole thing's left me pretty beat." I'd just fought for my life. Sure, I was physically tired, but it was the mental exhaustion that was really hitting me right now.

"Shall I call Lady Rosaria over?"

"What? How does that follow? Ah, incidentally, there was a short time between that man leaving and you entering. Was this room more isolated than I thought?"

"No. I couldn't suppress my anger, so I kicked him."

He managed to catch an escaping spatial mage and land a kick on him? I doubted even I could pull that off.

Wait, didn't I promise the assassin that I'd let him get away? This isn't going to come back to bite me later, is it? Eh, nah. Technically, I never promised that someone else wouldn't do anything, so I'm probably fine. Yeah. Innocent as a lamb.

"So, can you update me on the state of the front line?"

"Of course, Your Majesty. I have a report ready on the conflict at the Teyanave Confederation border."

* * *

Our "official" reason for this stretch of the tour was to observe our front line against the Teyanave Confederation, to make sure that we were actually fighting the enemy nation. Wait, no, from the Empire's point of view, I supposed the confederation was better described as a rebel element.

Anyway, that was why the Chancellor and such had gone to the front line themselves: to dress things up so they could trick me into thinking a real war was going on.

After all, the truth was that there was barely any fighting at all. But since they didn't want me to discover that, I had no doubt my security would be the tightest it had ever been—not to defend me from enemies, but to prevent me from coming into contact with any commoners or merchants who knew the truth.

Naturally, it was a whole lot of wasted effort, since I already knew.

"It appears that Duke Raul's forces have already breached the border," Timona explained. "It is likely that our convoy's planned journey will change to join them."

"They...want the emperor at the front line? Is that a testament to

how badly they beat back Teyanave?" This *was* the Chancellor's personal army with him directly at the helm, instead of a force of mercenaries, but I was still surprised it had seen such one-sided success.

"No. There has hardly been any fighting to begin with. The Teyanavi forces pulled back, abandoning the border villages. Duke Raul's army have put those same villages to the torch, calling it a 'victorious battle.'"

So there hadn't been any combat at all? "Any chance it's a trap?"

"It's possible. However, the Teyanavi forces have made no attempt to hide themselves, nor their numerical superiority to Duke Raul's army. In addition, all of the Duke's units that he's sent near Teyanavi cities have been annihilated. All of which suggests that the confederation is simply avoiding battle on purpose."

"Tsk. They've read us like a book." I couldn't help but click my tongue. To me, Duke Raul's army and the Teyanavi forces were both enemies. I had hoped they would grind each other down some. "Cutting their losses, huh? How very merchantlike of them."

"Yes. Compared to the military losses from a full-scale battle, they must consider the razing of a number of villages to be preferable. It appears that the Duke's army realized this also—it hasn't advanced any further beyond the ground it has taken."

Damn. So this had simply ended with both sides compromising.

Still, we had at least confirmed the presence of the Teyanavi forces. That meant we'd achieved our bare minimum objective of ensuring they weren't selling even more weapons and soldiers to the Central Continent. I'd just have to make do with that.

Moving onto the next problem...

"What about the regency's movements?"

"The regency, Your Majesty?"

"Yeah. We can't have them sending aid to Teyanave in secret in order to sabotage Duke Raul's army."

The Central Continent was a place of constant conflict, and also one of the Golden Sheep Trading Company's most profitable markets. Their goal was to sell the Central Continent what it couldn't produce fast enough for itself at a healthy markup—mainly arms and

mercs.

However, there was one resource a warring nation needed even more: *food*.

And it just so happened that the Empire possessed the most productive breadbasket on the Eastern Continent.

"It's possible the regency would do it just to ensure Duke Raul gets a bloody nose," I explained. "And then Teyanave would simply turn around and sell the supplies to the Central Continent."

"I see. I'll direct an agent to keep an eye on the matter."

"Please do."

Honestly, I didn't think the Minister of Ceremony would actually bother, since he was currently busy reinforcing his power base in the imperial capital. However, I couldn't say the same for his sons back in his duchy, whose actions I couldn't predict. That aside...

"Abandoning villages even after their lands were invaded, huh? You can hardly even call Teyanave a nation at this point."

Ordinarily, an invasion would be met with an attack by a defending army. Even if the latter was at a disadvantage, it would still have *no choice* but to wait for the right opportunity to strike.

A victory that came at a disproportionate cost was called "pyrrhic," but seen from another angle, the existence of that term was a testament to how war was something that happened *even if* it wasn't worth it. To willingly cede sovereign land simply because the cost-benefit analysis shook out badly was not a decision any proper nation should make.

Of course, doing so *temporarily* was fine, so long as it was all part of a bigger plan to win the war. In fact, I suspected that was how the Golden Sheep had sold the idea to the local lords. After all, publicly the Golden Sheep were no more than a simple merchant company *assisting* the Teyanave Confederation.

In reality, those lords were being milked for all they were worth.

Which meant that I could make use of this to harass the Golden Sheep. If the lords could be convinced that the withdrawal of Teyanavi forces had been the Company cutting its losses, rather than sound military strategy, there would be significant backlash. Nobody liked getting played. The problem was—how was a guy supposed to

go about achieving that? As long as the Teyanavi forces recaptured the land in the end, the Golden Sheep could say whatever they wanted. Even if they had a hard time of it, it would justify their excuse that the withdrawal was for the sake of a win further down the line.

Thus, I had to create a reason for Duke Raul's army to remain where it was. And it couldn't be temporary; it had to be something that needed constant upkeep.

In that case...

* * *

"Your Majesty. Your Majesty!"

It felt like someone was calling for me. And did I detect a faint floral note?

"Hmm? Rosaria?" I didn't know how or when she'd come, but Rosaria was now right in front of me, holding my hands and looking concerned. Glancing around revealed that Timona had disappeared somewhere. "Why are you here?"

"I forced Master le Nain to let me in. Your Majesty, are you hurt?"

It seemed she knew I'd been attacked. *C'mon, Timona, did you really have to tell her?* "Don't worry, I'm fine. Did Timona tell you?"

"No, my lady-in-waiting noticed. And by the time we mustered our available forces..." If you looked up "despondent" in the dictionary, you'd find a picture of Rosaria's expression in that moment, right there in black and white. "I'm sorry. I have no excuse."

It seemed I'd suspected Timona unjustly. Of course, he *had* still let her in...but I wasn't going to get mad over something that trivial. I assumed his absence in the room was his way of telling me to get some rest.

All that aside, as intense as my fight with the assassin had been, it had still taken place inside a barrier. If it'd been noticed, that meant...

"So that lady-in-waiting of yours is a mage? Quite the capable one, at that."

There was a brief pause before Rosaria answered, "Yes."

Ah. So that's how it was. "You also mentioned 'mustering your forces.' Should I take that to mean you have other mages with you? All from the Kingdom of Belvére, I assume."

"Yes... I will accept any censure you have for me."

"I wouldn't dream of it. Who you put in your retinue is your choice. I wouldn't say no to learning more about them, though."

She was the princess of a nation. It was completely reasonable for her to rely on her own guards over the ones provided by the Empire. Heck, even *I* didn't trust the Empire's guards!

"Of course, Your Majesty. Three have infiltrated our traveling convoy, while a further eighteen are spread throughout the area to avoid notice from the Empire's guards. My uncle Salomon de Barbetorte is in command."

Her uncle was a part of our convoy. While maintaining contact with outside agents from the inside would usually be a difficult feat, he *was* a former general. Come to think of it, that probably meant her agents were soldiers too.

"Are they all mages?"

"Yes. It was originally planned for the three in our convoy to go to your aid, but a group of insufficient strength might only have caused chaos and undue burden for you..."

She was talking like it was her own fault. "It was Lord Salomon who made that decision, wasn't it?"

"Yes..."

"It was the right call. Don't stress over it."

I would've made the same call myself. That aside, it seemed like their mages were skilled enough to have discerned what was happening inside the barrier, as well as make the judgment that they'd only get in the way.

That reminded me—I recalled hearing something about the Kingdom of Belvére being so forced into a corner before my betrothal to Rosaria that it had been on the verge of putting magically capable child soldiers into active service. I was fairly certain that Salomon had been the overseer for the project, so did that mean this was that same unit?

"We only recently managed to establish contact with the other eighteen members in this town," Rosaria explained. "I'm sorry it took so long to report this to you..."

"You really don't have to keep apologizing." Making Rosaria wear that expression just didn't sit right with me. "We might need their assistance before long. Let them know I'm expecting good things. And please don't make that face."

"But, Your Majesty. When I think about what might've happened to you, my chest just gets so tight..."

"Again, I'm fine. Seriously, you really don't need to worry so much." Well, I couldn't fully blame her for worrying; it was definitely abnormal for an emperor to get into direct combat himself. Still, her concern felt uncomfortably ticklish. Like, c'mon.

"Then...will you be getting some rest?"

She added that she was worried about that too, complete with a full blast of the puppy-dog eyes. *Um, Miss Rosaria? That's a little unfair, don't you think?*

What I really wanted to do was keep drafting up plans against Teyanave, but, well, I supposed I could always do that during the carriage ride. "Fine," I conceded. "I'll turn in for today."

"Of course, Your Majesty!"

Um...are you not going to leave? Don't tell me you plan on sleeping here. "Watching to make sure I fall asleep," you say?

Whatever happened to sharing a bed before marriage being a big no-no? Well, whatever. It wasn't like anything was going to happen, since we were just kids.

Avert Not Your Eyes

On a certain day in the fifth month of the New Calendar, our convoy reached the northern region of Baylor-Novei County—that is, the Empire's border with the Teyanave Confederation. The town we had arrived at was so abuzz with activity that you'd think it was festival season.

"Things look rather busy here," I remarked.

As always, Rosaria and I were alone in my carriage. It was prohibited for anyone but the emperor and his wife—or in this case, his betrothed—to ride in it. Yet, ever since we'd reached the town, the nobility traveling in our convoy had practically plastered themselves to the sides. Thanks to that, I had to be in constant idiot emperor mode. What a pain in the ass.

"Indeed, Your Majesty. Such a vivacious display of life is the constant state of affairs for my holdings. Though of course, it pales in comparison to the imperial capital."

So said Timona le Chauviré, the Count Baylor-Novei. His official position was...right, the Secretary of Hunting. I remembered him well because of his hoarse, striking voice and the way every little thing he did and said seemed custom-tailored for chasing after the limelight and getting under my skin.

"We have not left the imperial demesnes, so we would not know," I said. "When we left the imperial capital, though, it was rather quiet."

"Heavens above! I beg forgiveness for the narrowness of my views, Your Majesty. I must have been too occupied on the front line beating back the rebel forces to rightly grasp the state of the capital."

The implication behind his words was clear: *My town is much more lively than the capital!*

Was one-upping kids his idea of a fun time? He had firmly

cemented his place as "complete small fry" in my mind.

In the first place, all the activity here was a result of the "war"—just a passing economic boom. No doubt Duke Raul had directly pumped some capital into the area in the form of aid. Without all that, this would just be a sleepy border town.

Nevertheless, Count Baylor-Novei made regular trips to the imperial capital just to condescend to me in various roundabout ways. I always pretended not to notice, and he always went home satisfied. All of which was to say his claim that he knew nothing about the state of the capital was a complete lie.

To put the cherry on top, his claim about being on the front line was *also* a complete lie. Timona had reported to me that Count Baylor-Novei had been living it up in this town, funded by the "taxes" he'd levied on what Duke Raul's soldiers had looted. As a matter of fact, in the few months I hadn't seen him, he'd just about doubled in size—and I didn't mean vertically.

Ugh. This country's nobility were all cut from the same cloth as he was; "cleaning up" was going to be such a backbreaking task.

"Hmm, indeed," I said. "Where is this front line you speak of, anyway? It must be close by."

"But of course. The plan is for Your Majesty to spend the night here before setting out 'pon the morrow. It will be my honor to show you around."

I wondered if he'd caught onto the sarcasm in my words. I'd been implying that this place was the front line, because it was where he supposedly spent all his time. *Hmm. Yeah, nope. Right over his head.*

Rosaria let out a quiet giggle, though. Hell yeah.

* * *

To my chagrin, breakfast the next day was a group affair with the Chancellor and local nobles. In a rare turn of events, however, Timona came up to my side. Usually he stayed quiet around the nobility so as not to stand out. Yet this morning, he had come straight up to me in front of the Chancellor, of all people.

"Your Majesty," he whispered into my ear. "I would advise keeping your breakfast light."

That was all he said. But it was enough.

"Indeed. You may," was my response, in lieu of a thank you. I couldn't risk drawing suspicion from the Chancellor, and Timona would understand anyway. I was truly grateful for his advice.

It wasn't as though I'd forgotten. It was simply that my imagination had been lacking. I'd never known war in my past life as anything but an abstraction—statistics, history lessons, pictures on screens.

If I was to live as an emperor in this world, that sort of naivety was unforgivable.

To get a broad view of the front line—or the area the Chancellor claimed was the front line, at any rate—we climbed a small hill. We used horses, since getting the carriage up would've been an exercise in futility, and as we ascended, the thick, choking reek of blood only grew stronger.

"It smells bad. We believe our nose might fall off."

"Ha ha ha!" The Chancellor, who was riding ahead of me, turned. His eyes were cold and calculating, watching my every move. "This is the smell of the battlefield, Your Majesty."

It appeared that there was no issue with me expressing a negative reaction if it was purely for physiological reasons, but I suspected that letting any distaste bleed into my behavior would lose me the right to ever comment upon martial matters again. The Chancellor could simply give the excuse that "His Majesty seems to find the battlefield disagreeable. We should not cause him any undue distress," and I would be left with no recourse.

Pressing the issue afterward would only draw suspicion, and the moment he judged I wasn't just an idiot puppet, he'd have me killed.

The emperor needed to be ignorant, quick-tempered, and foolish. He—*I*—needed to act as though I were observing a play or a game board, as though all the people who'd been massacred weren't just as human as I was.

Decrying war as evil? Claiming that commoners and nobility were

equal? Nobody had ever taught the young emperor those values. I couldn't draw the nobles' suspicion here. Not even if the scene I was about to see was hell made flesh.

We arrived at the top of the hill, giving us a clear view of the Teyanavi village below. Or at least, the place that had once *been* a village. It had all been burned. The fields, the houses—even the bodies, every one of them once a human like you or I, reduced to inanimate lumps hanging from the trees along the road.

In a bold and proud tone, Count Baylor-Novei told a magnificent *lie*. "Observe, Your Majesty. In their cowardice, the enemy forces lay in ambush within that village. Yet we remained undaunted by their despicable tactics and seized glorious victory. A great triumph indeed."

The Golden Sheep Company, disinclined to waste troops in a battle against the Empire, had abandoned its border villages. No Teyanavi soldiers had ever come here.

In all likelihood, the villagers had simply fought to protect their home, and the nobles around me had labeled them the enemy because of it. That was the true shape of this tragedy.

The smell of blood, the smell of burnt meat, the smell of smoke rising from torched fields, and some acrid, irritating odor I couldn't place. Amid the vomit-inducing blend of smells, the first sound I heard was laughter.

The laughter of the soldiers.

It was followed by a sharp, piercing scream. Then more laughter.

When I caught on to the source, a rather obvious thought occurred to me.

Ah. This is the world I live in.

The screams of a man being burned alive, the shrieks and curses of a woman being raped, and the cheers of the spectating soldiers. The laughter of the nobility, lingering in my ears.

In this world, this was the norm.

My words had caused this devastation. I had asked the Chancellor about the effort to subdue the Teyanave Confederation and allowed him to choose this destination for my tour.

This had happened on my orders.

Perhaps, this entire time, other tragedies just like this one had happened because of some stray, unthinking word or action of mine. Even if they hadn't, if I was to regain power and set the Empire back into motion, it would mean reenacting the scene before me a thousand, thousand times.

That was what it meant to be emperor.

"So those people are surviving enemy soldiers?" I asked.

I felt sick.

"That, or collaborators. But as the commonfolk cannot be trusted, it is best to kill them now before they can once again assist our enemies."

"Ah, we see. Then what's happening over there?"

I felt sick.

"Oh, that. They're...extracting information about other enemy units. Commonfolk are rather stubborn, so such methods are necessary."

"Indeed! So you're already preparing for the next battle? Excellent, excellent!"

Sick, sick, *sick*!

Of this spectacle! Of the smiles of the nobility! Of my own powerlessness that was forcing me to vomit up these sickening words!

I was sick to my fucking stomach.

If the afterlife existed, I'd get my karma—and suffer their share besides. If hell existed, I would rot in agony for eternity. I already knew that. So I just...wanted to shut my eyes and ears. Close myself off from the world.

How much easier would it have been if I had never come here? Remained ignorant? Simply ordered the deaths of thousands with a single sheet of paper, seeing people as nothing but numbers? That was what all of this world's rulers did. Why couldn't I do the same?

I wanted to turn away.

And yet.

I also knew that choosing ignorance would only make my sin all the heavier.

"We think we'd like to see a live battle next."

Don't avert your eyes.

"Hmph. You *always* say it's too dangerous. We don't mind if it's from afar—we wish to see one!"

Don't let them see your disgust.

"Oh! What a grand burst of flame! Simply superb."

Carve this sight into your soul.

"Still, all this smoke is rather... Oh? A marquee by the hill! Did you prepare that, Chancellor? Good thinking!"

Deceive. Smile. And never *forget.*

I am the emperor.

For the rest of that day, until the sun set below the horizon and all the fires had abated into embers, I burned what I saw into the depths of my memory.

Carmine Hill

There was a chance the enemy forces would come back, allowing me to see some actual combat. Thus, I would be staying the night in the marquee rather than returning to town. When the nobles heard the emperor's selfish request, they snickered as they looked at me. Of course they did; there had never been any enemy forces in the first place. But it pleased them that their emperor continued to be an ignoramus, and so it was decided we would be staying here overnight. It looked like I'd be able to achieve my objective.

After dinner, I entered the marquee they'd prepared for me. Despite its temporary nature, it was afforded all the treatment owed the emperor's personal quarters. The nobility were unable to enter, so it was just Timona and I. And Rosaria too, for some reason, but I didn't have the leeway to concern myself with that right now.

I was currently preoccupied with vomiting into a hole Timona had dug for me in the marquee's corner. It was impossible for me to hold it in any longer. The reek of blood and smoke clung tightly to my person, each whiff reminding me of the scene I'd witnessed today.

"Your Majesty!" Rosaria's voice approached a scream.

"Lower...your voice," I said, wearily. "Or those outside might realize."

After several moments, she replied, "Yes... Of course."

I felt awful. Yet the nobility had dug into their meals as though it were any other day. No doubt they barely gave a thought to the humanity of those who'd died here. I knew this wasn't something I could allow myself to grow accustomed to. Yet if I were to have this same reaction every time...

"It would be rough," I muttered.

"Your Majesty, I shall keep watch outside the marquee," Timona stated. "It would not do for you to be seen like this."

"Please."

He left, leaving me alone with Rosaria.

“Your Majesty...”

She slowly stroked my back. I was grateful for her concern. However...



"Why...did you come?"

Rosaria should have been waiting with the carriage, a short distance away. I hadn't wanted to bring her to this place, stained with the cloying stink of blood as it was.

"Your Majesty. I am to become the empress one day." Even now, she sounded on the verge of tears. "I...cannot ever presume to say I will truly share the burden of the responsibilities you bear. I am keenly aware that such a weight...is not so frivolously carried. Even just today, I know the presence of a woman such as I must be a nuisance."

That really hadn't been my thought process, though. I just hadn't wanted her to suffer through what I had. I hadn't wanted her to see the evil side of the world. But she was right; she'd be the empress one day. She couldn't remain detached. I'd have to change my way of thinking.

Gently, she took my hands into hers. I realized that, at some point, my urge to vomit had faded.

"Even so, it would be unforgivable for me to ignore Your Majesty's burden. I will not allow myself to turn a blind eye. So, as selfish as it is of me to ask, please forgive me."

I was...honestly surprised. Her words echoed my own resolve. "Mmm. I have no intention of rebuking you." A smile came unbidden to me. It seemed that perhaps we were birds of a feather. "I'm...tired."

"You should rest for today, Your Majesty."

That was good advice; I was bone-tired. And again, while I could never let myself grow accustomed to this, I also couldn't let it take me out of commission every time. When I found the opportunity, I'd have to develop a spell to suppress nausea. Or maybe one that dampened my emotions.

"You're right," I said.

I held my hand over the hole and filled it with a simple earth spell. Despite what little time he'd had, Timona had dug the hole quite deep. Now that it was filled, there'd be no worry of the smell leaking.

The reek of smoke and blood that clung to my body was another

matter, though.

I lay down on the marquee's bed—smaller than my usual fare. Unprompted, the urge to vomit gradually began to return.

"Your Majesty?"

"Sorry. Lying down made it come back, a little."

Inexplicably, Rosaria chose to respond to that by climbing into bed next to me. While I *had* described it as smaller than the beds of the imperial demesne or nobles' mansions, it was still oversized for two children.

She calmly pulled me into her embrace. My head was against her chest. In less grim circumstances receiving this kind of attention from a girl would be cause enough for me to lose my composure. Yet, strangely, all I felt was a sense of peace.

"Your clothes will get dirty," I muttered. I had to be covered in soot, since I'd spent a full day surrounded by smoke. To top it off, I'd just finished emptying my stomach. I didn't think I'd gotten any on me, of course, but I was far from clean.

"I don't mind."

"The smell will stick to you."

"I don't mind that either. You've been through enough today. Please, rest."

A pleasant scent filled my nose. I felt the reek of blood that had permeated my skin—the reminder that death was close by—growing distant. A sudden rush of drowsiness took its place.

"Thank you."

Enfolded in Rosaria's merciful warmth, I parted ways with my consciousness.

* * *

The next morning, I woke relatively early. A glance to my side revealed that Rosaria was still asleep.

She'd been a pillar of support for me yesterday, in more ways than one. And while I couldn't predict the future, I had the feeling she'd continue to be, again and again.

"Thank you too, Timona. For staying awake on watch. How are

you faring?”

“One sleepless night is hardly worth mentioning.”

We both kept our voices low, so as not to wake Rosaria.

“Will you be bathing?” Timona asked.

Naturally, even the emperor’s presence hadn’t been grounds enough to carry a bathtub onto the battlefield. Timona was referring to the process of wiping me down with a cloth and hot water.

“Please... Though, on second thought, I can’t ask you to do every little thing. Shall I summon Rosaria’s attendants? They’re waiting outside the marquee.”

Using my heat detection spell was second nature at this point, so I could tell a pair of ladies-in-waiting were on standby outside. Quite honestly, I could’ve cleaned myself up...but I’d gained a habit of entrusting the work to others. It was just easier that way.

“No, I’ll do it,” Timona insisted. “We cannot be fully certain they’re trustworthy. Please don’t hold back on my account.”

“All right. Go ahead, then.”

While he was wiping me down, I absentmindedly retreated into my thoughts.

After this, we’d likely climb the hill for another look before returning to town. What followed would be a nonstop gauntlet of my escort dragging me around to see every local lord while I turned into a machine capable only of playing back whatever they wanted to hear. Worst-case scenario, that would continue all the way through to autumn.

So long as I thought of it as putting in hours at a day job, it didn’t bother me so much. Having to listen to the nobility’s drivel would be unpleasant, though. I’d take a school principal’s speech or a drunk boss’s rambling a hundred times over that. Especially when it came to this region’s lord, Count Baylor-Novei.

Come to think of it...

“Count Baylor-Novei’s name was Timona le Chauviré, right?”

“Yes, we share a given name. Do you find that confusing?”

“No, I doubt I’ll ever need to address him so familiarly. It just made me think that your family name might be ‘Nain,’ rather than ‘le Nain.’”

Timona looked at me with blank puzzlement—a rare expression for him. "It is, yes," he confirmed. "Did you...think it was 'le Nain' this whole time?"

His hands had stopped. Evidently my misunderstanding had come as quite the shock. As for me, I had broken out into a river of cold sweat. Your boss getting your name wrong sucked, plain and simple. This wouldn't damage our lord-vassal relationship, would it?

Timona chuckled. "Now that I think about it, Your Majesty has only been calling me by my first name since I gained your trust."

Wait, Timona laughed? He never laughed! But was that a happy laugh, or a cynical one? I couldn't tell!

"Huh...I *did* think the gap between the letters on Baron le Na—er, Baron Nain's gravestone was strangely large..." Turns out, that old adage about assumptions still held as true as ever. "Uh...I'm sorry."

"I don't mind. I've already severed relations with the baronial house of Nain. Though...does this mean Your Majesty will be granting me the house name of 'Lenain'? To receive such a thing from my liege lord—why, there could be no greater honor."

"Come on... Don't tease me."

"It was not my intention to jest..."

I dressed and got my appearance in order. Whatever the case, Timona didn't seem angry, which was a huge relief. Bullet dodged.

"I see. So if I wish to earn the surname of 'Lenain,' I must first perform achievements worthy of it."

"Please stop already. I genuinely can't tell if you're joking or not."

"You two seem to be having fun."

Glancing over at the bed, I saw Rosaria watching us, looking ever so slightly peevish.

If you ask me, it was her own fault for pretending to be asleep since halfway through our conversation...

* * *

What I'm about to say is blatantly and exceedingly obvious, but no enemy forces showed up today.

"What? Are they not coming?"

"It appears so, Your Majesty," Count Baylor-Novei declared grandly. "It is no wonder—there is little their anemic capabilities could achieve before the might of the Empire's soldiery!" He burst into booming laughter.

Technically, the forces here weren't of the Empire's army, but Duke Raul's. In essence, they were the Chancellor's private forces.

"Indeed? Then we suppose it cannot be long before the Teyanave Confederation falls."

The mood froze solid with my words. Count Baylor-Novei, having finally noticed that he might've let his mouth run a bit too much, immediately shut up and began glancing at the Chancellor.

That's what you get for being cocky, I thought. I'd leave it there, though—it would be risky to push it any further.

"Still, we do not really understand war. We leave the matter in your capable hands, Chancellor."

"Of course, Your Majesty. Your will is my command."

I was certain that couldn't be further from the truth, actually. It was obvious that he wanted to wrap this up quickly and leave. Not that I was going to let him.

"Even so, this hill is where we first witnessed war. We have taken a liking to it! Henceforth, it shall be known as 'Carmine Hill'!"

"Pardon...? Your Majesty wishes to use your venerated name...here? In the middle of nowhere?"

The nobility looked dumbfounded. Little wonder. By all rights, the emperor's name was reserved for places of great importance, like the imperial capital "Cardinal." If that place—and by extension the emperor's dignity—were to be seized by another country, it would mean a complete loss of face.

All in all, there was simply no way that the emperor's name should be attached to a tiny hill out in the borderlands.

"Indeed. This hill is a symbol of our victory, and everyone must know it."

By my reckoning, it was perfectly natural for Emperor Carmine to want to name something after himself just because he was in a good mood. Plus, he was a child, not yet endowed with a sense of dignity. There was nothing strange about making a declaration like this.

And as a result, the Chancellor could no longer abandon this place. To hand a location named after the emperor over to the enemy without resistance would be a massive loss of face—an opportunity the regency would be all too happy to capitalize on.

My reputation would take a hit too, of course. What could be more embarrassing than having a place named after you stolen away by a foe?

Good thing puppet emperors didn't have any dignity to begin with.

"In fact, why don't we build a castle here one day? Or even a whole villa!"

By playing this card, I had created a reason for myself to periodically check in on the status of this hill, meaning the Chancellor wouldn't be able to withdraw his forces without bearing substantial risk. The presence of his forces would also pressure the Golden Sheep Trading Company, preventing them from sending soldiers to the Central Continent. I had succeeded in achieving my initial objective: buying time against the Golden Sheep.

That wasn't all, though. This move was also likely to worsen the relationship between the Golden Sheep and the Teyanave Confederation's lords, because the latter wouldn't be able to reclaim their land as long as Duke Raul's forces remained here. They'd question why they'd had to unconditionally surrender their holdings in the first place.

Of course, this all hinged upon the Chancellor not withdrawing his troops. It was possible he'd abandon this hill and think nothing of it. My bet was that he wouldn't, though—I didn't think he'd be so willing to create a vulnerability while the Minister of Ceremony was whipping the regency into shape and consolidating his power base.

But irrespective of everything else, I personally had no intention of forgetting this hill for as long as I lived.

The Hischarlnovei Incident

In the eighth month of the 465th year of the New Calendar, the emperor's contingent entered the Duchy of Raul. More specifically, the region known as the Marquessate of Etruscharl. Beginning here, pretty much everything to the east was the Chancellor's holdings.

That said, the Chancellor himself wasn't traveling with us. He had become unable to leave our front line against the Teyanave Confederation. It seemed as though he'd done everything in his power to return with us to his lands, but even his hands were tied on this matter.

After leaving the County of Baylor-Novei, we had gone east, taking a path through the Counties of Baylor-Torei, Peckscher, and Dienca, the Marquessate of Arndal, then the County of Vadpauvre. Granted, we'd only detoured into Dienca because of my demands. We were kept busy taking in the famous products and places of interest everywhere we visited. Despite this ostensibly being a tour, it felt more like an extended educational field trip. Nevertheless, every moment was an invaluable learning experience about the Empire—and a crash course was what I desperately needed.

Of the things I'd come to know, foremost among them was that the Empire's northern region was, overall, very hilly, and also a major producer of wool. The County of Baylor-Torei was particularly notable for this, as its population of sheep might have outnumbered its human residents. Mutton had been a part of every meal during our time there.

As for the County of Vadpauvre, it had a flourishing forestry industry. What surprised me was that the concept of afforestation actually existed here. That inclined me to believe that...well, it wasn't important right now. In any case, the mountains were being well cared for. Definitely a good thing.

The County of Peckscher was famous for its glass. In fact, they

gifted me so much that it weighed down our whole contingent.

Unfortunately, I had precisely zero knowledge when it came to glass, so I had no idea how developed the technology was or how far it could still go. It was the first time I'd seen the process of glass products being made, even if you included my past life.

The County of Dienca was south of the County of Peckscher, and while we hadn't originally planned on visiting, my tantrum had been very persuasive. The local specialty there was—drumroll, please—none other than iron.

Yes, iron, the lifeblood of any arms industry. Can you blame me for being curious?

It was in the County of Dienca that I learned three things. One: guns and cannons needed steel for their construction. Two: steel was a limited resource, as it could not be mass-produced. Three: rails existed.

The presence of steel, I'd expected. In regard to its mass production, I believed that had only started up after the Industrial Revolution. I had no clue how to get that particular technological ball rolling ahead of time.

However, the existence of rails had been a surprise. I mean, the combination of tracks and carts was something I'd been planning on implementing after I seized power.

Still, given the limited availability of steel, the rails I'd seen had been constructed from wood, meaning they wore out fast and caused accidents often. Because of that, the overwhelming majority of mine workers had been slaves.

Slaves... Now there was a difficult problem. Frankly, I was fully committed to abolishing slavery one day. However, a top-down abolition scheme dropped on the public out of the blue would only invite backlash and sedition. At a bare minimum I needed to account for the food and housing needs of everyone released from bondage *before* I cut them loose from their owners' support, or it would defeat the whole purpose. I'd have to figure something out.

Lastly, we passed through the Marquessate of Arndal. It was one of the few regions in the northern Empire with level ground, making it the only land fit to produce a grain surplus that could support its

neighbors—in short, it was without exaggeration the lifeline of the north. A pity, then, that our internal struggles meant that not every fief out here got to enjoy the spoils.

Marquess Arndal was of the regency, and so were Counts Dienca and Vadpauvre. The former supplied the latter two, but not any of the lands belonging to the Chancellor's faction. This was particularly observable in the County of Peckscher, which suffered from an overall food shortage—though not one severe enough to qualify as a famine. This supply chain disparity would no doubt cause issues down the line.

