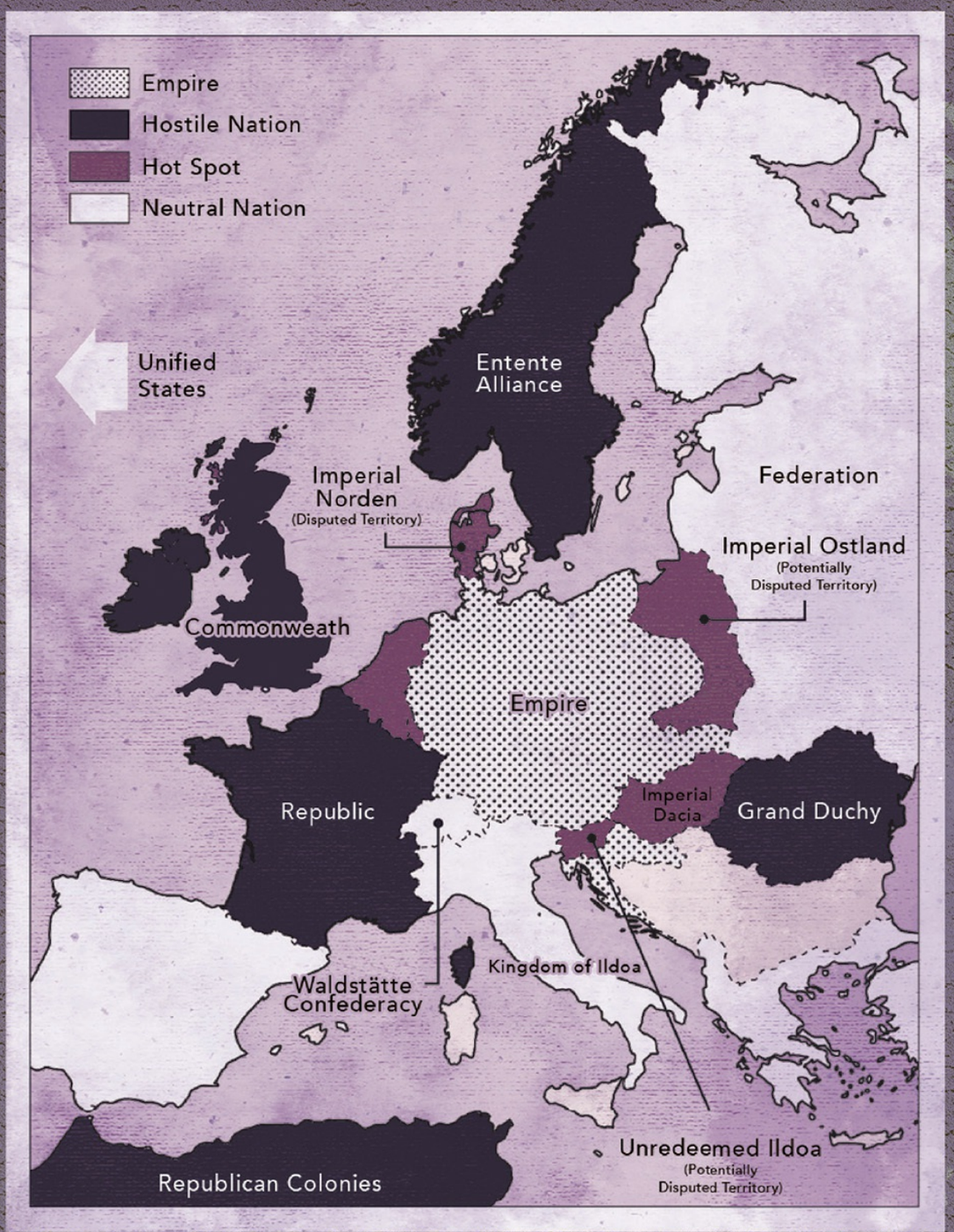
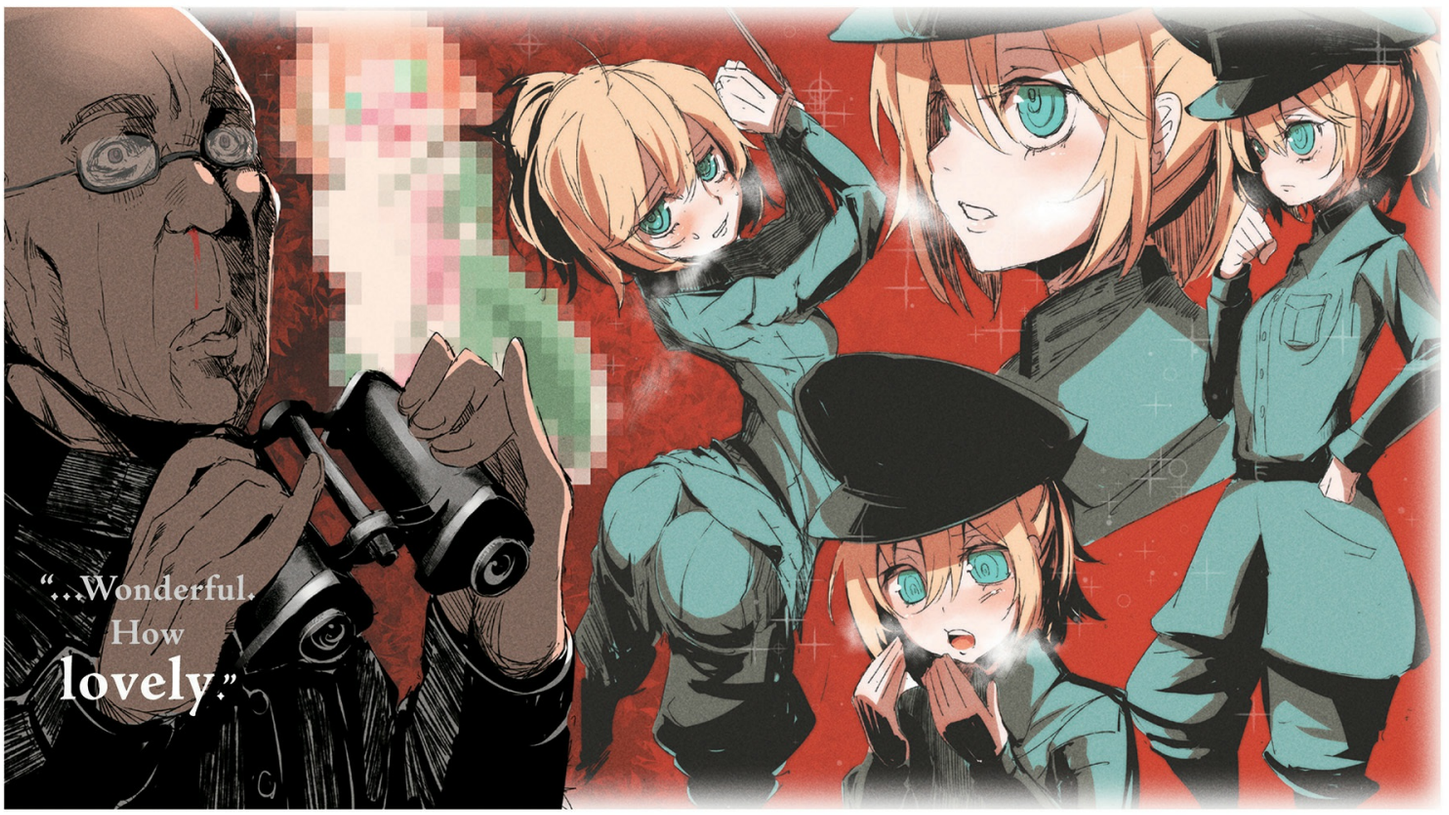

THE SAGA OF TANYA THE EVIL
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[STORY BY]
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Dabit Deus His Quoque Finem
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Dabit Deus His Quoque Finem

THE SAGA OF TANYA THE EVIL


"Good-bye, I guess?"
The enemy soldier gapes at the submachine gun Tanya thrust out at her.
!!
"Y-y-you're—!"


"...Wonderful.
How
lovely."

THE SAGA OF TANYA THE EVIL

Dabit Deus His Quoque Finem

〔4〕

Carlo Zen

Illustration by Shinobu Shinotsuki

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The Saga of Tanya the Evil, Vol. 4

Carlo Zen

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I

A Long-Range Reconnaissance Mission

Horrible things have many friends. Take bad news, for instance: You always get a lot at once.

Lieutenant General Hans von Zettour at the eastern situation review meeting

[chapter] I A Long-Range Reconnaissance Mission

MARCH 15, UNIFIED YEAR 1926, OVER THE EMPIRE'S EASTERN BORDER REGION

Soaring inconspicuously through the sky above the Empire's eastern border is a twin-engine transport plane. The workhorse of the Imperial Army Air Transport Unit is making a rare night flight.

The navigation lights, normally set to be as bright and clear as possible in friendly airspace to avoid collisions, have been turned off…

The camouflaged body of the plane flies leisurely toward its destination under the cover of darkness without a sound, save the slight drone of its motors. Ninety-nine out of a hundred people who glanced up at the sky would have no way of knowing that anything was there.

Its paint job was designed for flying into enemy territory, making the nationality unclear.

Originally a fighter, the craft has been outfitted against detection with every possible countermeasure available to the air command of a special operations group that, plainly speaking, didn't hesitate to violate borders.

Even if the controller at the Eastern Air Defense Combat Direction Center, organized under the Empire's Eastern Army Group, reported that they'd seen something weird on the radar, it wouldn't be noted officially in any report. If anyone there tried to file one, the visiting General Staff officers would simply stop by to insist, *You didn't see anything*, and that would be that.

The personnel on board this rather troubling craft can practically be called an imperial military secret. After all, the unit is the pet project of the General Staff, prepared to do even wet work in a pinch.

Yes, inclusion in this type of special ops group is synonymous with acknowledgment as the Imperial Army's cream of the crop. Most officers are unreservedly in awe of their legendary bravery and skill.

…Of course, for the unit's commander in question, awe is wholly unnecessary.

All I want is for someone to trade places with me.

Aware that she's getting nowhere with this futile train of thought, the leader of the special ops group assigned to this long-range reconnaissance mission deep behind enemy lines, Major Tanya von Degurechaff, gives a small inward sigh.

Looking down, I see my two tiny hands. No matter how you slice it, this is too heavy a burden for the fragile frame of a little girl. If I fulfill all the requirements of being a minor, then I'd like to request the appropriate protections. But no, even Tanya's daydreams don't include the possibility of leaving the front lines by suddenly pulling the child card and saying she doesn't want to fight.

The 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion is under direct command of the Imperial Army General Staff and, hence, is an extremely rare sort of battalion—it has the authority to act independently. Moreover, we've racked up a respectable pile of achievements. In other words, we made the mistake of proving ourselves useful. It also worked to our disadvantage that we were originally created through the good offices of the General Staff at home. To the higher-ups, we're a very convenient tool.

Thanks to that, we've been thrown onto every front, massaged into a band of veterans. From Commander von Degurechaff all the way down, every masterful officer in the battalion enjoys the reputation of being an elite.

That's why Tanya is cradling her head in her hands and lamenting, *I don't want to fight, but I suppose it's hard to escape at the moment*.

Having thought that far, she mulls over the events of several hours ago—and how her happiness at landing back in the imperial capital was so short-lived.

We'll go back a few hours.

Arriving over the imperial capital for the first time in a while, she noticed the sky felt cramped due to the dense interception line. She was thoroughly fed up with someone on the ground challenging her every time she passed through the multilayered anti–air defense zone.

They may have doubled as patrols, but their need to greet her colleagues from the instructor unit, too, was often annoying.

In the first place, humans aren't built to enjoy being challenged at gunpoint, even by friendly forces simply doing their duty.

Still, a few hours ago, as Tanya flew along the predesignated route over the capital, she was blessed with a sense of calm that was so total, the complicated procedures didn't bother her one bit.

After all, she'd finally managed to return to the capital. After the city they'd missed so much came into view from afar, the whole unit was in a good mood. It was impossible for the soldiers to conceal their delight at being summoned back to the home country and away from the southern front's boundless, barren sand.

Truly, the only word for the feeling was *ecstasy*. In the present, however, Tanya finds her optimism so utterly idiotic that she wants to literally curse herself.

In her defense, though, at the time it was no wonder.

Major Tanya von Degurechaff was sick of the battlefield, so any reason that granted freedom from the front lines was cause for genuine celebration. A summons to the home country was good news if there ever was such a thing, and she had no reason to be suspicious of the order.

Until they touched down at their designated billet, Tanya happily believed it—that they had been called home for leave. It was so generous of command to properly rotate personnel, she was nearly impressed.

Then her acquaintances Colonel von Lergen and Major Uger showed up to receive their report. For a returning unit, a greeting from familiar faces was undoubtedly a relief. The brass were being so considerate she admired their

human resources skills.

After allowing her troops to rest at ease, she instructed the officers to look after their men as she turned to Colonel von Lergen to give their report.

“All members of the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion reporting directly to the General Staff, including Major Tanya von Degurechaff, have returned from the southern front with no one left behind.”

“Good work, Major von Degurechaff. I’ve heard from the Southern Expeditionary Army about the magnificent things you’ve achieved. They said you really went all in, and when I looked at the combat reports, I was moved to find it true.”

“Thank you, Colonel von Lergen!”

“And you don’t have to worry about the decoration applications you submitted for your troops. I’ll do whatever it takes to get them through—think of it as my personal appreciation for your distinguished service in the south.”

They exchanged salutes with the awareness and pride of professionals. It was reassuring that Lergen had stated he would see to the applications.

It was the declaration of a career soldier—an officer of the General Staff, no less, so it probably wasn’t mere lip service. The weight of their achievements and his trust in them said his words could be taken as a contract.

“Sorry, I would have liked to present them this very moment alongside my gratitude, but we only received the recommendations a few days ago. I personally tried to expedite them, but…apparently, the administrators need some time to get through the paperwork.”

“No, I apologize that we didn’t maintain better contact. Military postal services were so limited in the war zone that I couldn’t even send a friendly note ahead.”

It was a textbook exchange of politeness and regrets regarding the interrupted communication.

Tanya would have liked to have kept better track of the situation in the home country, but…the only thing available was letters sent by ship, nothing so simple

as telegraph or e-mail. And that's why speaking face-to-face was so essential.

She should have polished her nonverbal communication skills. Her guard should have been up. Instead…at that moment, she committed the grave error of letting the kindness of the General Staff toward her unit get to her.

…I should have been more cautious, Tanya bitterly reflects aboard the transport plane. It would be impossible to regret that slipup more.

Closing her eyes and recalling that moment, she could tell at the time that Lergen seemed strangely sympathetic and nodded in all seriousness. "That's all right. I believe I understand the circumstances you were in."

Remembering what she said in response makes her sick. She had bobbed her head, thanked him, then asked about the general state of affairs in the capital and how things were back home.

You would think they would have reacted by then, but it was when she saw Major Uger's hesitant expression that she finally sensed something strange was going on.

"Now then, let's talk business. Major Uger has been in charge of this, so I'll let him explain. Please tell Major von Degurechaff about the transport division."

"Yes, sir… I'll explain once you've received the briefing documents."

"That's very kind of you, Major Uger."

Now she can only regret how carefree she'd been. *Did the southern continent dull my senses so much?*

How ironic that I refined my sensibilities for killing to the point that I now have a communication disability in normal society.

Would things have turned out differently if I had hesitated when Lergen asked if I still had a full complement of troops? she had to ask herself.

"Yes, we only suffered light casualties on the southern continent. General von Romel's command was of great help, and we returned with no major losses." She shouldn't have dutifully reported few casualties.

Hindsight is twenty-twenty, but I failed to sidestep a mission I probably could have avoided. Colonel von Lergen had found someone he could force into

shouldering an impossible task, and his delight manifested in a lovely smile.

This was the moment everything started going pear-shaped.

It probably took only an hour.

An officer from Strategic Reconnaissance in Operations appeared from nowhere with a smile and came jogging over at a wave from Colonel von Lergen. Tanya sensed definitively that something was off then, but it was far too late.

She should have told the General Staff her unit was exhausted and unfit for combat. The 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion does report directly to them, after all. In most regional army group command chains, we have the privilege of choosing our own missions. That said…it also means we're unable to reject orders from the General Staff.

Sadly, whereas normally someone in the command chain would veto the idea as too reckless, internally at the General Staff, on the principle of confidentiality, this had to stay between the one giving the orders and Tanya.

There was no opportunity for a third party to step in.

I suppose we can say, *Thanks to that…*

…Tanya is currently stuck commanding some mystery military group on a secret mission to cross the border.

More accurately, she will be.

Technically, Tanya and the others in the transport plane are flying over the empire's eastern border region for an exercise.

Even if that's only the official pretext, that's where they stand at the moment.

Their orders are to conduct an exercise, supposedly. She had informed her subordinates, as instructed by the higher-ups, that these exercise orders arrived suddenly from the General Staff.

But surely no one believed that.

The moment they had arrived at the staging area, they were bundled aboard an aircraft the General Staff had waiting along with their supremely suspicious

“exercise” orders, then took off without even being told where they were going.

And on top of everything, the transport plane was a special ops aircraft equipped for night maneuvers?

Everyone could tell there was more to the orders than it seemed. Even the credulous first lieutenants Grantz and Serebryakov could understand that much.

In the short time before embarking, the seasoned officers had grabbed whatever they could get their hands on as if there wasn’t a moment to lose.

Grantz, who had been assigned to handle weapons and ammunitions, hurled spare combat orbs and a full complement of ammo into the plane. Meanwhile, Serebryakov had become absorbed in inspecting a radio set she had skillfully appropriated from somewhere.

As for Captain Weiss, who had been getting worked just as hard as Tanya, he had busied himself stuffing the long-range recon veteran favorite—chocolate bars—into his units’ packs.

And as for where the hurriedly launched plane is headed—it’s technically a secret, but the members of the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion know how to navigate.

In fact, they have experience navigating at night with nothing but knowledge of astronomy. A ripple goes through the group as they realize on their own that they are flying toward the eastern border. As soldiers, the self-restraint to keep quiet until something is officially announced is in effect…but their questioning eyes—seemingly asking, *Aren’t the Eastern Army Group’s exercise ranges in a different direction?*—are incredibly obnoxious.

I don’t think there are any numbskulls who believe the pilot of a plane belonging to a special ops group would make a navigation error and take us away from the exercise ranges.

Even if Tanya feigns ignorance and says, “The higher-ups must have added a creative twist for us,” loud enough for everyone to hear, all her subordinates already know she was deep in conversation with a communications officer from Strategic Reconnaissance in Operations about a “personal errand” right before

they took off.

As such, the most she can really hope is for her troops to play along… She should probably be thankful that inquisitive looks are all that came up.

Either way, if she knew that this was how things were going to end up, she should have kept playing with that anachronistic colonial army in the wide-open desert.

In a sense, it was like wanting to overpower the Netherlands' colonial defense force with Zero fighters.

Last September, I was filled with trepidation when I saw all that sand, but compared to the muddy eastern front, hooray for the desert.

Major Tanya von Degurechaff is a veteran… She's not green enough to find any romance in war. For someone with experience, assisting a powerful ally to crush a weak enemy is preferable.

She cannot understand the appeal of voluntarily flying toward a dangerous front where tenacious enemies await and hoping the battlefield will experience shelling-with-achance-of-corpses. As is appropriate for a soldier, Tanya fervently wishes for peace. If possible, she would even like to work a nonviolent intelligentsia job while safe in the rear.

And that's why.

I'm repeating myself, but when Tanya was told her service on the southern continent was drawing to a close less than six months in, she was thrilled. She jumped for joy when her mage unit was told to return home for a periodic assignment rotation.

She had been moved by the General Staff's splendid management and discovered newfound respect for General von Zettour's impressive understanding of the troops' feelings.

The only unfortunate thing was that she had to part with General von Romel despite the fact that they finally, finally seemed to be hitting it off.

"De Lugo will be sleeping easier with you gone."

"Ah yes, our dear friend—I'll be waiting for the news that you've kicked away

his pillow.”

He was such an ideal boss that when she went to report she was leaving, they exchanged quips. Tanya would have hesitated to joke around if it was General von Zettour; it’s rare to find a boss who can roll with that sort of thing. Having a superior officer who truly understood what she wanted, granting her rights and leaving things to her discretion—that was what really made her efforts worthwhile.

The more she thinks about it, the more she is reminded…how truly easy she had it on the southern front.

On that continent, their commander was brilliant, their strength was about equal to the enemy’s, and the imperial soldiers had better discipline. Best of all, the enemy they fought was a beaten dog that had already suffered a huge defeat. A major loss would make a soldier more fragile than some might assume—which was precisely why the enemy’s actual strength was lower than its face value.

Lambs led by a lion may eventually transform into wolves…but if the lambs were defeated before the lion led them anywhere, their retraining wouldn’t go very well.

Aside from the logistical issues of being in the desert, access to water chief among them, some might have even called the battlefield comfortable. Bashing enemies as necessary, racking up decorations, and even sparing time to train the troops? It was hard to think of a more ideal situation.

The sole reason Tanya happily left the southern continent was because she firmly believed she was headed for the rosy future of rear service.

She would take a rest back in the Empire proper, hunt around for a position… It had been only a few hours since she took off, fantasizing about all the things she wanted to do.

It was her naive belief that the unit would get to take it easy for a month while the Empire reorganized its forces. She expected to enjoy spring in the Empire until at least April.

In the worst case, she figured she’d get all she could out of the season

garrisoned in a former Republican Army base. If that happened, it would be due to a phony war[1] with the Commonwealth—all posturing and no movement. She was optimistically imagining what essentially amounted to paid vacation.

…Yes, "imagining."

Sadly, soldiers don't have much freedom—and in fact, the number of liberties they do have is inversely proportional to their many obligations.

If I could supply my labor freely on the market, I would change jobs in a heartbeat. If private military companies existed, I would seriously consider joining one. No, I should probably just start my own. Reality is so harsh, Tanya loses herself in escapist fantasies for a moment.

Before she knew it, she had been forced onto this secret mission to cross the border the fatherland shared with the Federation.

It goes without saying this breaks all sorts of laws of war… Though technically, the Federation hasn't ratified many of them, so that legal gray area is a small consolation.

In any case, Tanya can't possibly question the validity of the mission. Unless something is undoubtedly violating the law, how could a soldier outright resist orders? She knows full well that if the General Staff has given an order, her job is to obediently carry it out.

But it's still not fair.

That said, at this point, Tanya casts away her sighs and complaints to reconfirm the situation she's been placed in and make sure she really has no options.

An operation against the Federation…

If we fail, the best we can hope for is some warm, humane communication (read: "torture") with the Communists.

We're sneaking into the Federation, where they have a form of government even Communists have a hard time achieving with their lives intact.

If we're hoping to get back in one piece, this is no time to cut corners.

"Captain Weiss, do you have a moment?"

“Yes, Major!”

Tanya makes up her mind and calls out to her trusted vice commander with a glance at the time on her watch. Luckily…

…it’s not an inopportune time.

“Sorry, but could you come here?”

The transport plane had been loaded with a mountain of low-altitude insertion gear, weapons, and ammunition, then packed with more aerial mages than anyone would think possible, making the interior terribly cramped.

Being on a military transport craft means not being able to call over a subordinate officer without a few others getting elbowed out of the way.

And Tanya has to raise her voice or it won’t carry.

This is a military vehicle, after all, not a passenger plane—it lacks even the slightest consideration for passenger comfort. For a military plane, the engine can be considered quiet, but it’s still a military plane. It annoys Tanya to no end that she has to scream to be heard over the incessant droning.

The saving grace is that she doesn’t really have to worry that her subordinates, no doubt listening with their ears pricked, might overhear them.

“Lieutenant Serebryakov! Lieutenant Grantz! Sorry, but please check everyone’s gear!”

““Yes, ma’am!””

After busying Serebryakov and Grantz, Tanya takes a thickly padded object out of the briefcase at her feet.

Weiss glanced over, so he must have noticed it was a sealed envelope of the type the General Staff uses. In response to his questioning eyes, Tanya nods and asks him to verify something.

“Captain Weiss, please confirm the time indicated on the envelope. I’d like you to check it against your watch. Does it match the current time?”

“Yes, Major. On my watch, it does.”

“Good. My watch reads the same. Then, in the presences of the commander

and senior officer of the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion, both having confirmed the correct hour…let's open the envelope."

Tanya rips open the missive and removes several documents. One look at the summary is enough to tell her it's what she expected.

She furrows her brow, withholding her comments for the moment, then hands the papers to Weiss.

"…This…"

It's only right that when he finishes reading, a groan escapes him.

"We were rushed off so we could be thrown into a reconnaissance mission to scout out Federation forces. If what this says is true, it's no wonder the higher-ups want to do whatever it takes to verify the situation."

"Yes, Major. I understand now. Given this context, I see why the orders we've received so far have been so strange."

She doesn't even have to look at Weiss's face as he's nodding next to her to know what color it is. Surely it matches her sickly complexion.