After all, this was one case where cutting off the head of the snake wouldn't work. Replacing the noble at the top wouldn't necessarily cause the sentiment of the people to suddenly pull a one-eighty.

On the whole, everything I'd learned was valuable. If I could extend this process to the entirety of the Empire, I was sure I'd have a much clearer picture of what needed to be done and what needed changing.

Incidentally, I probably should've mentioned this earlier, but "novei" and "torei" mean "west" and "east" respectively in Rotahlian.

The "novei" in "Hischarlnovei," our current location, was probably derived from that too.

* * *

It all happened with neither word nor warning. The first sign was when our column came to an abrupt halt on an empty stretch of road.

"The front's getting noisy again..." I mused aloud.

"I wonder if it's the usual?" Rosaria replied.

Our contingent stopping in and of itself wasn't rare; it happened every day. Commoners failing to prostrate themselves as we passed, the rear carriages creeping up too close to the front ones—there were all kinds of reasons. It was just that this time...the commotion seemed louder than usual.

"Or perhaps a carriage broke down..."

"Wait," I said. "Something's wrong."

Timona still hadn't come by to explain the cause of the delay. I could see carriages and horses racing past us, toward the way we'd come. But most conspicuous of all...

"That carriage, just now. Wasn't that Count Vadpauvre's crest?" Count Vadpauvre. The regency aide-de-camp who'd continued to tag along despite us already leaving his territory. Who'd declared he would be my guard. "He's running away? What—"

That was when the carriage door slammed open.

"Garfurian forces!" Timona shouted. He looked uncharacteristically harried. "I'm taking over the reins!"

The Garfure Republic. An enemy nation to the north of the Duchy of Raul.

Ah, hell.

"What happened to the driver?" I asked.

"He already ran!"

For real? I hadn't even noticed. My carriage had been constructed with excellent soundproofing.

"Do it."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Cards on the table, this was probably the most dangerous situation I'd encountered since being reincarnated. Despite that, a part of me had looped all the way around to dead calm.

Timona directed the carriage into a right turn, taking us off the highway in a straight shot south. It was a good call. I'd leave control of the carriage and the question of our destination to him. As for what I could do...

"Y-Your Majesty..."

"Calm down, Rosaria. It's okay. We haven't come into contact with the enemy yet."

I hadn't yet been able to hear the sounds of battle, so even assuming I was the Garfurian force's objective, it seemed unlikely they'd catch up to us anytime soon.

"Rosaria. I need you with me. Understand?"

Her panic was entirely understandable, but it would only worsen our circumstances right now. My read of the situation was that the

nobility had all run off without bothering to explain what was happening to the emperor. Abandoned and left for dead—a fate befitting a puppet.

Regardless, that meant the three of us had to figure a way out of this on our own. We didn't have the leeway to spare for panic.

"Y-Yes. I-I'll be okay."

"Good. Then can you open the door and see what's happening outside? I'll hold you so you don't fall."

"Of course."

Honestly, I wanted to go all out and start popping off spells right that moment...but I couldn't afford to do that where the nobility could see. Our survival was unmistakably my highest priority, but I couldn't just ignore the possible fallout.

"Um... Half of the column is still there! There's a lot of chaos...but I don't see any Garfurian soldiers."

"Is there anyone around us?!"

"Not that I can see!"

"Great, thank you! Come back inside!"

The wind whipped by something fierce, but I wanted to leave the door open so we could stay more alert. According to Rosaria, there was no one around us, so...

I leaned out of the carriage and began channeling mana. In my mind, I pictured a protective bulwark around our carriage, including the top. One that also guarded against the wind...

"*Custor!*"

"Thank you, Your Majesty!" said Timona, who was on the outside. Touching base with him was my next priority.

"What can you tell me?"

"I've received communications from our agents and the Kingdom of Belvére's! Part of the Belvérian unit is approaching to gather information, while the main unit will meet us further south!"

That had to be the mage unit I'd heard about. It was good to hear they'd be on our side. I wondered where I'd be right now if I hadn't betrothed Rosaria.

"What of Rosaria's attendants?"

"They remained behind with Lord Salomon. If necessary, they'll

buy us time.”

“For which I can’t thank them enough. And our agents?”

“I’m unable to get in touch with most of them. There’s a chance they’ve been hunted down already.”

Ah. It appeared that the Garfurians’ objective was the emperor after all.

However, I was less valuable to them dead than alive. A freshly minted Kingdom of Raul with just cause in its pocket would be far more of a threat than a corrupt, decaying Empire. That could only mean their goal was my capture.

By stirring up just enough chaos in the Empire, the Garfure Republic could cause a massive loss of face for Duke Raul, whose holdings it bordered, as well as deal a crippling blow to the honor of the emperor himself. It would also instill in me a sense of fear and inferiority toward the republic. Wins across the board, as far as they were concerned.

But if they wanted the best possible shot at seizing me alive...

“The enemy must be a small, elite force.”

“The estimate stands at a thousand, all on horseback,” Timona provided. “No infantry have been seen, aside from support personnel.”

That was...a lot. Their people’s equestrian origins weren’t for nothing, it seemed.

Timona was pushing the horses to such a gallop that the carriage had begun making creaking noises.

“The carriage stands out,” I said. “We should abandon it and continue on horseback.”

“It wouldn’t work,” Timona objected. “You and Lady Rosaria aren’t accustomed to longer rides.”

“I’ll use my magic.” The carriage boasted considerable defensive capabilities. It would be a shame to leave it behind, but I wanted to prioritize our maneuverability. “You two will ride on horseback, one each. I’ll support Rosaria with my magic while moving by golem. We should be able to gain some distance this way—what do you think?”

Timona considered it for a moment. “Understood.”

“Get that, Rosaria?”

"Yes!"

No matter what it took, we had to survive.

* * *

We spent that night outdoors, sleeping among the hills.

By my reckoning, we'd traveled a considerable distance south of where our contingent had stopped. Since the land around us changed elevation so often, it would likely slow down the Garfurian force's pursuit. However, it wasn't easy going for us either—even for Timona, who had to contend with the difference between the maps he'd memorized and the actual reality of the terrain. Evidently, cartography in this era was still more art than science.

While we'd had the option of continuing through the night, our enemy had split up in order to conduct their search, so gathering intel was our foremost priority. We'd set up a basic encampment on a slope facing opposite where we believed the Garfurian force was expanding their net.

Though I say encampment, it was more of an actual campsite; the Belvérian mage unit had only possessed the simple tents and bedrolls they'd hurriedly purchased in a nearby town.

Our escape had been carefully executed so far, so as to shake our pursuers off as best we could. We'd be okay for the night, unless I'd misjudged the situation. I'd considered the possibility of the Garfurians seeing the smoke from our fire, but judged it safe—they'd have to already be close to see it, and by then it would be a moot point. The Belvérian mages were keeping watch on our surroundings, anyway.

"If we're going to be captured, it'll be tomorrow morning," I mused aloud.

"That's assuming the enemy decides to make camp and rest," Timona said.

He was right—our enemy's movements could branch off in any number of directions right now. Hence our decision to lie low and gather intel.

"That smells of long odds to me," I conceded. "They're deep in

imperial territory. They'll want to prioritize speed." We'd done everything we could. All that was left for us was to conserve our stamina. "I'm going to sleep. You should too, Timona, Rosaria. Leave the watch to our friends."

The Belvérian unit were foreigners. By all rights, that meant it would be irresponsible of me to fully trust them...but I physically didn't have it in me to suggest an alternating night watch. Not that a single one of us joining the night watch would even make a difference if they *had* decided to betray us.

Whatever lay ahead, I'd just deal with it when the time came.

* * *

I woke to the presence of newcomers and unfamiliar voices. They didn't sound on edge—allies, then, most likely. Leaving my tent, I found that Timona was already awake. Beside him, a dust-covered man bowed his head.

"Your Majesty. This is Henri de Murrow, a subordinate of Lord Vodedt's and the chief agent for the operation around your tour."

"You have my deepest apologies for allowing danger to reach you, Your Majesty. I have no excuse."

Ah. So we'd finally linked up with the surviving spies. "Forget your apologies. Report."

The information Henri and his agents had brought with them turned out to be quite literally priceless.

To begin with, we now knew movements of the Garfurian force. Currently, it was still in active pursuit, only stopping periodically for brief rests.

Sketching out the sequence of events from the beginning, the Garfurians had first searched the traveling column to locate the emperor. Once they had determined I wasn't there, they decided that I'd made a break for the nearest town. In fairness, I'd think that too if my opponent was an idiot puppet, so there was no flaw in their logic. Unfortunately, however, I'd defied expectations.

After their blockade on the road leading to the nearby town caught zero emperors, the Garfurians had begun preparing for

withdrawal. It was probably because they'd judged they had already achieved the bare minimum of their mission goals.

That is, by causing chaos in the Empire's lands, they would make Duke Raul look like a chump and leave me with long-lasting Garfure-phobia. The simple fact that they had executed an attack on my traveling contingent meant that they'd already satisfied their primary objective.

But then they'd received news that had turned the situation on its head. The emperor's carriage had been found. In their eyes, this not only increased the likelihood that I was nearby, but also cemented the fact that I was escaping on horseback—something I was unaccustomed to.

Thus, the republican commander ordered a full pursuit. They recalled the units they'd deployed to set up the highway blockade; now they were southbound and expanding their dragnet. At this rate, they'd catch us in these hills by morning.

Once that was all laid out for me, our informant moved on to the Empire's movements. For this, we needed to establish that Duke Raul had taken a part of his main standing army with him to the Teyanavi front line, and had filled the vacancy by hiring mercenaries. However, it appeared that he hadn't left any of his army at the border, but rather in the major cities. He'd entrusted the border defense to the *mercs*.

This whole attack had only been set off because a handful of these mercenary border guard units had chosen to defect once the Garfurians had made them a better offer.

Now, I wasn't some Machiavellian diplomatic prodigy, but even I knew that was just what mercenaries did...

Of course, this didn't mean the Empire was just going to roll over and let the Garfurians act with impunity. Troops had begun mobilizing in the territories of all Chancellor's faction nobility, excepting Duke Raul himself. Not that there was any way they'd make it in time to prevent my capture.

Realistically, there were only two options on that front: the two forces that were already advancing toward me as we spoke. No, it would be more accurate to use the word "tribes."

The first was the Gotiroir tribe. They were an ethnic group who lived in the only autonomous territory within the Empire, and their land was located at the foot of the Heavensreach Mountains, east of even the Duchy of Raul's remote regions. They were, so to speak, mountain people, and they had been the first ever group to ally with the Garde clan after it moved south. Even when the Garde clan became vassals of the Rotahl Empire—even when it *founded the Bundarte Empire*—the Gotiroir had remained neighbors and sworn allies.

Yet currently, one could not call their relationship with the Empire a friendly one. The Chancellor had conflicting interests with the Gotiroir, and he'd used the Empire's name to meddle with their autonomy.

Their current chieftain, Gernadieffe, was a living folk hero who'd united the southern and northern Gotiroir despite only being in his twenties. As a sign of respect, they also addressed him as "Twice-Chieftain."

Gernadieffe and some of his people had come all the way to the western region of the Duchy of Raul. No matter how you sliced it, they had to have known about this ahead of time. What remained in question was whether they wanted to rescue me, kill me, or wait and see before committing to either.

The other approaching force was the Order of Atúr. Although they had named themselves like a chivalric order, the Atúr people were in fact a nomadic, equestrian tribe. Like the Garfurians, they had never put down permanent roots (i.e., converted to sedentism), and they were one of the main reasons for—and objects of—the Western Orthodoxy's ethnic discrimination.

The Atúr had survived through mercenary work, hopping from the temporary protection of one local noble to another, and were currently under Duke Raul's employ. Henri de Murrow had described their current incarnation—under their chieftain du jour, Péter Pál—to me as "the most troublesome sort of mercenaries." Like the Gotiroir, they would not be unconditional allies.

The Chancellor was in conflict with the Gotiroir and employed the Order of Atúr. However, his younger brother Georg V was the driving

force behind the persecution of the Atúr and had no quarrel with the Gotiroir. It was a delicate web of relationships that made the intentions of the approaching forces impossible for me to read. On top of everything, the two tribes were apparently on quite friendly terms.

From the report I'd been given, both forces were headed straight for us. They'd unmistakably pinpointed our location.

"What is Your Majesty's command?" Henri asked.

"Escape is impossible, and it's difficult to imagine a sudden improvement in our circumstances. All we can do is wait." Among the approaching forces were genuine nomads—we had no chance of outrunning cavalry to whom riding was a way of life.

"They may be attempting to use the chaos as an opportunity to harm Your Majesty's person."

"We'll deal with that when the time comes—by fighting all out, if need be."

If I let loose and set off my entire arsenal of spells, there was a chance we'd make it through. If even that failed...well, this would be where I died. End of story.

That was the nature of war. I wasn't so deluded that I thought I didn't stand in the same arena as everyone else.

"How long until they get here?"

"They should be in sight by dawn."

"Which is not long," Timona contributed, looking up at the eastern sky. "We should be seeing the first signs of daylight soon."

This was it, then. They'd be here soon. "The Garfurians will head straight here as soon as they spot the other approaching forces. If we can make allies of the two tribes, this place will become a battlefield. Henri de Murrow, draft us a map of this hill and the surrounding area—as detailed as you can make it. You have our permission to use a lamp."

"As Your Majesty commands."

"Timona, prepare a reception for the chieftains. Whatever we have on hand is fine."

He processed that for a moment. "Yes, Your Majesty."

It was time to make a gamble. If it paid off, I would gain two

powerful allies—two pieces on the board. If it didn't...well, if I couldn't manage this much, I didn't have much of a future as an emperor anyway.

"First things first, I suppose I'll wake Rosaria up."

How this would end, only God knew.

Upon a Hill Dyed in Sunrise

The sun rose in the east in this world too.

From between the peaks of the Heavensreach—a mountain range that rivaled the Alps from Earth in height—light spilled through the scant gaps. The people who lived in this region had called this light "God's Arrows" since before the First Faith had ever arrived. It gave the living strength and vanquished evil.

The approaching forces marched in perfect order with the light of God at their backs, lending them the image of divinity.

"It seems they've arrived, Your Majesty."

Acknowledging Henri de Murrow's report, I rose from the tree stump I'd been sitting on. "The men keep perfect order even in the absence of their commanders," I noted. "They're as elite as I've heard." Timona was receiving the chieftains now, in fact. I couldn't keep them waiting.

"Your Majesty..." Rosaria seemed unsure of what to say—her tone had an uncharacteristic quaver to it. "I wish you good fortune in the battle to come."

Er...or maybe that was only because she'd just woken up?

"Fortune in battle, huh...?" She was right; the conversation to come would be just as much a fight for survival as our inevitable clash with the Garfurians. The two chieftains were martial experts, and either one could kill me on the spot with ease. "Here goes nothing."

Now then. How was this going to play out?

* * *

A hastily improvised circular table with three-legged stools was far too beggarly a setting for an emperor to receive his guests. Yet it was what I had requested of Timona: no undue airs.

The chieftains were already seated. When they noticed my arrival, they made to rise.

"No need. Our coronation has not yet taken place." Before these two, the trappings of rank and formality would only be obstacles. I sat down and faced them.

"Your Majesty. May I present Sir Gernadieffe la Gotiroir, Twice-Chieftain of the Gotiroir, and Sir Atúrusz-Don Pál István-Ló Péter, Chieftain of the Atúr."

After providing introductions, Timona silently departed. The Gotiroir chieftain's brow leaped upward—evidently he hadn't expected the emperor to come talk alone. As for the Atúr chieftain, his expression didn't so much as flicker. Yet there was clear interest in his eyes as he watched me.

"We are the eighth emperor of the Bundarte Empire, Carmine de la Garde-Bundarte. Excuse our hastiness, but what should we address you by?"

My question was mainly out of consideration for the Atúr chieftain. His formal, tribal name was a mouthful, and he had no official position given to him by the Empire.

"Péter Pál is fine."

"And 'Gernadieffe' will suffice for me."

"Very well. As for us, address us however you wish."

I studied the pair as I spoke. Gernadieffe, Twice-Chieftain of the Gotiroir, was a muscular man of medium height. Coupled with his facial hair and dress, he was the picture-perfect stereotype of a barbarian tribe leader, and the sheer presence he exuded was almost tangible. No shade on barbarians, by the way—it hadn't been that long since we Bundartians ranked among them.

Péter Pál, Chieftain of the Atúr, had dark skin—a rare sight on people in these parts—and looked younger than his age. His rigid expression projected as much charisma as Gernadieffe, in his own way.

While Timona had taken custody of their weapons, these were two men to whom killing a child with their bare hands would be a trivial undertaking. I couldn't let my guard down.

"You speak like a diplomat," Gernadieffe said. "Quite a change

from how the world speaks of you."

I nodded. We sat evenly spaced around the circular table, none of us higher or lower than the others. A place for true diplomacy. "We will be begging for your assistance in short order," I said. "None of us stand to gain anything if we continue to act the fool, for the right of choice lies in your hands."

I already knew that their objective was to assess the emperor. If they had been hostile, they would've simply attacked us on sight, and if they had only come to pay lip service to my title, they would not have waited at a table so clearly intended for negotiations.

"Mmm. I suppose you're right." Gernadieffe stroked his beard as he spoke. "Then permit me to ask a question. I understand Your Majesty observed the Teyanavi front line. What did you think of it?"

"That's a vague question. What is it you truly wish to ask?"

"Did you hear them? The lamentations of the folk whose homes were pillaged. Their cries of rage and hatred."

Oh? I didn't expect his information to be so detailed. "Keenly. We discovered that it is apparently not in our disposition to derive excitement from such things."

"Then what is Your Majesty's opinion on pillage?"

That was a thorny question. Having come from an age of peace, my natural, ingrained reaction to the act was disgust. But the answer I needed to give here was Emperor Carmine's.

"Our sentiments aside, we can speak only of the nature and cause of the act, and on this front, we can answer in a word," I said. "It is a *consequence*."

"Oh?"

"The Empire governs as it does, and so inevitably its armies resort to pillage. So it will remain for as long as the Empire's methods remain the same. There is no change in outcome without a change in one's process."

The Empire needed to be reworked from the ground up. But if I wanted to alter the machinery of violence my military was founded on, I would need the capacity for violence of my own.

"We cannot call pillage folly, nor would we tolerate the claim," I continued. "It is but a single tool, fit for some tasks and unfit for

others. It instills fear in the enemy's citizenry, pressures enemy supply lines, and improves troop morale in the right conditions. If one cannot adequately control an area one has occupied, pillaging it is a perfectly sound and effective choice."

Even back on Earth, people resorted to looting and robbery in times of protest, disaster, or open conflict. A world without pillage, a world without war—such places belonged to the domain of pure idealism. And while it behooved a ruler to hold oneself to certain ideals, one could not afford to be prisoner to them. Armchair theory often sounded good in the abstract, but came at the cost of human lives in practice.

"So, how does one go without pillaging? The question practically answers itself. The army that never resorts to pillage is the army that doesn't *need to*: a force sustained by unshakable morale, efficient supply lines, and the bindings of a steely disciplinary code. A force whose mere *presence*, whose very *name* strikes fear into the enemy."

"Oh? We Gotiroir have never suffered defeat in the mountains...but we do pillage if necessity calls. Do you mean to say we are lacking, in your eyes?"

The corners of Gernadieffe's mouth rose in a lazy smile. I couldn't sense any killing intent from him, but he didn't need that to be incredibly intimidating. I'd essentially just impugned his people's prowess to his face.

Not that I was going to back down. "Lacking? Yes. But not in skill. What you *both* lack is logistic support. Reconnaissance, intelligence, supplies, medical care—your *noncombat* divisions fall overwhelmingly short. You are forced to pillage to obtain information, to flush out the enemy, and to replenish your supplies. What you need is the ability to maintain your ground. To carry on the fight."

"A sustained effort. I see."

"Of course, it would be impossible to complete such an army in our generation. But we would see the foundations laid for it and the work set in motion—reforms, trial runs."

"Hmm. Fascinating." The look in Gernadieffe's eyes had become

more intense.

Moment by moment, the sky was getting brighter. The Garfurian host would arrive at any time now. But impatience would only be my downfall.

"Then allow me to ask the question my ancestors have been asking Your Majesty's predecessors for generations," Gernadieffe said. "What is an emperor?"

"The most pivotal cog in the mechanism of government." After thinking about it ever since my reincarnation, this was the answer I had finally arrived at.

"A...cog, you say?"

"Yes. Albeit one you would miss sorely, for replacements are hard to come by, and the mechanism would fail, were it damaged."

Just to unpack this a little, consider the following: As the emperor, by the underpinning principles of the nation, I was an inviolable, absolute being—and in an odd little paradox, I lent those very principles and the law built upon them legitimacy that was no less absolute for as long as I abided by them. In addition, the mere presence of an emperor could provide a nation leverage over its neighbors based on the weight of the title alone—an advantage you couldn't ignore when it came time to step up to the negotiating table.

There were many other benefits to having an emperor. But make no mistake: It was *not* a prerequisite of government.

"You seem to be implying that you consider an emperor unnecessary."

"Currently, the emperor *is* necessary," I said. "Without one, the mechanism will halt. But as industry advances, the mechanism itself —that is, the state—will change. If the day should come that our work can be done by more efficient means, odds are good our position would not last much longer before it was consigned to the waste heap of history."

I knew well enough from my time on Earth that nobody *needed* an emperor. Plenty of humanity had done just fine without them.

"We are confident that the coming centuries will bring a sea change in the governance of the world's nations—somewhere, some

country is going to put together that this ‘representative democracy’ business has legs, and its peers will follow suit until such time that it merely becomes common sense to the people of that age. The kings and emperors of the world may persist in certain corners, but I surmise their role will be largely decorative, kept for tradition’s sake.”

On a strictly rational and dispassionate basis, sovereigns were a waste of good carbon. However, knowledge of my past world also meant that I knew such figures could become key pillars of cultural identity.

“But tradition, no matter how pointless, cannot be made light of. For while it takes but a moment to destroy, its creation is measured in centuries, and that in and of itself lends it significance.”

Personally, I thought it would be fine if the position of emperor was abolished one day. But once abolished, it would not be so easily restored. That was why I’d leave it untouched: to leave the freedom of choice in the hands of the generations to come. Whether they lived in an autocracy, a republic, a constitutional monarchy—the decision would be theirs.

“Our ideology can be summed up in one sentence. We wish to leave future generations with more room to author their lives on their own terms, in every respect. Whoever rules them is merely an expression of that collective authorship.”

“A world without kings? I find that difficult to believe.”

“Really? It should be simple. Imagine a world where humanity has gone extinct. There—no kings, right?”

“Hmm. Well, well...” Gernadieffe murmured. Then, louder, “You’re more impressive than I heard.”

He wasn’t talking about the rumors of me being an idiot. As I’d suspected, he’d come here aware of my true nature.

“Anything to add, Sir Péter Pál?” Gernadieffe asked.

“Just one question,” the man said, breaking his lengthy silence. “Will you protect my people or not?”

Ah. An entirely reasonable question. “Let us talk of profit, then.”

Not that I could cough anything up right now even if he asked. My word was all I could offer.

“By necessity, we can only deliver on our promises after we have

seized back power. But you may consider the following yours, if you are with us: freedom of religion, the abolition of the Western Orthodoxy's Inquisitorial branch, recognition of the Atúr people as formal citizens of the Empire and their guaranteed freedom to preserve their culture, and the conferral of a noble title for their chieftain. How does that sound?"

I hoped he didn't ask for something more short-term as well...

"Sufficient. Henceforth, I swear unto Your Majesty my service."

Péter Pál accepted my words with little more than a nod. That was easy. In fact, that was *so* easy that it was actually scaring me. Come to think of it, wasn't this what Timona had been like too?

"And what will you offer me, Your Majesty? I am already imperial nobility."

"Formal imperial recognition of your lands as a self-governing dominion and a complete ban on tariffs. That's what you want, isn't it?"

Purely in terms of power, the Gotiroir people had enough to go independent anytime they wanted. However, my read wasn't that they had *chosen* not to, but that they hadn't been *able* to. The Gotiroir were mountain folk: The specter of famine hung over them always. That was why they'd chosen to remain in the Empire—which boasted the most productive breadbasket on the continent—even if it meant suffering the Chancellor's harassment.

Specifically, the Chancellor had imposed exorbitant tariffs and interfered with the food supply chain. Abolishing both policies would be the bare minimum to win Gernadieffe over. Plus, banning tariffs on his people's lands wouldn't change the fact that they were still dependent on the Empire's food stores. There was no need for me to be stingy here.

"Additionally, we can offer to reform toll collection—the nobility will run roughshod over you no more. Though I fear we cannot *eliminate* the toll system entirely—the highways must be maintained somehow."

When I looked at Gernadieffe, I saw that his shoulders were shaking. The movement began small, but gradually grew larger and larger, before finally—

"Keh heh heh... Hah! Haaah hah hah!"

What was that supposed to mean?

"Very well! Then henceforth, we are Fifthsworn! I shall recognize Your Majesty as the fifth generation, and in accordance with our oath, myself and my people shall become your shield!"

Hold on, what the heck did "Fifthsworn" mean? And I get why he'd change his attitude, but wasn't this way too big of a swing?

"Now then, Your Majesty—we stand ready to do your bidding! What is your command?"

Just as I was about to ask what he was steering at with this "Fifthsworn" business, Timona returned to inform me of the enemy's approach. Naturally, our meeting quickly turned into an impromptu war council.

I guess I can take that to mean negotiations were a success. Right?

I dunno, man...

A Diverse Battle

We held a brief tactical discussion before directing the Gotiroir and Atúr forces into formation. Despite our preparations, though, we weren't actually sure if any combat would happen.

After all, the Garfurians were expecting to waltz on in and capture an emperor still shell-shocked by their sudden ambush. Now that they'd discovered he had linked up with friendly troops, it was perfectly possible they'd give up and withdraw.

"The enemy appears rather motivated."

"Hmm? Ah, Salomon, you're here. You have excellent timing."

Salomon de Barbetorte gave a silent bow of his head.

"The ladies-in-waiting?"

"I ordered them to search for Her Highness Rosaria's whereabouts in their formal capacity as ladies-in-waiting. Currently, they should be asking around town for information."

What did that... *Ah. I see.* Now that my talks with Gernadieffe and Péter Pál had gone well and things had settled into a state of relative calm, I was beginning to make all kinds of connections.

"The reports I'd heard estimated the Garfurian cavalry were mustered a thousand strong, but the number I'm seeing is over twice that," I remarked. "May I trouble you for an explanation, Lord Barbetorte? Providing one should prove simple for someone with such *foresight* into *so many things*."

"The Garfurian host can be classified as heavy cavalry. Though their lances have devastating penetrative strength, they also break easily, necessitating that the riders return to the main host after each charge to pick up a replacement. Because of that, they are always accompanied by armigers, their weapon-bearers."

Throughout his explanation, Salomon looked completely unfazed. Well, whatever. I didn't feel like laying into him. He'd only sidestep any criticism anyway, since I had no evidence to go on. Incidentally,

Timona appeared to have figured it out too, because he was glaring daggers at the man.

Enough of that, though. I had a looming battle to think about.

The Garfurian force, which had fanned out to partially encircle the hillside, numbered roughly a thousand cavalry and fifteen hundred armigers. Meanwhile, our forces consisted of approximately five hundred Atúr cavalry and three hundred Gotiroir infantry. Only the latter maintained a defensive position here on the hill—the Atúr cavalry were spread across the plain, staring down the enemy's left flank.

"Your Majesty," Timona began. "Are you...sure about this strategy?"

"I know nothing about how they fight, nor their specialties in combat. Leaving it up to them is the smart choice."

In our earlier war council, I had basically given complete tactical command over to Gernadieffe and Péter Pál and told them to have at it. As a result, we'd arrived at a strategy that ensured the Atúr cavalry would only have to think about whittling down the enemy's numbers—while also guaranteeing that the Gotiroir could lure the enemy into fight on their favored "mountainous" terrain of the upper hillside, which was positively forested compared to the base. This meant that I was relatively vulnerable to enemy attacks, since I was on the hilltop...but I had my magic to keep me safe.

The two chieftains had been confident that we could never lose if they were allowed to play to their strengths, and I was by no means a military expert, so I left the matter in their capable hands.

"But now that the Atúr cavalry have left the hill, isn't there a chance they'll turn their backs on us?"

"I understand your concerns, Timona. But I think we'll be fine. Whoever wrote this script appears to be rather talented. Even regarding this battle, I daresay we're supposed to..."

I was about to say "win," but then I realized that I'd sound too much like one of those soldiers in the movies who say they'll marry their sweetheart once they make it back home. *Whew, close call.*

"Hmm? The enemy's moving," I noted. "They're...dismounting?"

"That is one of the strengths of the Garfurian cavalry," Timona

explained. “They receive infantry training as well.”

The vicinity of the hilltop where we’d made our encampment was bare, but otherwise, it was trees all the way down. The Garfurians must’ve judged a horseback assault to be impossible.

“Your Majesty. The enemy’s left flank is charging the Atúr cavalry.”

Only the central section and right wing of the Garfurian force had dismounted. It appeared their left flank was riding out to meet the Atúr.

“Oh? The Atúr have already begun pulling away,” I observed.

According to what Péter Pál had told me, the main tactic of the Atúr cavalry was a fighting retreat using mounted archery.

In this world, bows were still more powerful weapons than guns. That was all the more true for the Atúr, whose bows were of special make and said to surpass all others. My money was on them being composite bows, if you ask me.

The Garfurian cavalry clustered in multiple units, performing a perfectly coordinated charge. However, the Atúr cavalry were no less coordinated as they retreated, firing arrow after arrow back at their pursuers. Both were elite mounted forces who had undergone copious training—well-oiled machines down to the last cog, screw, and sprocket.

“Their tactics, their direction... It’s poetry in motion.” This was only a small-scale skirmish, but I wondered if I wasn’t perhaps watching the pinnacle of this world’s military arts.

“If they fight like that and the enemy decides to split their cavalry...the latter could circle around to the side of the hill where we’re defenseless.”

“You’re not wrong, Timona. But I suspect Gernadieffe wouldn’t just let that happen.”

Besides, the Atúr cavalry was retreating in such a way that the enemy’s left flank *couldn’t* fall back. Rather than moving at constant speed, they varied their pace like an undulating wave, pulling the Garfurians’ formation apart bit by bit.

Suddenly, the sound of trumpets tore the air, coming from the Garfurian main host.

“Your Majesty, the enemy infantry has begun their advance.

They're encroaching on the hill."

The enemy's center section and right flank advanced. They came to a temporary stop at the base of the slope, whereupon a contingent of what appeared to be mages stepped in front.

"Are they...casting a spell?"

"Summoning magic," Timona explained. "Generally, it's only capable of conjuring weak monsters—the sort of fare you can disperse with a stray bullet—but..."

"They can actively avoid projectiles, and in battles like these, they can help nail down the enemy's position. Am I right?" The natural integration of magic into combat doctrine made me recall that *oh, yeah. This is a fantasy world.* "In comparison, the Gotiroir soldiers are...quiet."

More than just quiet; I couldn't sense them at all, even though we shared the same hill. The Garfurians had made the same observation I had, and must've thought their enemy was small in number, because they resumed their advance. However...

"The summoned monsters are gradually decreasing in number," I noted. "But I can't actually see it happening. That's...terrifying."

By now, battle had well and truly been joined, and I suspected it was the numerically inferior Gotiroir who had the upper hand. Not that I could visually confirm it, with all the trees in the way.

For a while afterward, I watched the battle progress, occasionally defending us from oncoming enemy spells. Then...

"Hmm? Look at the rear of the enemy's right flank. There, where the armigers are lined up. Does it seem disorganized to you?"

The armigers from the center section and right flank waited in formation at the base of the hill, no doubt to watch the dismounted horses and act as reserves. However, a section of their formation had suddenly crumbled.

"Half of our mage unit concealed themselves in the woods behind the enemy's right flank," Timona explained.

That had to be Salomon's work. It seemed the report I'd received about the former Belvérian child soldier unit was true—they'd already seen live combat. But...that still didn't explain why the enemy formation had fallen apart so *much*.

Straining my eyes to get a better look, I saw a fusillade of swords spring out of the woods. There was no mistaking it; that man in butler's garb had come as well.

"His way of apologizing...? I wasn't going to hold a grudge in the first place, but I'll take it," I muttered, letting my inner thoughts slip. If he really had come, then all that awaited the enemy hereon was more chaos. "There are a lot less enemy infantry now too... The Gotiroir are scary."

If you ask me what spooked me about them so much, I would say it was the fact that the enemy commander couldn't even see the losses their own force was taking. They'd charge headlong into oblivion well before it dawned on them how screwed they were. Even from my viewpoint up here, the only observation I could make was *Huh. When did the enemy thin out so much?* The Garfurians probably didn't even understand what was happening.

Hilly terrain was textbook home turf for the Gotiroir. After the fact, I'd put together that this was the first ever instance in history of a battle between them and the Garfurians. But while the former's fighting style was a mystery to the latter, the latter's switch from cavalry to infantry had turned them into the Gotiroir's favorite prey. The difference made itself plain.

"The enemy's left flank is collapsing too," I observed.

The Atúr cavalry were getting the better of their opponents too, but this one was purely an issue of matchup. On one side, you had heavy cavalry with such a focus on shock tactics that even their mounts were armored. On the other, you had extremely mobile light cavalry, to better maintain their mounted archers' range advantage. The Atúr were quite literally running away with it.

"The situation is tilting in favor of our forces. The enemy should soon choose to withdraw."

I nodded at Salomon's words. We'd had the advantage in every field. With the growing chaos in the enemy's rear right flank, they would likely give up on the idea of capturing me and retreat in short order.

"It's about time, then."

"Your Majesty..."

Timona must've surmised my intent, because he sounded incredulous.

If we simply left the enemy alone, they'd be out of our hair. But that wouldn't allow us to destroy them. This was our chance to wipe a thousand of the Garfure Republic's elite cavalry off the map. As the emperor of Bundarte, I couldn't let this slip from my hands.

There was no issue with exposing my magic here. The Gotiroir and Atúr wouldn't say anything either, especially without proof.

I began channeling mana. I'd learned from the spells I'd guarded against earlier that the effective range of magic was a little longer than a gun, but shorter than a bow. "Effective range," of course, being the term for the distance at which you could expect the weapon to cause a given degree of damage. In terms of pure range, guns were obviously on top.

In any case, my point was that your average spell just couldn't stay lethal over the same distance as a well-aimed arrow. The further a spell got from its caster, the more difficult it was to control, lowering its potency.

"Their commander is...him, over there, right?"

But what if you only needed to maintain that control for a single moment?

"*Flamma Lux.*"

The beam of light flew in a straight line, piercing through the enemy commander's body in an instant. I could've fired a lot more, really, but there was no sense risking my magical capabilities reaching the ears of someone I didn't want knowing. I'd leave it at one.

"With the enemy commander dead, the Garfurians' formation will devolve into chaos. At this point a rout is inevitable," I said. "Prepare to pursue."

"...Yes, Your Majesty."

Including the mop-up phase that ensued, the tally ended with us having destroyed half the Garfurian forces, while the Gotiroir and Atúr had only taken light casualties. All in all, it turned out to be a completely one-sided victory.

Checking Answers

Given the Gotiroir's terrain advantage and the Atúr's maneuverability and speed compared to the Garfurians—who were known for being slow even among cavalry in general—perhaps our landslide win was only a matter of course.

Once the pursuit had concluded, we decided to return to the imperial capital, escorted by the Atúr. The Gotiroir returned to their lands. That was fair enough, since they hadn't brought horses with them. I was actually impressed they'd traveled all the way out here, considering.

Since we'd gotten completely separated from the tour contingent, I imagined the question of my safety was currently sending the capital into a frenzy. I needed to return before someone like the Chancellor or Minister of Ceremony did anything that would get out of hand.

The problem was: how was I going to act when I returned? Lambasting the factions would be a chance to chip away at their influence, but also carried with it the risk of assassination if I overstepped.

We'd abandoned the emperor's carriage during our escape, so we acquired a number of ordinary ones to make our return. Unlike the ol' miniature fortress, these new carriages came with no annoying rules, so I used the opportunity to hop in the same one as Timona and Rosaria, hoping to discuss our next moves after we got back to the capital.

I had not expected to also be riding with a complete stranger.

* * *

The stranger, a man, walked over out of nowhere after we'd boarded the carriage. He had pale skin, long silver hair that reached

his hips, and eyes that never opened. Dressed in a clergyman's attire with the exception of the blade at his side, he gave his name as Deflotte le Moissan.

"Though I suppose it would be simpler for Your Majesty to recognize me as the child of Alfred, the Count Palatine Vodedt."

I glanced at Timona. He gave me a small nod, so I turned back to this Deflotte guy.

"I've heard your name. But...my understanding is that you're a minister superior of the church who cut ties with the Count Palatine when you took the cloth. What business do you have here? And...under *whose orders* have you come?"

Rosaria stiffened beside me, and the Atúr guards assumed ready positions. Perfectly reasonable reactions. The afterglow of a victory made for ideal circumstances for an assassin, and the top dog of the Western Orthodoxy was the Chancellor's younger brother. There was motive aplenty there.

"I have come at the behest of my mentor, who has charged me with Your Majesty's safety. He also bid me to provide you with—to use his words—a degree of assistance. First, please accept this." Deflotte produced a single book from the folds of his robe.

"What is it?"

"It is a copy of the First Faith's original scripture."

There were several moments of resounding silence, which Timona was the first to break. "Impossible. Only several have ever been confirmed, and those were all east of the Heavensreach. Are you suggesting that you were carrying around a priceless national artifact in your clothing?"

"Oh, no, not that kind of copy. This is a compilation I compiled and translated into Bundartian for His Majesty's ease of perusal. I'm rather confident in my accuracy. If you'll permit me to accompany you during your journey to the capital, I would be pleased to answer any queries you might have."

He translated a text that didn't exist west of the Heavensreach Mountains himself? Did that mean he had ties to another First Faith denomination? No, in that case, he wouldn't have approached me in such a suspicious manner. Besides, I had no real conception of

where "minister superior" put him in the hierarchy, but at the very least it pinned him as an active member of the Western Orthodox clergy. If he *did* have extradenominational ties and was found out, odds were good he'd be burned at the stake before the day was out.

Did that mean the owner of the original holy scripture copy was a member of the Western Orthodox clergy? But no such discovery had ever occurred in the Empire. Well, it *was* possible that it had simply been kept secret this whole time. *Especially* if the plan had been to keep it out of the hands of the Archprelates over the generations, whose talents and concerns were unfit for all but political matters. So, was Deflotte's mentor in opposition with the Archprelate?

Oh. Wait. If Deflotte's mentor was... Ah. So that was why he'd sent Deflotte to me now. It was all coming together.

"All right. You can tell me more in the carriage." I turned to the Atúr guards. "Apologies for causing you concern. Let him pass."

I beckoned Deflotte into the carriage.

Hang on, I thought, *can the guards even speak Bundartian? Ah, whatever.*

* * *

"Your Majesty. Do you intend to trust this man?"

Our carriage was on the move now, and Timona was watching Deflotte, his expression still obviously wary.

"I doubt his mentor intends to kill me, even if he *did* exploit an attack from an enemy nation in order to enlist the chieftains to my cause."

Upon hearing my words, Deflotte chuckled quietly. "Indeed. Sometimes, I wonder if my mentor's eyes can truly see the future."

"What do you mean?" Rosaria looked surprised.

I didn't blame her. We'd been running for our lives. If someone told me that everything from the ambush to the battle had all been scripted by someone else, I'd be surprised too.

"This is a good opportunity," I said. "I've been wanting to check my homework."

There was one major problem with the sequence of events that

had kicked off with the Garfurian soldiers crossing the border.

"The mercenaries who should've been guarding the border turned coat, allowing an elite Garfurian cavalry unit to attack our tour contingent. Since it was so sudden, it was all we could do to make our escape. Now, Rosaria, a question for you. Do you think the attack was a spontaneous thing? Or do you think it was a well-refined plan?"

"The latter, of cour— Oh!"

Indeed. The Garfurian force's movements had been too precise. It was as if they'd *known* where I would be, and when. "There's no mistaking it—they had information on my movements. Information that only a select few among the Empire's nobility should have possessed. In other words, someone leaked it to them. Now, who do you think that was?"

"Um... Duke Raul, perhaps?"

Bzzt. The way she cocked her head was cute, but unfortunately for Rosaria, that answer only scored a thirty. "Duke Raul *would* have motive," I conceded. "He would've wanted to be rid of the Teyanavi front and return to his holdings as soon as he could, and an attack on the emperor in his duchy would be plenty of reason to withdraw. Yet, such a plan would carry far too much risk."

My suspicion was that Duke Raul's stock had experienced a swift and severe downtrend on the proverbial market. Not only had his lands been invaded by the enemy, but it'd only come to pass because of the very mercenaries he'd hired. And *then* the emperor had been attacked while passing through his domain and gone temporarily missing. Above all, it hadn't been his forces that had protected me and driven away the enemy, but those belonging to different people entirely.

His reputation was in tatters. No, that was understating it. His very status as Chancellor had to be in question. That was how much he'd lost.

"Who do you think it was, Timona?" I asked.

After some thought, Timona replied, "I think...the plan to incite the Garfurian force was originally Duke Raul's, yes. But it was the Minister of Ceremony who commandeered it to result in a genuine

attack."

Oh, not bad. That was still just sixty points, though. Incidentally, if he'd only said "the Minister of Ceremony," that would've only scored a thirty, just like Rosaria.

"True, with the emperor and Chancellor both far from the imperial capital, it's the perfect opportunity for him to seize power. If I had died, chances are good he would have gradually, brick by brick, assumed complete control. But there's one problem with that reasoning."

Timona gave it some more thought. "Count Vadpauvre?"

"Correct."

Count Vadpauvre of the regency. The nobleman who'd been the first to turn tail and flee during the attack.

Until that moment, the count had stuck close to my side, proclaiming that it was the aide-de-camp's duty to guard me. Then, when push came to shove, he abandoned me and fled for the hills.

If it had been the Minister of Ceremony's intention to have me killed or captured, he wouldn't have expressly attached his own people to my contingent. Case in point, upon my return to the capital, I fully intended to damage his influence by raking him over the coals for Count Vadpauvre's cowardice.

"Here's my speculation," I began. "The instigator was indeed the Chancellor. He wanted a reason to withdraw to his holdings, so he leaked information to the Garfure Republic. But that only consisted of a vague report that I was in the region. He believed that as long as he could stir the Garfurian forces up a little, that would be enough of an excuse for him to return."

In fact, Duke Raul likely would've considered it sufficient pretext even if the republic's only movements had been to send out spies and scouts to determine the veracity of the information.

"Next, we get to the Minister of Ceremony, who catches wind of the Chancellor's plan. He decides to utilize it for his own ends: damaging the Chancellor's reputation and enhancing his own. The former will happen if the emperor is attacked in the Duchy of Raul, while the latter will happen if it's the regency's guards who protect me. I don't know specifically what the Minister's plan *was*...but he

could have, for example, attempted something like commissioning one of the mercenary companies guarding the border to feign an attack against a traveling contingent that would soon pass by, but withdraw before causing any real harm."

A scheme like that would explain why he'd hitched Count Vadpauvre to my side. That was why, when a full-scale Garfurian force had shown up unannounced, the count had been the first to flee in panic, as foolish as it was.

"Then, amid this tangled web of plots, there's someone who sees an opportunity. This individual enacts a plan where the Garfurian force conducts a genuine attack, but he also directs the Gotiroir and Atúr toward the emperor to serve as protection. It's even possible he designated that hill as the battlefield ahead of time."

The Gotiroir's lands were the mountainous region near the Heavensreach, east of the Duchy of Raul. Yet the hill where the battle had taken place was in the duchy's northwest. It was a journey that would take several days even on horseback, yet the Gotiroir had traversed it on foot. No matter how you sliced it, they had to have known of the Garfurian attack several weeks in advance.

"To further ensure our success, this individual informed Salomon of this information beforehand, guaranteeing a certain degree of control over my movements. And to prevent the unlikely worst-case scenario of the Garfurians catching up to me, he delayed them with the false information that I escaped toward town. Really, I am in awe of his foresight."

Deflotte's smile never faltered once as I spoke. I took that to mean my conjecture had hit the mark.

"This individual had three objectives," I continued. "The first was to damage the reputation of the Chancellor and Minister of Ceremony *simultaneously*. The second was to put the Gotiroir and Atúr peoples in contact with me—and make them my allies—while the factions were blind. And the final objective...was to send the emperor a message. To let me know I have a backer."

There was also a fourth objective which I would keep quiet about. In all likelihood, my mysterious backer knew I was a transmigrator, and had wanted to let me know that he knew.

I even knew how he'd found me out: The man in butler's attire must've leaked the info. That would explain why the other transmigrator had been at the battle, out of sight but making a show of using spells I would recognize to inform me of his presence.

Ever since I'd seen the man in butler's attire, I'd been considering the possibility that yet more transmigrators existed in this world. Perhaps Deflotte's mentor himself was one. Did that mean the "mentor" and the "man in butler's attire" were coconspirators?

Or perhaps the man in butler's attire had only participated in the battle as an apology for leaking my secret. Either way, I had no intention of blaming him. He wasn't my vassal—not yet, anyway—and at the end of the day, I'd come out of this whole ordeal unscathed and with powerful new allies.

Above all, I had no evidence. All he had to do was feign ignorance, and I'd have nothing to point to that I could use to criticize him.

Moving away from him, though...

"Finally, this backer needed to confirm whether his message had gotten across to me. That's *your* role, Deflotte le Moissan. In other words, this mentor of yours *is* the individual of which I speak. Am I right?"

"Magnificent, Your Majesty. It appears you have perfectly received my mentor's message."

The issue was: *Who* was his mentor? It had to be someone in the upper echelons of the Western Orthodoxy who also wasn't a part of its main power bloc—that is, the Chancellor's faction. That narrowed it down enough that I could probably find him with some effort...but I'd let sleeping dogs lie. Whoever he was, he'd clearly already moved mountains to support me. If it became necessary for me to know who he was, he'd no doubt come to me himself.

"I thought it would take you several days to reach the answer," Deflotte said. "Dear me. It seems my duty is fulfilled, leaving me with little to do."

Oh? This was the perfect opportunity, then. "In that case, why don't I begin reading the scripture you've translated for me?" I suggested. "Whenever I need something clarified, I'll ask you. I

assume you won't mind?"

"Why, not at all."

I didn't know if his translation was accurate or not, but I'd never read the holy scripture to begin with. If I was going to continue living in this world, it was vital knowledge, so I set my mind on finishing it before we reached the imperial capital.

I spent the next while reading, bumping along to the movements of the carriage. I quickly discovered that the text was minuscule, apparently to keep the tome portable. Quite honestly, trying to read it while at the mercy of the carriage's jolting was difficult...but to my surprise not impossible, once I got used to it.

Incidentally, Rosaria, who had started out trying to read along from beside me, suffered a quick KO at the merciless hands of motion sickness.

Cleaning Up After the Chaos

The turn of the year came and went, bringing us into 466 NC. In the months that had passed since my return to the capital, imperial politics had been, to put it bluntly, stormy.

I'll start with my own affairs.

The fact that I'd technically won my first battle had apparently endeared me to the imperial capital's citizenry, dispelling the negative image that I was simply "the son of the crown prince who'd died in battle."

In spite of that, my victory hadn't inspired any particular wariness in the nobility, because of the rumor that I'd left everything to the tribes and hidden away at the back of the battlefield, trembling in my boots. Incidentally, I'd been the one who directed Salomon to spread that rumor.

The nobility weren't wary of me, and the city's people liked me. My position was ideal.

Next, let's cover the regency and the Chancellor's faction.

Before I'd made it back to the imperial capital, the factions had been occupied with political mudslinging, constantly trying to blame the opposing party for what had happened. The Chancellor was attacked over his hired mercenaries turning coat and the fact that the emperor had been attacked in his lands. Similarly, the Minister of Ceremony was lambasted for his proclaimed "guard" running from the fight, as well as the fact that he'd spent the several days that passed while my whereabouts remained unknown making shady moves around the capital.

This fruitless quarrel had continued for some time even after my return, causing the dukes' political positions to nosedive into shaky territory.

Despite what you might think, this was actually a horrible situation for me. After all, their downfall wouldn't necessarily result

in the nobles under their umbrellas flocking to me, and the more cornered they became, the higher the chances were they'd resort to assassination or rebellion.

In the midst of all this, the next step I chose to take was to refuse all meetings with the nobility.

Officially, the young emperor, having for the first time tasted the fear of someone coming for his life, had begun jumping at shadows, losing his trust in the nobility.

At a glance, this might seem like a disadvantage for the dukes, but it was actually me buying them some time. I wanted them to stop the useless blame game and carry on with destroying the evidence of their misdeeds.

You see, if either of their crimes were to be properly exposed, the emperor would have no choice but to punish them. However, I had no military might to back me up—for now, at least—so I wouldn't be able to enforce that punishment. Because of that, I'd decided to steer the situation toward letting the dukes sweep their wrongdoing under the rug.

After all, their dignity and reputations had already tanked plenty for my purposes, and even a measly rat would find the courage to bite a cat, if sufficiently cornered.

Still, allowing things to return to normal without any fanfare would be no fun at all, which is why I let myself indulge in a bit of harassment.

As mentioned previously, I was refusing to meet with the nobility—but there were actually two exceptions. One was the old hag of a regent, whose political influence had been ground down to the bare minimum by her father, the Minister of Ceremony, and the other was Archprelate Georg V, the highest authority in the Western Orthodoxy and younger brother of the Chancellor.

The result was that the Chancellor and Minister of Ceremony threw a lot of their personal weight behind the Archprelate and regent respectively, all so that they could regain meeting privileges with me. Because of this, the regency became a two-leader system, while the religious clique in the Chancellor's faction grew influential enough that the Chancellor's clique was forced to make concessions.

The Minister of Ceremony in particular, though, had to be seething. After all that time and effort he'd spent reshuffling his power base to only follow him, he was back to square one in the blink of an eye. Ah, sweet comeuppance.

Yet, in terms of the faction power balance, what had once been an advantageous tilt toward the Chancellor's faction was now a fifty-fifty deadlock. This was because the Archprelate, who served as the Chancellor's substitute and was a significant factor to the faction's clout, had suddenly lost a great deal of influence.

I didn't know why, only that there had to have been some kind of new development within the church—and *that* meant it was the work of Deflotte's mentor. If he'd decided this was for the best, I'd trust his judgment and leave it to him.

All in all, this left imperial politics in a cautious balance upon a strange, four-sided seesaw, with the major players being the Chancellor's clique in the number one spot, closely followed by the Minister of Ceremony's and the regent's individual cliques at basically equal second, and the Western Orthodoxy at fourth.

The whole situation was a powder keg just waiting to ignite. Still, I figured that was preferable to a continuous oil fire.

Anyway, now that the Chancellor and Minister of Ceremony had regained the privilege of seeing me, it seemed they'd settled on a final cover story: They suspected the attack had been a cowardly scheme by the Teyanave Confederation and Garfure Republic working in unison to incite chaos within the Empire. The "suspected" part is the bit you should be paying attention to. By phrasing it like that, they technically weren't lying. Just "providing their opinions."

Those kinds of noncommittal statements and dressing speculation up as truth had been rife on modern-day Earth too. And if they had been a good enough tactic to fool billions of people worldwide back there, propagandizing to a dinky little Empire with an estimated population of thirty million had to be child's play.

Still, the dukes had cause to bring up the confederation and the republic. Both nations were currently at war with the Empire; it was highly improbable that they hadn't had at least *some* hand in the events.

Thus, the "unfortunate misunderstanding" was resolved, and the young emperor became furious with both of these cowardly nations. He ordered the Chancellor to subjugate the Garfure Republic, and the Minister of Ceremony to do the same to the Teyanave Confederation.

Naturally, the two were "indignant" at having been manipulated by enemy nations. They "humbly accepted" my commands, "swearing valiantly" to me that they would destroy their respective foe. Consequently, they returned to their lands in order to begin preparing their armies.

What a farcical charade.

* * *

Now, I didn't believe for a second that the dukes would take this subjugation thing seriously. However, if either one was too obvious about slacking off, the other would rake them over the coals, so I *did* expect that we'd see a few skirmishes or small-scale battles fall out from it all.

As far as I was concerned, that was just fine. Right now, I needed to make both the confederation and the republic bleed, even if only a little. Then, once I seized back power, I'd give them the proper, thorough beating they needed and bring them to heel.

I had a valid reason for this, of course. Hear me out.

Currently, the Bundarte Empire adjoined seven other nations. Of these, our borders to the east with the Teiwa Imperium and Kingdom of Gordignon consisted of mountainous terrain, so there was no need to go redrawing any maps there. The problems were the two nations to the north and the three to the south.

All five of these nations had a history of invading and pillaging the Empire, their sights set on our grain-producing regions. But instead of committing to full-scale war fronts, they had always preferred pincer attacks, a contributing factor to the Empire's current weakened state.

Unless both our southern and northern borders were stabilized, the Empire would always face the threat of war breaking out on a

hair trigger. That was why I needed to give those nations a few knocks—at least enough that they stayed out of the Empire's affairs. Whether I went all the way and crushed them was a separate question.

Incidentally, this in fact had been the unchanged, official state policy of every generation of emperor from the first through to the sixth (it had stopped with the sixth—remember that dumbass?—and no one had managed to reinstate it since). Source: Count Palatine Vodedt.

Oh, speaking of Count Palatine Vodedt.

It turned out that Deflotte le Moissan hadn't been pulling my leg—he was indeed Vodedt's child. According to the Count Palatine, Deflotte had left the family because his way of thinking hadn't aligned with theirs. Deflotte's priority was the welfare of the nation, which didn't always mesh so well with the Count Palatine's loyalty to the Rotahl lineage above all else.

To quote the Count Palatine: "He's the kind of man who would cut down even Your Majesty, if he believed it would better the Empire. Do tread lightly around him."

That explained why he'd been all too happy to send me fleeing from an ambush before springing an unexpected meeting with the chieftains on me. Though, if I had to pick, my values definitely aligned more with Deflotte's than his father's.

Deflotte had parted ways with us just before we'd entered the imperial capital proper. Apparently, despite having been blind from birth, he could "see" people and objects by sensing the faint traces of their mana. Before he'd left, he'd explained that crowds and other large gatherings of people made him weary.

I'd actually believed him too, dang it.

"No, that man has artificial eyes—magical tools that confer ordinary sight upon him."

If his blood father was saying that, it was probably true. The Count Palatine's explanation also gave me an inkling as to why Deflotte hadn't accompanied us inside the city: I suspected he hadn't wanted to meet his father.

After all, it appeared they were the kind of parent and child that

only ever spoke of each other as “that man” or “him.” You know, the kind whose family affairs you don’t want to get involved with.

Uh, not that I was in any position to speak. I was a son who saw his mother as nothing but a game piece useful for keeping the Minister of Ceremony under control, while the regent was the kind of mother who’d said she was glad I was safe exactly *once* upon our reunion, only to then do nothing but bad-mouth the dukes. Yeah, there was no way an onlooker could ever think we were a decent parent and child...

While I’m on the subject, all the Count Palatine had said regarding my return was that he was “pleased to see me unharmed.” Eh. That was fair enough, given our businesslike relationship.

What had surprised me was Nadine’s reaction. Duke Warren’s daughter had apparently been genuinely concerned for my welfare, because upon seeing me, she’d burst into tears and called me an idiot for making her worry. As much as I’d wanted to make a comment along the lines of, “Oh, so this is what tsunderes are like,” I’d wisely read the room and kept my mouth shut.

Vera-Sylvie had cried too. She’d then proceeded to remove the iron bars of her window and pull me into a hug. I had no idea when she’d become able to manipulate iron like that, and it had been tempting to ask her if she was finally done trying to hide the fact that she knew who I really was. But again, I’d wisely kept my mouth shut.

I wasn’t used to having people cry for me. I didn’t know how to react.



I wonder...
In my past life, had anyone cried for me when I died?

The Second Tour

Year 466 of the New Calendar, Summer. The emperor's tour contingent set out once more. This time, we'd mainly be touring the Empire's western region—the Minister of Ceremony's sphere of influence.

Because of the "trauma" I incurred from the Garfurian ambush during my first tour, it had taken the combined efforts of the regent and Count Palatine to "convince" me to go. As a result, the Minister of Ceremony now owed them a debt. He'd been willing to go so far because my previous tour had taken place almost solely in the Chancellor's faction's holdings. Basically, if things were left as they were, the Minister would've gotten a raw deal. Now, the Chancellor of old would've certainly intervened in the Minister's efforts to drag me out to his lands—dressing it up under the pretext of defending the unwilling emperor, of course. At the very least, he would've publicly called out the Minister's actions.

But he didn't, which suggested he didn't have the leeway.

I couldn't have him pulling the trigger and raising an army against me, so quite honestly, I *had* been a bit leery about going on the tour. But in the end, I decided to leave the Belvérian contingent—Rosaria, Salomon, and co.—in the capital while I was out.

One of my original reasons for touring the Empire was to put some distance between Rosaria and the imperial capital, but the situation had quite obviously shifted. Before my first tour, the Chancellor and Minister of Ceremony had seen her as disposable, someone they could get rid of the moment she became a nuisance. Even if she'd protested, they could've simply accused her of espionage or some such and that was that.

However, thanks to the Garfurian ambush, there were rumors floating around that the dukes had betrayed the Empire. Turns out, when you continuously accuse your opponent of something, it tends

to linger in people's minds. Go figure.

But while their never-ending accusations had always been just that—accusations—they'd now become full-blown suspicions. In contrast, Rosaria and her people had participated in the battle (not by actually fighting, but they'd been around) and had the trust of the young emperor. If the dukes made any move against her, it would only confirm their status as traitors in people's eyes, invalidating their actions.

They said the nail that sticks out gets hammered down, but that was only true while a hammer was in the picture. Since the hammer was currently out for repairs (read: the unrest in the factions had settled down), the nail was unmistakably safe. Especially since the dukes weren't yet desperate enough to try hammering it with their bare hands.

I trusted that Rosaria and Salomon could balance the regent and Chancellor against each other. As for Duke Agincarl, the scheming old materialist, he'd be accompanying me on the tour.

We set out in the eighth month of the year, with a vastly beefed-up guard escort. Incidentally, Count Palatine Vodedt was joining us as well. He hadn't mentioned a specific reason, but it seemed the ambush on the emperor had left him with a bone to pick.

* * *

Unsurprisingly, the tour concluded with no ambushes or assassination attempts.

Another difference from last time was that, thanks to Count Palatine Vodedt, I was able to learn a lot more about the Empire, and in greater detail. The personalities of the nobility, how the people of each region saw their lords, the descriptions of facilities I wasn't able to examine personally—the works. Timona, while well educated, was always by my side and thus knew little about the Empire beyond the capital; it was a fascinating change of pace to be traveling with someone who could answer my questions on the fly.

As for what I learned, I suppose I should begin by laying out that the Empire's western territories had a relatively flourishing economy,

owing to maritime trade. In fact, it was possibly more prosperous than the Duchy of Raul.

However, this yielded disproportionately little military strength, because Duke Agincarl had given part of his holdings to his sons: Fried, the Marquess Agincarl-Novei, the eldest, and August, the Marquess Agincarl d'Decci, the second. More specifically, it was because his sons were on bad terms—this was the regency's weak point.

The Chancellor's faction had a weak point too, but, well, let's leave that for later.

All that being said, this weak point in the regency was not a fatal one. To illustrate this, we can look to silver: the mainstream currency in the western Empire. Duke Agincarl himself controlled the Empire's largest silver mine, the cunning geezer.

Incidentally, it seemed the common method used to refine silver was via mercury amalgamation. Damn it. Another one of my domestic cheat codes scratched off the list.

Then again, I hadn't seen it with my own eyes. In fact, I hadn't been able to observe anything related to silver or salt-making, the two main industries of the Duchy of Agincarl.

Another interesting topic that had cropped up was magical device workshops. Just as the Duchy of Raul had begun to mass-produce cannons, the Duchy of Agincarl was making steady advances in the development of magical implements for military uses. Though, as you'd expect, it was all being kept tightly under wraps—so much so that even Count Palatine Vodedt hadn't been able to discern the specifics.

The rest of the tour was boring, consisting of nothing but various receptions and displays of hospitality. Since the emperor's carriage had been recovered, I spent all of our travel time alone. Boredom, thy name is solitude.

* * *

While the tour had lacked much in the way of sights worth seeing, it *did* lead me to a realization. It was difficult to put into

words, but there was something about the...atmosphere, perhaps, that had differed from that of my first tour. In a nutshell, even though my mother was Duke Agincarl's daughter, the citizenry hadn't been all that welcoming of me.

Of course, that wasn't to say I'd been received with resistance or refusal. Apathy—that was the right word. If anyone had displayed a strong reaction, it was the barons, viscounts, and other people of such social classes. According to Count Palatine Vodedt, they were the surviving remnants of the old Agincarl Kingdom nobility.

Given the history of the area, I could understand their reactions.

The Agincarl region had existed as an independent cultural sphere since before the Rotahl Empire's collapse. Thus, the Kingdom of Agincarl had been the first bloc to declare independence from the Early Giolus dynasty and put up the most stubborn resistance to the Bundarte dynasty's reunification of the Empire.

Edward I, the second emperor, had been forced to grant generous concessions in exchange for the Kingdom of Agincarl's capitulation. Agincarlish nobility would be relegated to the status of barons and viscounts, but retain power and jurisdiction equal to the level of counts and marquesses. Above all, they were legally exempt from the obligation to participate in the Empire's wars—even if it was a defensive war as a result of an enemy nation's invasion.

However, these favorable conditions did not last long.

In the era of Charles I, the third emperor, the Empire was invaded by the Kingdom of Garfure (technically they were already a republic by this point, but on paper they still had a king). Despite suffering a crushing defeat in battle, the Empire managed to pull through thanks to the assistance of the nobility.

Naturally, since the Empire wasn't the aggressor, it gained no land for its efforts, and thus none was parceled out to the lords who participated in the conflict, leaving them discontented. In comparison, almost none of the Agincarlish nobility had joined the war effort at all due to the exemption they'd received from the second emperor.

Seeing this, Charles I chose to deem the actions of the Agincarlish nobility as "acts serving the interests of the enemy" and

declared that he would be seizing their holdings, whether they consented or not.

This was a clear violation of the Agincarlish surrender treaty. Ordinarily, such tyranny would have failed to gain the approval of the wider aristocracy. However, this case proved different. You see, Charles I had promised his lords that the lands seized from the Agincarlish nobles would be divided among those who had participated in the war against the Garfurians.

Thus, the nobility, prioritizing their self-interest, agreed to be party to tyranny.

In this case, the small degree of autonomy the Agincarlish nobility still possessed—as well as the Agincarl name—worked against them. To the imperial nobility at large, they weren't perceived as "fellow imperial nobility," but "Agincarlish nobility."

It was over before a revolt could even get off the ground. With the armies of imperial nobility marching into their holdings, the Agincarlish nobility were forced to abandon their efforts to muster a counterforce. In the end, they were stripped of much of their rights and privileges.

Edward II, the fourth emperor, succeeded in calming the Agincarlish nobility—who hated the Empire with a passion—through repeated diplomatic negotiations. Edward III, the sixth emperor, incited the "Great Agincarlish Revolt" through his repeated tax increases. And the one who suppressed this revolt, bringing the region under his control and taking the title of Duke Agincarl, was none other than Phillip, the Minister of Ceremony.