The situation is the very definition of grave.

…If the General Staff's analysis is correct, Federation forces are massing all along the border in preparation for a major offensive.

According to the documents marked "burn after reading," multiple border canaries are chirping in warning. Considering the circumstances, the chances of it being a false alarm are exceedingly low.

Ever since the Federation was established, the Empire has been meticulously defending the eastern border as precaution against the Communists. Various canaries, including a large number of long-term sleeper agents, are stationed in the border region precisely because of that potential impending crisis.

Never mind the members of the General Staff—every single officer in the Imperial Army worries day and night that the Communists might attack.

Which is why…

…the Eastern Army Group hasn't budged from where they're stationed on the

border. They didn't move when the north front opened up in the fight against the Entente Alliance, nor did they move when the Republic's sneak attack created the Rhine front, and certainly not for the front in south-facing Dacia.

Prepared for the nightmarish possibility of becoming caught in a Republican pincer attack, the Imperial Army General Staff has pushed human intellect to its limits in order to keep a sharp eye on their eastern neighbors—because they believe that the Empire's most dangerous moment will be when the Federation strikes them from behind.

That much is obvious.

The Imperial Army was already hit once with the Republic's sneak attack right after committing the Great Army to the north.

The Empire isn't about to make the same mistake again. Even if major offensives are launched on the Rhine front, the armies in the east stay on full alert.

Still, things have become considerably laxer since the main imperial forces wiped out the Republican Army's troops.

…I can't imagine why the Federation would move now with the current stalemate. Thinking logically, the reports could very well be a false alarm.

But even if we wish that the Federation's movements are nothing more than a joke, anyone who reads the briefing would be instantly forced to discard any transient hope.

The problem is verification. If the Federation Army is being mobilized, the Empire needs to know about it—which is why the General Staff has been so determined, even if it means violating the rules of war.

"The General Staff is ordering us to cross the border regardless of appearances, meaning the potential danger must outweigh all the risks." Tanya continues with a sigh, "Though I guess we have no choice… As the commander of this battalion, I apologize for not being able to give you guys a break."

"It's our duty, Major. Under the circumstances…we really have no choice."

"Then I guess we'll just have to feel sorry for ourselves, huh?"

How many times will I have to sigh? Tanya complains in her head as she reviews the situation.

Some suspicious Federation movements on the eastern border.

That's all it took to shatter the Empire's relaxed victory mood.

Thinking back, it makes sense that she hadn't detected any of the comfortable vibes normally expected of someone serving in the rear coming from Colonel von Lergen or Major Uger, even though she had just returned from the front lines. If her nonverbal communication faculties had been functioning normally, she would have instinctually braced herself.

The General Staff must genuinely believe that there are signs of a major offensive. In other words, they're sure the Federation will start a war.

If so, then maybe the General Staff has a bunch of units mobilized as backup, and we just don't know about it.

"Captain Weiss, what do you think of the General Staff's analysis of the east?"

"Honestly, I'm not convinced. I can't think of a reason the Federation would attack the Empire now."

"Me neither, Captain, *but that's precisely why it's so strange*."

"Huh?"

"I can't imagine the General Staff would be overlooking something we've already considered."

"That's true. So then…" Weiss falters but then nods, seeming satisfied, and murmurs in realization, "…Ah, I see."

Exactly. Tanya nods and continues, "So if that's the case…the General Staff's certainty the Federation is a threat is what's ratcheting up the sense of crisis."

Imperial forces can't violate the border for show or on a mere whim. That would be tantamount to handing the other side a free card. The General Staff could make excuses about an error during an exercise, but it's a fact they're sending us over the border. If it becomes a diplomatic issue, the harm that would befall the Empire during peacetime would be extraordinary.

The higher-ups decided to accept that risk and have us sneak into the Federation, so…there must be a reason.

The General Staff wouldn't take such a decisive measure based on half-baked intelligence. In other words, the brass considers this a final check, not hesitant reconnaissance.

They are assuming hostilities will commence and preparing for the worst by moving a few units into place.

"So it's war."

"I beg your pardon, Major, but this is all still speculation. Considering the facts, it's a hypothesis with a high probability of being true, but there's nothing that definitively says the Federation is joining the war. It doesn't even have any reason to!"

As Weiss points out with a frown after Tanya's murmur, the motive for Federation involvement is certainly a mystery… No, Tanya and only Tanya has an *inkling* of an idea.

"If the Federation was going to come out with their fists flying, they would have coordinated with the Republic. I can't think of a reason they would start something after the main imperial forces are already back home. Could it be some kind of demonstration? A diplomatic bluff?"

Tanya smiles wryly at Weiss's suggestion that it's a bluff. He seems like he doesn't entirely believe it himself. She could question the uncertainty on his face, but instead, since she knows her vice commander is a man of outstanding common sense, she kindly accepts his opinion.

…How did the wars that humanity has experienced start? The answer to that could be found in any history book. Almost every war starts with folly induced by inertia or some other nonsense—failures of reason, essentially.

"Expect the worst. We'll be dropping under the assumption that we're heading into combat."

"Major?!"

A stifled voice tactfully asks her to reconsider, but Tanya sighs at him and pats

his shoulder before continuing. “The mission is obviously to punch into enemy territory. We’ll confirm the start of the war and attack at the same time. The homeland’s literal intention is reconnaissance in enemy territory, but given our positioning, the true nature of our orders is to prepare for an attack. Either way, if war is declared, we’ll be expected to act on our own judgment. We should be ready.” After bitterly expressing her thoughts, Tanya realizes they need to explain the situation to their subordinates and adds, “All right, Captain Weiss, if you have no objections, would you kindly fill in the troops?”

“Me, ma’am?”

From the confused look on his face, she gathers that he can’t fathom why she’s asking him to do it. Well, he’s probably capable of overlooking Tanya’s complexes, or perhaps you could say “her shame.”

…I’m jealous he can project his voice.

“Unfortunately, Captain, I can’t speak very loudly… My voice won’t reach everyone in this noisy plane.”

The vexing truth of the matter is that even if she raised her voice, the engine would drown it out. She already had to scream at the top of her lungs during her private conversation with Weiss.

No, it’s not that there’s something wrong with her. Even a grown man would have trouble being heard in the back of the plane, so it makes sense that a child would only hurt her throat trying.

Sadly, Tanya can’t use a formula to amplify her voice as suggested in the aerial combat manual, since they’re avoiding any and all magic activity. The unit is on a mission to infiltrate enemy territory. Using a voice amplification formula would be like flinging mana signal all over. She might as well announce to the enemy warning net that intruders have arrived.

…We have to at least make it across the border before we’re detected.

“Ah, well…I’m sorry, Major.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m sorry to trouble you, Captain Weiss, but I’d appreciate if you would give the explanation.”

“Of course. I should have offered in the first place. I hope you’re not angry with me.”

Had Tanya unconsciously put on an annoyed face? Her subordinate’s guilty expression makes her feel that she owes him some consideration. Unable to do anything else, she pats him on the shoulder one more time.

Then, with a thank-you, she asks him to begin.

Weiss is efficient and gets right down to business. He starts the briefing, seeming predictably bothered by the cramped plane, given his sizable physique.

“Attention, all units!”

The moment his voice thunders out, Serebryakov and Grantz react promptly, repeating “Attention!” like a mechanical switch has been flipped. The reactions of the other officers and men, who up until that moment had been busy making a racket checking their equipment, are also perfect. Everyone stops what they’re doing the moment the order is given.

The way they turn to face Tanya and Weiss in perfect unison, without so much as a peep of private conversation, can only be called magnificent.

This is what you call a model of discipline and order.

“Troops, our battalion commander has revealed the outline of our mission.” He says it unflinchingly under the gaze of the focused men and officers, who are determined not to miss a single word. “Due to a mishap during our exercise, we’ll be performing reconnaissance across the border in Federation territory.”

Those statements are unbelievably mismatched, but none of the quietly listening mages are inept enough to interrupt. People who misunderstand—and not just kids who haven’t learned their lesson—often make fools of themselves.

Tanya’s reliable troops possess a wonderful understanding of that point.

“This is all according to the General Staff’s instructions. This mission is our specialty: long-range recon. That said, the ROE this time are highly specialized… Troops, this one’s critical.”

Weiss looks more nervous than ever before, but his natural voice is still loud enough to fill the interior of the plane—it’s enough to make Tanya envious.

Still, all that means is that he has something she doesn't.

Everything comes down to how work is outsourced. There are more options out there than the subpar you-get-what-you-pay-for. The saying "Every man to his trade" is true in the same way as the Ricardian formulation of comparative advantage.[2] Tanya's quiet voice is a good excuse to delegate this job.

"Before explaining the mission, I'll give you an idea of the situation in the east. Starting a few days ago, multiple sources have been reporting suspicious behavior in the area."

As Weiss efficiently explains the background, the men seem to grasp the implications. The ones with good instincts are already glancing in the direction of the Federation.

Everyone knows the Eastern Army Group has long been at their traditional station on the border, a critical position, focused entirely on the Federation as its potential opponent.

"…So it's finally happening?"

"I don't see how this could mean anything else…"

The troops don't usually let shaken glances and murmurs slip, but under the circumstances, it's not surprising.

The Northern, Western, and Southern Army Groups, who have been dealing with raging battles in recent years, often criticize the Eastern Army Group for standing around and getting free lunch, but Supreme Command pays no mind and keeps those soldiers right where they are. The threat those forces pose is not something the Federation can take lightly. Within the Empire, as well, the people urging vigilance are not in the minority.

Imperial soldiers are incapable of forgetting about the Federation. One word about trouble in the east, and everyone understands what that means.

"True, we were originally mobilized as one unit involved in investigation and verification, but the situation has changed dramatically. This morning before dawn, the General Staff received a distress signal from the Eastern Army Group's 437th Tactical Special Reconnaissance Platoon."

With that one comment, the air in the plane seems to freeze over. This is the exact moment the question *Could it be?* transforms into the conviction *So it's true*.

In response to her subordinates' tense reactions, Tanya nods in confirmation.

The situation is simple.

An alert has been sent by the anti-Federation patrols in the east. There's no other reason the tactical special reconnaissance platoon (that is, the unit illegally violating the border on deep reconnaissance missions) would make a peep. The 437th is a high-stealth unit that goes to the trouble of posing as some Siberian-like guys, diplomats, or whatnot in order to infiltrate. Nothing else is known about the unit other than that it reports directly to the Strategic Reconnaissance Department in the General Staff's Operations Division.

"They were standing by for rapid response against the Federation on Warning Line One when they raised the alarm, reporting via encoded signal that a Federal unit of unclear scale was mobilizing."

Taking into account their flight path as well as Weiss's explanation, only a new recruit would be unsure about the nature of their mission.

"I have some more bad news. After the original report from the 437th, there have been no additional transmissions. Sadly, multiple other tactical special reconnaissance platoons have gone dark. Our canaries in the mine cried out once, then stopped."

To describe the situation in the east in a word: *unsettling*. The tension is about to shatter. Even an optimist would admit that with this much circumstantial evidence, the possibility that it's all a misunderstanding becomes incredibly low.

The Red Feds made some kind of move. Our lookouts gave a distress call and then went silent. That's why we're going to see what's happening—by violating the border of a neutral country, apparently.

After reflecting upon the events, Tanya figures her subordinates all understood as well. She sighs, then steels herself.

Whatever happens, let's not give the Reds a chance to take us prisoner.

If the Federation was a country that honored human rights and whatnot as admirably as the States, that would be one thing…but regardless of what happens to the frontline troops, the soldiers dropping deep into enemy territory have a very real chance of being captured.

If we were up against the feisty Yankees, at least their nation is civilized. As long as military police are around, there's no need to worry about summary executions.

But we're up against the Reds.

It's already possible to see the terrible future awaiting us once we drop in by looking at the fate of the Germans taken prisoner at the end of the war,[3] but Tanya isn't in a hurry to sacrifice herself. There's no reason to contribute to the study of battlefield psychology by personally performing reenactment experiments.

In other words, to return home alive, it's critical that we at least resist the Red threat. It's rough, but I don't have a choice when it comes to fighting for survival.

If there's one good thing, it's that… Tanya boasts to the god she doesn't even believe in about the decent hand she's been dealt.

"So our mission is pretty much what you expect."

Weiss's tone is oddly restrained as he implicitly informs them that this is war.

Tanya watches everyone maintaining their cool: company commanders Captain Weiss and First Lieutenants Serebryakov and Grantz, and the rest of her subordinates.

They're elites, probably among the best in the whole Imperial Army.