In other words, the barons and viscounts descended from old Agincarlish nobility saw the emperor and Minister of Ceremony as enemies. They only hadn't risen up in arms because they didn't have the influence to muster an army big enough to push back. Put another way, if the conditions were right, they'd be sharpening their blades by morning.

My point being, the regency was a lot more fragile than I'd taken it for, between its two-leader structure between the regent and Minister of Ceremony, hostility between the latter's eldest and second sons, and this anti-Bundartian resentment among the old

Agincarlish nobility that I'd freshly discovered.

Yeah. I could *definitely* use this.

The Final Tour

467 NC. I finally turned twelve. Evidently, I'd hit a growth spurt, as recently my height had been increasing by the day.

That in and of itself held no particular significance, but it seemed the dukes were growing more wary of me now that I was properly a preteen. Lately, they had been presenting me with "incense," rambling on and on about its beneficial effects. Don't ask me what kind of effects; I'd already forgotten.

Of course, when both the Chancellor *and* Minister of Ceremony dropped by to give me a "rare commodity," something was obviously up. There was no way I'd be inhaling any of it. My suspicions were proven right when I glanced at Count Palatine Vodedt's stern expression, clearly warning me against the stuff. Were the dukes seriously trying to pass it off as "incense"? What a disgrace to the name of a perfectly good meditation tool.

Why was it that those two dregs of society only cooperated for crap like this, anyway?

Not that I couldn't see their reasoning. Getting the emperor hooked on primo junk was the quickest way to getting what they wanted, and exactly why I'd committed to my idiot act in the first place. Had they finally grown weary of even my childish tantrums?

Either way, I could sense that they were beginning to feel the pressure.

Now then, what to do with these dangerous "offerings" of theirs? What I really wanted was to trash the stuff right away, but I couldn't let the dukes find out that I hadn't used any.

Left with little recourse, I lit it up. However, to avoid making any contact with it—let alone inhaling it—I threw up multiple airtight *Obex* around me. I couldn't be too careful; this stuff could really ruin me.

The "offerings" didn't come without their advantages, though.

Since the nobility were well aware of the danger, they stopped coming by my quarters.

My butler Herc was the only one who stayed around. I didn't know if anyone had told him what it was, but I'd noticed him making the effort to show up more often...initially. Recently, he'd been coming by less, and the hollow look in his eyes and sluggishness in his demeanor were becoming increasingly common.

Look, I mean, I was pretty sure he'd been directed to check if I was using the "offerings" or not, so I couldn't exactly protect him from inhaling the stuff, could I? I had no choice here.

What's that? How do I really feel? Yeah, okay, fine. The guy had used me as his personal cash cow since I was a toddler. I figured it was only fair if I used him as a guinea pig to help me better my disguise.

Putting aside the topic of the jester who'd been abandoned by his noble masters, the "offerings" meant that I was now stuck in my quarters. This was partly because I had to pretend the "offerings" were making me sluggish, but also because maintaining my barriers ate into my strength.

Still, I was grateful magic existed in this world—*powerfully* grateful.

I was worried that the dukes had sent Rosaria the "offerings" as well, but that fear proved unfounded. It seemed even they hadn't yet chosen to cross that line.

After all, if it came to light, there'd be massive diplomatic fallout. Or, if Rosaria and her people were to find out about the "offerings," there was every chance they'd barge in here and stop me. And if anything, it was in the dukes' interests to keep us separate.

At any rate, my life very much resembled that of a chronic shut-in's. My first chance in a while to finally go outside came with the summer, as preparations finished for my third tour.

My first *official* chance, that is. I had been keeping up my visits to Vera-Sylvie in secret, naturally.

* * *

My third tour would mainly take place in the Duchy of Raul, the reasoning being that my first tour of his holdings had been cut short. Remind me again, dear Chancellor, of who was at fault for that in the first place?

As for the Duchy of Agincarl, I'd be visiting that again next year. No skin off my nose, really.

Anyway, this time, there was a big difference from my previous tours.

"Enough is enough! Stop holing yourself away inside your carriage and get some fresh air and exercise!"

That big difference went by the name Nadine de Van-Warren, daughter to the Duke Warren. She was accompanying us. Having turned eleven, her personality was beginning to mellow out a bit. Uh, unless I was just imagining things. That was also very possible.

"Don't wanna."

"Such laziness! You'll grow fat again, you know!"

No, yeah, the old Nadine would've grabbed me and tried to drag me outside by force. She really *had* become kinder.

"Not today."

"Nadine, you mustn't be so high-handed with His Majesty. Come, let's go together."



To my surprise, Rosaria and Nadine had become quite close while I hadn't been looking.

"If you say so, Rosaria..."

I had to admit, I never would've expected Nadine to get so attached to Rosaria that she saw her as an older sister. What method had Rosaria used...?

Incidentally, I'd already told Rosaria about the "offerings," including my magical protective measures and the act I was keeping up. As such, she wasn't riding in the miniature fortress with me this time. After all, I'd occasionally need to "light up" in the carriage.

It was worth mentioning that we had no plan to pass through the Duchy of Warren, which was in the Empire's south. The fact that Nadine was accompanying us anyway, though, suggested that Duke Warren would be coming to meet *us* somewhere in Chancellor's faction territory. After all, with his daughter traveling with us, there was nothing strange about him dropping by to say hello.

Of course, our meeting would undoubtedly take place under surveillance by the Chancellor's people. There was no way I was going to get another open discussion like the one I'd had with the Gotiroir and Atúr chieftains.

* * *

Unlike my first tour, we set out from the imperial capital headed straight east. The region that bordered the County of Pildee—where the imperial capital was located—in that direction was the Duchy of Aphoroa, which was also under direct imperial control. Further east than that, however, were the lands of Chancellor's faction nobility for as far as the eye could see.

Incidentally, north of the Duchy of Aphoroa was the County of Vadpauvre, which we'd passed through during my first tour.

Ah, speaking of Count Vadpauvre, his desertion of the emperor in the face of the Garfurian ambush had made him the target of censure from the rest of the nobility. Last I'd heard, he'd handed his title over to his eldest son and gone into retirement.

Currently, we had set out from Keighamer, a town at the

easternmost end of the Duchy of Aphoroa, and the plan was to reach the city of Reydra in the County of Veria before the day was out. My impression of the Duchy of Aphoroa had been...chaotic. Everything had felt rather thrown out of order, since both factions had various officials in charge. Nobody even attempted to sustain a pretense of direct imperial control. I certainly didn't remember telling them they could make themselves at home, but ah well.

"Hmm? Count Palatine, is that a hill?"

Curious about the scenery I could see outside the window, I murmured a quiet question to Count Palatine Vodedt, who had accompanied me again and was riding parallel to the carriage upon a horse.

"Yes. I believe it is called 'Chelán Hill.' It also serves to mark the border between the Duchy of Aphoroa and the County of Veria."

"It's rather large... Nothing like the hill from back then." The hill I was referring to was, of course, the battleground against the Garfurian soldiers who'd pursued me. The area starting around here and onward to the Duchy of Raul was dotted with hill country.

"If I recall, there is a heretic legend that it is the resting place of the final emperor of the Harperion Empire."

The city of Reydra was almost directly east from Keighamer. Because of Chelán Hill, however, the road curved south rather than continuing straight. Strategically, this was a key position. If one controlled this area, they'd control the highway.

"The emperor's grave, huh? Far from a lucky omen, but..."

Plus, the hill was wide. It would serve as an excellent base if fortified, or even a decent battlefield to lure the enemy into.

"Count Palatine." My voice had dropped even lower. Matching my discretion, Count Palatine Vodedt simply turned his gaze toward me. "Can you draft a map of Chelán Hill and its surrounds?"

"Yes."

Excellent. And after that, we would need... "We'll need water. If a well exists, get it into good condition. If not, attempt to excavate one. If there's no groundwater, excavate a hole large enough to be used as a reservoir, then refill it so it isn't discovered. Mobilize Fabio and his men if you need to. This is your highest priority—and please

be discreet."

"Understood."

The plan I'd spent so long weaving together on my own was slowly taking shape. Only God knew if it would work. But I was getting ahead of myself. First, I needed to figure out how to get to the point when I could set things in motion.

Still, finally, *finally*, I could see the vision.

The Gotiroir and Atúr; the deadlock between the regency and the Chancellor's faction, as well as their weakened state; both dukes splitting their forces to deal with Teyanave and Garfure; the relatively empty imperial capital—politically, everything was already in place. The problem was the open question of my strategy—but I'd just encountered my light bulb moment.

The next step...could I successfully use my meeting with Duke Warren to pull the trigger?

A Meeting with Duke Warren

The tour in the Duchy of Raul went smoothly—or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that I had nothing to do.

During the return leg, I was to have a meeting with Duke Warren in the Marquessate of Ramitead. Evidently my read was right: The Chancellor was wary of the renowned soldier. It had taken meeting in his own territory, among a cohort of his noble lapdogs, and restricting the meeting to a brief audience for him to finally give his approval.

Indeed, the Chancellor's faction kept a vigilant eye on Duke Warren. In terms of pure military might, his veteran forces rivaled Duke Raul's army. But because the Chancellor and his pocket noblemen were so focused on Duke Warren, their usual vigilance toward other matters had fallen by the wayside.

This was a pure fluke, but a welcome one. I couldn't have designated this place for our meeting if I'd wanted to—it was the Chancellor who'd had the final say.

You see, the Marquessate of Ramitead was currently being unlawfully occupied. By rights, its ownership belonged to none other than Fabio.

And as it happens, I had directed him and the other fortunate survivors of the margravial house of Ramitead to infiltrate the area, in which they would remain in hiding and prepare to raise an army. It was right off the back of the field survey I'd ordered of Chelán Hill, but they'd just have to grit their teeth and bear the overtime.

As for me, I was waiting for my meeting with Duke Warren, dressed in a gaudy outfit that was entirely too superfluous. I suspected they'd put me in it as a bit of a power play, to put pressure on the duke. Once I took power back, though, clothes like these were going straight into the "discontinued policies" bin. I mean, why would you use so much *actual* gold to decorate an outfit?

I felt like I was walking around in a damn lead apron.

"Make way for the entrance of His Majesty Carmine de la Garde-Bundarte, eighth emperor of the Bundarte Empire!"

Incidentally, I'd learned that the "offerings" the nobles had been giving me were called guandaleo, a dried form of the guande plant. From observing Herc, I'd also learned that inhaling the smoke produced by burning it caused extreme sluggishness of thought and physical lethargy, while withdrawal led to sudden bouts of irritability. And when I say "sudden," I really meant that they came out of nowhere.

So, anyway, my point was that I was going to be doing my best to act the part of a hardcore guandaleo smoker.

"It has been too long, Your Majesty. Your servant Richter de Van-Warren greets you."

When I was little, Duke Warren had dropped by the imperial demesne several times with Nadine in tow, but none of those visits had ever been more than a brief exchange of greetings. He was the quintessential military man through and through, and he almost never visited the imperial capital. He'd loved and respected my father—Crown Prince Jean, his comrade on the battlefield—and was the type of man with sufficient discretion to know he was a bad fit for politics and give it a wide berth.

What would such a man think, when he saw the son of his sworn friend turned into a puppet of the nobility? Well, let's find out, shall we?



"Who?" I asked.

I slouched back against my seat, keeping my eyes unfocused and wandering. Since my "condition" had worsened slowly but steadily over the course of the tour, the Chancellor and the others would suspect nothing. They were simply convinced that their "offerings" were working.

After a brief pause, Duke Warren spoke again. "Duke Warren, Your Majesty. I must apologize for my daughter's behavior—it is my understanding that she has at times inconvenienced your person."

Ah, it seemed he just thought I was peeved with him because of Nadine. I hoped he'd hurry up and notice.

"Duke Warren, His Majesty is fatigued from the long journey."

And now the Chancellor was trying to smooth things over? *Don't get in my way here, buddy.*

"Duke Raul... If that is the case, then why have you so far rejected our formal proposals to—"

"Oh, right, Duke Warren. It has been too long."

The room immediately became as silent as the grave. The emperor, his eyes hollow, had just interrupted Duke Warren mid-sentence. It was enough to make anyone feel uncomfortable.

Duke Warren's remaining eye widened. He'd caught on.

To the duke, a soldier to his core, the emperor was his liege—the target of his unwavering loyalty and support. If he saw me like this, how could he *not* act?

There were several more moments of silence before he finally spoke. "Very well. It does seem as though His Majesty is feeling under the weather. I shall return at a later date."

Uh...what? Did he just back off? My plan had been to act out withdrawal symptoms if he didn't notice, and I thought he'd be outraged if he *did* notice. Don't tell me I failed?

I glanced in Count Palatine Vodedt's direction, but all he did was give a subtle shake of his head. So no follow-up was necessary here?

Oh. It was becoming apparent to me that Duke Warren wasn't *incapable* of political strategy at all. It was just that he didn't like it.

"Come, Your Majesty. Let us go."

I allowed the Chancellor to lead me out of the room. If my suspicions were correct, he didn't suspect a thing—just what Duke Warren had intended.

I didn't want to count my chickens before they hatched...but this was looking promising.

* * *

Let's have a brief chat about politics.

Currently, if a domestic rebellion were to break out in the Empire, it would technically be a rebellion "against the Empire," not a rebellion "against the emperor."

This was because, ordinarily, the emperor was only recognized as the emperor after the coronation. However, because of the political conflict, the coronation had yet to take place. And since a ceremony that *should* have taken place had *not*, solely to accommodate for the circumstances of the nobility, there was valid weight to the argument that they were unjustly infringing upon the authority of the emperor.

In simpler terms, this meant that any potential rebel army had just cause. Namely: "eliminating the emperor's advisers who are secretly plotting against him."

As a quick addendum, the whole debacle with the Teyanave Confederation had just been them going independent—not something you really needed just cause for.

Anyway, my objective for my meeting with Duke Warren had been to inspire in him the determination to call his forces up to arms. If I handed him *casus belli* on a silver platter—that being "executing the Chancellor and Minister of Ceremony for the sake of the emperor"—then all that remained was whether or not he decided to pull the rebellion trigger.

Assuming he did, it didn't actually matter to me if his rebellion succeeded or failed. Why? Well, what do you think the Chancellor and Minister of Ceremony would do, if a civil war kicked off? The answer: they would rush to hold my coronation as soon as possible in order to take away the rebellion's *casus belli*. Then they would send their armies to deal with the rebel forces, leaving the imperial

capital undermanned.

That was the chance I was waiting for—my chance to purge the nobility and seize real power.

Thus why I'd needed to motivate Duke Warren to start a civil war during our meeting. And it had to be him. In fact, I'd had my eye on him since way back—the very beginning—as my prime rebellion-starting candidate, if I ever needed one. Firstly, there was the degree of military strength at his disposal. The Chancellor and Minister of Ceremony were wary of Duke Warren's army; if the latter started a rebellion, the former two would be forced to meet it with all of their strength. Next, there was the geographic factor. The imperial capital, Cardinal, was basically in the exact center of the Bundarte Empire, and the holdings of Duke Warren to the south, Duke Agincarl to the west, and Duke Raul to the east were more or less *equidistant* to it. Not too close, not too far—the Duchy of Warren was at the perfect distance to buy me enough time to make my move. After all, if the capital was occupied before I could take control, I could very well end up the puppet of the occupier.

That was why my meeting with Duke Warren had been vital. No matter what, I needed him to marshal his forces.

At first I'd been worried I'd failed when I saw him back down so easily...but Count Palatine Vodedt's signal suggested the opposite had been true. The duke had backed down in order to ensure his rebellion was successful—to ensure the Chancellor and other nobility didn't perceive his newfound resolve.

For a seasoned general like Duke Warren, such a simple ploy must have been child's play.

I returned to the capital, and the new year passed without so much as a whisper of unrest. The Chancellor and Minister of Ceremony most certainly still had Duke Warren on their radar, but it appeared their guards were down since Nadine remained in the capital as a potential hostage.

But I knew the truth. I could tell Nadine was more restless than usual.

Without a doubt, Duke Warren would make his move.

Only a little longer, and history would be set in motion.

Third Era: The Imperial Civil War

The Civil War Begins

"Duke Warren has marshaled an army."

When this news reached the imperial court in the fifth month of 468 NC, it came to the surprise of few. Duke Warren and the Chancellor had been at odds since the era of the previous emperor, during which they had belonged to the crown prince's faction and the emperor's faction respectively. Then there was the Minister of Ceremony, who had been in the crown prince's faction with Duke Warren—the former oversaw political affairs while the latter oversaw those of the military—but had famously got along with him like oil and water.

Thus, most of the nobility had been of the opinion that Duke Warren could revolt at any moment. In fact, some even expressed their surprise that it had taken him this long.

Regarding *casus belli*, the statement Duke Warren had communicated to nobility throughout the Empire was exactly as I'd predicted: He wished to strike down the Chancellor and Minister of Ceremony, who had seized control of the imperial government, and free His Majesty the Emperor from their clutches, pointing to the delay of my coronation as proof.

Upon receiving this statement, the Chancellor and Minister shelved their dispute for the time being and hurriedly agreed to hold a coronation. The only question that remained was the crux of why they'd put the coronation off for so long in the first place: Who would crown me?

I'll skip to the conclusion and inform you that they simply decided to *both* crown me at the same time.

Man, if that was an option, why hadn't they just done that to begin with? Was it simply human nature to procrastinate until a deadline loomed?

In this case, maybe it *was* just simple procrastination. After all,

the dukes didn't seem particularly stressed out.

Indeed. The imperial court only became a buzzing beehive three days later, when it was reported that Duke Warren's army had passed through the Marquessate of Dozran *entirely unscathed*.

The Marquessate of Dozran was another southern region of the Empire, and it adjoined the Duchy of Warren to the north. Its lord was Aloir le Van-Dozran, the Marquess Dozran, and as you could tell from the "Van" in his name, he came from imperial stock.

Specifically, he was descended from a man named René, the fifth son of Charles I, the third emperor. René's eldest son, also named Charles, was adopted by Edward II, the fourth emperor—who had no male offspring—and went on to inherit the throne, becoming Charles II, the fifth emperor. Continuing down the line, Charles II went on to father Edward III, also known as Edward the Foolish, the sixth emperor, as well as the current Duke Agincarl, which made him my great-grandfather.

Thus, as far as the systems of the Bundarte Empire were concerned, the margravial house of Dozran had a prestigious pedigree. However, as we all knew, lineage did not necessarily equate to a proportionate degree of actual power.

Presently, the holdings of Aloir le Van-Dozran, the Marquess Dozran, had deteriorated to the scale of a count's. This was because a part of it had been given to the neighboring Kingdom of Apraada during the peace negotiations following the Third Apperaas War—the war during which my father, Crown Prince Jean, was assassinated.

Marquess Dozran, seeking the reclamation of his land, had then cozied up to the Chancellor's faction, hoping to put his eggs in the basket of Duke Raul's army, the largest in the Empire. And by "cozied up," I meant "paid his way in with bribes."

In spite of this, Marquess Dozran was unable to join the faction. You see, his eldest son, Manvel le Van-Dozran, was an ambitious lad who had the idea in his head that the sooner he kicked his father off the head chair, the sooner he'd inherit the title. The Minister of Ceremony took advantage of his ambition, intervening to give Manvel his support and allowing Manvel to seize hold of a part of Marquess Dozran's power. As a result, the father and son found

themselves split across factions, condemning them to being deemed as effectively "neutral" in the eyes of everyone else.

Incidentally, Marquess Dozran had no idea that the cession of his land to Apraada had been a scheme by Duke Raul, who'd considered the pedigree of the marquess's lineage to be a threat. From a bystander's perspective, he was a man to be pitied. Well, he *had* been.

As you'd probably assumed, the family quarrel between Marquess Dozran and his son had been leveraged by the factions in the imperial capital into a proxy battleground. However, since the Chancellor and Minister of Ceremony had agreed to a temporary ceasefire and collaboration in order to put down Duke Warren's rebellion, the dispute in the Marquessate of Dozran had come to a temporary halt as well. It seemed the marquess and his son had been ordered to work together to confront Duke Warren's army. However...

"Impossible. We ordered them to buy us time!"

"Did no fighting take place at all?"

"Duke Warren's forces are advancing too fast! Our conscription effort won't make it in time!"

After waking from my midday nap, I'd been dragged out of my quarters by the Chancellor and the gang and plopped on the throne. Currently, I was watching a pack of the nobility endlessly mill about in obvious panic. I wished I had some popcorn.

As it happened, I knew the reason behind the recent developments thanks to the Count Palatine's reports. Marquess Dozran's second son, Anselm le Van-Dozran, had maneuvered his way into command of his house's army after he'd caused his father and brother to fall out. Then he'd put them to the sword and granted Duke Warren's army free passage.

I didn't precisely know if Anselm's actions had been engineered by Duke Warren or his own independent plot, but I suspected it was the latter, since he hadn't merged his forces with the duke's. If he'd had a preexisting connection to Duke Warren, it stood to reason that he would have joined his cause.

"Calm yourselves! *Calm* yourselves, I say!"

The Chancellor was screaming his head off. Poor widdle guy.

If you ask me, it was his—and the Minister of Ceremony's—own fault for acting so late. They should've put pedal to the metal as soon as Duke Warren mustered his forces. Instead, they'd faffed about because they'd underestimated him.

Not that I was complaining. The more the nobility panicked, the easier it was for me to act unnoticed.

"Fortunately, the good Count Palatine Vodedt caught wind of Duke Warren's suspicious movements and has managed to apprehend his daughter, Nadine," the Minister of Ceremony declared. "The duke's character is known to all of us—we will be able to buy as much time as we need as he negotiates for her. In the meantime, we'll muster our forces. Begin by contracting whatever mercenaries are at hand."

The mood among the nobility turned notably cheerful at the Minister of Ceremony's words. Oh, and the Chancellor looked miffed. Probably because he'd wanted the glory of making the announcement.

Me? I was just staring into space, like I had been doing the whole time. I mean, why had they even needed me here?

"Our general, Count Chamneau, is already en route to the imperial capital with his army! Under his command, even Duke Warren is sure to meet with defeat!"

And the Chancellor counters by name-dropping Count Chamneau! The nobility go wild! Is that a cramp I see in the Minister of Ceremony's face?!

Hey, I thought, *this is more fun than I expected, huh?*

On the topic of Count Chamneau, though, I hadn't realized that Vera-Sylvie's father had been given military command. The Count Palatine had been in contact with him for some time, preparing him to side with me, so...

I glanced in Count Palatine Vodedt's direction. He gave no reaction other than a silent smile.

Ah, I got the picture. He'd played the Chancellor like a fiddle. But with the other job I'd directed him to do, when in the world had he managed that?

* * *

Rewinding to a week ago...

The Count Palatine had arrived to give me a report. Incidentally, Timona and Salomon de Barbetorte were also present.

"Your Majesty, it appears Duke Warren is marshaling an army."

"'Appears,' meaning it has yet to happen?"

"Correct. But at this point, it is a certainty."

Hmm. It seemed the Count Palatine could track Duke Warren's movements quite closely. "Very well," I said. "Keep Nadine under constant surveillance. If she acts the slightest bit unusually, imprison her."

"Oh? Are you quite sure?"

"Yes. We'd like her to act as our messenger to Duke Warren. She'd be rather suitable, no?"

"Hmm. Indeed."

Duke Warren didn't know that I wasn't a mere puppet, so even if I took control of the imperial capital, chances were high he wouldn't believe me—if the news even managed to reach him. I couldn't have that happen. Considering my future plans, I had to absorb Duke Warren's forces in as unscathed a state as possible.

"Take every measure to ensure she doesn't commit suicide," I ordered. "In fact...send an agent to her early on—a woman, if possible—and have her claim to be one of Duke Warren's people. Then have her periodically feed Nadine information under the pretense of waiting for the right chance to break her out."

Despair killed people. But from another perspective, that meant people could always live on as long as they had hope.

"Your wish is my command. I must say, though...Your Majesty is quite thorough."

"Do you find it strange?"

"No. You have my admiration."

"Mmm. Thanks, we suppose." Well, I'd fully admit that I was getting into this. I was one step away from getting the payoff for a decade and change's worth of patience. Could anyone remain calm in my place? "Instruct Fabio to rally his forces just before Duke

Warren enters his holdings. If successful, he's to advance toward the imperial capital on a different route."

"Understood."

Worst case, there was a chance we'd need the Ramitead forces to storm the capital. Then there was... "How many decent people are in the imperial guard?" I asked. "We'd like them on our side. Timona, can you handle the selection and groundwork?"

"Leave it to me, Your Majesty," Timona replied. His voice was noticeably deeper, having broken earlier than mine. Incidentally, when it came to swordsmanship, I could no longer hope to even touch him. Wait, no, that had always been the case.

"And what does Your Majesty wish of me?" Salomon asked, just as I'd planned on wrapping things up.

"Are you certain you should be taking our orders?" I asked. He was a marquess of the Kingdom of Belvére, and what I would be conducting was unmistakably a coup d'état.

"It is Her Highness Rosaria's wish," he explained. "But above all, I believe that my involvement at this stage would better secure peace for my Kingdom."

So it didn't matter if he was acting without authority as long as the end result was good, huh? What a refreshing man to deal with.

"We have an idea...but the coronation will doubtlessly take place under mana-sealing wards," I mused aloud. To be fair, I was planning to use that exact factor to my own advantage. Since I could still perform magic under the wards, I would have an overwhelming upper hand. "What does Rosaria plan to do?"

"Her Highness plans to make a temporary return to the Kingdom. Officially, her stated purpose is to persuade His Majesty the King to send reinforcements for the civil war brewing in the Empire."

Hmm. But I hadn't asked her to do anything yet. Still, if she could rustle up an additional army, it would be a genuine lifesaver.

"Shouldn't you go with her?" I asked.

"Her Highness is concerned for Your Majesty's well-being during her absence, so I will be remaining here with my subordinates."

Well...I supposed that was fine. I'd just think of Salomon and his people as a reserve unit. The most important thing was that Rosaria

would be away from the danger in the capital—which also had the added benefit of making it easier for me to act more boldly.

"Ready yourself and your subordinates to leap into action at any moment."

There was little time left. I had to use what I had to prepare as much as I possibly could...

The Elevator

Three days after Duke Warren's army passed unscathed through the Marquessate of Dozran, it advanced into the Marquessate of Emersache, a territory under direct control of the emperor. During this period, chaos descended upon the imperial capital. Rumors of the rebel army's approach began to spread, causing some of the citizenry to flee the city.

Additionally, the influx of a large number of mercenaries tanked public safety in no time flat. In order to supplement the army's lacking ration stores, many businesses found their goods forcibly levied—under the orders of the Chancellor and Minister of Ceremony, of course.

Naturally, the people's opinion of the dukes worsened. As for me, I wanted to thank them for diving headfirst into the bad guy role without me even having to ask.

Incidentally, the army's lack of provisions was thanks to the fact that the Gotiroir had made mass food purchases, even going into debt to do so. More specifically, compared to Duke Warren, who had stocked up slowly and steadily to avoid detection, the Gotiroir had purchased extreme amounts all in a short time frame—almost as if to *declare* that they were preparing for war. It had resulted in an excellent bluff to cover Duke Warren's tracks, keeping the imperial nobility in the dark until the rebellion was already underway.

What was more, the Chancellor, who had misread the Gotiroir people's act as a sign of *their* rebellion, had been forced to keep the majority of his forces in his holdings...which wasn't necessarily a mistake on his part, to be fair.

For the record, I hadn't directed the Gotiroir to do anything. I was impressed; they were once again proving their capabilities.

As for the Atúr, I'd heard they had joined the other mercenaries being gathered in the capital at the Chancellor's behest. The guy had

no idea. But hey, if he was going to deliver a reliable fighting force to my doorstep like that, I certainly wasn't going to say no.

* * *

As the coronation approached, the chaos spreading through the city infected the imperial demesne. Part of that was because the big ceremony would be happening so soon, but chiefly you could chalk it up to how the state apparatus had ground to a halt.

Now, the imperial government hadn't exactly been chugging along smoothly until this point, given the conflict between the Chancellor's faction and the regency, but there *had* been a certain level of compartmentalization that had allowed it to function. After all, they were so fixated with what their opponents could and couldn't do that the division of roles became second nature.

However, now that the Chancellor and Minister of Ceremony had called a ceasefire to the conflict, this clear-cut division of roles had abruptly fallen into shambles. Either multiple people tried to solve singular problems, or problems popped up that nobody took on at all, leaving everything in a total state of disorder.

Amid it all, I left the imperial demesne, headed for the church on Founder's Hill.

It was my understanding that this church was where the ceremonial sword necessary for the coronation was kept. Apparently, Cardinal, the Emperor Paterfamilias, had stated in his will that only the person who would become emperor could touch it. Thus why I had come, accompanied by Count Palatine Vodedt.

I imagined that the faction nobility—Chancellor and Minister of Ceremony included—would ordinarily have accompanied me too, but it seemed they were so harried for time and resources that even the short trip to retrieve the sword was beyond them.

I felt a sense of nostalgia as I stepped into the church, having not come here since the Founding Day jubilee, and saw there was an elderly man inside. His attire marked him as a member of the clergy—and quite a high-ranking one too, if his bombastic hat was anything to go by.

“It is an honor to meet you, Your Majesty.” The old man bowed deeply. “Allow me to congratulate you on your victory at the hill.”

Ah. I’d been wondering when he was going to make contact. So the time had come, huh?

“You must be the mentor that Deflotte le Moissan spoke of.”

The man who’d manipulated both me and my enemies to add allies to my side. The man who’d had us all dancing in the palm of his hand. It went without saying that he was dangerous, but I had him to thank for my meeting with the Gotiroir and Atúr chieftains.

“My name is Daniel de Piers. Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

Count Palatine Vodedt, who was positioned behind me, provided a more detailed introduction. “He is a prelate officium of the Western Orthodoxy. Outwardly, his allegiance lies with the regency.”

“A prelate officium?” I repeated.

“I am one of the three individuals below the Archprelate in the Western Orthodoxy’s hierarchy. My duties mainly consist of overseeing the management of ecclesiastic facilities and institutions.”

As Daniel de Piers explained, he took an angled half step back to reveal a doorway behind him—a hidden doorway, given that I hadn’t seen it during my previous visit.

“I see. So the safekeeping of the Ceremonial Sword is one of your official duties?”

“Indeed. Follow me, if you please. I shall show you the way.”

I let him take the lead and followed after him. Count Palatine Vodedt, however, stopped before the hidden door.

“Your Majesty, I cannot accompany you any further.”

“Is that so?” It was some sort of custom, I presumed.

“Yes. So I shall leave you with one piece of advice.” The Count Palatine paused to think for several moments before continuing. “Whatever Your Majesty’s judgment, our only duty is to be loyal. Even if, for example, Your Majesty’s desire were to conquer the world, we would follow you. Please do not forget that you are under no obligation to heed that man’s words.”

That was a lot to take in. While I didn’t have a clear grasp of what I was about to walk into, it was obviously going to be far from ordinary.

"Very well. I'll take that to heart."

"My gratitude, Your Majesty. I shall remain here, on guard."

I nodded, then passed through the hidden doorway.

* * *

Immediately past the doorway was a spiral staircase, at the bottom of which was another door. It opened into a small room, where yet another door awaited us.

Something felt...off.

"The Imperial Sword is ordinarily stored beyond this doorway." As he spoke, Daniel de Piers *held something up* to the doorway. "However, in order to reveal to Your Majesty the truth, we will be going to the original storage area."

As he finished his sentence, the floor shook slightly. No...wait. Was the room *descending*?

"An...elevator?"

"Of sorts. Though it is far *slower* than the real thing." Daniel de Piers smiled. "It will take some time before we reach our destination. Mana lacks the instantaneous output of electricity, you see."

I'd long since suspected that he knew I was a transmigrator, and he was proving my suspicion correct. Did that mean...?

"Are you a transmigrator too?"

He gently shook his head. "No. I am merely aware of them."

If you ask me, he seemed a lot more than just "aware."

"In the First Faith, Ein is called the Illuminatus, but this is a title others used to address him, out of respect. He never once named himself such, chiefly choosing from two other appellations instead."

"So we're talking holy scripture all of a sudden?"

Deflotte had given me a book he'd claimed was his translation of the original holy scripture—the text that contained Ein's words and the First Faith's doctrine. The contents had been fascinating, and as one who would be administrator of this nation, I considered it necessary for me to memorize it, at least to a certain degree.

"God's First Follower and Aychi's Messenger," I provided. "He mainly went by the former, though he gave his name as the latter as

well, especially when relaying certain teachings he described as the 'Teachings of Aychi.'"

That was where Ein's other commonly used title, the "Messenger," had come from.

"I'm pleased to see you've read it," Daniel de Piers said. "Opinion on the nature of this 'Aychi' is divided, with interpretations differing across First Faith denominations. For example, the Imperial Faith believes Aychi to be a messenger of God, while our Western Orthodoxy believes that Aychi is God's name—and thus *is* God. However...I believe the term 'Aychi' might hold a different meaning for Your Majesty."

I hadn't had much interest in Ein's aliases, so I hadn't lingered long on the topic, but if there was something more to it... Oh.

Aychi. In this world, it sounded like nothing more than another random proper noun. But to me—to someone who'd come from another world—it held a different meaning.

"*Eichi,*" I murmured.

The word for *wisdom* in my home's language. Ein's teachings were the wisdom of humanity—not the humanity of this world, but another's. In other words, the founder of the First Faith...

"He was from my world."

"Yes. And we who know the truth call ourselves 'Ein's Storytellers.'"

* * *

Now that I knew the truth, I realized that there had been a lot of evidence in plain sight. The tale of the horizon, in which Ein explained why the world was a globe. The custom of eating three square meals a day. This whole time, I had thought it was all nothing but quirks of this world's religion, similar to religions of my past world yet ever so slightly different.

But the truth was, it was all common sense from Earth, molded into the shape of religious teachings. I'd had all the clues, yet I hadn't realized. Of course, Earth had been far from a monolith. Diverse ways of thinking had abounded, such as certain cultures

eating two or five meals a day instead of three. If that was the number Ein had picked, did that mean he'd been Japanese as well?

Leaving that aside, though...

"Does that mean God doesn't exist?" I asked. If there was a list of remarks that would get me burned at the stake if I said them to a clergyman, that had to be pretty up there. And here I was, doing just that.

"No. Ein came to this world at the behest of God, who wished for him to spread the more developed knowledge of his world throughout this one."

"Is that the truth, or another interpretation?" Well, even if he did claim it was the truth, I wouldn't necessarily have to believe it.

"To us, it is the truth. But as we cannot provide hard evidence, you may see it as an interpretation, if you wish."

That was fair enough. I was glad he was open-minded enough of an adherent to see it that way.

"Tell me about 'Ein's Storytellers,' then," I asked. Why did the cadence of that name sound familiar? Oh! Because it had the same sort of ring to it as the "Rotahl legacy's protectors."

"If I were to express it in a brief few words...perhaps I would call us believers of those who have transmigrated."

"Not believers of the First Faith?"

"We follow only the words of Ein. That was the nature of our contract with him, you see."

Hmm. I definitely had to get to the bottom of this.

"Our ideology consists of but a single notion," Daniel de Piers continued. "Since those from your more developed world know of the mistakes and failures of your world's history, would that not make them suitable to guide our world into a better future?"

He wasn't wrong. Ethnic conflicts, environmental issues, religious issues—centuries, millennia worth of history. I—and those like me—knew about the future that would come for this world. We knew what would be deemed mistaken, and what would be deemed righteous.

It was the ardent wish of all humanity to long for a better world. Even if differing ideas on how to get there sparked conflict, even if

there were those who chose mistaken methods, at our core, what we wanted was the same.

Ein's Storytellers had chosen to build their methods on what the transmigrators brought with them. Because, in a sense, we already knew the answers to the test. Of course, even if one knew the answers, it was so very human to repeat the same mistakes regardless.

"But...isn't that a clear departure from Ein's ideology?" I asked. "He advocated for having faith in God, didn't he?"

"Yes. Though we believe in God's existence, we are heretics who have chosen to give precedence to transmigrators. However, Ein *did* confer upon us his approval, provided we abided by the three conditions he wished us to keep to after his death. One such condition was to relay the teachings of the First Faith unaltered. There are, of course, certain denominations that are more easily accepted by the people, and occasionally statesmen will interpret the teachings to their convenience...but such matters are beyond our responsibility."

"That's terribly ironic. You lack faith the most, yet you're the most loyal to the teachings." *Oops.* I'd gone ahead and said what I was thinking out loud.

"Can you blame us? Power corrupts people's hearts. It was why Ein could not trust his fellow believers even while he was still alive."

That...sounded like it had a pretty bloody story behind it.

"Thus the contract?" I asked.

"Yes. Evidence that we were no exception." Daniel de Piers chuckled. "As for the second of his dying wishes..."

The old, crafty clergyman's eyes were intent as they studied me, and the words he spoke felt like a physical blow.

"He wished for the existence of his child to be kept secret for two centuries, then revealed only to those who most needed to know after those two centuries had passed."

Ein’s Storytellers

After hearing Daniel de Piers’ words, I was fairly certain I mentally whited out for several seconds.

The First Faith taught that Ein had remained celibate his entire life. His lack of offspring had been why his followers had taken it upon themselves to inherit his teachings, even if their differing interpretations had then led to fracture.

“Impossible.”

If that was the truth, it was enough of a bombshell to turn the entirety of the First Faith upon its head.

Oh. That must’ve been why Ein had kept it a secret. Wishing to avoid his offspring being used, he had arranged for a two-century grace period—enough time for the various First Faith denominations to solidify their roles in society. Even if the truth came out now, it would simply be treated as baseless poppycock, a tiny ripple on a lake’s surface.

So then, why had Daniel de Piers revealed it to me? It clearly meant I qualified to be among the very few in the know. But was that because I was the emperor? Or for a more intrinsic reason?

I was a transmigrator. Ein’s Storytellers wanted to entrust the world to transmigrators. Only Ein’s Storytellers knew about Ein’s offspring. Wait. *Ein.* Didn’t that mean “one”?

“Daniel de Piers.”

“Daniel is fine, Your Majesty. Yes?”

“What was the name of Ein’s child?”

“But of course, it was ‘Zwei.’”

Zwei. *Two.* The pieces all fell into place.

“So that’s why Ein entrusted his child to you. The Storytellers consider transmigrators to be this world’s future. He knew you’d spare no effort to protect his offspring.” In other words... “His child was a transmigrator too.”

"Correct. And thus, we devised a hypothesis: Ein's bloodline was susceptible to transmigration. Naturally, this was not true of all of his descendants. But we believed that safeguarding those of his bloodline was our likeliest path to seeing the birth of more transmigrators. And it seems time has proven us correct."

So transmigrators were born among Ein's descendants, huh? "Does that mean I'm of his bloodline?" It suggested the man in butler's garb was too, on top of his connection to Ein's Storytellers.

"Even we did not expect his bloodline to intersect with the imperial family's so soon. Nor for the very first child born into the line for the throne to be a transmigrator."

"So you're saying...the connection's from my maternal grandmother?"

"Yes. Lady Maria, the late wife of the current Duke Agincarl, was one of Ein's descendants."

It was just one whammy after another with this guy. *Come on, man. You can't spring this on me when I'm just about to attempt a coup d'état.*

Silently, Daniel knelt and bowed his head. "Your Majesty. You are a transmigrator. Thus, we, Ein's Storytellers, pledge to you our undying loyalty. We need neither merit nor laurels to mark our service. Yet, should you deign to honor us, we have but two desires for which we would beg your consideration."

Two? I had a good guess at what one might be, but...well, it couldn't hurt to hear him out. "Speak them."

"Yes, Your Majesty. In the aftermath of the oncoming civil war, please grant clemency to Ein's descendants. As many as you are able."

Saw that one coming. The Storytellers wanted the birth rate of transmigrators to be as high as possible. "So you wish for me to spare Duke Agincarl's relatives?"

"Not all of them. We understand that it would be unreasonable for Your Majesty to turn a blind eye to some, given their acts. But we humbly request that Your Majesty reconsiders the fate of those who surrender themselves to you of their own volition."

Truth be told, I wanted my purge to be as thorough as possible.

But if easing off a little guaranteed me Daniel as an ally, I didn't mind making that trade.

"Very well, but they'll be your responsibility," I warned. "I'll make no guarantees about their future if they agitate the hornets' nest again."

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

"Are they really worth going to such lengths to protect? We transmigrators might have a degree of future insight, true. But there's nothing stopping us from using it for evil ends." There was no doubt in my mind that there were others who would use their otherworldly knowledge for personal gain.

"We are aware that such a danger exists. It is why our role is to be both guardians and watchers."

That was another way of saying the Storytellers had eyes on me too. *Join the club, guys. You're hardly the first.*

"Nevertheless, I personally believe that *stagnation* is the most undesirable outcome," Daniel continued. "So long as the transmigrator induces change, I am willing to overlook a certain degree of wrongdoing. After all, it is the mire of stagnation that is proving to be the ruin of my people."

"Your 'people'"?

Daniel removed his headwear, revealing a pair of long, tapered ears.

"Elves?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

The elves of this world were actually strikingly similar to the fictional race from Earth. It was my first time seeing one, but knowledge of them and their unique characteristics was common knowledge among the general populace.

Among the many boring sermons delivered by the Western Orthodox clergy, stories of elves and dwarves cropped up frequently. The former were spoken of as a wise, long-lived, and beautiful people who had extended a helping hand to Ein and his followers during their time of persecution upon the Central Continent, while the latter were described as a barbaric race, short of temper and stature, who had actively engaged in the persecution.

"Come to think of it, there was no mention of either in Deflotte's translated scripture," I noted.

"Ein was indeed persecuted by the dwarves," Daniel explained. "But he believed that expressly praising or criticizing a race of people would one day give birth to deep-rooted discrimination, and thus strictly forbade his followers from recording them in scripture. However...the victims of the dwarves were not few. Their accounts still remain in the records of the First Faith today, regardless of denomination."

You know, up until now, Ein had been nothing more than a silhouette of a person in my head—just "the guy who founded the First Faith." This was the first time I'd heard something about him that made me respect him as an individual. Maybe part of that was because I knew he was my ancestor now, but as a fellow transmigrator, I could honestly say that I had a big pair of shoes to fill.

That aside, I was fairly certain that no elves or dwarves resided on the Eastern Continent. "So when you say your people lent him a helping hand, I assume you don't mean on the Central Continent. Did you accompany him and his followers here? Given your lifespan..."

"I'm afraid to say that my people are not quite as long-lived as Your Majesty may believe. It was my father who established Ein's Storytellers, not I."

Hmm. And here I'd thought for sure Daniel had met Ein in person.

The room continued its slow descent. It seemed I still had time for questions. "So you thought there was a chance I was a transmigrator," I said. "And brought me into contact with another during my first tour to confirm it. But why wait until then? And why the prolonged period of no contact afterward?"

"I believe Your Majesty may already know the answer. It was a work of many years to successfully infiltrate the Western Orthodoxy—work that would have gone to utter waste if we had invoked the hostility of the guardians of Rotahl's legacy."

My thoughts flashed back to the Count Palatine, waiting upstairs.

So he'd been the roadblock, huh?

Ein's Storytellers valued my safety as a transmigrator first, emperor second. Given I'd lived my entire childhood under the specter of assassination, secreting me away to another country had been a totally valid choice available to them. In fact, if they'd made me the offer before I'd resolved to become emperor, I would've had my proverbial bags packed in a heartbeat.

However, this would have been an unforgivable act in the eyes of the Count Palatine, who valued me as the emperor and inheritor of the Rotahlian legacy. No wonder it had taken him until the eve of my coup d'état to permit Daniel to contact me. We had come far enough that turning heel was no longer an option.

Now that I was thinking about it, I was beginning to suspect the Count Palatine hadn't held back at all when it came to obstructing this whole affair. That certainly explained why Daniel had needed to leverage a Garfurian invasion to contact me, as well as why the Count Palatine had accompanied me on every subsequent tour. Plus, that didn't even begin to touch on the mess that was Deflotte, who despite being Count Palatine Vodedt's son, clearly considered Daniel to be a father figure.

"I'm guessing things have been rather rocky between you," I remarked. No matter how you looked at it, they had to have clashed something fierce over me.

"Fear not, Your Majesty. There have been no...*fatalities*, to date. And now that we are both in your service, I am sure we are both reasonable enough to let bygones be bygones." The old elf smiled.

My guy, that doesn't work if it doesn't reach your eyes. "So be it, then," I said. "We believe we understand your organization's motivations and goals, now. But tell us: what scale do Ein's Storytellers operate on? How large are you?"

"Purely in terms of numbers, we are but a scant few."

That tracked. Ein's Storytellers were essentially a secret society with an extremely specific and existentially polarizing agenda. They couldn't exactly run recruitment drives in your local parish.

"Then what degree of control have you personally seized over the Western Orthodoxy?"

"At a conservative estimate, seventy percent."

Okay, so I knew the Archprelate was more concerned with material gain than matters of the spirit, but *seventy* percent? What the *hell* was he *doing*?

"Archprelate Georg V has centralized the church's wealth under his sole ownership," Daniel explained. "Naturally, there are many who object. It has made my work rather straightforward."

"You don't say." I paused. "Frankly, we had gone so far as to consider subjugating the church with military force, if necessary, but it seems you have the matter well in hand."

As you might expect, I was about as enthusiastic about making an enemy of the church as your average person is about catching the plague. Religion was touchy like that. Turning everyone I ever met into a dice roll to see if they'd be a mortal enemy simply because of their spiritual convictions sounded like a nightmare—one that could remain comfortably in the realm of dreams, please and thank you.

"If anything, I would like to request that Your Majesty be thorough when subjugating the nobility and military," Daniel said. "As the church has no force of arms of its own, any individual lord could put their boot to our neck with their personal soldiers."

"We had never intended to do otherwise."

If I didn't have to worry about bringing the church into line, that freed up resources I could use elsewhere. But I could leave the brainstorming for later. The room had finally come to a stop.

"Seems we've arrived."

"Yes, Your Majesty. You have my deepest apologies for the wait. We are deep below the imperial capital, Cardinal. Now, Your Majesty will bear witness to the secret of the Empire."

The doors made a sound, then slowly began to open.

The Secret Beneath the Imperial Capital

The first sensation that greeted me was a lukewarm breeze. I took a step beyond the doors into a dimly lit chamber. Despite the gloom, there were more lights than I could count, ranging in color from red to green to violet.

"What is this place?"

The chamber was so overwhelmingly spacious that I found it hard to believe we were underground. I could barely even make out the ceiling. But that wasn't the surprising part. No, that honor went to the dizzying array of strange geometric constructs, as diverse in color as they were in size.

"Are those...magic circles?"

"Yes. I believe they all hold significance, but I'm afraid I only know the function of a fraction."

The luminescent magic circles—endlessly varied in size and pattern—crept up the walls like ivy, festooned the ceiling like stars, and hung in the empty air in thick flocks. The sight of them alone told me this facility had to have belonged to an advanced civilization indeed. Yet, as if to contradict that notion, I also saw structures made of mere wood and brick, as well as books that were little more than bound reams of parchment.

If you'd asked me what this place was before I'd reincarnated in this world, I wouldn't have had the slightest clue. But now? After I'd encountered magic?

"How many spells must have been developed here?" I breathed. "More than that—I can't even guess as to their nature."

In contrast to my timidity, Daniel advanced straight ahead. Caught by surprise, I hurriedly followed.

It was *because* I knew magic that the chamber inspired in me

equal parts fear and awe. Whenever I had encountered a spell, I'd always been able to at least broadly categorize it, even if I was ignorant of the core principles behind it. But these magic circles were different. Unfathomable. Alien.

Yet, perhaps not as beyond reach as I'd initially thought. Their organized locations suggested some manner of role division. If I thought of the detailed patterns laid along the ground as code, of sorts, then was the parchment the display? And the wooden structures—they seemed to be acting as storage for something.

It was obvious at a glance that this never could have been anything from Earth. If the civilizations of my old world had built their foundations on science, then this was the product of a civilization built on magic.

"What is this? All of this?"

"To put it simply, these are the remnants of an ancient civilization."

Lost technology. Products of advanced civilizations that had been lost to time. Earth had possessed its fair share of such stories, but I'd never considered them to be anything more than fantastical exaggerations of history. Yet here I was.

"Why is something like this under the imperial capital?"

"Because the Empire was ambitious, as is its wont. It sought to take this lost technology for itself and bring the world to heel."

That made sense. It was certainly an ambition befitting an emperor. But, wait...

"Empire? Do you mean to say..."

"Until I succeeded the role, the guardians of Rotahl's legacy were the custodians of this place."

What? So the Rotahl Empire knew about this place? "But no city existed here before Emperor Cardinal."

"Indeed. The Rotahl Empire valued this underground facility, but they also had a certain reverence for—and fear of—the enigma it represented. That Emperor Cardinal erected a city atop it is a testament to his daring."

Ah. That explained "Founder's Hill." So Emperor Cardinal's desire for this technology had motivated him to designate this place as his

Empire's capital.

"If one could make the treasure of the ancients theirs, the world would be in the palm of their hand. Of that, I have no doubt. Yet, to date, no one has proven able to uncover its secrets." Daniel came to a sudden stop. "In the end, they were only able to utilize a fraction of this facility's *original* capabilities."

A number of swords hung suspended in the air before him, affixed into place by magic circles.

"Swords?" I questioned.

"This facility's original purpose," Daniel confirmed. "The production of artificial sacred swords."

Sacred swords. On Earth, they had been the weapons of myth and legend, capable of astounding supernatural feats. In other words, weapons of fiction. But magic was squarely in the realm of the real in this world. Fiction was fiction no longer.

"So sacred swords truly exist?"

"As they were a product of the times before the Tabula Rasa War, hardly any remain."

The what now? Oh, boy. "Wait. Slow down. Explain it in order."

"But of course, Your Majesty. We wouldn't be able to reach the main topic at hand otherwise."

* * *

"Long ago, the world was inhabited by many different races, and their civilizations' grasp of magic far outstripped what our own can achieve today. But a war came to pass that jeopardized the survival of entire peoples. In the folklore of the elves, we call it the Tabula Rasa War."

"The Tabula Rasa War?"

—The earth sank, the seas broke, the skies fractured. So it is known.

—For centuries afterward, the continents moved as if stirred to waking. So it is known.

—No greater calamity has mortal hand ever wrought. No stranger would it have been if the stars themselves had fallen. So it is known.

"Across all races, populations were cut down to a fifth. Some died out entirely. It was a fool's war. One with no victors, that brought the planet to the brink of destruction. A war that reduced the civilizations that had come before to a blank slate."

"And this facility is from that era?"

"Yes. It was a munitions factory, for the express purpose of mass-producing instruments of genocide—these very blades."

It was a difficult story to believe. I almost wanted to dismiss it as pure fantasy.

"But that is a story of the past. Not particularly relevant to those of us in the present." The old elf pointed at a particular sword. "The topic at hand is thus: Emperor Cardinal selected one sacred sword to serve as the Ceremonial Sword."

The blade was frightening. Sinister. What it lacked in ornamentation it made up for with an aura of bloodlust and madness. The sheer volume of mana it contained beggared belief, yet its austere form made the name "Ceremonial Sword" seem unfitting.

It was a weapon in the purest sense of the word. I broke out into a cold sweat that refused to cease, and I was only *looking* at it.

"It's...rather difficult to observe. Nausea inducing."

"All those versed in spellcraft would feel the same. But Emperor Cardinal understood not its terror. He only had eyes for what it could do." Daniel shuddered slightly, then invoked a name. "*Vastat*, the artificial sacred sword. It possesses the ability to force unconditional obedience from those around its wielder."

Excuse me, but *what*? That wasn't in the realm of magic anymore. It sounded more like an honest-to-goodness *curse*.

"When Emperor Cardinal chose this to be the Ceremonial Sword, he issued a twofold edict. First, it was to remain forever untouched, with the only exception being during the coronation. Second, only the emperor was permitted to lay hands upon it."

According to the coronation etiquette of the Bundarte Empire, only the emperor was permitted to wear a blade. After being crowned, he would unsheathe the Ceremonial Sword and declare his ascension to the throne. In other words, this sword's power forced

recognition of the emperor's enthronement.

"Emperor Cardinal must have wished to stabilize the process of succession, which is so oft fraught with conflict," Daniel provided. "Peerless warrior and capable statesman he may have been, but it seems even he suffered from the flaw that is so common in those with a crown."

I considered that for a second. "He had faith in his descendants."

"Indeed."

The first emperor had established the rule, believing his descendants would adhere to it. A doomed endeavor. Humans were fools and would be until time itself ended.

"We had always wondered," I said. "Edward III. The man who ruined the Empire with his idiocy. He remained on the throne through his final days before perishing from disease. Why did nobody assassinate him? Why was his tyranny permitted for so long? How is it that none proved able to stop him? We suppose we have our answer, now."

"Yes. The Ceremonial Sword never left his side."

In short, Edward III, the sixth emperor, had taken the blade that Emperor Cardinal had bequeathed to his successors as a form of assistance and used it to indulge in wanton despotism, reducing the Empire to the state it was in today.

"Unable to stop him, the guardians of Rotahl's legacy reached the conclusion that they were no longer able to serve as the blade's custodians. Thus, the role was finally passed to me."

"You speak as if that were your aim all along."

"Yes. It was why I infiltrated the Western Orthodoxy, and is connected to Ein's third and final stipulation."

Judging from the nature of our conversation so far, I doubted he was about to suggest we figure out a way to get the WMD production line pumping.

"This is straying slightly from topic, but is Your Majesty aware of the tale of Ein and the pagan shamans?"

"Yes. It appears in the holy scripture."

In an attempt to undermine a First Faith that was rapidly gaining followers, the pagan shamans had tried to deceive Ein with a false

revelation from God, created by magical means. However, it was recorded in the holy scripture that Ein easily saw through the sham. I hadn't lingered on the tale for long, as I'd written it off as a simple parable, meant to teach followers that the truly faithful would be granted salvation.

"In truth, Ein, who could not utilize spellcraft even in its simplest of forms, had no method for determining whether the shamans' revelation was genuine. No method but one: the name God used for him. A secret Ein did not reveal until he was on his deathbed."

"And...that name is?"

"According to Ein, God's name for him was the 'Meddling Historian.'"

Meddling Historian? Did that imply he had knowledge of the past?

"Ein knew of this world's history, and the events that had led up to his time. Naturally, this includes the Tabula Rasa War. And that is related to the other duty entrusted to him by God, beyond simply spreading the knowledge of his original world."

"Allow us to guess. His duty was to destroy ancient facilities such as this one?"

"Correct. It is why he came to this continent."

So he *hadn't* fled here to escape persecution? It sounded a lot like this had actually been Ein's main objective.

"East of the Heavensreach, the First Faith was adopted with relative ease, and every genocide foundry it uncovered was razed during Ein's lifetime," Daniel explained. "However, west of the Heavensreach, the First Faith had difficulty finding purchase. Thus, Ein entrusted the matter to us as the third of his dying instructions. 'You must destroy every remnant on the continent.'"

To Ein's Storytellers, if the Tabula Rasa War was the result of a world that had taken the "wrong" path, then the path taken by a transmigrator's original world was the "right" one. The dismantling of these ancient facilities lined up perfectly with their objectives.

"So why have you let this place be?" I asked. "Why bring us here?"

"If preventing entry were enough to solve the issue, then my efforts alone would suffice. But dismantling it is a different matter.

The slightest misstep could be ruinous, to not even speak of the time and labor involved. We judged it was impossible to accomplish in total secrecy—all the more so because of its location directly beneath the capital."

He wasn't wrong. Taking all this magic apart without it blowing up in our faces would be a herculean effort.

"Thus, we waited for a sovereign who would understand." For the second time today, the old elf knelt.

Ah. So this is his second request of me.

"We wish for tragedy to never repeat itself. There is no denying the value this facility represents. Were Your Majesty to make this ancient technology your own, unifying the continent would be well within the realm of possibility. But the future beyond that is no future at all. Please, Your Majesty. Renounce this place. If you are willing to grant this desire of ours—"

"No, well, there's simply no other option, right?"

There was a brief pause before Daniel spoke again. "As wrong of me this may be to say, are you certain you should be deciding so swiftly?"

Certain or otherwise, I really just couldn't see an alternative. This place was the equivalent of if aliens showed up on Earth with perpetual motion engines or some other equally advanced technology. If *people* got their hands on it, it'd be a one-way ticket to the end of the world.

"We are not doing so without good reason," I said. "If this facility's magic could be analyzed, some ambitious sovereign would have done so already. The same goes for its sacred sword production capabilities. Yet neither has happened. The conclusion to be drawn is that this place is simply too far beyond modern knowledge. Or are we mistaken?"

"No. Even we of the Storytellers have not been able to operate this facility, despite knowing its function."

Perhaps in a few centuries people could make use of this place. But any civilization that could would also possess the means to build a similar facility from scratch. I wasn't going to concern myself with the hypothetical societies of the future.

No, my concern was the time period *before* the world reached that level of magical understanding. If the existence of this place got out, it could be leveraged by enemies of the Empire, not to mention the likely possibility of some firebrand of a future emperor making a mistake they couldn't take back.

"This 'Vastat' is a testament to that," I explained. "Sure, Edward III might have used it to enforce his tyranny. But he also incited countless rebellions against himself, not to mention the constant losses he suffered in war. The sword might be potent, but it's nothing in the face of a nationwide rebellion, and it even carries the potential to rob one's vassals of their capacity for thought. Could it be used for good? Absolutely not. Nine times out of ten, it would be the root of its own wielder's downfall."

The strategic arms—ICBMs and the like—of my past world had been a similar example. Extremely strict regulations and securities protocols were the bare minimum to even warrant *considering* their use. Above all, though, I had zero faith in my descendants. It was human nature to seek power, even if it meant the destruction of one's own nation.

I mean, it was the sixth emperor's tyranny with the sword that had put me *into* this mess. Why would I even consider treading the same path as that dumbass?

"You'll help us with the dismantling," I said. "Though of course, it will have to wait until after the civil war."

"Thank you, Your Majesty. With this, we can finally fulfill Ein's will."

I could hear tears in Daniel's voice, and it wasn't my imagination. I pretended not to notice.

* * *

For the time being, I decided to keep the facility off-limits and file its dismantling in the back cabinet of my mind to consider another day. At the very least, I'd have to conduct aboveground experiments to discover a method that wouldn't cause its magic to run amok.

"The question is, what do we do about the Ceremonial Sword?"

Assuming we'd be disposing of Vastat, we'd need a replacement, and the nobility weren't blind enough to miss a national artifact looking suspiciously different from the previous coronation's.

"Might I suggest this as a replacement?" Daniel gestured toward another of the swords, though this one was on the ground rather than suspended in midair.

"Isn't that also an artificial sacred sword?"

"We believe this facility to have two main functions. The first is to manufacture blades whose purpose is to become sacred swords, while the second is to saturate said blades with magic over the course of years. In fact, it seems the latter process takes over a century at the very least. Our estimate of Vastat is that it underwent this process for perhaps a millennium or two."

"So you're saying that sword is still incomplete?"

"Yes. Since they were both intended to be weapons, it matches Vastat in appearance. I imagine their creators did not wish their enemies to be able to identify the swords—and thus their unique abilities—by sight alone."

In other words, they had been designed to be generically usable. "From the look of it, though, that sword is magical too."

"It is, but its function is exceedingly simple. It stores mana within itself, which the wielder may release at will. Nothing more. Modern magical technology is capable of the same, so there should be no issue with Your Majesty wielding it."

Hmm. That...kind of sounded like something I'd like to use on the regular. "Would it be in poor taste if we made it our weapon of choice?" Even if it technically was a different sword, it would be turning my back on the first emperor's edict.

"There should be no issue. That man—the guardian of Rotahl's legacy—will not like it, but he will concede to Your Majesty's decision in the end."

"Very well. Then henceforth, it is ours." I picked up the blade. Not even a hint of dread or sinister aura. With this at my side, well... The coronation would go that much more smoothly.

"Shall we return aboveground, Your Majesty?"

"Mmm. We look forward to your continued service."

To be honest, that had been one heavy conversation. I had a lot more on my plate to think about now.

But with this incomplete sacred sword and Ein's Storytellers, I had added two new powers to my arsenal—a significant increase.

Five days remained until the day of the coronation.

Balthazar the Imperial Guard

The next day, I found myself sipping herbal tea brewed for me by Timona as I waited in my quarters for a guest of mine to arrive.

The "Ceremonial Sword" I'd brought back with me yesterday was also in the room, tightly wrapped in a purple cloth. I'd already asked Timona to procure a suitable scabbard, but the weapon's lack of one wasn't the primary reason for its current state. Apparently, the cloth's presence was tradition—one of many rituals carried out in the lead-up to the coronation.

The cloth's ruddy purple hue was also known as Rotahlian purple, and in bygone times had been restricted to the Rotahlian emperor's use alone. A sacrosanct color, to put it succinctly. Though, these days, there were no societal restrictions on its usage, so its reputation was more of a traditional holdover.

My interest was more preoccupied with the magical blade *within* the cloth. It had the ability to constantly absorb mana from its surroundings, which its wielder could release at will. But while that was far from rare—modern magical implements could replicate the exact same effect—as far as I was concerned, this sword was an absolute godsend.

Now, I'm betting that when I say "mage," the first weapon your mind jumps to is a wand, or a staff. From what I'd learned of this world's magic, that was—in theory—the right answer.

The simplest method of casting a spell was to use your internal mana as a medium to affect the ambient mana around you. I imagined this was the most ubiquitous technique employed by this world's spellcasters. However, two things were necessary to perform magic: a mental image of the spell you wanted to cast, and a mental image of yourself channeling the mana. Well, strictly speaking, you could half-ass the latter and still produce the spell. It just wouldn't have much in the way of potency or effect.

Anyway, simultaneously maintaining both of these images was no easy feat, especially in, say, a battlefield situation, where half a dozen other concerns demanded your attention. It was all too easy for a mage's mental wires to get crossed and fizzle out.

In swoops the trusty staff to save the day. A mage could use a staff as a mana-channeling medium, freeing up more brain space to dedicate to crafting their spell. In brief, it was an assistive tool for mental processing. A single unit attempting to render two mental images risked them blending together, but transferring one to a second unit—the staff—meant the processes never had the chance to mix.

To top it off, staves could also be enchanted to make the mana conveyance process easier. Two birds, one stone.

Even for my own casting, I instinctually applied hand motions. I could perform magic standing stock-still if I specifically focused on it, but adding some faint somatic element simply felt natural. My guess was that I was subconsciously using the movements to compartmentalize my thought processes, and judging by how my spells were faster and more accurate when I used my hands, it worked.

However, following that to its logical conclusion suggested that staves did not actually need to be *staves*. After all, if hand motions were a viable substitute, why not sword flourishes?

What was more, the unfinished sacred sword had the ability to store and release mana. At a considerable rate too, if my tests had been anything to go by. Of course, a high mana output rate alone made it no more of a weapon than a water pistol, but that *rate* was exactly what I was looking for, because mana-sealing wards didn't take effect instantaneously. When I'd tested the sword under the wards yesterday, I'd confirmed my hypothesis that it could still output mana. It also proved that the sword stored it internally, rather than as a coating across its surface.

I was also able to use the ejected mana to cast spells. It still stagnated over time, of course, but the rate at which it emitted active mana meant that I had a decently long window in which I could perform magic before the wards' effect kicked in.