"We'll cross the border and prepare for the worst. While conducting surveillance of the Federation Army, we'll sound the alarm if necessary. It goes without saying that until our opponent makes a declaration of war, this technically counts as violating the border of a neutral country. Move with utmost caution."

Weiss keeps his explanation very matter-of-fact like the pro he is, but it's

precisely because he's a pro that his emotions make it difficult for him to keep his voice steady without some effort.

I can't help but love his ability to put up a front of internal mastery, however superficial. It's so perfect how he has both that humanity as well as the self-restraint of a specialist.

Weiss probably has a few things he'd like to say to the higher-ups about this sudden order and impossible mission that has been foisted upon the battalion. Tanya herself isn't sure if all this secrecy from the General Staff should be appreciated.

There's no question that confidentiality is important. But confidentiality and whether you've been given the information you need or not are two issues that must be considered separately.

I hardly think there are any Reds in the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion…, Tanya thinks but immediately regrets it. Speaking from a HUMINT standpoint,[4] the Reds have a reputation for infiltrating power structures to gain sympathizers no matter the situation.

In other words, she can trust only the battalion she knows well.

Suspicion is a milestone on the way to paranoia, but there's no guarantee that there aren't any Reds among those who have access to her battalion's operating schedule. It's like a bunch of cunning raccoons and sly foxes trying to trick one another.

"We're heading into enemy territory fully expecting the start of a war. If by some happy chance we manage to avoid that, we'll probably pull out immediately, but as an experienced unit, we need to be prepared for the worst; all of you need to move out ready to do battle with the Federation. That's all from me!"

"Thank you, Captain Weiss."

Weiss concludes the briefing. When he alerts Tanya that he's finished, she switches gears. Her thoughts tend to follow rather roundabout paths to realms unrelated to the operation at hand, so she saves those for later. *Right now, I have to fulfill my duties as a frontline commander.*

It’s important to keep an eye on what’s further ahead, but without living to see tomorrow, every plan is nothing more than pie in the sky no matter how well thought out.

“Battalion brothers, it’s exactly as Weiss said! The General Staff learned a lesson on the Rhine front! We don’t want to be sneak attacked twice! I’m not a fan of how they informed us of our mission at the last minute in the name of confidentiality, but it does make me laugh when I think about how cautious they are.”

The higher-ups in the Imperial Army must still feel the sting of their blunder against the Republic. Everyone who fought on the Rhine front nods nostalgically as if to say, *Yeah, that was awful*. Meanwhile, the older hands begin joking about how Grantz isn’t so green anymore, and Serebryakov assumes an air of seniority among them. It’s a deeply emotional scene.

Tanya is satisfied with how much the tension has dissipated and continues.

“That said, this time the capable higher-ups really nailed us with their scheming. As long as they’re capable, I’d like to skip the quibbling and give thanks to either God or the devil. Give thanks to whichever one you believe in. Personally, I recommend Satan, who’s a live-in staff officer at General Staff headquarters.”

“Major, is it true you have a devil’s tail?”

“That’s a good question, but it’s also pointless. I lost my tail in that awful mess of Republican guns, trenches, and what have you. It’s too bad; had I been kicking back in an easy chair, I might still have it.”

Though it depends on the time and place, putting on a silly grin and countering a joke with a joke has its merits. Clowning around can ease nerves and serve as a tool for employing some of humanity’s highly developed linguistic abilities: criticism and cursing.

“Now then, as Captain Weiss told you…we’re up against the Reds. There’s no such thing as being too cautious.”

She shouts at the top of her lungs but still can’t match Weiss’s volume. Looking around, she sees her subordinates straining to catch as much as

possible. Tanya consciously attempts to raise her voice further, then recognizes the need to maintain face, forcing her to desperately pretend nothing is wrong.

"…The aircraft we're on, belonging to the Twenty-Second Aerial Transport Unit, is flying at full speed toward our operation zone. In order to conceal our presence for maximum effect, maintain the mana ban even after you drop. This goes without saying, but stealth is our highest priority."

This transport plane participating in the exercise will accidentally violate the Federation's border due to the navigation instruments experiencing "technical difficulties." Of course, no one will notice that the instruments are out of order, so imperial soldiers airdrop, thinking it's the predetermined exercise area. That's our story, but naturally, not a single person who hears it will believe it. It's hard to even pretend. But we don't want to invite the byzantine diplomatic issues that would result from being an aggressor, do we? *Politics…*, Tanya thinks and adds another remark.

"And, well, all these highly obnoxious instructions are political requests. I don't have a tail, so I don't really get it."

The burst of chuckles from the back of the plane is proof that her chatter can be heard over the engines. Of course, conversely, the fact that everyone has to listen so intently is proof that her lack of volume is inconvenient.

"We've got about thirty minutes until we reach our planned drop point. After we hit the ground, we'll regroup while keeping our mana signals suppressed. All in all, it's business as usual. I expect the usual results."

The plane has night camouflage to reduce visibility as much as possible. For a special ops plane equipped for low-altitude penetration maneuvers, the veil of darkness is best, although it does make friendly identification more difficult.

Any airborne drop means that we'll have issues staying together during deployment. Swiftly regrouping after landing requires quite a bit of training.

Ask a unit to do it without wireless communication, and most commanders will throw in the towel.

But Tanya knows she doesn't need to bother worrying.

This is the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion. They have experience navigating by

dead reckoning out in the desert with zero landmarks. When it comes to their skills, including navigation, Tanya is confident there will be no problems.

The achievements of this battalion, selected on their merits, are exceptionally brilliant. Her troops displayed their competence comprehensively in Dacia, in Norden, on the Rhine, and on the southern continent. Their results have been exceptional. The soldiers who make up the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion are now a band of wonderfully reliable veterans.

Grantz and the other replacement troops who joined when the unit was on the Rhine front have also made remarkable progress. They've more or less reached the level of the original members who were at the battalion's formation. And the critical element, which is the battalion's combat strength, has been maintained almost perfectly with a nearly always full roster.

A major factor is the unit being directly under the General Staff, ensuring that we have the budget and authority that allows us to perform well.

There had been nearly no time to train them, but…while they might be a bit war crazy, Tanya has been able to whip them into excellent shape over that brief period.

That's what it means to invest effectively in human capital.

Of course, the fundamental labs, theoretical education, and practical training you can get over a longer period in college is also meaningful. *This here is the difference between academia and application. Not that I go so far as to believe that soldiers need academic education.*

That's when Tanya laughs at herself for getting sidetracked. Still, redundancy is nothing to sniff at… Even if it doesn't have anything to do with the current mission, that human tendency toward certain modes of thinking must be important for mental stability.

We need to believe in freedom, fairness, and the market. Humans are political animals by nature.

If that's the case…we should act politically as well, competing freely and fairly in the market.

"I remind you that this is an operation in Federation territory. Once we begin,

the worst-case scenario is that our enlistment records never existed."

Conversely, in an environment where there is no market, there's no need to play fair.

Rather, such a situation calls for appropriate political action. If our opponent infringes on the freedoms of others, then we must be freedom fighters.

It's written clearly in the peace constitution of a certain peaceful nation: Freedom is won through ceaseless battle. In other words, fighting for freedom contributes to peace. That means we must battle these horrible totalitarian Communists for liberty, justice, and human rights.

"This is the way it always is, but apparently, they're not going to make things easy for us."

Tanya's tone is no less heavy than the droning serenade of the engines, but she addresses her subordinates in as loud a voice as she can.

After all, this is an unconventional mission.

Responsibility for violating neutral territory tends to fall on those in the field. This isn't the type of mission troops welcome. As an analogy, no office worker would be happy to be thrown under the bus by their company.

No one wants to mess with insider trading or problematic donations unless the returns are huge. That's why companies have legal departments to find loopholes under the pretext of enforcing compliance.

…What I mean is…my company's legal department is overflowing with respect for the law, obviously; it's passionate about performing its function in society. Yes, I only mentioned that earlier bit as a generalization; you could say my company, the army, and so on are the spirit of the law incarnate. As she is about to make these excuses to herself, Tanya winces, realizing she can't escape the conditioned responses from her previous life.

Something about a leopard and its spots. Perhaps a nation can't change its character, either?

"If the 437th is right, the fatherland has no time to waste."

The state's interests come above all else—the continental raison d'état.

With war fanatics for neighbors and the Reds swarming, you don't have to be *la France* to come up with that idea. That said, raison d'état is also *raison d'humanité*. Considering its limited nature, there must be few concepts in all human history that are as flimsy and unreliable as reason.

Furthermore, if it's "for the state," we could be forced to take responsibility for all wrongdoing. There's no guarantee the unit that carries out the plan won't be thrown aside like a lizard's discarded tail.

State authority figures tend to want to protect themselves, so they often align their personal power with state interests—it's really problematic.

That's why there has to be trust between those giving the orders and the people carrying them out. Nothing is better for my peace of mind than knowing the character of Colonel von Lergen as well as the lieutenant generals, Zettour and Rudersdorf.

"Put another way, we'll become children again and go on a secret adventure without telling the international community first. Are any of you so dead inside that you would balk at a thrilling expedition to peek into a country of mysteries? Not in my battalion! We've been through forests of swords and hails of bullets, so I'm positive on that point."

Her confidence in those men from the General Staff is what lets Tanya crack jokes. If the superior officer is clowning around, that indicates they trust the brass, which puts the men below at ease.

The moment they hear what she says, her subordinates erupt together in laughter and whistles; none of them looks worried. They all wear cheerful smiles that say, *Let's give it to 'em!*

Well, even if it's nothing more than pre-sortie bravado, I'm glad they have the wherewithal to put on a brave face. It means they trust me enough not to complain in my presence.

A superior who isn't trusted by their subordinates is liable to be dismissed for lack of management ability, so this is key.

Yes, I'm quite satisfied with how things are going.

"Previously acquired intel suggests that the area the 437th was covering is a

Federation staging point, though Intelligence says that's not confirmed yet." Taking care not to spoil the mood, Weiss chooses now to make his comment. It's a brilliant move framed as supplementary information but intended to calm the frenzy.

It's entirely thanks to competent officers like him that we can maintain the troops' willingness to fight while preserving discipline.

Takeda Shingen was right. The people are your stone walls…[5] In a way, though it annoys me to admit it, Stalin implemented this literally—although it's more accurate to say he used a wall of people from the fields as a substitute for a stone wall.

I suppose the walls of capitalism are metaphoric and the walls of Communism are literal. It's about the same as the difference between capitalist and Communist chairs—wood versus electric. If I had to sit in one, I'd pick wood.

"May I ask a question?"

"Certainly, Lieutenant Serebryakov. Go ahead."

"If the area the 437th was covering is the site of activity, then the Federation Army's intentions are clear. Assuming it's obvious that the Federation is planning a preemptive strike on the Empire, will we be permitted to launch our own attack to head it off?"

Good question. Tanya nods at Serebryakov's comment. It's not as if Tanya herself hasn't been tempted to do exactly that. To prevent potential accidents, it's best to set a policy for the whole unit about how to handle things.

"We're up against the Communists, so there's no need to hold back…or so I'd like to tell you, but just this once, I can't. I'm going to make myself clear: I won't tolerate any misfires."

Our opponent is the Commies; they make people suffer. We should weed them out according to the market principle, but we need to stay true to the market's main foundations: deals and contracts.

"We'll have the Federation take the first shot. I can't give permission to fire on the Federation Army until they attack the eastern border."

"…We're in another awful spot, huh?"

"I agree with you, Lieutenant Grantz."

"I understand how you both feel, Lieutenants, but this is an order. Anything else?" *Seems like we're done here*, thinks Tanya as she purposely begins to change the subject. "If that's it, then I have one more thing to add. The captain of the flight has been kind enough to offer to be our decoy and continue violating Federation airspace after we drop."

I honestly feel horrible about it, but the plan is for this "transport plane" to remain in enemy airspace for us. It will maintain its altitude and course after we go to keep the enemy from immediately figuring out our drop point.

"In the event of a Federation attack, the safety of this aircraft is not guaranteed in the slightest."

What will happen if it gets intercepted by fighter planes or mages? Well, these are the guys who turned the Red Square into an international airport, so it's entirely possible they could totally miss their target, but still.

These are Commies. They shoot down even civilian planes. They probably handle things so bureaucratically it's as if democracy, liberty, and philanthropy all fell through a hole in their heads. I'd like to assume the plane will be safe, but do Commies even use logic?

"Don't forget their kindness. Respect those who stand with you on the battlefield. Give thanks for the sacrifices of your brothers-in-arms. Consider the fatherland's expectations that we will fulfill our duties."

I truly hate war. I believe killing others is the nastiest business in all of human history. Logically speaking, it's an utterly inexcusable waste of resources and human capital.