Until now, I'd used my internal mana, but now I had the sword as an alternative fuel source. I'd quite literally doubled my combat potential—and that wasn't even going into the make of the blade itself. As you might've expected from the "foundation" of a sacred sword, it held a wickedly sharp edge.

Long story short, having this sword meant that my chances of pulling off my coup d'état at the coronation were high. Custom demanded that only the emperor could be armed during the ceremony, which basically guaranteed the presence of mana-sealing wards to enforce a degree of security. Since I would be the only person with a blade—and by my reckoning also the only person who could ignore the wards—I would be in an overwhelmingly advantageous position to seize control of the room. And once I had every noble present in bindings, the imperial capital was as good as mine.

The only remaining problems were external factors: the imperial guard, and the military force currently being put together to stop Duke Warren. I needed control over both—but all I could do on those fronts was wait for the reports from Timona and the Count Palatine.

"Your Majesty. I've brought the imperial guard matching your conditions."

"Let them in."

Now then, what kind of person was I about to meet?

* * *

The soldiers who safeguarded the imperial demesne were a blunt instrument, to be sure, but I needed to make them *my* blunt instrument.

Due to the poorly thought-out venal policy of Edward III, the sixth emperor, the position of imperial guard became akin to gold leaf—an embellishment nobles and merchants could use to add prestige to their status. The renowned might and earned pride of the role had been quick to fade, and presently, it was simply a who's who of wealthy merchants and noble heirs.

However, the position's deterioration did not mean the imperial demesne needed protectors any less. And for as much as Edward III might have been an irredeemable moron, his obsession with his own self-preservation was even more pronounced. He understood that if the imperial guard couldn't keep him safe, it didn't matter how many artificial sacred swords he carried around—*someone* would succeed eventually.

Thus, while he'd happily sold off spots in the imperial guard at high prices, he'd refrained from doling out the traditional knighthood associated with the role—that of Quare Eques, or Knight of the Imperial Guard. In short, he'd established a system of institutional segregation.

He would eventually go on to sell knighthoods as well, of course, but he never went as far as putting Quare Eques up for grabs.

What's that, you ask? Didn't the legitimate imperial guards of the time protest? Well, they probably did, but he shut them up with a big fat salary raise. I couldn't tell you how they might've felt about it—only what history had recorded. During the period when Edward III had raised their salary, the Knights of the Imperial Guard had not resisted his rule.

Incidentally, the Quare Eques pay rate remained high to this day, and the Chancellor and Minister of Ceremony had in fact raised the salaries of the rest of the imperial guard to match.

Truth be told, this was an issue for me. From a fiscal standpoint, cutting the pay of the imperial guard was the correct decision, but doing so would ensure I'd never gain their support. Why does that matter, you ask? Well, go look up how many Roman emperors were killed by the Praetorian Guard and come back to me.

Even for me, going head-to-head against a retinue of angry Quare Eques was as good as a death sentence. I had to head that problem off before the pass.

Basically, my best option was to get through the coronation without the imperial guard's help, then crack down on them afterward, curtailing their pay, their size—or even dissolving them entirely—for being in the Chancellor's and Minister's pockets.

However, that meant there was a chance they'd oppose my

actions during the coronation. If I couldn't keep them in check, they'd get a good shot at killing me, obviously, but more importantly, the nobility would be able to escape in the chaos. When I'd weighed the nobility across the scales from the imperial guard, I'd decided my priority was crushing the former, thoroughly and exhaustively.

Oh, the gatekeepers? Right, right—I'd almost forgotten about them. Still, the position was nothing more than a title created to scatter like chicken feed among the scions of nobility. I'd never even seen any of them do anything *resembling* work. I'd shut them down just like the rest.

All that being the case, my chosen strategy was to hold a clandestine meeting with a member of the imperial guard. The fact that I'd managed to pull it off was a testament to how lax the nobility were getting around me. All the recent hubbub meant they were losing more and more breathing room by the day.

The man finally arrived at my quarters after a thorough pat-down from Timona at the manor's entrance. You couldn't be too careful; who knows what kind of magical listening devices he might've had on him?

"This way, Sir Chevillard."

The man—Balthazar—followed Timona's lead, entering the room and kneeling in respect. The entire time, he did his utmost to avoid meeting my eyes. I hummed in consideration as I examined him.

"It is an honor to be in your presence, Your Majesty," he said. "My name is Balthazar Chevillard. I have come today—"

"It's good to see you again," I interrupted.

Despite his best efforts, I'd caught a glimpse of his face, and that was enough for me to recognize him as the guard who'd answered my question about the people's cheers. The last time I'd seen him was through a carriage's window, but he looked...older? Perhaps "worn" was the word. He certainly hadn't been this unshaven before.

"Shuvalov le Goose," I continued. "How long has it been? Since the parade? We were not aware that the Empire had a practice of changing one's name."

He flinched, a tiny jerk of his shoulders. This was kind of fun. *Given what we're about to discuss, maybe I'll put the screws on him*

a little.

I'd actually had Count Palatine Vodedt search for "Shuvalov le Goose" not long after the parade. Despite the brevity of my exchange with the guard, he'd seemed the decent sort. I'd realized it had been a fake name after the search came up with nothing, but I had to admit: I never would've expected Timona's chosen guard to be the man in question.

I'd asked Timona to find me someone with experience commanding troops in live battles, who also seemed willing to pledge loyalty to the emperor. The former was particularly important, because while we had an agent in the imperial guard whose presence meant we could *neutralize* it, that was different from being able to *utilize* it. And it seemed that Balthazar had indeed led men into battle in his time, albeit only smaller units.

"Or perhaps we are mistaken, and it is simply a coincidental resemblance?" I asked. "Well? Which is it?"

I noticed that he was ever so slightly trembling. To be fair, he *had* lied to the emperor's face. No doubt he was expecting one hell of a tongue-lashing. I wasn't angry, though. If anything, I admired the good instincts that had inspired him to use a fake name and avoid trouble down the line. Having a good sense for danger was valuable in all manner of circumstances.

All in all, I considered myself lucky that Balthazar hadn't been some random low-ranking nobleman. I wouldn't even have had to ask his name for him to shove the various and sundry details of his life story down my throat, from his official position to the history of his family and more.

Speaking of Balthazar, the man was still kneeling, still utterly silent. Yeah...any more of this and I would just start to feel bad.

"You used a false name, didn't you?"

"I...I deeply, *deeply* apologize, Your Majesty! Please, I beg your forgiveness!"

"That will depend on you. You may begin by raising your head."

I was hoping he'd agree to my request. Otherwise, I'd have to have him killed or imprisoned to maintain confidentiality.

* * *

I gave Balthazar the crash course. The Empire's current state, the assassination of the crown prince and previous emperor, and my plan to execute a coup d'état at the coronation.

"So...you want—uh, *Your Majesty* wishes for my assistance in mustering your forces?"

He didn't seem at all surprised to hear about the assassinations. Were rumors of them circulating the streets or something? "Mmm. By all rights, it would be a command, but as we have no power currently, that would be the most accurate summary. We trust you don't mind."

"I...yes, I believe I understand." Balthazar lowered his head again, clearly deep in thought. Some time passed before he raised it. "Why is Your Majesty asking this of me?"

"Because we judged you to be necessary for this plan."

Technically, Timona had made the call for it to be Balthazar, but I trusted him, so his decisions were as good as mine. If this failed, I would assume the responsibility too. That was how I believed sovereigns—no, *all* leaders—should be. Not that I'd had any management experience in my past life. I was kind of winging it here.

After several more beats of silence, Balthazar spoke. "You honor me with your words, Your Majesty. As a member of the imperial guard, I pledge to you my loyalty and allegiance—as it should be. Your wish is my command."

"Thank you. We'll need to stay in frequent contact in the lead-up to the coronation, so we'll assign an agent to you to act as intermediary. We'll introduce you later."

Said agent would also be keeping an eye on him. *Sorry, my guy, but I can't slip up this late in the game.*

"Now, take a seat; be at ease," I continued. I eyed him for a moment. "Oh, come now. We are not so volatile that a mere false name is enough to invoke our displeasure."

After sinking into the plush chair and sipping some of Timona's herbal tea, Balthazar seemed to relax. I had to give the guy credit;

his nerves were made of tough stuff.

"We look forward to your service, Sir Shuvalov le Goose."

There was a moment of pained silence. "Please, Your Majesty. I actually know the poor fellow with that name."

There was genuine discomfort on his face. *Hey, man. You're the one who picked it.*

"Just a little jest," I said. "Now then, Balthazar. Let us waste no time; we must discuss your first assignment. Tell us—do you believe it would be possible for you to seize control of the imperial guard?"

There was a pause before he spoke. "There are about fifty of us currently in the capital. Of them, ten are officers, while the rest are promoted commoners like me." Another pause. "Your Majesty."

Since the imperial guard positions put up for sale during the years of the venal office policy were now tools to add prestige to noble children, it was common for said imperial guards to blow off the associated duties in favor of their own pursuits. Thus, many didn't even reside in the imperial capital; the ones here were mostly of commoner birth. That made it possible to seize command of them in the span of several days. If I could take the city in the meantime, all the better.

"Many of them hate the nobility, so I suspect they'll be receptive to Your Majesty's cause," Balthazar continued. "The problem is, I'm the only Quare Eques among us."

That was probably inevitable. All the officers—the ones in command—were nobility, and thus the enemy. "What if you had detailed information on every imperial guard in the city?" I asked. "Ideologies, connections to the nobility, personalities. How much would it improve your chance of success?"

"Ah. Mmm... In that case..."

Credit for the data went to the Count Palatine. For the cherry on top of the cake, he was even updating the info every few hours. Thanks to Duke Warren's rebellion, the movements of both factions had become predictable to a degree, freeing up more surveillance agents for other work.

Balthazar pondered some more before settling on an answer. "No... I'm sorry, Your Majesty, but even then, it would be difficult."

Ah, well. Perhaps a definite guarantee had been too big of an ask. “It’s fine,” I assured him. “We cannot allow any room for failure. Better you tell us the truth than promise us the impossible. What of this, then: How would you rate your chances of seizing control of a *section* of the guard, and ensuring only yourselves are entrusted with the coronation’s security?”

“Shaky, Your Majesty. Too many are eager to participate in the coronation, especially the officers.”

Hmm. That tracked, for that pack of glory hounds. It would be too risky to try removing them from the whole thing.

After some more thought, Balthazar rubbed the back of his head and spoke. “What if... What if I ensured only the guards under my command were *exempt* from the coronation itself?”

“Exempt?”

“Yes, Your Majesty. On the day, we’ll be split into two groups: those present at the coronation, and those on guard duty outside. The former must be unarmed, but the latter may carry weapons as usual.”

Oh? That was news to me. I’d known that only the emperor could carry a blade, but...well, I guessed it made sense that applied to the guards inside the venue as well.

“When Your Majesty makes your move, we’ll rush in from the outside, still armed,” Balthazar suggested. “That should allow us to detain the nobility, as well as the rest of the guard. Given the distance, our arrival would be delayed—though not by more than a minute, I should think.”

Now we were talking. The more I turned this plan over in my head, the more I liked it. Yeah, I could make this work.

“That should be fine,” I said. “It will not be too difficult for us to keep the venue under control for that long. Now, let us discuss the details.”

There were four days left until the coronation. So long as I continued to lay the groundwork and didn’t let my guard down, I was sure I could pull this off.

From the Tower with Love

Without a doubt, the fight was drawing closer. Even the common residents of the capital could feel it, despite how little news they were privy to. According to the reports I'd received, the city's districts were descending into chaos.

The massing of mercenaries had degraded public safety, and while a certain subset of establishments—taverns and the like—were enjoying a roaring trade, much of the citizenry had shut their doors in fear. Some, expecting that the city would become a battlefield, prepared to flee entirely, and more than one noble was among their number.

This was no surprise, as Duke Warren's prowess in battle was well-known—not to mention the fact that he had twenty thousand swords under his banner, all bound directly north for the capital. And then there was the *other* bit of news that had further accelerated the people's efforts to leave the city.

The survivors of the margravial house of Ramitead had raised an army and, in only a handful of days, conquered the majority of the marquessate before turning their eyes toward the imperial capital. Fabio was at their head and was currently en route from the east with five thousand soldiers behind him.

That was actually a few too many for my taste, but I'd have to wait until I'd received his report to hear his reasoning.

In comparison, the purported number of antirebel forces gathered in the capital was around fifty thousand. The true figure was much more nebulous, since mercenaries as a rule exaggerated everything. After all, a bigger number gave off an impression of reliability, meaning a bigger payout. And while too big a discrepancy between claim and truth risked exposure, the nobility had bigger problems at hand than auditing individual bands of sellswords.

It had been decided that the commander of the force to

subjugate Duke Warren would be Mathieu le Chapelier, the Count Chamneau and a man who bore the military rank of general. Tomorrow, the Chancellor would officially delegate command of the army to him, whereupon he would depart the capital to meet Duke Warren in battle.

Why weren't the Chancellor or Minister of Ceremony taking command, you ask? That would be because neither of them were generals.

You see, Duke Raul and Duke Agincarl actually possessed no authority to direct the imperial army. The forces under their command were no more than private soldiers under their individual employ, a practice adopted by much of the nobility.

In the Empire, only three ranks possessed the right to command the imperial army—emperor, Imperial Grand Marshal, and general. Of them, the numbers of the latter two depended on the times (long story short, there were more of them in times of war) but broadly speaking, there were one to two Imperial Grand Marshals and three to five generals within the Empire at any given moment.

Unless you held one of these ranks, you could not command the army, simple as that. My father, the late Crown Prince Jean, hadn't led imperial forces on the battlefield because of his royal title, but because he'd also possessed the rank of general.

Incidentally, the nobility had been blatantly ignoring these rules ever since I became emperor. Both the Chancellor *and* Minister of Ceremony had gone around calling their own forces the imperial army in order to boost their prestige. That wasn't going to fly in this case, however, since the entire point behind Duke Warren's rebellion was to purge those he'd accused of despotism. It seemed even Dukes Raul and Agincarl had possessed the foresight to play by the rules this time.

Currently, there was only one Imperial Grand Marshal in the Empire: Giusto de Seeve, the Count Seeve. In the Empire, marshal ranked higher than general, so ordinarily command would have fallen to him. There was just one catch, however—he was neutral nobility. Furthermore, while the title of Count Seeve did not possess any territory, Giusto de Seeve also held a separate baronial title and

all the holdings that came attached. Said barony was in the Empire's south—in other words, Duke Warren's sphere of influence.

As far as the Chancellor and Minister of Ceremony were concerned, Count Seeve was the most dangerous man in the imperial capital. Thus, they had placed him under house arrest in his manor.

Why had they appointed a neutral nobleman as Imperial Grand Marshal in the first place, you ask? I'd have to assume it was because they found it preferable to appointing someone from the opposing faction. A good old-fashioned compromise. Plus, if a full-scale war ever broke out against another country, the dukes would *want* someone competent in charge, lest they suffer losses too.

Now, did that mean Count Seeve was my ally? The answer was a hard no. I'd asked the Count Palatine to make contact with the man via an agent, but he'd refused to be involved in a civil war, stating that while he would stand against the Empire's external foes, he had a complete noninterference policy when it came to politics.

Stubborn fellow. He was low on my priorities list, though, since he wasn't leading the army. I'd leave him be for now.

Next we came to the generals, of which there were three. Well, there *had* been three. The standing of one in particular had been in question even before all of this had kicked off.

I was, of course, talking about Richter de Van-Warren, the Duke Warren. I'd only learned this recently, but upon relinquishing his Imperial Grand Marshal rank, he'd received a proposal from the Chancellor to take the mantle of general. However, he'd deferred his decision, wanting to put distance between himself and the capital, leaving himself in a position where some people called him "General" and some didn't.

That period of deferment had lasted over a decade, but the Chancellor had finally rescinded the offer, given the whole, you know, rebellion thing.

The remaining two generals belonged to the factions, one each.

The regency's general was a man named Phillip de Agincarl. Note that this was not the Duke Agincarl of the same name. *This* Phillip was his grandson, the eldest son of Duke Agincarl's eldest son, the

Marquess Agincarl-Novei.

I should mention that he had precisely zero experience commanding an army, which of course meant that putting him in charge of the Duke Warren subjugation force would have resulted in a disaster. *Why'd you entrust such a vital military rank to your grandkid in the first place, Duke Agincarl? You can't just hand that stuff out like holiday presents, damn it.*

Perhaps I shouldn't have been surprised; judging by how his grandchild was his namesake, he probably doted on him. I was just glad it had made the decision of who would be commander go smoothly.

In a relative sense of the word, anyway. The factions' bickering had still dragged the process out over several days.

Finally, the third general was Mathieu le Chapelier, the Count Chamneau. He was Vera-Sylvie's father, the commander of the Duke Warren subjugation force, and the man I was about to meet face-to-face.

* * *

Mathieu le Chapelier's personality could be described in a single word: cautious.

His daughter was currently, in reality if not in writing, a hostage of the Chancellor's faction. His holdings were surrounded by the territory of regency nobility, and relations were tense. The fact that he'd endured such circumstances for so long was a testament to his sheer fortitude and stoicism. Even when he'd been appointed the commander of the Duke Warren subjugation force, he'd declined the first two times, only capitulating after the third.

Another exhibition of his careful tendencies was how, despite Count Palatine Vodedt repeatedly making contact, he had still managed to avoid providing a definite answer.

Today, the count had come to my quarters—openly, rather than in secret—to pay his respects to the emperor before he departed for battle. What was more, it seemed the Chancellor and Minister of Ceremony were under so much pressure that they had no

wherewithal left to be wary of our meeting. Ol' Chancy in particular had lost an entire line of communication to his holdings because of Fabio's uprising, and while the young agent's forces were currently headed for us, they could easily turn north and cut the Duchy of Raul off from the capital at any moment.

As I reclined into the plush chair, a steaming cup of tea was placed before me. "Your Majesty. I have a report for you before your meeting with the count."

"Go ahead." I took a sip of Timona's brew and discovered it was herbal tea.

"The matter of the imperial guard appears to be proceeding smoothly."

"Good. Continue observing and compile a full report for me later."

"By your command."

My meeting with Balthazar had managed to remain a secret, so we avoided using his name whenever possible, just to abide by good practice. Using "Shuvalov" had been an option, but the man in question found that extremely unpleasant, so...

Incidentally, I'd waited until the eve of my coup d'état to contact Balthazar because one: I'd needed to wait until the factions' surveillance on me weakened, and two: I wanted to avoid our operation springing any leaks. The risk of the latter in particular only increased in proportion to the amount of time allotted. There was a third reason too, and it was the most important. I had an agent in the imperial guard ready with a nonlethal poison which would incapacitate the guards for a period of time. In other words, if Balthazar had refused to cooperate, I would've had the next best option available.

"By the way..." I glanced at my teacup. "You've been brewing a lot of herbal tea recently." Not that I minded—I rather liked the taste.

"That particular herb has detoxifying properties," Timona explained.

"Why would—ah. The guandaleo?"

The dried form of the guande plant. While I *had* lit it, I'd managed to avoid inhaling any of the smoke by using my magical

defenses. The factions hadn't sent me any more after Duke Warren's rebellion either. That was the public reason I was holed up in my quarters—I was ostensibly suffering from withdrawal symptoms.

"It is an additional precaution for the sake of thoroughness," Timona said. "Some of the plant's scent clung to your attire."

I'd actually accounted for that with my magic too. I'd figured being extra careful couldn't hurt, since I wasn't sure if skin contact was enough to cause symptoms, as opposed to outright inhaling the smoke.

"How overprotective of you."

"Such is a vassal's duty." There was a brief pause. "It appears he has arrived."

I put my teacup down and raised my head. Count Chamneau, who entered the room accompanied by Count Palatine Vodedt, was a handsome man who looked younger than his age. It didn't take much examination to see the resemblance to Vera-Sylvie, especially given her maturing appearance as of late, now that her magic wasn't stunting her growth.

"Count Chamneau," I said. "Please, sit."

With Balthazar, I'd had a backup plan. With Count Chamneau, I didn't. But even so, I was certain he'd side with me. After all, it was in his best interests.

Supposing he refused to align with me, departed to meet Duke Warren in battle, and lost, the responsibility would fall on his shoulders. Worst case, he'd have his holdings seized.

However, if he *won*, the tragedy would be all the greater. The political ball game would revert to a back-and-forth between the factions, leaving Count Chamneau—who was of the Chancellor's faction but surrounded by the regency—once again isolated. That is, if he wasn't assassinated outright by the regency as soon as he returned to his holdings.

The only reason he'd been able to come to the imperial capital was because the Chancellor and Minister of Ceremony had agreed to a temporary truce, alleviating the pressure on the County of Chamneau by its neighbors.

Essentially, Count Chamneau was a hunting dog, allowed to live

because there was prey out in the field—prey by the name of Duke Warren. Once the hunt was over, the hunting dog would lose its purpose and be swiftly disposed of.

So, what was Count Chamneau to do? Leave his prey alive?

No. As a noble, the correct decision for him to make would be to swear his allegiance to a new master, and respec his class from hunting dog to watchdog. Naturally, I'd find it adequate if that was all he did. It was how a relationship between sovereign and vassal should be. The thing was, though—relationships based on profit and loss alone left no room for trust.

Hence why I figured I'd take a more roundabout route this time, so to speak.

"Apologies for the suddenness, but do give us a moment." I proceeded to channel mana into the earring Vera-Sylvie had given me.

The count's reaction was visible. "Is that—?!"

"Vera. I'm handing the earring over to Count Chamneau. Is that all right?"

I'd informed her of this beforehand, of course, but I couldn't blame her for the nerves, given everything. "Deep breaths," I said. "You don't need to make this anything more than what it is. You're simply talking to family for the first time in a while. That's all."

There was a small pause. I spoke up again. "Whatever you want. It doesn't have to be about me. I'm handing it over now, okay?"

We were within the bounds of a mana-sealing ward, but the earring still worked fine. However, since there *was* the chance the connection would drop if the mana source ran dry, I fueled the earring up with probably a little more of my internal mana than was necessary before handing it to the count.

"Count Chamneau, we have suddenly remembered a pressing matter we must see to, so we will be temporarily excusing ourself," I said. "It should not take long, so please do us the favor of safekeeping that earring in the meantime. We can hold our discussion upon our return."

He accepted the earring in silence with the palms of both hands, as though cupping the most precious object in the world.

I studiously ignored the way those hands were trembling and quietly saw myself out.

The Pieces Fall into Place

Having excused myself, I walked down the hallway. My pace was slow, just in case—people were supposed to think I still wasn't feeling well.

"May I ask Your Majesty's destination?" Timona inquired.

I gave a small shrug. Our intelligence agents had the area on lock, so the count's call with his daughter wouldn't leak. The only question that remained was: What was I to do with this free time on my hands?

"Who knows?" I said. "I hadn't thought that far." I couldn't exactly leave the premises, given how I was pretending to be sick.

"May I suggest a bath, then?" Timona offered. "Provided we inform the ladies-in-waiting that you've had a brief spell of haleness, it shouldn't seem out of place."

Outside of when I'd gone to fetch the Ceremonial Sword, I essentially hadn't left my quarters. Since that was the natural behavior for an emperor who was suffering from (alleged) guandaleo withdrawal, I hadn't had a proper bath in days—just wipe-downs and hair washes.

"That sounds nice. Please."

"As you wish. I shall go ahead and prepare."

I waited until after Timona had disappeared down the hallway, headed for the bath, before speaking. "Do you perhaps have an objection to make?"

"No," said Count Palatine Vodedt, who had appeared by my side. "Though I do have an opinion I'd like to express."

An opinion, huh? "Is it regarding the method I used to make an ally out of Count Chamneau?"

It wasn't hard to browbeat someone into giving you the answer you wanted, whether you used intimidation or awe. But people's minds were quick to change. Thus, it was better to make an

emotional appeal—which is why I'd used Count Chamneau's daughter to win him over. Even if it was the same sort of method that the Chancellor and Minister would have resorted to.

"No, I believe Your Majesty's judgment there was correct," the Count Palatine said. "Given his circumstances, the count had no choice but to align himself with you. All that remained was to convince not his mind but his heart. No, I simply wished to warn you that Your Majesty should not reveal your private self to your vassals so easily."

Ah, he meant my exchange with Vera. That was fair. "Very well. I'll keep that in mind," I said. Essentially, he was telling me to act more emperor-like. "Incidentally, Count Palatine. Did you spread rumors among the citizenry of the truth behind the deaths of my father and the previous emperor?"

After a momentary pause, the Count Palatine replied, "Yes. Was it unnecessary of me?"

I'd checked with Balthazar too, but it seemed that my reputation among the people couldn't yet be called "poor," thanks to the persistent rumors in the public sphere that one of the Dukes had assassinated the beloved Crown Prince Jean. So rather than any actual affection for me, it was more that the people hated the dukes and pitied me in comparison.

"Not at all," I said. "Keep it up. Just make certain you aren't found out."

"But of course. As you wish."

In my personal opinion, information manipulation wasn't in and of itself evil. Of course, if no restrictions were put in place, it would result in the proliferation of misinformation, fake news, and lies. I had seen both the benefits and detriments of media manipulation in my past life. But in this world—in an era where the majority had no formal education—it would be difficult for the populace to filter their own information. Thus, a degree of control was necessary to avoid widespread confusion.

Or so went the justification used by those in power. At the end of the day, those who used it to commit unforgivable acts were just that: unforgivable. I mean, in my past life, I'd been on the side

getting fed the information.

"Have the rumors not reached the Chancellor or Minister?" I asked.

"I imagine they have," the Count Palatine confirmed. "However, they know that if they levied such rumors as grounds to punish the masses, it would only worsen public opinion."

As one would expect from governors of their own holdings, the dukes seemed careful around that kind of stuff. If they *were* to crack down, it would have to be thorough—basically to the point of an out-and-out reign of terror—which the opposing faction would never overlook. They'd chosen instead to sit on their hands.

It was a delicate power balance; the fact that it had somehow lasted this long was incredible to contemplate.

* * *

After my bath, I returned to my quarters, whereupon Count Chamneau knelt and proffered me the earring.

I took it carefully. "Have you spoken enough?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

He hadn't seen his daughter in over a decade since she'd been imprisoned. If it had been up to me, I would've liked to give the guy more time.

"At our coronation, we plan to overthrow the Chancellor and Minister of Ceremony and crown ourself," I declared. "Once successful, we will immediately release your daughter from her imprisonment. Count Chamneau—will you follow us?"

There was a moment of silence before the count replied. "It was my intention to obey Your Majesty after you were crowned. However, it seems my loyalty is long overdue. I, Mathieu le Chapelier, the Count Chamneau, in this very moment, do hereby swear my undying fealty to Your Majesty the Emperor. I can only apologize that this took me so long."

"Thank you, Count. Your loyalty to the Empire is just and true."

I couldn't read his mind or anything, of course. But there was no mistaking that he was on my side now. Even if the Chancellor or

Minister offered to release Vera-Sylvie for him, the possibility that the opposing faction would interfere remained high. As long as that was true, the count would choose the option with the least risk: me. Thus, the count had my trust.

"Now, be at ease, Count Chamneau," I said. "We have a request to make of you."

First, I needed detailed information on all the forces gathering in the capital. Count Chamneau was overseeing them in his capacity as general, but if my suspicions were correct...

"We suppose an accurate breakdown of military strength would be difficult, wouldn't it."

"I'm afraid so," he confirmed. "Though I would put the number at forty thousand at least."

"But if sellswords make up the core...it shouldn't be too difficult to disperse."

The main mercenary army was an issue that needed to be taken care of. Even if Count Chamneau, its commander, declared his sword under my banner, there was no guarantee the army would follow. After all, they weren't his men, but a mishmash of legitimized paramilitary groups. It wasn't hard to imagine that some of them would resist.

Nevertheless, sellswords lived and died for the paycheck. If I could keep their purses full, they'd have little reason to publicly oppose me.

"As for the private forces of the nobility joining the effort, the majority belong to the Chancellor's faction," Count Chamneau explained. "Duke Raul's personal contingent remain in his holdings, as he's wary of the Gotiroir tribe's movements. Could it be that they are also...?"

"Yes. The Gotiroir are with us."

I had no confidence I'd be able to keep them in line, of course, but I wasn't about to reveal that.

"I am not surprised," he mused. "As for the regency's forces, none are of a size worth mentioning. It appears that much of the old Agincarlish nobility did not obey the call to arms. As a matter of fact, some have even openly sworn their swords to Duke Warren's

banner."

"They've joined Duke Warren's army?" I knew the old Agincarlish nobility had a bone—let's be honest, an entire skeleton—to pick with the Minister of Ceremony, but did that equate to enough of a reason to join Duke Warren?

"Is Your Majesty aware of the circumstances in the former Marquessate of Agincarl-Torei?"

The Marquessate of Agincarl-Torei... If I recalled correctly, it had been a political opponent of the Minister of Ceremony, who had ceded it over to the Kingdom of Apraada shortly after my birth. Since it hadn't participated in the war that the Empire had lost, it had refused to accept becoming a bargaining chip for the peace treaty, and thus had resisted Apraada's occupation. However, with no support from the Empire, its resistance movement was quickly crushed.

"The Marquessate's nobility *would* have reason to despise Duke Agincarl," I agreed. "So they joined Duke Warren and other old Agincarlish nobility followed?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Did that mean anti-Apraadan resistance forces were a part of Duke Warren's army? Would the Kingdom of Apraada even allow that, given their connection to Duke Raul? No, wait. They probably saw it as an opportunity to eradicate the resistance in one fell swoop, as opposed to letting the conflict continue within their borders.

In that case, perhaps the ties between Duke Raul and Apraada weren't as strong as I'd thought. This was valuable information...for later. International diplomacy could wait until *after* my coup d'état.

"Forces have also entered the Empire from the former imperial territory now belonging to the Kingdom of Rocourt," Count Chamneau continued. "They've joined with the resistance army that sprang up in the Marquessate of Ramitead." He paused. "Was that also Your Majesty's doing?"

Go figure. No wonder Fabio's army seemed awfully large. "Yes," I confirmed. "They've sworn loyalty to us." Well, assuming Fabio was still with me, that is.

"If that's true...then I suspect what Your Majesty wishes from me is not an additional force of arms."

"The nature of the army under your command is simply too volatile," I agreed. "You may depart with it under the continued facade that you will be contesting Duke Warren's army. In the meantime, we shall apprehend the imperial capital nobility and seize control of the city."

Pretty much every noble in the city would be present at the coronation. If I seized the venue, I'd be able to arrest every single one of them. And if I managed that, their personal forces within Count Chamneau's army would be putty in my hands.

"After we have seized the city, we will dedicate the rest of our time to disarming your—and Duke Warren's—army, if not disbanding them entirely."

"I see no error in Your Majesty's judgment. If you are able to purge the Chancellor and Minister of Ceremony by your own hand, I have no doubt that Duke Warren will obey your command."

Duke Warren's *casus belli* was striking down the dukes who had monopolized the government and freeing the emperor from their grasp. If I managed to do that myself, he'd have "succeeded" in his quest. And while he might've had the option of becoming the new Chancellor and seizing true power for himself were I powerless, the existence of Fabio's army and the Order of Atúr—and to a lesser extent the Gotiroir, who weren't present—meant that I *did* have power.

In which case, Duke Warren had two options: obey me or rebel. But the cause he'd raised his banner under had been to free me, and he was no madman—the idea of opposing an emperor who'd freed himself from the Chancellor and Minister of Ceremony would be unthinkable to him.

Naturally, that was no guarantee he'd *continue* to be loyal to me down the line, but I'd wait to burn that bridge until I got to it.

"You believe he will as well?" I asked.

"Yes. Duke Warren is a righteous man." Count Chamneau thought for a moment. "That being the case, I believe Your Majesty's request of me is to simply keep his army in check and buy you time?"

Once my takeover of the capital was finished, Duke Warren would fall in line. But in the meantime, there was every chance that a part of his army would jump the gun and cause all manner of trouble.

"That is the essence of our request, yes," I confirmed. "It will take time for us to seize total control, so dedicate your best effort toward maintaining a stalemate with no open conflict. We also have one more request. We would like you to dedicate a unit you trust to holding the city's gates."

To stop the nobility from escaping, I planned on having all entrances and exits to the city locked down during the coronation. The Count Palatine had proposed interior blockades, the plans for which were already in place. However, they weren't a perfect solution. Someone needed to hold the exterior as well.

"Just the gates, Your Majesty?" Count Chamneau asked.

"Yes. We have already arranged for forces to hold the interior. However, for caution's sake, we'd like your men to hold the exterior. That includes the city's east."

"The east as well? That will require a much larger allotment of soldiers...but I understand. I swear that we shall not allow a single soul to escape."

Given how the imperial capital's eastern wall wasn't complete, he'd have to scrounge up quite the force to cover it all.

"Thank you, Count Chamneau. This is a duty only you can fulfill—We will be relying on your service. If you succeed, your deeds will be appropriately rewarded."

The truth was, I could've also given this job to the Order of Atúr. However, I'd instead tasked them with surveillance. Surveilling whom, you ask? Why, Count Chamneau, of course.

Don't get me wrong, I fully expected him to obey me. But whether he'd carry out my orders to the letter was a different question. For instance, there was a chance he'd turn a blind eye to the escape of certain nobility he had ties to—and I couldn't have him doing that. Hence the oversight.

Hey, I was putting my life on the line here. You can never be too careful, you know.

And the Stage Is Set

The night after my meeting with Count Chamneau, I allowed several intelligence agents to guide me to the dungeons beneath the city.

Within the imperial demesne, there were two places worth calling a jail. The first was the prison used to hold foreign nobles or knights captured in war. It wasn't luxurious living, but it was decent, and it allowed its prisoners to maintain their human dignity.

After all, such prisoners were valuable bargaining chips in the diplomatic game, and ransom was a lucrative enterprise. This prison had been constructed to exacting standards in order to prevent the possibility of escape, but otherwise, it was a nice enough place. This was partly because a prisoner becoming injured or sick could cut into the value of their ransom, and partly because the nobility knew that if *they* were ever captured by a foreign nation, they would want the same standard of treatment. Thus, VIP prisoners of war had it good, as far as being a POW went, anyway.

Incidentally, this prison had gone unused for several years. This could be attributed to there being no major conflicts in recent memory, but it would be more accurate to say that the amount of battles the Empire had won among the minor conflicts could be counted on one hand.

The *second* place that qualified was known as the dungeons, and they were altogether a different beast. The dungeons were made to facilitate suffering. Their occupants were traitors and serious criminals, who were kept under the assumption they would never leave again, save for a final march toward the gallows.

As one tale went, a certain past emperor had thrown basically everyone he disliked down here, and almost none had come out alive.

Naturally, the place wasn't maintained in any meaningful sense of

the word, and daylight was a foreign concept. Here, in this prison that smelled of rot and misery, a young girl languished in the dark: Nadine de Van-Warren. Duke Warren's daughter.

Splish. Splish.

The dungeon guards—well, undercover agents—who walked ahead of me sent up little splashes with each footfall. What they were stepping in, I couldn't tell you. Since the floor here was cobblestone rather than concrete, it didn't really have a proper drainage system of any kind.

There were no openings for ventilation, let alone windows, and what little illumination there was came solely in the form of the lamp carried by the agents walking ahead.

I had no doubt that the place smelled awful. Since I had to keep my visit a secret, I had overlaid an *Obex* around me to prevent any odor from clinging, but the agents were holding their noses, so it had to be pretty damn bad. Just to be careful, I wasn't even walking on the floor but atop a *Custor* I had cast. I really hadn't been kidding when I'd said I couldn't let anyone find out I'd been down here.

This was no place for a girl barely into her teens to endure. However, according to the Count Palatine, the nobility had been adamant about imprisoning Nadine here rather than the nobles' prison because of her status as the daughter of a traitor. It was my understanding we were managing to sneak food to her in secret, but that was cold comfort indeed.

Incidentally, the Count Palatine wasn't accompanying me. He'd said it wouldn't be a wise idea, as apparently he'd been the one to arrest Nadine. She was well within her rights to hold a grudge against him...even if, in reality, *I* had been the one to give the order.

The agents ahead of me stopped. From the other side of the iron bars, a girl slowly lifted her head, squinting at the sudden intrusion of light.

"Nadine."

Her clothes were filthy. A slight hollowness to her cheeks told me she'd lost weight. It seemed she'd recognized me from my voice, because she spoke, her voice frail.

"You're...okay?"

For a moment, I didn't know what she was referring to. "We should be asking that of you," I said. "We are not the one who has spent days in a lightless cell."

"The guandaleo. You looked like you were suffering."

Comprehension clicked. Had she heard about that from Duke Warren? "We are sorry," I apologized. "That was an act. One we were forced to keep up. In truth, we never inhaled a single breath."

"Is that...so? I'm...glad." Nadine's eyes met mine. It seemed they'd grown accustomed to the dark. "Despite being by your side...I couldn't do anything for you. I was useless."

Her voice was pitifully fragile. On the verge of tears, as if all the confidence she'd once had in herself were no longer there. The firebrand of a girl that had ridiculed me and tried to educate me was gone. Her heart was...broken. I couldn't ask for what I needed from her, like this.

But if I was any judge of such matters, she had not yet succumbed to despair. After some thought, I decided to discard the emperor and simply speak as myself.

"Maybe that's true," I said. "But I don't think you're a useless person, Nadine."

I had learned a number of things about her during the years she'd spent in the imperial demesne. She acted her age, and her list of faults was a long one. Compared to Rosaria and Timona, perhaps she did indeed come up short.

However, she was a *doer*, not content to merely react to her circumstances. That was clear enough from how she'd come to the imperial demesne to correct my behavior. And she was perseverant too—how else could she have continued to endure the hostility of the adults from both factions and remained unbowed?

She wasn't the kind of girl who would let a single setback plunge her into despair.

"There's a task I'd like to entrust to you," I said. "Will you take it?"

Several moments passed before Nadine spoke. "Is this to help me escape?"

"Don't misunderstand. I'm not good enough of a person to do that. I'm asking this of you because this is a task *only you* can carry out."

Yeah. I wasn't a good person at all. After all, it was my fault she was imprisoned here.

"I'm not freeing you for your sake," I continued. "I'm doing it for mine. If you fail, you will die. I may be killed. So do not accept if you're going to do it with half-hearted resolve."

And if she ever found out it was me, perhaps she would hate me. But that was fine.

"Your life will be on the line," I finished. "No, the very fate of the Empire will be. So I'll ask again. What will you do?"

It could have been my imagination, but the light seemed to return to her eyes. "You need me?" she asked.

"Yes. Only you can do this."

"Then I'll do it."

Her voice was powerful and clear. Good. I could entrust this to her, then.

"At dawn, Count Chamneau will depart the capital with his army," I began. "All the activity will send the city into disarray. You will use that chance to leave and deliver a letter we have written for Duke Warren."

I couldn't rule out the possibility that there were people with ties to the factions amid Duke Warren's army. Hell, even his inner circle. So I couldn't let anyone but him see my letter. Going through his daughter was my best chance of ensuring that.

"If the count's army catches you, you won't be able to avoid inspection," I warned. "Far from it. Depending on the character of the mercenary, even your personal safety may be at risk."

"Of course."

"You'll be accompanied by a single agent. We assume you remember her voice; she's the same one who's been making regular contact with you. She'll take you to Duke Warren." What I didn't say was that aside from guarding her, the agent would also be Nadine's surveillance. It was her job to dispose of the letter, should it come to that.

"I understand."

"There'll be a horse and a change of clothes ready for you. Clean yourself using the well, then wait for dawn."

The problem was, how much time could we buy before Nadine's absence was discovered? Once that happened, it was even possible that they'd root out the agents we'd dedicated to this operation as well. Either way, it was out of my hands—the Count Palatine had assured me he'd handle it.

Until now, he'd kept all of his agents well hidden, only using them when absolutely necessary. However, he was laying all his cards on the table now. It seemed he'd decided this was the turning point. He wasn't wrong; if I managed to seize power, there'd be no need to have his spies lurk within the imperial demesne anymore.

As the agents freed Nadine from her cell, I spoke my final words to her. "Take utmost care, and succeed in your duty."

"You should... Your Majesty should be careful too."

Well. Given how much I'd told her, it only figured that she'd gotten an inkling of what I planned to do.

"Mmm... I'm counting on you."

I turned heel and left.

* * *

Upon returning to my quarters, I walked into the final briefing for our coronation day strategy. It was taking place now because I would have no time during the day before the coronation itself—it would take my attendants an entire day to stuff me into my regalia and tweak all the bells and whistles to be in the right position.

"Welcome back, Your Majesty."

"Mmm. It went according to plan. Report?"

Present were Timona, Balthazar, Count Palatine Vodedt, Lord Salomon...and Daniel the Storyteller.

"The security allotments for the imperial guard have been decided," Balthazar revealed. "Our men are positioned as expected." He turned his gaze to Daniel.

"Preparations are complete on my end also," the old elf reported.

The Western Orthodoxy was almost entirely under Daniel's control already, and the plan was for him to put the final nail in the coffin simultaneously with the coronation. Afterward, he would direct the clergy to disseminate information among the citizenry. As for the clergy members who would be present at the coronation itself, we planned for them to be stationed at the venue's exit, using their bodies to prevent the nobility's escape until Balthazar arrived with his armed imperial guard. People of the cloth they might have been, but the nobility would be unarmed, so it would pose no issue for them to buy us a few seconds.

Next to speak was Count Palatine Vodedt. "Then I shall give my report next," he said. "Regarding the city guard, I have received authorization from Count Nunvalle to have them shut the city's gates when the coronation begins. Furthermore, it will be possible for them to mobilize in full to perform patrols."

The city guard was a majority commoner organization with a degree of power that put them just about in the middle of the scale between the modern-day police force and private security officers you and I are more familiar with. The imperial capital's gates were their jurisdiction in peacetime, so a blockade of the city would require their cooperation. If we could secure that, it was likely the lockdown would go off without a hitch.

As for why we needed to talk to the Minister of Finance to secure their cooperation, well, there was where things got a bit messy.

Technically speaking, laws carrying over from the Rotahl Empire dictated that the city guard should be under the jurisdiction of said city's mayor—in this case, the mayor of Cardinal. However, during the entire lifespan of the Bundarte Empire, there had never *been* a mayor of Cardinal. This was in part because the desertion of the mayor of Odieunau—the imperial capital during Rotahlian times—had been a factor behind the city's downfall.

Thus, until now, the city guard had been under the jurisdiction of the emperor himself, or a directly appointed mayor pro tempore (a temporary position with limited authority for when the emperor departed the capital for military expeditions and such).

In other words, the city guard was formally under my control.

However, due to my age, that was impossible—or at least, that was the pretext the Chancellor had used to place the organization, along with all the others, under his control.

However, the city guard were known for their dislike of Duke Raul and openly refused to obey his commands, citing them as an abuse of his authority. As you'd expect, this led to him attempting to abolish them on multiple occasions. The Minister of Finance, deeming the city guard essential, had put a stop to that and continued to fund their existence (despite the imperial budget deficit).

Thus, the city guard's loyalty currently lay with Count Nunvalle, who was the guy signing off on their paychecks.

"Well done," I said. "May we take that to mean you informed him of everything?"

"No, I only shared with him the bare minimum," Count Palatine Vodedt reported.

If we were mobilizing the city guard, then clearly *something* was going to happen at the coronation. Now that we'd come this far, I'd assumed we were going to let the Minister of Finance in on the secret, but it appeared that the Count Palatine had decided to remain tight-lipped.

"We can't have him falling into a panic on the day of," I warned.

"There will be no fear of that, Your Majesty. I shall be by his side during the coronation."

Count Nunvalle was neutral nobility; if we revealed our plans to him, he would undoubtedly cooperate. However, it seemed that Count Palatine Vodedt wished to tread more carefully. Not that I thought he actually *suspected* the Minister of Finance of anything. He'd straight-up assured me in the past that Count Nunvalle was as "neutral as neutral could be."

The problem likely lay with the count's inner circle. Any one of the Minister of Finance's aides or confidants could have ties to the Chancellor's faction or regency.

While the Empire's spies cast a fine net, there had been a time when said net had been full of gaping tears: the transitional period when Count Palatine Vodedt had become the spymaster due to the

previous emperor's assassination. Or in other words, when the Count Palatine's predecessor had committed suicide.

According to the Count Palatine, it was during this period that the previous emperor's private fortune (the money *not* managed by the Minister of Finance) had vanished into thin air. To this day, not a single trace of the culprit had been unearthed. The factions accused each other, obviously, while the Minister of Finance was more occupied with the Empire's failing economy. As for the Count Palatine, he'd obtained little in the way of information regarding this case. After all, it had happened while the imperial spy network had fallen into chaos.

However, it seemed that Count Palatine Vodedt suspected the culprit was someone close to the Minister of Finance. If that was true, then they had probably funneled the previous emperor's money into either one of the factions.

Well, when I say that the Count Palatine *suspected* that was the case, I mean that only in the loosest sense. He'd told me himself that the possibility was "nigh on nonexistent," so his withholding of information from Count Nunvalle was likely just him being ultracautious. As an example, essentially all of our conspiracy's contact with the Minister of Finance was through the Count Palatine.

"Very well," I conceded. "We understand your concerns, so we shall trust your judgment. And the rest?"

"Proceeding without issue."

I nodded. Timona had given me his report before this meeting, so I turned my eyes toward the last member, Salomon de Barbetorte.

"Lord Salomon," I said. "We will need you and the Belvérian mage unit to stand ready to combat any unforeseen circumstances."

"I have already shared our strategy among the unit," he reported. "The only remaining variable is the dukes' movements on the day."

Indeed, even after all this thorough planning, there were still too many uncertainties—foremost among them the question of how the Chancellor and Minister of Ceremony would act on the day of. I'd prepared contingencies for a number of possible scenarios, and one of them was mobilizing the Belvérian unit as an adaptable mobile task force.

“Your job will not be easy,” I said.

“It cannot compare to the burden of Your Majesty’s task,” he replied. “I must ask, however. Are you certain you wish to proceed with this strategy?”

“Of course.”

My own job was simple—crown myself by my own hand, come hell or high water.

Burden? It wasn’t even close. Everything I’d done, everything I’d endured—all of it had been for the sake of this single day looming on the horizon. Even if it meant killing those of my blood with my own two hands.

“Gentlemen, do not forget that this is only the beginning,” I declared. “As such, failure will not be tolerated. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Your Majesty!” A chorus of voices.

The stage was set.



The Bloodsoaked Coronation

Day 28, Month 5, Year 468 of the New Calendar. Duke Warren's army established an encampment half a day south from the imperial capital.

In response, the coalition army of mercenaries and private soldiers led by Count Chamneau took a defensive position opposite, with its back to the city. Both armies stared each other down across the length of no-man's-land they had formed, but were otherwise quiet.

It was as if they were waiting for something.

While this was happening, the emperor's coronation took place within the city itself. A solemn affair indeed, if slightly hurried due to the circumstances.

The nobility gathered in a hall once used by the second emperor and his court for social events and anxiously awaited the young sovereign's arrival. Many of them planned to leave the capital with their families once the coronation had concluded, and the Chancellor and Minister of Ceremony were no exception. They needed to return to their own holdings and prepare for the unlikely scenario in which Count Chamneau suffered defeat at the hands of the rebel army.

The entirety of the Empire held its breath for the coming battle between Duke Warren and Count Chamneau. Even the nobility present at the coronation found themselves more concerned with the latest news from the front than their liege's crowning.

After all, it was but a puppet emperor ascending to a hollow throne. Such a thing would bring no change. This was true not only in the minds of the nobility, but the city's people too.

* * *

On the morning of the coronation, rain fell upon the imperial

capital.

It wouldn't affect the indoor ceremony, but a number of imperial guard positions had to be adjusted—they would now have a slightly easier time storming the venue. It was as if the winds of fate themselves had turned in my favor. The hall where the coronation would take place was located in a plot within the northwest section of the imperial demesne. The plot itself was surrounded by walls on all sides—all too convenient for my purposes.

After being dressed in gaudy regalia bedecked in eye-watering ornamentation, I sat in an appropriately named waiting room, counting down the minutes until the moment of truth.

"Goodness! You look absolutely radiant!"

That voice belonged to the regent, who had joined me earlier. Her platitudes were nothing new; she'd talked my ear off with them yesterday while the attendants had been adjusting my regalia.

"Thank you, mother," I said.

"My, you seem in wonderful condition today," she remarked.

"Yes. We feel very relaxed." I was almost certain she was aware that the factions had been gifting me—her own son—guandaleo. In light of that, I thought it was shamelessly brazen of her to take this attitude.

"You look so gallant—the very image of your father. Isn't that right, father?"

"Gallant is indeed the word. Dear me, your grandfather may cry from sheer joy."

Aside from the regent, the Minister of Ceremony was also present. The Chancellor and Georg V had been here until their arrival, and I was currently wearing the cape they had gifted me. I found it rather tacky, personally—there was far too much gold trim for my liking.

"Soon, my precious grandson will declare his name before the world," the Minister said. "Thus, your grandfather has prepared for you the greatest gift of which he could conceive." He took an object from an awaiting attendant and removed the cloth wrapping. "A scepter, crafted by the most celebrated artisans in the Empire, solely for your use today."

The scepter indeed deserved the name, as it was far closer in resemblance to the object traditionally carried by royalty rather than a mage's implement. Perhaps it was because the blue bloods of this world descended from mages, but it was common for members of the royal family to carry such decorated scepters around as a symbol of authority.

Where they differed from a mage's wand or staff was in their functionality, or rather, their lack thereof. The Minister's gift was egregiously adorned in gold, silver, and precious gems, which would make it less of a conduit for magic than an annoying obstacle.

"Oh, my!" the regent exclaimed. "Its splendor is truly worthy of His Majesty."

"What do you think, Your Majesty?" the Minister asked. "Is it to your liking?"

Honestly, it wasn't even in the same ballpark. How could it be? Neither of these two had any idea what my preferences were. "Yes, we are greatly pleased," I said. "Thank you, Minister."

"Your Majesty's gratitude is the greatest happiness I can know."

In the end, all three of us were playing house. Despite the regent and Minister of Ceremony's feigned affection, they regularly grappled for control of their own faction. The fact that they were parent and child by blood mattered nothing to them. What was more, the Minister had masterminded my father's assassination, while the regent had ordered her own fair share of deaths and imprisoned Lady Norn and Vera-Sylvie. Frankly, I had no sympathy to spare for either of them. They would receive the fate their wicked ways had earned.

While I lived on as the emperor, staining my hands just as red as theirs.

Our little game of house continued until we were informed the ceremony was ready to commence. I kept my eyes unfocused and speech poorly enunciated, a puppet until the end. In spite of this, the regent and Minister had bright smiles and cheery tones. If you'd called them insane, I wouldn't have been able to disagree. But perhaps from where they stood, nothing at all was out of the ordinary.

Given that I was planning to kill them, perhaps I was mad too.

Whether it would be by my own hand or by my word as they stood at the executioner's scaffold, I still didn't know. But I would kill them all the same—my blood family.

It probably said something that I felt not an ounce of hesitation or regret.

The coronation today was not an end goal, but a checkpoint I had to pass. I didn't plan on stumbling.

* * *

I could hear music from afar, trumpets and drums. The sounds grew louder as we approached the coronation venue. Supported by Timona and the regent at my sides, I slowly advanced down the roofed corridor that connected to the hall.

The regent was in a good mood, which I could understand. She was oblivious as to what was about to take place, likely only thinking about the expanded influence she would enjoy after her son was crowned. Timona, however, was startlingly calm. Unruffled expression, composed demeanor. For a while, I couldn't figure out why that seemed off to me—and then I realized it was because *I* was nervous.

A wry smile almost made its way onto my expression before I strangled the urge. What was I doing, getting nervous now? Failure wasn't an option here.

When we reached the doors, the regent left us, heading in first. A short while later, the music stopped, blanketing the hall in silence.

"Your Majesty," Timona said.

"Final checks," I replied. "Have any problems cropped up?"

"None. However, both of the dukes are carrying swords."

They are, are they?

I was silent for several heartbeats. "Very well. Then I'll do it. Have you informed Lord Salomon?"

"Yes."

I heard a voice from within the hall. It was time.

"Your Majesty. Good luck."

"Mmm. Here I go."

Timona placed his hands on the doors, and they slowly swung open.

* * *

If a sight ever deserved to be described as grandiose, it would certainly be the view from atop the throne. From the opulence of the throne itself to the ostentatious frippery bedecking the hall, one could almost be forgiven for assuming the Empire was a wealthy, flourishing nation. That is, until they were told that the majority of the ornamentation present had been lent to the state from the Chancellor and Minister of Ceremony's personal vaults.

Of the nobles packed into the hall, the majority held the title of count or higher. The factions had at first wanted to include the lower nobility as well, to make a show of strength, but compromised on the current number of attendees due to space concerns. It had created extra work for me; I'd have to seize control of the noble district after I was finished here in the imperial demesne.

Nevertheless, there were still enough people here that I couldn't make out their individual faces from my position atop the throne. It reminded me of the sight I'd seen after I'd reincarnated. I'd cried, if I remembered correctly.

There was a set of steps before the throne, wide and low. The Chancellor and Minister of Ceremony stood below, holding the imperial crown. Slowly but surely, they began to ascend toward me.

This was it.

By all rights, the coronation should have had far more pomp and circumstance, but the enemy army half a day from the capital had everyone on tenterhooks. We'd skipped most of the formalities.

An attendant—of which duke, I didn't know—stood near the bottom of the steps, parchment in hand. I had no doubt that as soon as the crown was atop my head, I would be forced to issue an imperial edict declaring Duke Warren a traitor to the Empire.

The dukes ascended another step. Swords hung from their waists, just as Timona had reported.

Our conspiracy had put a number of contingencies in place to adapt to any variables as best we were able. For instance, we'd accounted for the possibility of somebody bringing magical tools into the hall. While mana-sealing wards were in place, certain tools could still perform their function under them. Thus, it was well within the realm of possibility that somebody would attempt to seize control of the hall with a magical weapon of some kind.

In the event of that happening, the plan was for Lord Salomon to disable the wards so that I could temporarily keep the situation under control with my own magic. Then the imperial guard and Belvérian mage unit would rush in to tie up the rest. This way, while my spellcasting would be revealed, we would be able to keep my trump card of being able to cast under the wards a secret.

And among the plans we had made, one had been for the possibility that Dukes Raul and Agincarl would wear blades during the ceremony.

* * *

"The question is how the Chancellor and Minister will act," I mused. "What are your opinions?"

I was with Count Palatine Vodedt after he had just reported to me that Duke Warren had raised an army. Timona and Lord Salomon were also present, and I wanted their thoughts on how we should deal with the dukes.

"We have two options," I said. "Seize them to be executed before the people, or kill them on the spot."

"The former would make it easier for the citizenry to understand the regime change," the Count Palatine agreed. "But leaving the dukes alive carries the risk of their escape."

I nodded. "That it does. What do you two think?"

Salomon thought for a moment before speaking. "Assassination may be preferable. I have never heard of a sovereign killing his lords during his own coronation. For better or worse, it will leave an indelible mark on your reputation."

That was true. Killing dukes of all people at a state ceremony

would be a rude awakening for the rest of the nobility and establish a precedent. There was no doubt they would tread warily around me going into the future.

"But it would also dispel your image as a puppet," Timona contributed. "The nobility may become wary, but it will become more difficult for them to oppose you."

An equally valid point. Of course, even if the nobility couldn't oppose me during the coronation, there was plenty of leeway for them to do it after the dust had settled.

Nevertheless, if I wanted to directly administer the affairs of the state, having a reputation as a fool or a puppet would only serve as an irritating obstacle. If I could wipe that slate clean in a single moment—well, the profit outweighed the loss.

"Suppose we slay the dukes with our own hand," I asked. "How far will the ripples reach?"

"Assuming a posthumous trial is held to expose their criminal acts, I believe repercussions would be minimal," the Count Palatine answered. "Only those of the nobility with a guilty conscience will have reason to fear Your Majesty."

Okay, let's sort this all out. The benefits of holding a public execution were that the people would have a clear indicator of a change in government, and that the dukes would be labeled as evil while I would be seen as just. Overall, these factors would smooth out my effort to seize control of the city.

In terms of drawbacks, it left a minuscule possibility that either or both of the dukes would escape, leading to a quick regrouping of their factions—which we needed to remain in chaos for as long as possible. Of course, this drawback would pose no issue if we simply didn't allow them to escape.

On the other hand, killing the dukes on the spot would decapitate the factions and shock the nobles present into powerlessness. As the saying went, dead men could not speak in their own defense. Plus, it would do away with my poor public image.

In terms of drawbacks, it meant that more time and effort would need to be dedicated toward gaining the people's understanding. And after the coronation, time would be something I could not

spare. I needed to seize control of the capital, win Duke Warren under my command, then launch an offensive against the factions before they could break from their confusion.

Would adding one more delay be the card that collapsed the house?

"In the end, it will depend on how much force we are able to muster," I mused.

"Does that mean...we will be proceeding with the execution plan?" Timona asked.

"Yes. Though of course, this all assumes we can co-opt enough of the imperial guard to lock down the venue."

Timona bowed deeply. "I will not fail you, Your Majesty."

I nodded, then added a final addendum. "However, if our ability to apprehend the dukes becomes no longer a certainty, then we shall kill them ourself."

* * *

The Chancellor and Minister of Ceremony ascended the final step. In accordance with etiquette, they bowed deeply before me. Swords hung from their waists, just as Timona had reported.

In the Bundarte Empire, only the emperor was permitted to wear a weapon during the coronation. Yet, with the overwhelming degree of power these men had accumulated, there had been a chance they would openly disregard the rule.

It seemed that what we'd feared had come to pass.

I had no misconceptions that their swords were a provision for me; it was quite obvious that the weapons were a testament to their dread of each other. They might have temporarily joined forces for mutual benefit, but all the conflict and history between them had left little room for trust. They could not even fathom the idea of walking beside each other unarmed.

To the side of the throne was a cloth-covered stand. It held the scepter I'd been gifted, and beside that, in the place of the Ceremonial Sword, was the incomplete sacred sword wrapped in Rotahlian purple cloth. It was within arm's reach of me.

Thus, there were three people in this entire hall who were armed: the two men before me and myself.

It had to be me. With the dukes armed, locking this place down would prove that much more complicated. Failure was not an option. Risks had to be eliminated.

I stood from the throne. Quietly, slowly, feebly. So that I wouldn't draw suspicion.

As soon as I was on my feet, I reached toward the stand. Flexing my fingers to ensure my grip around the sword's hilt, I turned my eyes to the men before me.

Their own eyes were wide open. Their gazes matched mine, then flew to my right hand. Time seemed to slow to a crawl. With my left hand, I ripped the cloth wrapping away from my sword. It came away easily—I'd had Count Palatine Vodedt alter it beforehand—revealing the weapon's naked blade.

In retrospect, perhaps the Count Palatine had always known it would come to this.

My skill with a sword was nothing worth mentioning. I was no match for Timona. I would have to resort to magic to secure the kill.

The incomplete sacred sword had the ability to store mana. I drew out that mana now, wreathing the blade in heat. *Flamma Lux.* What would ordinarily have been a beam of thermal energy clung to the sword's blade, creating a searing edge.

I was surprised by how calm I felt. My left hand joined my right on the hilt, and my left foot stepped forward as I settled my aim.

It seemed comprehension had dawned for the two men. Their mouths opened to speak. I stepped forward, carefully channeling my strength into the motion of my swing. My blade's trajectory was angled, so as to cleave two necks of different heights in a single stroke.

For my entire life, I had feared assassination. For my entire life, I had played the fool. For my entire life, I had endured in silence. Baron Nain, the Teyanavi village, the guandaleo—I had not forgotten a single transgression. Thus, I had thought that all I would feel in this moment was gratification.

Yet, there was nothing. No abhorrence, no delight. Simply the

empty-minded swing of a sword.

The spell-wreathed blade passed from right to left with surprising ease.



Blood sprayed. I could feel the heat of some on my cheek. The faint scent of singed flesh began to spread.

The sound of two objects falling to the ground came and went. Before the crown could join them, I gently took it away in my left hand.

* * *

There had been a moment of deathly silence; I only noticed when the first scream ended it. More screams and shouts filled the air as chaos immediately descended upon the nobility. Amid the choking reek of blood, I took a deep breath and projected my voice as far as I was able.

"*Silence!*"

A pair of limp corpses slowly crumpled. Again, I raised my voice.

"Or have you forgotten why only the emperor is permitted a blade?!"

The nobles toward the front froze. My voice hadn't reached those at the back, but I could see armed imperial guards already rushing in the entrance.

I raised the sword in my right hand. Traces of charred blood still clung to it. "We have purged the criminals responsible for the deaths of our predecessor and the crown prince!" I proclaimed. "Should you object to our actions, come forth!"

Fortunately, Vastat, the Imperial Sword's ability to bend others to the wielder's will was unknown due to the weapon remaining in storage outside of imperial coronations. Only a select few knew the truth—Ein's Storytellers and the Rotahlian watchmen—and those select few were on my side. Even if some among the nobility had noticed my use of magic, they would assume it was the power of the Ceremonial Sword. After all, it was a far likelier assumption than me being able to cast spells beneath the mana-sealing wards.

I looked down upon the nobility, waiting. Timona had already run to my side. Yet nobody seemed willing to protest what I'd done.

At the back of the hall, the imperial guard under Balthazar's command had begun the process of arresting the nobility, one by

one. It seemed they'd already suppressed the unarmed imperial guards who'd been stationed inside. A number of the Count Palatine's agents were also assisting with locking down the venue, and there was little in the way of resistance to be seen. Everything was proceeding smoothly.

I lifted the warm crown in my left hand, preparing to place it on my head. That was when I finally noticed that my hands were shaking.

Unlike when I'd shot down that enemy commander with magic, I'd felt a physical response when cleaving through flesh with a blade. Both were equal acts of murder, so my shaking made no logical sense. But it seemed the body kept a more honest accounting of the weight of its doings than the mind.

I forced strength into my left arm and slowly raised the imperial crown into the air. Blood still trickled from it as I placed it upon my own head.

"We are Carmine de la Garde-Bundarte, eighth emperor of the Bundarte Empire!" I declared. "And we have crowned *Ourself*! Carve this into your hearts! After *no one* will we follow, and to *no one* will we yield!"

Blood trickled from the crown down my cheek.

"*We* are *emperor*!"

I spoke the words as if commanding the future to obey. Further down the hall, a spymaster slowly bowed his head in deference.

Not the End but the Beginning

After the coronation, I quickly washed the blood off me and summoned Count Palatine Vodedt, Daniel the Storyteller, and Count Nunvalle to my private quarters. Balthazar and Lord Salomon were busy with guard duty and keeping an eye on the nobles we'd seized, so I left them to it.

When the trio entered the room, they knelt as one and bowed their heads. I bid them to be at ease and they did so—with the exception of the count, who kept his head lowered.

"Count Nunvalle, you may raise your head."

"I...I cannot. For me to have been so blind to Your Majesty's intent—to think that it was all but an act to rid the Empire of the blackguards exploiting it—I am asha—"

I interrupted Count Nunvalle's apology by placing a hand on his shoulder. "It is only due to your efforts that the Empire remained in a state where it *could* be saved," I said. "You have our heartfelt gratitude, Count. Please. Raise your head."

"I...am unworthy of Your Majesty's words."