Still, for this fight, I'd like to say this:

Glory to the freedom fighters!

"In other words, I expect you to complete your mission as usual. Give your all for your fatherland and His Imperial Majesty. Glory to the Empire!"

"Glory to the Empire!"

To an amateur, this mission probably seems reckless. A single battalion of mages is pretending to be ranger paratroopers. It would technically be better to have the airborne specialists infiltrate.

This mission is basically asking us wizards to fight using our fists instead of magic—and with almost no time to prepare.

Incredibly reckless.

But we're up against the Reds. Even if it's unreasonable, we have to do it somehow.

The school of thought that preaches nonviolence works only against civilized countries. Yes, it might be an option against people who would hesitate to point a gun at someone who isn't resisting.

Sadly, Communists would merrily shoot.

As a free individual with zero interest in being overrun by an oppressive totalitarian nation that happily kills even those who don't resist, I have no choice but to fight.

A few minutes after Tanya conveys her determination to her men, the time comes.

"Major, we've reached the operation zone."

The captain informs her they've arrived at their destination. From now on, he and his crew will continue to violate Federation airspace unescorted.

If we can't honor their sacrifice, we don't deserve to be called freedom fighters.

Give me liberty or give me death.

This is a holy war to secure, defend, and protect freedom. If there's any duty that can't afford to be shirked, then battling totalitarians to defend the relatively free world surely must be it. I don't want a war. But staying friendly with a totalitarian nation of unparalleled brutality trying to murder its neighbors will be difficult.

It's hard to coexist with the world's evil. Especially for a model citizen like me, but that goes without saying.

“Battalion commander to all units! Drop, drop!”

We must not flinch before the darkness.

Tanya throws open the door, shouting at the top of her lungs, and urges Serebryakov to jump.

“Then if you’ll excuse me!”

“Gather together in a group. I’ll pretend I didn’t see the knives for silencing any witnesses. This operation is go! I say again, this operation is go!”

Everyone has their drop parachute on their back, and no one in my battalion hesitates to leap out of the plane. Understanding that the most dangerous part of the airdrop is the descent, the unit both swiftly and skillfully begins jumping, with admirable discipline and no grumbling.

Tanya, too, ducks her head and jumps out of the plane, taking care to maintain proper distance from the others as she falls. There is no time to enjoy diving through the darkness of the quiet night sky—she soon lands in what seems to be appropriately wild backcountry. In this wide expanse, there is no sign of people, but the ground isn’t swampy, either.

She quickly recovers her parachute and meets up with the nearest troops who landed ahead of her. She takes charge of the group and leaves the stealth prep to them.

Luckily, there are no numbskulls who got separated from the group and lost their way. As these are elites, there has been no trouble to speak of, and things are going according to plan. Judging from this series of events, regrouping is going swimmingly.

This amounts to a pat on my own back, but the skill of each officer deserves special mention. Serebryakov and Grantz, who I sent ahead of me, have even taken command of platoons and set up a perimeter defense.

There is something to be said for training, then training some more, and finally making it through your baptism in combat. The battalion succeeds in quickly regrouping, free of confusion despite the darkness, then readies itself.

All Vice Commander Weiss and I need to think about is how to evaluate the

situation and what our tactics should be. A unit where the leadership puts in proper thought and the bottom simply does as they're told should be praised as a model of efficiency.

"Lieutenant Serebryakov, report in on our status."

"Yes, ma'am. Regrouping post-drop is complete. No losses. Lieutenant Grantz's company is currently on watch. At present, we haven't spotted anyone affiliated with the Federation, including civilians."

"Good work. Are there houses or anything?"

"We've found some light sources, but all of them are concentrated in the area previously supposed to be a staging point. We haven't seen any sign of civilians within a radius of several kilometers."

Good. Tanya nods. Then Weiss, who has just run over, delivers the report she's been waiting for.

"Sorry to interrupt, Major. The long-range wireless setup is complete. Monitoring functions are normal."

"Okay. Oh, Captain…I don't suppose there's anything about the imminent start of a war?"

"Nothing at present. We only detect heightened levels of Federation transmissions."

"…Anything from home?"

"Not yet, Major. The Empire hasn't talked about starting a war yet, either. Incidentally, the signal is clear, and we are certainly not experiencing any jamming."

Tanya nods. *So it hasn't started yet.*

"We need to be ready to pull out immediately in the event the Federation's mobilization is a bluff. Lieutenant Serebryakov, check to make absolutely sure we haven't lost any parachutes or other gear."

Having Serebryakov confirm our preparedness to withdraw is for the off chance we get lucky.

With an “Understood!” Tanya’s adjutant races off to give the gear another once-over. We’ve got to grab a hold of Lady Luck and pin her down, but at least I’m sure Serebryakov won’t cut any corners.

“It seems you’ve really begun trusting Visha as a commander, Major,” Weiss comments from behind Tanya as she watches Serebryakov go.

Tanya nods as if to say that it’s only natural. “Lieutenant Serebryakov has shown me she’s the real deal and earned my trust. I believe in those who deserve it. I don’t really think there’s any more or less to it than that…”

“Yes, it’s exactly as you say… Major, I realize it’s presumptuous, but would you let me lead the approach toward the enemy staging area?”

“Oh brother, is that what this is about?” *It’s not as if I don’t trust you, too*, Tanya implies as she gently pushes back. “Captain Weiss, the commander leads. Besides, they’re not the enemy yet.”

“Major, I realize I’m still being presumptuous, but I hope you’ll reconsider.”

“What’s the issue you’re trying to raise?”

“I think I’m better equipped to handle the physical stresses of a no-magic march. If you don’t mind, that is.”

Oh. Tanya finally realizes where this is coming from.

In a nutshell, this was prompted by what happened earlier. I lamented my quiet voice, and apparently, when I left the explanation of the operation up to Weiss, he finally recalled the disparity between our physiques.

And he must have realized that in a contest of pure strength that doesn’t involve magic, Major Tanya von Degurechaff is a fragile little kid.

“…I should be happy to have such a good man under me, but there’s no need for you to go to such extremes.”

Him worrying about me at this point will only cause problems. Well…if being a delicate maiden could get me a position in the rear, things would be different.

As a mage who had no option but to choose the military academy or be conscripted, I can’t have my fitness to command questioned now. Even if he made his offer in 100 percent good faith, it’s easy to imagine what might come

next.

That saying about how the road to hell is paved with good intentions feels awfully real right now.

“I apologize for overstepping.”

“No, I appreciate it,” says Tanya, even as she determines internally that she needs to make a demonstration of her power.

Logically speaking, it’s foolish for a commander to demonstrate brute courage. But this unit is an augmented battalion of forty-eight. There’s no law that says the commander can’t go on a recon detail.

And given that she is currently trying to figure out a way to do the impossible, she could actually be praised for upholding the Imperial Army tradition of leading from the front.

“Okay, back to the mission. We’re going to go observe the Federation Army, and I’d like to use the standard procedure for night reconnaissance.”

“Who will be in the scouting party?”

“I want you to stay; I’ll take Serebryakov and maybe two more.” Tanya says that it’s a tough choice, but internally she’s already made up her mind. At this delicate juncture, on the brink of war with the Federation, she has to go herself.

If her subordinates were to get ahead of themselves and initiate combat, she would, without question, be the one to blame. That’s just how far a commander’s responsibilities go. In that case, going herself is the only option.

“Regardless of what a normal unit is like, our battalion isn’t made up of children who need their hands held. We’ll conduct an officers’ patrol…”

But Weiss wants to be on the recon team, and his points are worthy of consideration. These are the soldiers of the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion who carried out separate advances in independent units while fighting on the southern front. They aren’t a bunch of new recruits who would fly into a panic at the mere absence of their commander.

So Tanya steels herself—to make an exception and go scouting with just the officers.

“Time to go to work, guys. Let’s do this quickly and quietly.”

Tanya and the rest of the officers of the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion promptly advance—without relying on magic—to do some recon. That is, they approach as close as they can on foot.

But they don’t even have to take much of a risk to grasp the situation.

A glance through binoculars is enough to reveal huge amounts of supplies and soldiers. There’s way too much live ammo for an exercise.

“Relay our situation: The 437th was right. And it appears we’re too late.”

Even at a distance, she can see countless barracks in a flurry of activity despite the fact that it’s long past sundown.

On top of that, is what people would usually say in this kind of situation, I suppose…

There are several tank divisions staging here that aren’t even supposed to be stationed in this region according to the treaty. The icing on the cake is that their railway guns are already in a forward position.

Don’t bother thinking about their range—having railway guns in this region is an outrageous act tantamount to a declaration of war.

Agh. Even though it’s dark, a close look shows that the barrels are slowly adjusting. Considering the amount of time it takes to correctly align railway guns, they must be preparing for an offensive.

Railway gun barrels don’t last long to begin with, so there can’t be any other reason to work them so hard. Even if this is a live ammo exercise, I’d like to ask them exactly where they think they’re exercising.

“Major, look at that!”

When Tanya looks through her scope in the direction Grantz indicated with a stifled shout, she sees what are clearly piles of fuel and shells. As she watches, the soldiers who came out of the barracks begin to board a ton of trucks, apparently on orders from an officer.

If this is all a bluff, the Federation is performing one hell of a tightrope-walking act.

“…Maintain radio silence until the last possible second. Make a report the moment those railway guns fire in the Empire’s direction.”

“Understood. Will do.” Weiss, who carried the long-range encoded signal machine, hooks it up to the wireless.

He’s using a onetime pad, which means even if someone intercepts our signal, as long as they can’t decode the message, the chance we expose our positions is low.

Now we can call our little recon mission complete.

The question is what to do now. The main issue is that we’re not technically at war yet. There haven’t been any reports about fighting breaking out, either.

Even if it’s only a matter of time, we won’t be forgiven for attacking preemptively. Besides that, whether to retaliate when Federation forces open fire is another question.

We may be in the vicinity of the border, but we’re still clearly operating in Federation territory.

Even if the enemy strikes first, if we counter immediately, we’ll have to explain *what we were doing there in the first place*.

In the defense of freedom, it should be our right to strike first. Unfortunately, our nation demands politically correct behavior.

It’s too bad, but as a tool of the state, I must obey the organization—even if by blowing up those mountains of ammo and fuel, we could save our allies and get rid of a ton of Commies.



I suppose I'll simply have to hold back.

"Serebryakov, this is an order for all units: We must not engage first."

"U-understood."

Trusting in the skill of her adjutant, who quickly sends a directional optical transmission to the troops behind them about fire discipline, Tanya turns inward as she thinks about war with the Federation, which suddenly seems much more real.

The enemy must be daydreaming about a one-sided attack on the Empire. In other words, this is the best time to blindside them.

But if we do that, we'll have to answer why we happened to be on Federation land when the attack took place. After all, the Federation is currently not at war. And Communist propaganda is tough to beat.

This should come as a surprise, but North Korea did declare that South Korea attacked first and even tricked some amount of people for a while, so there's precedent. Well, there is the possibility that all those were hopelessly pro-Communist anyway…

One option would be to wait the better part of an hour before attacking…but wasting time like that could prevent us from keeping up with the enemy's moves.

But as noted earlier, attacking right when the Federation Army does has its own problems.

Okay, thinks Tanya as she racks her brain, but her thoughts are interrupted by the scene before her.

The railway guns have been slowly getting their minute adjustments…but all the barrels stop moving at once. At the same time, the Federation position falls momentarily silent.

What the—? It happens almost exactly as she reaches for her binoculars.

"They actually fired…"

The words that spill out of Grantz's mouth as the guns roar say it all.

The railway guns erupt, and the racket at the staging point suddenly revives.

If it was only one shot, there might have been room to claim it was a misfire, but…this is something else. One look at the motions of the Federation soldiers already loading the next round makes their intentions clear. There's no way to misunderstand what it means when railway guns near the border shoot in the direction of the Empire.

"Major! The Federation is attacking all along the front…," Weiss says, turning pale as he monitors the wireless.

"A declaration of war. Just now, the Federation declared war on the Empire!"

"And what does home have to say about that?"

"A-an order just came through: 'All units, regardless of whom you report to, attack!'"

So they're telling us to do it.

Guess we know what to do. Tanya nods as she grasps the intent of the order.

"Transition into the wartime response plan!"

As Weiss receives reports conveyed in frantic shouts over the wireless, Tanya's attention is captured by the scene unfolding in front of her.

From here, she can see that the railway guns are slowly being loaded with ammunition. Once they're ready, more rounds fly toward the Empire with a roar.

War against the Reds.

Combat against the Reds.

A struggle for survival against the Reds.