If anything, I felt bad for all the trouble I'd caused Count Nunvalle, not to mention the fact that I needed him to keep his nose to the grindstone for me. We had a distinct shortage of talented people and a mountain of problems we needed dealt with.

"We look forward to your continued service."

"Yes, Your Majesty. It would be my honor."

Honestly, maybe my main concern should have been whether I'd end up accidentally causing his death by overwork.

As the count took a seat by Daniel and the Count Palatine, I announced, "First, we wish to conduct a trial—albeit one stripped of the pomp and circumstance."

Incidentally, trials in this world didn't necessarily require things like the suspect being present or lawyers for the defense. They

didn’t even need the presiding judge to be neutral. In that sense, perhaps you couldn’t call it a “trial” in the same way you would one from my previous life, but in this world—in this age—that was the shape of justice.

“We hereby exercise the throne’s judicial power,” I continued. “Henceforth, the ducal house of Raul, as well as the ducal house of Agincarl, will stand trial in absentia for their crimes.”

To elaborate on the judicial power that I was talking about, first I need to explain that landed nobility possessed state-recognized—and therefore emperor-recognized—jurisdiction over their holdings. Among their rights (which were restricted to their direct holdings) were the right of taxation as well as judicial authority. In other words, whenever problems (disputes and such) cropped up in a territory, the local noble had the right to arbitrate the outcome. Meanwhile, the emperor possessed jurisdiction over those very nobles in turn.

Essentially, my declaration boiled down to “I’ll be using the emperor’s authority to put them on trial.” However, it was worth clarifying that much of this legal area was not explicitly codified, making it technically common law rather than statutory.

In plainer terms, that meant legislation regarding the topic was fast and loose. There were several reasons for this: confusion due to the parallel existence of familial law and imperial law; the disinclination of the privileged class (nobility and the royal family) to systematize laws that would restrict themselves; the tendency for armed might to trump force of law (with disputes being settled by conflict and war); et cetera, et cetera.

In the end, laws did not impose themselves; they required a force behind them. In a society more like the one I’d come from, this would be something like the police.

As for the Bundarte Empire, however, that role was fulfilled by the emperor’s armed might—the imperial army, in other words. But any army could, of course, be resisted. This was especially true for the nobility, who possessed armies of their own. If they were dissatisfied with the emperor’s arbitration over them, they tended to revolt—a tendency that in turn dissuaded the emperor from just laying down

the law as he pleased.

Naturally, this dynamic did not exist in a vacuum either. Any uninvolved nobility watching the proceedings could just as easily think, "tomorrow, that could be me," and join in on the revolt. Thus, it became necessary for the emperor to avoid stepping on his lords' toes.

That said, in this case I didn't have to worry about that sort of delicate balancing act. I mean, it wasn't as if Dukes Raul and Agincarl were going to object, and no matter what I did, their houses were sure to revolt anyway, given the whole, you know, killing their heads of house thing. It kind of made the idea of tiptoeing around them a moot point.

"As an ordained member of the First Faith, I, Daniel de Piers, hereby bear witness."

"The ducal house of Raul is accused of ordering the assassination of Crown Prince Jean," I announced. "The ducal house of Agincarl is accused of ordering the assassination of the late Edward IV. Furthermore, both houses are accused of wrongfully establishing a peace treaty detrimental to the interests of the Empire, of laying false charges upon the Marquess Agincarl d'Decci, the Marquess Ramitead, and the Count Veria, and of unjustly invading and occupying their holdings. Said ducal houses are also accused of further crimes, of which there are too many to list. Should anyone present object to these charges, speak."

A trial such as this required several individuals present in order to be legitimate. Aside from a member of the clergy to bear witness and the emperor to act as prosecution, there needed to be at least three members of the nobility to affirm or deny the charges. It bore mentioning that, in the event there were no objections, there was no need to provide proof of wrongdoing—hence why the nobility lacked any faith in this process. It had long since become the norm for them to publicly ignore or outright revolt against the adjudicated result.

"No objections have been raised," I continued. "Thus, we hereby declare the ducal house of Raul and the ducal house of Agincarl guilty. In light of their crimes, they shall be stripped of all titles and

status, and their holdings and fortunes—in entirety—are declared forfeit. Additionally, the heads of both houses are sentenced to death, with their heads to be put on public display. Should anyone present object to this ruling, speak."

All in all, that was a considerably heavy sentence. But in this case, the heavier it was, the louder the message would be about the gravity of their crimes. And therein lay my objective behind holding this trial.

"No objections have been raised," I concluded. "The ruling stands. Both houses shall be stripped of all titles and status, and their holdings and fortunes seized in entirety. In addition, the heads of both houses are sentenced to death, with their heads to be put on public display. Trial adjourned."

"As an ordained member of the First Faith, I, Daniel de Piers, do attest that this trial was conducted in accordance with the law, and that justice has been dispensed."

Incidentally, Daniel's title of "ordained member" was basically synonymous with "member of the clergy." Nonordained members existed too, lower in the hierarchy, and they technically *weren't* members of the clergy. For all intents and purposes, the Archprelate himself (representative of the Western Orthodoxy) was a simple ordained member as well. Of course, whether this organizational structure applied differently in other denominations, I had no idea.

"Count Palatine Vodedt, display their heads as we planned," I ordered. "Do treat them with care."

"By Your Majesty's command."

Now we were in a race against time. If a civilian riot broke out, that'd be check and mate for me.

"Prelate Officium Daniel. What is the status of the church?" I asked.

"Already under control, Your Majesty. We have sentenced Georg V to be burned at the stake. The proceedings may be carried out as soon as you transfer him into our custody."

"Tomorrow, then. Thank you for your efforts."

In case you were wondering, even the emperor had no jurisdiction to execute a clergy member; such arbitration had to be

handed out by their own. So as much as the phrasing left more to be desired, I was grateful they'd be putting the torch to the guy.

"And Count Palatine Vodedt," I said. "Regarding the venue for our address..."

If we'd been able to capture the dukes and publicly execute them, the citizenry would've had a clear indicator of the political shift. However, I'd purged them at the coronation hall, meaning there was a chance I could fail to gain the people's understanding. As such, I had decided to give a speech. All that was left was to decide where.

"We suppose the White Plaza is out of the question?" I asked.

"Unfortunately so," the Count Palatine confirmed. "We would be unable to guarantee Your Majesty's safety. The upper bound of our guaranteed security would be the Black Plaza."

The White Plaza was located outside the limits of the original imperial capital area, in between the districts formerly known as the cities of Seydi and Dudet. In contrast, the Black Plaza was within the original walls. Since the former was larger and situated near major residential areas, it was the better choice for a public address—but not enough so that it was worth taking on the extra risk.

"Furthermore, as predicted, we will only be able to manage a hundred or so new city residents," the Count Palatine continued. "You have my sincere apologies."

The city of Cardinal could be divided into two chief domains: the old city districts, and the new city districts. Since I'd currently restricted traffic between them, giving a speech in the old city wouldn't ensure it would reach the new city. Thus, in the event that giving it in the new city was impossible, I'd asked the Count Palatine to bring at least a hundred new city residents over.

"If you say that is the limit, then we must make do," I conceded. "Proceed with the arrangements."

"By Your Majesty's will."

It wouldn't matter if the old city residents accepted me if a riot broke out in the new city. Ideally, I would've liked to have more of the latter's residents in attendance, but I was already running our agents ragged with multiple jobs. I had to stay realistic.

"Ah, and Count Palatine."

"Yes, Your Majesty?"

"We look forward to your continued service."

Way back when, I'd asked the Count Palatine to lend me his strength until the coronation. Now that I'd crowned myself, I figured the implication was that he'd continue to offer me his loyalty, but making things clear couldn't hurt. Just in case.

"Of course, Your Majesty," the Count Palatine said with a small smile. "What I said to you that day bore no trace of falsehood."

That...was a little ominous, honestly. But whatever.

* * *

It was decided that I'd deliver my public address from the cathedral of the Western Orthodoxy. I had some time before everything was ready, which I spent ruminating over my future plans while drinking Timona's herbal tea.

Firstly, the nobles I'd arrested needed handling. I'd have to decide to release them or punish them on an individual basis. Even if I did the former, the timing was crucial. Early, and their status as lords would be stable; late, and their holdings might fall into chaos—especially if they had second or third sons who were tempted to make a play for the position of heir. If I timed everything well, I could basically control the nobility's actions, so it bore careful consideration.

Next there was the matter of Duke Warren. I was fairly sure Nadine had safely reached him with my letter, but how would he choose to act? Given the circumstances, he'd undoubtedly return to the Empire's fold, but the issue was what he'd do afterward. I wanted him to leave his army here for me, but there was a chance he'd return to his holdings too. And I needed every soldier I could get my hands on right now.

Speaking of which, there was also Count Chamneau's force to consider. I had to disarm the private noble armies within it as soon as possible; it'd be a substantial pain if they ran to the rescue of their lords, after all. I needed to keep a close eye on them.

As for the mercenaries, though, Count Chamneau was handling them well. Their original employers were Dukes Raul and Agincarl, meaning they had been a step away from becoming my enemies. However, after my meeting with the count, he had convinced the dukes to accept him as the mercenaries' chief employer—at least until the battle against Duke Warren was over—under the reasoning that having a differing employer and commander might cause the mercenaries to ignore or disobey orders on the field.

Thanks to that, Count Chamneau was currently the one handing out the mercenaries' paychecks, meaning they'd obey him until further notice—which was soon, actually, since their contracts weren't very long and we didn't have the funds to rehire them.

That brought us to the topic of money. Or more accurately, our total lack of it. I had a number of fundraising ideas, but none would help us re-sign a host of sellsword bands in the short term. I couldn't just dismiss them, though, since they'd be quick to resort to banditry. What to do, what to do...

Finally, there was the biggest issue of all: the upcoming conflict with the Duchies of Raul and Agincarl.

We had managed to take most of the nobility into custody, as they'd attended the coronation, but "most" wasn't "all," and they had families waiting back home. Dukes Raul and Agincarl were no exception.

Duke Raul had a son by the name of Sigmund de Van-Raul, a cavalry commander. Currently, he was preparing the Duchy of Raul's forces for a possible conflict with the Gotiroir tribe. As for Duke Agincarl, his second son August de Agincarl, the Marquess Agincarl d'Decci, was likewise still in the Duchy of Agincarl. Once news of my purge reached Sigmund and August, I had no doubt they would declare that they would succeed their fathers' ducal titles and marshal their armies. The Empire would only truly be under my control after I'd subdued them.

Long story short, nothing was over yet. In fact, this was only the beginning—a civil war had just kicked off. But it was also my golden opportunity to beat the dukes' heirs into submission. With their fathers—leaders of the factions and lords of their holdings—gone,

the duchies would be in chaos, and I had most of the faction nobility in chains. Without them in my way, I could strike at the Duchies of Raul and Agincarl directly.

And once I had the duchies under my control, the faction nobility would be no more than a disorganized mob of rabble. The only question that remained was how I was going to achieve that, but I had—

"Your Majesty," Timona said, interrupting my train of thought. "The preparations are complete."

I shelved my plans for the moment. There was a speech I had to give first. "Indeed? I'll be there shortly."

"Before that, Your Majesty. Here."

I turned and saw that Timona was proffering me a sword, still in its scabbard. "Is that...what I think it is?"

"I took the liberty of procuring a scabbard for it," Timona explained. "If Your Majesty intends to continue wielding it, I believe it would be best to alter its public image."

I pulled the blade out slightly and saw red still clinging to the metal. "Dried blood?" I asked.

"Yes. If others see it as the Ceremonial Sword, they will recall Emperor Cardinal's edict. But if its image as a blade of purgation is stronger, those objecting to your use of it will lose ground."

I considered that for a moment. "The Blade of Purgation, huh? I like that." Timona was right; this was one issue for which a single impression could make a big difference.

"One last thing," Timona said. "The Count Palatine has discovered one of Duke Warren's agents in the city. They appear to have been gathering information. I believed you should be aware."

I wasn't too surprised; the agent in question probably *was* just gathering intel—what was happening, and how. After all, Duke Warren didn't seem like the kind of guy who'd be fully convinced by a single letter.

In that case, it might be a good idea to include a message for him in my speech too...

"Very well," I said. "If that's all, then I must go."

Like the Founding Day that had come and gone so long ago, I

would soon stand before my people. But this time, I wasn’t afraid.

Epilogue: The Emperor’s Address

As the coronation took place within the imperial demesne, a disquieting air hung over the capital. The city’s gates had been blockaded without word or warning. A hush fell over the streets, with even the ever-busy Black Plaza falling as silent as the grave. The air hung still and heavy, as it would in anticipation of an oncoming storm.

When the stillness broke, it broke first at the cathedral.

The stronghold of the First Faith’s Western Orthodoxy had been constructed at the time of the city’s founding, and looked out onto one side of the Black Plaza. Today, as on all days, the ardent faithful had come to worship. However, in an abrupt turn of events, they were ushered out by the sudden appearance of members of the upper clergy, from minister superiors to even the hierarchs.

For some time afterward, one could hear shouts and bellows coming from within the cathedral. The people recognized that something was not right. By then, in the imperial demesne, the coronation had begun.

Silence held fast over the city. Its gates were under tight guard, with even passage between the old districts (the original city of Cardinal) and the new (the former cities of Seydi and Dudet) restricted. But, some time after midday had come and gone, a hundred or so citizens were suddenly escorted by the city guard to the Black Plaza.

Then word spread that the newly crowned emperor would be making an appearance at the cathedral, and that all those who wished to see him should gather.

By this time, the people of the city had already surmised that some manner of irregularity had occurred in the imperial demesne, and many were bracing themselves for political upheaval. What form it would take, however, none knew. How could they, when they did

not even know who their new sovereign would be? Rumor spread that the young emperor had been deposed, replaced upon the throne by one of Duke Raul or Duke Agincarl.

Seeking the truth, much of the citizenry headed for the plaza, packing it tight with bodies. Finally, under the careful watch of city and imperial guards, the emperor's carriage arrived.

That day would be recorded as Carmine's first public address to the people of Cardinal. Notably, news of the young emperor's accession to the throne was received with much shock and joy among the citizenry.

* * *

"Dear people of Cardinal."

A single man stood upon the cathedral's balcony, facing the gathered masses in the plaza as he spoke.

"Our beloved imperial citizens. We are Carmine de la Garde-Bundarte, eighth emperor of the Bundarte Empire."

His voice belonged to that of a boy, still high-pitched, immature. But perhaps that was exactly why it resounded so clearly across the Black Plaza.

"As Duke Warren's army approaches, you have spent the recent days in unease. Yet you need fear no longer. Why? Because his cause is not rebellion."

For the majority of the citizenry, it was the first they'd seen him since the Founding Day parade. The boy from back then had grown, a solemn, imperial dignity clear in his bearing.

"We, as emperor, hereby declare: Duke Warren is no traitor to the Empire. No, that appellation belongs to the men known as Karl, the Duke Raul, and Phillip, the Duke Agincarl."

A wave of shock rippled through the plaza. Had the emperor himself just branded the Chancellor and Minister of Ceremony—the two most powerful men in the Empire—traitors?

Murmurs broke out amid the crowd. The emperor's tone shifted, becoming more forceful.

"Citizens! The late emperor Edward IV, our grandfather, loved

you. He loved the Empire with all his being, and fought valiantly to serve as its custodian. Our father, the late Crown Prince Jean, was the same. To protect you, he took up his sword and strode toward the battlefield. This, you all know."

The former Crown Prince Jean had enjoyed almost fanatical support from the people of the imperial capital. The gallant figure he had struck of a leader from the front and conqueror of the Empire's enemies had painted him as a hero to all.

"Yet our father—the crown prince who should be your guardian still—was murdered."

When their hero died, the people of the city had fallen into grief. It had only been a decade and some since that day of tragedy, and his memory still lingered strong in their minds.

"Was it by an enemy nation? No. No, our dear citizens. It was no outside foe who felled the brave crown prince. It was none other than Karl, the Duke Raul!"

The roars of the crowd enveloped the plaza. Yet the emperor continued to speak, no hesitation in his words.

"And while the Empire was still *grieving*! One man murdered the emperor and plotted to seize the Empire for himself! Indeed, I speak of Phillip, the Duke Agincarl!"

The plaza was a cacophony of noise, shouts and jeers filling every inch of space. But the emperor's voice thundered above it all.

"In their rapacious greed, the traitors murdered the emperor and crown prince! They sold off imperial land! Condemned your fellow countrymen to die! And unjustly seized governance over the Empire! All to fill their own pockets! They corrupted our homeland, robbing you blind with unfair, excessive taxation!"

Fury. A primal human register. It was simple in its nature, and far easier to comprehend than any clever sociological treatise.

Some raged at their hero's assassination. Some were inflamed at the thought that their poverty had only come about to satisfy the greed of those in higher stations. Others smoldered because they knew the hollow regret of those whose lands were ceded to another nation, while yet more felt the righteous indignation that tyranny was so wont to inspire. No two people felt the same fury. Yet it was

all fury all the same.

All at once, every citizen gathered in the plaza was seized in the grip of one, singular human feeling.

"Then they bided their time, scheming to kill and usurp us! For their tyranny, they shall not be forgiven! For their usurpation, they shall not be forgiven! For their sins, *they shall not be forgiven*!"

The people's cries of anger shook the plaza. One and all, souls united in outrage.

"Under their rule, this Empire was shattered. Its dignity trampled underfoot. It feared the blades of other nations, and its farmers were left to wallow in destitution. Yet as though that were not unjust enough, the traitors looked down upon you—Our dear, beloved people—from on high, and *laughed* as they ground you into the dirt, all for their own selfish desires!"

Duke Raul and Duke Agincarl were evil. Irredeemably so. Of that, there was no longer any doubt.

Slowly, Carmine looked over the crowd. He watched in silence as the plaza continued to steep in its anger, the cries of the people the only noise in his ears. He stood before their fury unflinching, waiting as the sound ebbed away like the tide.

All present awaited the emperor's next words. He shut his eyes, just once, and then they flew open as he roared.

"But you need endure their atrocities no longer! Why?! Because today, they have *fallen*!"

Two crates were arranged before the cathedral. As the emperor spoke, the imperial guard retrieved their contents: a pair of severed heads.

"Karl, the Duke Raul, murderer of our father and your guardian! Phillip, the Duke Agincarl, the criminal who assassinated our predecessor! On this day, We—Carmine, eighth emperor of the Bundarte Empire—have purged them with our own hands!"

Carmine unsheathed his sword, thrusting it into the air.



The pair of heads, the blood upon the emperor's sword—it was likely that only those at the very front could see. Yet all present understood. The evil had been vanquished. And the one to do it had been the boy before them: the small yet valiant Emperor Carmine.

"Victory is ours! The reign of evil is no more!"

Joyous cheers filled the plaza. Evil had been defeated. The treacherous lords preying upon the Empire were gone, and the future of the nation was bright. Such was what everyone present believed.

"Our dearest citizens of Cardinal! We, Carmine, eighth emperor of the Bundarte Empire, declare this before the city that bears the name of our venerated forefather! We declare it before you, the proud people of the Empire!"

Cheers for the emperor filled every corner of the plaza.

"The Empire shall be reborn! We will see this nation once again reign over the continent! This we swear—We will deliver the Empire *victory*!"

Not a soul went unswayed by the emperor's words. Even the unease that they should have felt at his youth had become but a symbol of the Empire's bright future.

"Glory to the Empire!"

—Glory to the Empire!

—Long live His Majesty the Emperor!

Fervorous joy engulfed the plaza, continuing on, and on, and on.

—Our hope! Our light!

They were the same cheers Carmine had heard on the day he'd decided to live as the emperor. But now, they resounded all throughout the city.

Extra Chapter: A Record of the Thorn Princess's Growth

Nadine de Van-Warren was proud that Duke Warren was her father. He was feared by his enemies, adored by his people, and possessed such trust from his officers and soldiery that it bordered on religious belief. Nadine respected her father, whose loyalty to the emperor remained firm even after he'd lost an eye, and so she worked hard in order to become a daughter worthy of him. As a noble, when it came to her conduct, etiquette, and studies, she was among the best of her generation—the result of tireless daily effort to not bring shame upon her father's name.

Hence, when Nadine first heard the rumors surrounding Emperor Carmine, she could not sit still. In her mind, the sovereign of the Empire to which her exceptional father had sworn his loyalty needed to be just as exceptional. The idea that he wasn't invoked in her a kind of righteous umbrage.

She felt it again during her first meeting with him. Emperor Carmine's dim-witted and slothful conduct lived up to his reputation, and her incensed provocations—to motivate him to improve himself—were met with naught but flippant comebacks and condescending laughter.

In short, the emperor made her very mad.

Though, precisely speaking, her anger was not directed at him. Nadine herself failed to notice this, but the true target of her anger was the people around the young Carmine, who were content to allow him to wallow in mediocrity.

"Father, I am going to the imperial capital! I shall continue my studies by His Majesty's side and ensure he becomes a more respectable person—even if only by a little!"

Thus, Nadine left her father and departed for Cardinal. If the

adults wouldn't teach Emperor Carmine anything, then *she* would have to. There was no doubt in her mind that she was capable; after all, everyone extolled her as a prodigy. She could change his ways—of that, she was certain.

* * *

"I have come to beat that rotten nature of yours into shape!"

Despite Nadine's proclamation upon arriving at the capital, her days in the imperial demesne were epitomized by frustration. No matter how much she appealed to the nobility to give Carmine more of an education, their only ever answer was, "But of course. As soon as His Majesty wishes for it." Yet the young emperor in question barely paid attention in what few lessons he had—that is, when he wasn't skipping them entirely. And if that wasn't the worst of it, he constantly acted rudely toward her, using the excuse that she was younger—she *was*, but only by one year!—and whenever she bit back, the attendant who was always with him would send her death glares.

For better or worse, Nadine was an "ordinary" young noble lady. She was outstanding in comparison to the others of her generation, yes, but she did not possess memories of a past life, nor a spirit forged by the burden of a collapsing kingdom. Her resolve was not that of the boy who had sworn to use his life in his liege's service, and neither was it of the young man who desperately sought the vindication of his fallen house. She was only ordinary, and to her, the vipers' den of the imperial demesne was far too cruel a place to be.

Nadine knew that the adults of the imperial demesne considered her a nuisance. Nobility, merchants, even the servants distanced themselves from her. If not for the attendants she'd brought with her from home, her life would have been quite isolated indeed.

Nevertheless, that she did not run from her hardship was a testament to her innate hatred of losing, and to the heartening presence of Carmine himself. The emperor did not heed her words, true. Yet despite his exasperation, neither did he push her away. He always returned her dogged persistence with a response, even if

that often took the form of an annoyed expression.

It stood in stark contrast to how the adults received her, never giving her more than false smiles, and so, little by little and disoriented all the while, Nadine became more openhearted with Carmine.

Of course, this only manifested as a redoubling of her efforts to badger him, but what is affection if not myriad in its forms?

* * *

After spending several years in Carmine's vicinity, Nadine began to realize that "lazy" and "foolish" were perhaps not as sound a set of adjectives for him as she'd initially believed. For instance, after skipping classes, a genuine lazy fool would like as not hole up in his quarters or spend his time gallivanting about. Carmine instead chose to spend the majority of his time riding.

Among the nobility, riding was a more uncommon skill than not, as many preferred the convenience of a carriage. Even Nadine had not sat astride a horse until after she'd come to the imperial demesne. Incited by her sense of rivalry against Carmine, it had taken her no small amount of effort to finally achieve competency, and the experience gave her an inkling of the invisible effort that Carmine was putting in.

But despite her new insight into his true nature, Nadine did not stop urging Carmine to study. Rather, now that she knew he was no common fool, she firmly believed that he was obliged to study *more*. After all, he still needed to become a liege worthy of her father's service.

Of course, this would have resulted in Carmine being assassinated by either the Chancellor or the Minister of Ceremony. Nadine, however, was ignorant of this—albeit through no fault of her own. Publicly, the dukes maintained an image of geniality, and their pampering of the young emperor was well-known.

Even until the time of Carmine's first tour, Nadine still believed that the dukes were soft on him.

"You're running off on a leisure trip when all you do is skip

classes anyway?! Unbelievable!”

Despite her vehement protests, Carmine refused to listen. It was only after the young emperor temporarily vanished following an attack by the Garfure Republic during his tour that Nadine became aware of her misconceptions. For the first time, she got a glimpse of the imperial court’s true nature.

* * *

During Carmine’s first tour, Nadine spent her time partly in the imperial capital and partly in her father’s duchy. By coincidence, she happened to be in the former when news broke of the attack on the emperor.

“The tour contingent was attacked and annihilated by Garfurian cavalry! His Majesty’s whereabouts are unknown!”

That single, brief notice spread through the imperial demesne like wildfire, agitating it into a beehive of activity. Some pressed the messenger for more information, while others sought explanations from the Archprelate or Minister of Ceremony, and yet more immediately prepared to leave the city for their own holdings. Amid the chaos, Nadine—who had no influence and no connections—was left floundering. There was no one she could rely on, and no one she could ask for more detailed news.

Forced to gather her own information, she began eavesdropping on passing conversations and lingering outside rooms when she could get away with it. During one such endeavor, while she was in the vicinity of an imperial guard break room whose door had been left slightly ajar, she heard two guards discussing the matter.

“You know, it reminds me of what happened to His Highness the crown prince.”

“Shut up, you dullard. What if somebody’s listening?” There was a pause. “Besides, everyone’s already noticed that. No doubt you-know-who’s behind it. Or the other one.”

“But His Majesty’s only ten.”

“You think that would make *them* hesitate? In any case, you should get an escape plan in order. Worst comes to worst, this city

ends up a battleground."

This was the first time Nadine had heard anything of the rumor that Crown Prince Jean had been assassinated. Her father had never told her of such suspicions. The thought that Carmine might have met the same fate struck her dizzy, as though her vision had gone pitch-black.

Later, she was able to catch a panicked exchange between two of Carmine's ladies-in-waiting in a hallway.

"So which of them did it?! Duke Raul? Or Duke Agincarl?"

"Don't ask me! But if they killed his entourage, they might come for us too!"

"Are you proposing that we run, then?! We can't! How would we even—"

Though distant, Nadine was still able to make out their words. It seemed that everybody was of the opinion that one of the dukes—who seemed so doting on the young emperor on the surface—had masterminded the attack. Slowly, Nadine began to realize the depths of her own ignorance.

At the same time, she was perturbed by the ladies-in-waiting, who feared not for their liege, Carmine, but for themselves. In the Duchy of Warren, it would be an unthinkable sight for a vassal to place themself before one they served. It made her wonder—could it be that everyone around Carmine was so honorless and self-serving?

Hushed conversations bloomed all throughout the imperial demesne, and all were marked by the assumption that Carmine had been killed. Their main topic of concern was not whether he had survived but who the next emperor would be.

Growing up, Nadine had been her father's precious little girl. Thus, Duke Warren had not told her of the nature of nobles or the depths to which he detested it. Their profiteering, their self-serving egos, and their tendency toward groupthink—he'd kept her away from the darker truths of high society. Perhaps one could call Nadine naive, in that sense. Certainly, the imperial court's sudden transformation—not even a day had passed since the news—came as a terrible shock to her.

Then, once it became known that Carmine had survived, the

factions shifted their attentions to making sure the blame fell anywhere but on their heads. It was an unseemly conflict, and it filled Nadine's heart with terror. Her entire life, she had been taught that it was the duty of imperial nobility to serve the emperor. To instead treat him as a disposable plaything? It was too frightening to even bear contemplating.

Yet even so, Nadine did not run.

"Idiot. I was worried about you."

That was what she said to him upon his safe return, between the tears. She clung to him tightly, relieved that he was unharmed.

All the while, another girl was watching.

* * *

Several days after Carmine departed on his second tour, two young noblewomen sat opposite each other in a garden within the imperial demesne. One was Nadine, daughter to the Duke Warren, and the other was Rosaria Van-Chalongé-Cruveillier, the princess of Belvére to whom Carmine was betrothed.

"Please, you don't have to be so nervous. You'll hurt my feelings."

Being a daughter of nobility, tea parties were frequent events for Nadine, and her etiquette was without flaw. But on this particular occasion, her conversational partner was a princess, and if that were not nerve-racking enough, they were alone.

"I humbly apologize for my inadequacies, Your Highness."

The girls did not speak to each other often. Rosaria was not always by Carmine's side, and when she was, Nadine usually chose to stay at a respectable distance.

"That is exactly what I mean," Rosaria grumbled discontentedly. "I suppose I should bring this up first, then." Her expression became serious. "Ever since His Majesty returned, you've been holding back."

Now that Nadine understood the danger of Carmine's circumstances, she had stopped her usual practice of confronting him with her grievances over his behavior. How could she not have? She was worried that he might be assassinated at any moment.

"I...I am sorry for my previous behavior," Nadine apologized. In

her mind, Rosaria had arranged this tea party to scold her for pestering her betrothed. “It was not my intention to cause Your Highness offense. I shall refrain from doing so in the futu—”

“No, no, quite the opposite,” Rosaria interrupted. “Your sudden change will draw suspicion. And...” She smiled. “You have never once caused me offense, Nadine. Let alone His Majesty. To him, you are one of the very few he feels comfortable letting his guard down around. So, please—just continue to be yourself.”

To Nadine, the surprise from Rosaria’s words felt like a physical blow. Yet at the same time, they had the strange ring of truth. Perhaps to Carmine, who was surrounded by untrustworthy adults, a child of the same age was a rare source of solace. The more she thought about it, the more hindsight told her that he’d indeed always seemed to be enjoying himself whenever he teased her for lecturing him.

“Also...”

Nadine raised her head and saw that Rosaria’s expression had yet again changed completely. Now, the princess looked sulky.

“Please don’t call me ‘Your Highness.’ It makes me feel lonely.”

After some consideration, Nadine blushed faintly, and she dropped her gaze. “Then...may I treat you as an older sister, R-Rosaria?” Secretly, she had always admired the older girl, whose conduct as a princess was perfect in execution—a model for her own.

“Nothing would make me happier! Let’s support His Majesty together, okay?”

The girls would continue to deepen their relationship thereafter, which became a source of bewilderment for Carmine, who had no idea when they’d become such fast friends.

Afterword

Long time no see. Masekinokatasa here. Please allow me to express my sincerest gratitude for purchasing volume 2 of *Imperial Reincarnation*.

With the second volume, we've finally arrived at a good milestone point in the story. Honestly, I think that the way volume 1 ended was a little half-baked, so I feel quite remorseful for those who stopped there. I'm sorry. (Not that there's any point in me saying this in volume 2's afterword.)

Now then, in this volume, Carmine has finally stepped onto the stage of history. The event that future historians will come to refer to as the "Scarlet Coronation" will surely go down as a turning point for the Bundarte Empire.

However, the assumption of direct imperial rule (that's when the sovereign themself administers the government) alone is not any sort of guarantee of a stable reign. As a ruler, Carmine has finally arrived at the starting line. There are a mountain of problems he still has to deal with, so the story must continue. As the author, I'd like to make it as long as I can for you to enjoy...but I'm afraid this author in particular has quite the slow pen. Come on, Masekinokatasa. You can't blame everything on your health, you know.

Lastly, I would like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to everyone at TO Books, who have continued their excellent work from volume 1 and delivered such a wonderful final product. I am deeply moved that they also saw fit to grant *Imperial Reincarnation* a manga version. (Check it out if you're interested, everyone!)

Likewise, my deepest thanks also go to Kaito Shibano-sama, who has once again provided such high-quality illustrations. I like coffee too! Though I can only really drink it black.

And above all, I would like to thank all of you from the bottom of

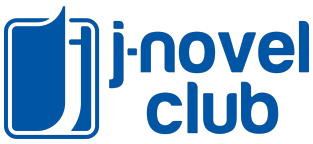
my heart for sparing your time to pick up this book.

May we meet in the next volume.

May 2022, Masekinokatasa







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by Masekinokatasa

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