Tanya joins up with the troops she had standing by to the rear so fast it embodies the words *on the double*.

"All units, prepare to attack!"

In the space of a breath, the arrangements to mobilize the unit happen naturally, and the troops are ready. I know all too well what must be done.

“It’s likely that the Federation Army is already engaged with the Eastern Army Group on the border. Therefore, we are abandoning our plan to withdraw! Transition into attacking maneuvers—now!”

I want to go home, but unless I take care of this assignment, I can’t be free. At the very least, we have to cause some chaos and secure our escape route. We’re currently deep in enemy territory on a mission. We may not like it, but pulling back means fighting through all the Reds attacking the Empire.

“We’re going in to deal with the enemy reinforcements. We’ll do what we can for now, since it’ll help us understand the situation. First let’s blow up the stockpiles! Assume strike formation!”

In order to avoid a desperate withdrawal, we can’t just leave; we have to wreak some degree of havoc. Well, it’s undeniable that the chance to blast Commies makes Tanya more inclined to wage war.

But, Tanya abruptly analyzes her own thoughts, *it’s not as if this is my fault.*

…I’m a pacifist, after all. It’s simply that I can’t accept looking up at the same sky as a bunch of Commies. I can’t stand it when guys who’ve never set foot on a factory floor try to argue about economics. Sure, I heard they monkeyed around in a porcelain factory, but still.

Well, Commie theorists can’t even read the factory inspection team reports, so what can you expect…?

That’s the type we’re up against. As a disciple of capitalism and a wholesome citizen who loves rightfully adored freedom and liberty, I’ll do what I must. The NRA aren’t the only ones who take up arms.

“““Yes, ma’am!”””

“Company commanders, seize control of your attack route. All units, after this raid, follow the instructions from your company commanders on how to engage.”

For the moment, the operation is a deep raid. This is a method the battalion has used over and over again from the Rhine to the sandy southern continent. The company commanders are well versed in it.

Ideology will triumph? Ha, we'll crush that offensive delusion with physics and providence.

"I have one bit of good news. We're currently not picking up any Federation mages," Tanya adds. Despite the signs of a large-scale offensive, no mages have been detected. She's so used to the presence of mages on the battlefield that she finds this strange. But mages are a pain if you get on their bad side, so their absence is fortunate.

As long as there isn't some quirk to Federation mage doctrine, we can assume this means there aren't any.

"But don't drop your guard. Always be on the lookout for enemy reinforcements."

The Federation has soldiers growing on trees. Who knows where they come from? I can't understand how they can drive their own fellow countrymen so hard.

Honestly, even Tanya doesn't really want to understand, either.

"Attention all units. As you can see, the Federation has unequivocally targeted the fatherland. How can they be serious? It's absurd, really."

All right, this is where I speak from the heart to my anti-Commie freedom fighters.

"What did the Reich do to them? The answer is simple. We didn't do a thing. Not a thing, my brothers."

The Empire wasn't hoping for a war that would require invasion. It didn't have the slightest intention of coming to blows with the Federation. But if there are anachronistic anti-intellectuals who would attack the peaceful Empire… coexistence is impossible.

They're a threat that must be eliminated for the security of the human race.

"If we allowed the Communists to go unchecked by not doing anything to the Federation scum, then the responsibility is probably ours. Troops, we've got to settle this here and now."

This is the price for slacking on garbage disposal. We've got to beat back the

Commies for the relative freedom of the Empire and the rest of the humane world. That is more than enough reason for war.

“We’re fighting for our fatherland. No, the very fate of the world hangs on this conflict! Rouse yourselves to battle! Be brave!”

If we don’t do this, the world will be forced to go along with a century of experimentation on human beings. Normal humans can’t physiologically process the poison known as Communism—it’s as deadly as potassium cyanide.

Tomorrow anyone who is not achlorhydric will perish en masse. If a tragedy is avoidable, I want to avoid it.

“Rouse yourselves to battle, troops! Rise up!”

The future of the free world depends on you.

“Take up your rifles! Grab your orbs!”

Guns don’t shoot people.

People shoot guns.

People shoot Commies with guns.

“Begin maneuvers!”

Tanya urges her soldiers to defend freedom, and in response they charge forward.

The 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion led by Major von Degurechaff has officially shifted from their original reconnaissance mission to assault.

Naturally, they’re equipped for recon, so they don’t have the correct gear for assaulting a base. Even for mages, with their high degree of versatility, a frontal attack on the staging area would usually be difficult.

Usually…

“…Well, railway guns make splendid targets.” Tanya chuckles to herself.

Artillery positions have no lack of combustibles. You can practically count on a powder magazine or some other explosive warehouse to be around.

And the Federation Army artillery positions are piling up exposed ammunition

all over—no safety management at all. Well, Communists like to ignore regulations, so this mistake is very much in character. As a result, we can detonate their expensive railway guns, lined up like goose necks on the chopping block, with an easy chain reaction.

Wonderful. Tanya grins and shouts, “Prepare to strike! We’re advancing, then pulling a hit-and-run!”

“Understood!”

“Ready explosion formulas! We charge once they’re ready!”

Just a single explosion formula.

Normally, if it takes out a pillbox, that’s great. But if there are secondary explosions? Now we’re talking. Even just starting a fire can blow a vast amount of supplies in an instant.

“Big, fragile, highly flammable. The perfect target.”

“Without a doubt. This reminds me of how the Dacian Army assisted us with our anti-surface attack training.”

“…I made such an embarrassing error back there.”

“Don’t worry about it, Captain Weiss. The only one who would laugh at you for following the textbook to the letter is Lieutenant Serebryakov over there.”

Ignoring the hell unfolding below them, Tanya and her vice commander, Weiss, fly leisurely along, quite pleased.

Apart from the odd stray shot, there is virtually no aerial interception.

The battalion must be completely used to anti-surface strike missions by now. In a magnificent display of skill, Serebryakov routs one unit while Grantz efficiently targets another that managed to stand its ground.

Both the division of labor and the competence of the raid can be described as admirable. The 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion was both intensely screened and trained, but their baptism through live combat has made them even more elite. Compared to their time in the Dacian War, the troops are markedly more disciplined and efficient.

Of course, just like in Dacia, lack of skill on the enemy side is a big help.

We don't have any explosives that can be used for anti-surface strikes. Still, if we can land a shot in there somewhere, the shells laid out along the line of railway guns will explode.

And our aim is those flimsy railway guns. This really is, as Weiss noted, the perfect target.

"Man, and I can't believe their reinforcements are all infantry."

We had been convinced Federation mages would be called up to defend the staging area, but our expectations have been dashed. No matter how much we terrorize them, the only ones who come running to intercept us are foot soldiers. Tanya had been expecting a fierce counterattack, so the disappointment is actually quite intense.

It's like going into the spring labor offensive with a recommendation for a round of layoffs and having it go through with no resistance. It doesn't get much more unexpected than that.

"Lieutenant Grantz's company has a suggestion, Major. They'd like to perform another strike to increase our gains."

Tanya had told everyone not to spread out too much so they would be able to retreat while the rear guard held off the enemy if substantial enemy reinforcements showed up.

But under these circumstances, it might not be a bad idea to push for more. From her bird's-eye view, she can see that they missed some pockets of resistance here and there.

"Let's do that, then. It seems this is turning into less of an ambush and more of a maneuver battle."

"Yes, ma'am. Right away."

Tanya's not about to let the enemy reestablish organized resistance. In that sense, it's best to hit hard when the battle is going favorably. She decides to accept the suggestion and promptly calls for a second attack run.

Seriously, though, where are the enemy mages? Tanya wonders as she

watches her troops who were on standby in the sky break from their previous withdrawal formation and join in on the mop-up attacks. It's common sense that a logistical facility like this depot would be raided.

Whether the enemy is competent or not, any good army should still be thinking about defense. A unit of mage reinforcements, skilled or not, should be sent as a matter of course.

Conduct a probing anti-surface strike and deal with the reinforcements who show up without realizing what they're in for. That was the plan, and she figures it wasn't a mistake to have her troops lie in wait.

But no one's seen any enemy air units yet, much less mages. I expected they'd at least send units in piecemeal, ignoring the concept of efficiency entirely, but what is this lack of response?

It's quite difficult to understand the workings of the world in this age.

"Major, there's an urgent message from HQ."

"We're connected? Read it."

For now, she decides to switch gears to focus on the directions they were finally able to get from headquarters.

"Yes, ma'am. It's an order to support the eastern armies. The details are up to you."

The message handed to me contains the usual flight orders with permission to act freely. I'm glad the brass are so good at managing their subordinates. If I had a boss like Tsugene or Full-of-shit-guchi,[6] I'd completely lose the will to fight and hightail it out of here.

Ah, it's so, so great to have General von Zettour as my superior. If I stick with him, given the current state of internal faction dynamics, I'm guaranteed to advance. What a wonderful connection to have. He's very valuable in terms of social capital.

"What's the situation? I want to know what the front lines are like."

This is all for that wonderful stakeholder. As a rational individual of the modern world, it's clear that my destiny is to do a thorough, sincere job. Trust

and sincerity are the basic business practices of modern times. That said, excessive favoritism and collusion will only afflict the organization with a contemptible case of arteriosclerosis, of course.

…Either way, the concept is too difficult for Commies with no mind for efficiency to comprehend.

When their Commie brains think about production, distribution is completely absent from their ideas. Well, they can go ahead and make a pile of worthless products only to let them rot.

For our part, all we have to do is follow the market. Apparently, Adam Smith was religious—that bit about the invisible hand of God is pretty awkward for me. It must be the invisible hand of the market.

Oh, thinking is so fun. But the only people who really get to immerse themselves in it are academics.

Work awaits. Ah, you boorish Commie bastards.

“Our soldiers are putting up a good fight, but it seems our strength is a bit on the low side.”

“Okay, let’s switch gears and fight a delaying battle while we wait for the Great Army to arrive.”

We’ve been ordered to provide support to friendly armies in the region. What we do depends on their status. In this instance, delaying the enemy probably makes the most sense.

In other words, we’re helping to buy time, so all we have to do is bully the Commies. If it’s only a spot of teasing, then I don’t have to take any dangerous risks.

At the same time, I get to enjoy the satisfaction of whacking some Commies. My work here has a sense of purpose.

“Are you sure? I think we’re more in our element fighting on the move as we have been so far.”

Weiss had given the order to Grantz’s company to transition into pursuit and joined the conversation at some point. His suggestion is certainly tempting.

The Federation's territory is vast. And on top of that, we're fighting the notoriously inefficient Commies. It's true that guerrilla tactics are a valid option against a rigidly organized opponent.

The theater of operations here is much larger than when we fought on the Rhine, so the enemy must be spread more thinly. The circumstances are too perfect. Given the current situation, it'd be more of a pain to approach the main lines and be incorporated into a friendly unit.

I love whacking Commies, but I'm not at all keen on Commies whacking me.

"Either way, if you compare it to breaking through the enemy's main lines, doesn't taking a detour seem better?"

We'll support the eastern armies, but only if we're safe. There's no way I'd prioritize them over myself.

Liberty. It's obvious that liberty must be prioritized above everything else.

In other words, we have no obligation to join the front lines, which are most certainly embroiled in a heavy firefight.

Luckily, we also have a just cause, so we'll pursue safety to the extent possible.

"We'll fly, then?"

"Of course. But instead of stealthily sneaking around, let's be a distraction."

If we divert enemy forces, that'll satisfy the order from home to support the delaying battle. And it'll feel so good to whack Commies with some style. No limits in terms of ROE, either.

Naturally, we'll have no choice but to attack urban areas as well. After all, Commies are always talking about general attacks by all citizens or whatnot.

I'm sure it's beyond practicing levy en masse; it's more like they believe everyone's a soldier. After all, these are the type of people to launch a major offensive against agriculture. What kind of farmer would attack farming?

I'm sure they're doing something inefficient like mobilizing their entire population to blow up an agricultural base. In a book on the topic, I read that the food commissar or whoever is basically just the commander of a looting

unit. And I know the procurement units or whatever they're called have people from cities and farming villages in them.

In other words, this should be just like taking on guerrilla units.

Logically, all Communists are combatants. Yep, okay, I guess I should try something showy now. I absolutely do not want to use the Elinium Type 95, but considering how useful it would be for blowing up Commies, I might be able to stand it.

…But if I'm going to do that, then I want to demolish something symbolic.

Idol worship or the cult of personality or whatever it may be, I'll smash one of those bronze statues Commies love so much and laugh at their inefficiency. I wonder where would be good. Maybe Josefgrad.

Nah, if I'm going to do this, nailing the capital will be most effective. This goes without saying, but that's the capital of a country we're at war with. Some might think the place would be heavily guarded, but that would only show that they're amateurs.

Commie air defense is full of holes—more like a dysfunctional colander. Pilots being too drunk to take off and fly interception missions is a daily occurrence. Or they scramble but end up chasing around hallucinations.

On the rare occasion they down something, it's a civilian aircraft or a careless scout… If we're merely serving as a distraction, we can pull out if they ever start actually intercepting us.

"Let's pretend we're going to attack the capital."

"A raid on the capital? I don't think this will go the way it did in Dacia… Surely the Federation has tighter defenses. They probably even have a proper warning system. I feel like there are too many things to worry about if we go in without intelligence."

She didn't expect the faces of her subordinates to get so nervous the moment she voiced their objective. It can't be true, but she has the sneaking, uncomfortable feeling that they think she's incapable of judging what is and isn't achievable.

On the other hand, she can understand how Weiss's "worries" are based on commonsense misunderstandings. *Well, it can't be helped—they're rational, modern individuals*, she concludes.

Certainly, someone with common sense would decide the capital must be well protected. Anyone would come to that conclusion.

But our opponents are Commies.

"Don't worry. Everyone knows the Commies have no air defense."

"The intelligence we received estimates fairly formidable defenses…"

The Red Army is famous for its legendary air defense. A civilian Cessna even casually landed at Red Square International Airport once.

"Ha-ha-ha, very funny, Captain Weiss."

The country's capital was reached after multiple layers of air defense manned by the proud border patrol were defeated—by a civilian teenage pilot with almost no special training in low-altitude penetration maneuvers or anything. It's probably worth mentioning those soldiers were clumsy enough to shoot down civilian aircrafts once in a while.

Worrying about an air defense shield as "formidable" as that is pointless. Sure, it's a mistake committed by Commies in another world, but the defect that caused it is a fundamental issue. As long as that remains constant, assuming the same thing could happen in this world has a high probability of being correct.

"Communist air defense? I'm sure any teenager off the street could break through. Not even worth the effort to worry about it."

"What? It can't be that bad, can it?"

"Hmm. Well, even for a distraction, it could be a good demonstration."

Actually, our odds are only fifty-fifty, but we do have a chance.

It's aggravating to have to learn from the Great America's firebombing of Tokyo, but the lessons are significant. As a diversion, it's too perfect.

I'll show the home country my fighting spirit and get some results while I'm at

it. I'll even employ a fairly safe method.

"So are we really going to do it?"

"Of course. Oh, but I forgot one thing. Ask the guys at home. I want to make sure there won't be any political issues."

We're attacking an enemy country's capital, after all. Considering the possible political ramifications, it's important to confirm how we should proceed.

Even if they stop us, there will be a record that shows we proposed it. And if we get the go-ahead, it'll be an excuse to stay away from the main lines for a while.

"Understood. I'll verify immediately."

It gives Tanya immense satisfaction to see her subordinate set about briskly carrying out instructions despite the abruptness. She smiles warmly in spite of herself.

I'm in the position to take the juiciest part of this fight using a safe plan.

This is quite good. It even makes Tanya happy.

"…I can't wait to get authorization."

Which is why she thinks:

I hope they're quick about it.

SOME DAY IN MARCH, UNIFIED YEAR 1926, TEMPORARY IMPERIAL ARMY POSITION ON THE SOUTHERN FRONT, FOX'S DEN

General von Romel of the Imperial Army, surveying the status of the battle through his binoculars, suppressed a frustrated grimace and shrugged. The Imperial Army had a decent advantage, but it also seemed too much like a battle of attrition.

If victory came at the cost of running all available firepower into the ground, there would be no next time. Romel had to settle for dealing a blow instead of wiping out the enemy.

"…We can't quite manage? Then I guess we have no choice. Withdraw."

He found it regrettable, but as long as his forces couldn't break through, continuing to attack head-on was nothing more than mudslinging.

"Are you sure, General von Romel? If we keep this up…"

"We don't have enough water, and more importantly, our losses keep increasing."

The staffers maintained that they could win if they pressed on, but to Romel, the conditions for victory were different. Limiting attrition had to be prioritized above all else on the southern continent.

The worst of their problems was that they were nearing the limits of their water supply. If they retreated immediately, what was left would last until they reached the rear. If the fight dragged on, there was a chance they would run out even if they withdrew.

Knowing when to quit was critical in such a place. The allotment of limited resources could change everything.

"For now, let's call the blow we dealt good enough. Begin withdrawing. I do want to take de Lugo's head someday, though."

"Yes, sir."

The Free Republican Army was stubbornly holding out. Not only that, but it was Romel's personal opinion that their combat strength seemed to be growing with each passing day. Unfortunately, he'd also heard that the resistance efforts of de Lugo's anti-Empire organization were popping up in more places.

The home country had started earnestly hoping for the elimination of de Lugo as part of the occupation policy. But their opponent was no pushover. He was attempting to aggravate imperial attrition while avoiding a decisive battle.

If the Empire let it go on too long, they risked losing their chance to crush the Republican leader. That said, whether de Lugo's intentions had filtered all the way down was another question. It wasn't clear if the colonial units were up to speed on the situation.

We could try to pull something—which is why before Romel knew it, he had an idea.

“Mm-hmm, a scuffle should be fine. We’ll ready an ambush as we withdraw. If they bite, we’ll surround and annihilate them. Otherwise, we’ll just pack our things and go.”

“Seriously? …You want to set a trap for them?”

His staffers’ doubts—*but I thought we were pulling out*—irritated him. *If she was here, she would have understood, acknowledged, and handled it without needing another word.*

“You bet. Make it look like we’re fleeing in a panic.”

He wasn’t sure what the chances were that they could draw in the enemy, but it was worth a shot. If even one enemy unit started poking out its head, the momentum would sweep along the rest, and more would come pouring through the gap.

Conversely, if the Republicans were on their guard, Romel’s troops would be able to make a safe retreat. Basically, it wouldn’t hurt to give this operation a try.

“Understood.”

For the moment, the Imperial Army began retreating under Romel’s eye. The troops at the tail end pretended to flail about in confusion as they went. They purposely left no abandoned vehicle traps; they’d been instructed to make it look like they lacked the presence of mind to set booby traps.

That would make the enemy less cautious about advancing, meaning everything would go more smoothly.

“All right, how’s this going to play out? This’ll be a piece of cake if they bite.” Romel wondered what their enemy would do. *Best case, they fall for it, of course*, he thought, sipping cold coffee.

It would depend on what happened, but a successful retreat wouldn’t be bad, either.

Are there any problems in my plan? I think I’m doing my best, but did I miss something? He reflected on his actions and was satisfied for the time being.

At the very least, he’d done everything he could. Now he just had to wait to

see the results.

“…We did it! General, they came right out!”

“All right, let’s tease them a bit. Don’t send the mages yet. Reel them in!”

And the results were good.

Were they spurred by the romance of the military? Or did they simply not understand? Whatever the case, the poor Republican fools casually left their defensive positions and exposed themselves.

At the very least, they seemed to have momentum. The belief that they had repulsed the Imperial Army bolstered their morale.

“Buy time with the central unit so we can reorganize.”

Of course, he didn’t want to clash head-on with an enemy who was chomping at the bit. He promptly considered his options before ordering a change in positions. They would buy time for the units that had managed to pull back so they could reorganize the chain of command.

“Pretend to continue withdrawing. Have the main forces set up some distance from the enemy.”

In any case, the best idea would be to divert enemy energy for as long as a delaying battle could be maintained. After all, they were seething.

Actually clashing with them was beyond pointless. Conversely, if their morale could be broken, they’d be sitting ducks. The moment they realized they were surrounded, they’d become the ones trying to make a break for it.

The plan was to tighten the encirclement right as the situation became clear, trapping them like mice.

“To get them in a better position for us?”

“Exactly. We’ll feign a withdrawal, then surround them.”

The enemy was operating with tunnel vision. They would probably assume any unit they couldn’t see had gotten away. And that was why an attack on their naive flank would work.

It seemed the Republican Army lacked more commanders like de Lugo, who

had a wealth of experience. Even simple tactics could lure in forces that didn't report directly to him.

Aiming for weak points is how you fight a war. Sorry, but I'll be doing exactly that.

"So how should the mages move?"

"Ah, right. The mages will provide support and follow-up once the central unit starts to crumble."

He realized he hadn't given any orders to the mages yet and promptly issued them. He thought he was being careful, but apparently, he was quite tense. At some point, he had begun assuming the mages would move without him saying anything.

"Understood. Right away."

"…Sheesh. Looking back on it, Major von Degurechaff sure was easy to work with."

She was a commander who could grasp his intentions and take the best actions without needing to be told. Once you got used to it, there was no officer easier to use.

They had finally gotten in sync…

"Things would go more smoothly if I could have her back."

He never thought she would be summoned by the home country. The top was always meddling with his hand. Maybe that was the fate of a soldier, but it was still lamentable.

He was especially desperate for skilled mages.

"Well, there's that trouble with the Federation. Things are tricky."

Still, good mages were in demand everywhere. That had to be why command had pulled out her battalion and stationed them at home. Considering the deteriorating situation, he had to agree it was a reasonable course of action.

After all, the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion's job was guerrilla-style maneuver warfare. If the General Staff was anticipating that war with the Federation

would take place on a much larger front than what they dealt with in the fight against the Republic, they would definitely want a mobile unit.

Tanya's battalion's superb ability to act independently, which Romel had to admire, was perfect for putting out fires. On top of that, mages could cover a greater range with fewer people than infantry could. He'd heard the General Staff was fretting about logistics, so they would appreciate that.

"Sheesh. I guess we should offer our condolences to the Federation."

"Huh?"

"Even I wouldn't want to face that battalion."

I guess all I can do is wish Major von Degurechaff luck. My belief that she doesn't need my well wishes must mean I trust her too much. Well, that's fine. Romel drained his coffee and changed gears.

Coffee in the desert is great. It changes your mood, and even better, you can make a habit of it without being criticized, unlike alcohol. Not that there's anything wrong with alcohol.

Anyhow, time to get to work.

"Ah, I see. That's for sure."

"Okay, I think it's about time for us to get down to business, too."

Our job for the moment is to finish off the Republic.

MAY 9, UNIFIED YEAR 1980, THE FEDERATION CAPITAL

Hello, everyone.

This is WTN Special Correspondent Andrew.

I'm here with the WTN crew on Great Patriotic War Remembrance Day covering the ceremony being held in Moskva. Would you like to take a look?

This is a parade of veterans who served in the war.

They did battle on the eastern front, a region comparable to the Rhine as one of the areas that saw the fiercest fighting. It was most likely the eastern front that caused the most casualties during the war.

Let’s take a moment to honor their sacrifice…

Now for a little history lesson.

Up until hostilities broke out, the relationship between the Federation and the Empire during the Great War had been extremely delicate. These days we can laugh about it, but…up until the fighting began, both countries’ attitudes were to simply keep an eye on the other, despite the tension.

The Federation’s stubborn neutrality during the hard fighting on the Rhine front is considered decisive. Because of it, the Republic didn’t get to destroy the Imperial Army with the multifront saturation attack they were so eager for.

And as a result, the Republican intelligence agency guessed at the time that the Federation was maintaining a friendly neutrality toward the Empire. The leader of the Free Republic’s forces, General de Lugo, even assumed the Federation must have been sending voluntary armies over.

In reality, the only action the Federation had taken since the beginning of the Great War was to condemn it via the Commissariat for Foreign Affairs.

On the other hand, there was a period of time, albeit brief, during which the imperial and Federation militaries had built such a close relationship they nearly formed an alliance, as can be seen in the partially released Treaty of Rappalo. The two countries seemed to be against each other, but they secretly exchanged military knowledge and signed a nonaggression pact.

With that background in mind, I’d like to look back on the day the Federation joined the war.

That year, the Free Republican Army and the Commonwealth Army were having a tough fight on the southern continent. They could both hardly believe their ears when the good news came through.

The reaction of the Commonwealth’s Foreign Office to the first report is still talked about today.

It’s said that when they received word that the Federation had joined the war, they hastily concluded it had joined the imperial side.

There’s even a legendary anecdote that says Major General (at the time)

Habergram of the Commonwealth Army's Foreign Strategy Division sent the messenger away three times. Incidentally, General de Lugo of the Free Republican Army is said to have believed it in two tries.

…Well, it must be proof that we with John Bull spirit[7] stay on our toes and don't give in to positive thinking.

Naturally, the Empire's reaction stands in contrast.

They say it shocked even General von Zettour, who with his fiendish plans plunged allied countries into fear. According to his adjutant's records, when he received the report of signs the Federation Army would join the war, the first words out of his mouth were, "Of all the ridiculous—" It's also noted that he and his colleague General von Rudersdorf, unable to comprehend why the Federation would enter the fight, were so stunned they practically started staring into space.

That said, these days this isn't viewed as their mistake.

After all…the Federation's involvement in the war was unexpected even to most of its own military officers.

The decision to join the war was made a mere month before their initial move. The generally accepted belief is that the plan was drafted by only a handful of key figures.

They made slight changes to the regularly scheduled large-scale exercise, choosing a staging point near the Empire and setting expectations of a great deal of live fire.

Obviously, it was mobilization under the pretext of an exercise. And since at the time there was a war on, the other countries were surely sensitive to such scheming—especially the Empire, right next door.

Imperial intelligence discovered something brewing in the Federation.

But after making every effort to collect intel, the Imperial Army General Staff concluded that the Federation's exercise wouldn't overstep the bounds of a demonstration.

That was a complete miscalculation.

Of course, after suffering the Republic's sneak attack on the Rhine front, they knew enough to keep their defensive lines sharp.

Still, after surveying "the great majority" of Federation officers, they were convinced.

They believed the Federation Army was not interested in starting a major war.

Given that on the all-important Federation side, the majority of commanders believed they were heading to an exercise, the survey results were a matter of course.

The true intentions of the masterminds were completely hidden from the Federation commanders until the last moment. As proof of this, even the State Defense Committee was informed only seventy-two hours before the fighting started.

Which is why, despite its cautious handling of the situation, the Imperial Army was outsmarted. And it was forgiven as such. It did barely manage to get defensive lines built, but the deployment of backup was definitely not ideal.

And that's why, as I mentioned earlier, General von Zettour lamented that they'd been tricked ("Of all the ridiculous—").

So let's take a look at how this war came to pass, even when Generals von Zettour and Rudersdorf doubted it would start.

Remarkable progress has been made in scholarship of this area in recent years.

Today I'd like to welcome Professor Sherlock of Londinium University's Political Science faculty, who specializes mainly in the key figures of the Federation of that time period.

Thank you very much for coming, Professor Sherlock.

"Thank you for having me. So you want to know the latest news in Kremlinology?"

Yes, sir. I understand that your area of expertise is Kremlinology, the analysis of the Federation leaders.

"That's correct. Information is so limited that it's been a bit like a whodunit,

though.”

Ah, the Federation is secretive to the core indeed.

You wouldn’t believe how much time and effort it took to just get our visas to come out and film. I mean, really? Even though the country’s Foreign Office issued us entry visas for the Day of Remembrance, there was another form we needed!

Aside from the border police requiring a different permission slip, the Public Health Service required yet another document. Then the Propaganda Ministry nearly confiscated our camera because we didn’t have a filming license!

“Ha-ha-ha! That sort of thing must happen all the time. Most of my progress with sources took place outside the Federation.”

I see; they’re so secretive that you need to do a lot of deduction. But I’m curious about your “progress with sources.” For example, are you saying that documents were declassified outside the Federation?

“Exactly. We’re finally beginning to discover documents from one of the sides of the conflict—the Empire.”

Did you hear that, everyone? Yes, it’s the key to unraveling the mystery of this Great War we’re investigating. Apparently, there were several pertinent items in these “confidential imperial papers.”

So, Professor, what was the reason the Federation decided to go to war?

“Probably mass paranoia.”

Huh? Sorry, Professor, but could you say that one more time?

What did you say?

“Sure, ‘mass paranoia.’”

…Sorry, but I don’t know much about psychology. Do you mind explaining?

I believe I know the definition of “mass paranoia,” but…I can’t quite wrap my head around it. I’m incredibly embarrassed to admit this in front of all you viewers, but perhaps I’m not a very bright student.

If you please, Professor.

“Ah, well, the straightforward explanation is that mass paranoia is when members of a group all fall under the same delusion. In this case, the leadership of the Federation as an organization was utterly convinced that their neighbors were out to get them or that if they didn’t attack first…they’d be done for.”

That strikes me as an awfully extreme hypothesis… What kind of examination did you perform that led you to infer such a conclusion?

“That’s a good question. Actually, I hit on it when I was taking a historical approach by trying to understand the context in which the decision was made.”

So you investigated the history of the era?

“Exactly. And after much analysis and examination, I found that, from as far as twenty years prior, the Federation leadership’s mental state had been gathering attention.”

I see. So you looked into the background of the decision. And that’s quite a long time ago.

“There was no helping it. In Communist nations, the health and mental status of the leadership is a state secret.”

That’s similar to our country’s politicians. I think they should learn from the royal family and make that information public. Well, not that I think we should allow pushy gossip mags to hound them for it.

Now then, we got off topic. So the Federation leadership was as stubborn about maintaining confidentiality as the Commonwealth’s?

And that made your analysis difficult?

“No, no, no. The thickness of the Federation’s veil of secrets blows the Commonwealth’s out of the water. That said, my main issue was a lack of documentation.”

Still, I’d say the Commonwealth’s politicians have their guard up higher than average. Our reporting team is never welcome. Anyhow, if the Federation is even more secretive, then I understand why getting your hands on any documents has been so difficult. But you say the situation has changed now?

“That’s right. It’s all due to a secret we found in the Imperial Army General

Staff's documents. After the war, all the materials seized by the alliance armies were declassified, and we finally found it."

Secret Imperial Army documents? And? What did you find?

"Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars Dzhugashvili was like a man possessed. The head of the Commissariat for Internal Affairs, Loria, was concluded to be a monomaniac."

Er, that's another awfully extreme conclusion. How in the world did they end up there? Given that these documents are from a country at war, surely the most generous interpretation you can give is that the facts are distorted.

"That's a very good question. But the analysis was performed in a serious, neutral manner by specialists. Even judging by today's standards, they adhered well to the principles of psychological analysis. Our general impression is that they did a proper job."

So we can believe what they said? It's correct and unbiased? If we can believe this information, how reliable do you think it is?

"It's certainly more reliable than the Federation's official accounts."

Which means that the reason the Federation entered the war was…paranoia? How surprising!

…So a mass delusion changed the course of history. It really gives you a sense of how ironic, or perhaps how strange, history is.

This has been WTN Special Correspondent Andrew and Professor Sherlock of Londinium University's Political Science faculty.

TEXTBOOK FOR LITTLE CITIZENS: THE HISTORY OF OUR NATION

Kind Mr. Josef was worried.

The expectations of all who believed in him were weighing on his shoulders.

Thinking only of the people's happiness, he thought it was time to work hard at developing the Federation.

But…

Its citizens, spoiled by his kindness, only fell into decline.

How awful!

Mr. Josef was so upset.

He decided to ask his trusted comrade, Comrade Loria, for a solution.

Capable Comrade Loria jumped into action.

First, in order to get the people to understand the importance of work, he took the initiative in starting inspections.

It goes without saying that Comrade Loria had a perfect understanding of Mr. Josef's orders.

He began trying, though never with a high-handed attitude, to persuade the people. *If your current job is too difficult, why not try an easier one?*

Comrade Loria's activities reflected his understanding of Mr. Josef's kind heart; he thought together with the people about what sort of work would be a good fit for each of them.

Of course, he actively encouraged the people who wanted to try intense or difficult jobs. But Comrade Loria felt that only encouraging them was irresponsible.

In order that they not feel lonely, he sent them helpers. And he decided to look for a manageable job for the people who couldn't handle intense, difficult work.

Actually, this was Comrade Loria's biggest challenge. Each and every person was different. Some comrades were fast runners, while other comrades were slow but strong. Some comrades had very quick minds but a weak sense of responsibility.

It was incredibly difficult to grasp the diversity of the people. That was precisely where his predecessor, Comrade Iezhov, had failed.

But Comrade Loria couldn't betray the trust of Mr. Josef, whom all the people respected.

He had his people investigate nearly the entire country.

He preferred assertive, revolutionary action; there is even a story about how he sent his staff into the wheat fields of a farming village. They kept searching for a new job even as they helped the tearful people bring in their harvest.

Finally, far in the east, they found a simple job that anyone capable of counting could do. Comrade Loria was pleased and asked his subordinate who had found it how many people could be employed that way. The response was ideal.

All the nation's people could be employed, and there would still be openings! This surprised Comrade Loria, so he asked another question.

What in the world is this job?

The answer:

The environmentally friendly job of counting trees in Sildberia.

It was work that soothed the tired people's hearts with the power of nature and would surely protect the environment as well.

People could enjoy forest bathing while gazing up toward the clear starry sky while spending their days devoted to this noble task.

It was truly labor by the people, for the people.

Comrade Loria gleefully decided to report this to Mr. Josef.

Of course, when Mr. Josef heard, he practically jumped for joy.

Pouring his prized Georziyan wine for Comrade Loria, he thanked him for living up to his trust.

The two men looked each other in the eye, and Mr. Josef expressed his sincere gratitude for Comrade Loria's devotion. And he praised him, saying that the country itself should be happy to have such a fine comrade.

It goes without saying that Comrade Loria was thrilled. He promised to work even harder for Mr. Josef—and he faithfully kept that promise, so much so that not a day went by that the people didn't speak of Comrade Loria's unflagging efforts. It seemed like things would go on this way forever, but then one day, Comrade Loria had a dream like a divine revelation.

It almost seemed to predict the future.

Of course, Comrade Loria was a logical Communist, so he wasn't fazed by such unscientific things. He continued to solemnly perform his duties day after day.

But he was tormented by the dream nearly every night.

At that point, even Comrade Loria had to wonder if he was exhausted due to overwork.

He decided to ask Mr. Josef, whom he trusted and respected, for advice.

And what do you know—Mr. Josef had been having the same dream! *What could it possibly mean?*

After thinking for a little while, Mr. Josef logically concluded that both of them had the same worries. After all, the future of the nation was resting on their shoulders. Even if the weight was different for each of them, they both felt it.

Perhaps the dream was caused by some concern they shared.

In other words, perhaps there was something they needed to do.

Mr. Josef and Comrade Loria put some serious thought into that idea. But Mr. Josef hadn't made any particular mistakes domestically. All the people, his comrades, were living happy lives.

Not only that, but he had received a report that the economy was growing well. He searched and searched, but no matter how hard he looked, he could find only reports that said the people's happiness was growing.

And that improvement showed no signs of slowing down.

It was to the point that people who made mistakes competed to see who could participate in the canal construction project first. The people who had been spoiled by Mr. Josef's kindness were finally learning to have a work ethic.

What could there possibly be to worry about?

That was the question flitting across Mr. Josef's mind.

The answer became clear as Mr. Josef, whose strong intellectual curiosity made him eager to learn, was reading a foreign newspaper. Tragically, the

world had been enveloped in war!

Since he was in a peaceful country, the war naturally had nothing to do with him.

But he had to do something.

And he didn’t even have to think to know that the people of the world, surely suffering, needed a final solution.

Mr. Josef, with his wonderful loving heart, tried to think what he could do.

Surely there were people somewhere who needed his help.

As the leader of the people, dear Mr. Josef couldn’t hesitate.

Comrade Loria persuaded the reluctant Revisionists,[8] and Mr. Josef finally knew what they had to do.

Even so, they didn’t give up on words at first.

They tried to have a conversation with the militaristic imperialists. Very sadly, however, their words and good faith did not get through to them.

For the peoples of the Republic and the Commonwealth, and for the people oppressed under the imperial authorities, Mr. Josef was forced to act.

That is how Mr. Josef and Comrade Loria’s battle began.

Of course, peace-loving Mr. Josef’s army severely lacked the experience necessary to fight against the bloodthirsty Imperial Army. Unfortunately, no small number of soldiers went to Sildberia to count trees.

It was certainly not Mr. Josef’s intention to force the people to change their jobs. He always gave them a choice, but even so, many people felt they should respond to his kindness and volunteered to join the army.

And that is how the Federation Army ended up fighting for the people of the world.

(from the Commissariat for Education–approved textbook, *The People’s Textbook for Schoolchildren*)

JANUARY 17, UNIFIED YEAR 1926, FEDERATION CAPITAL MOSKVA

He was a boring man.

His friends didn't find him worth debating against, and in truth, he wasn't. As his friends were promoted, the organization trusted him with administrative duties, if that.

He was also a stranger to military glory. Rather, he failed stupendously and even hampered his allies' victory. For that reason, he was looked down upon, and no one ever considered him someone to be wary of.

And then he quietly built up his status in an administrative position everyone had avoided.

Having the rights of the administration effectively meant controlling personnel. Little by little, he put people under his influence in inconspicuous yet important positions.

No one saw him as a legitimate threat. They just thought of him as a good underling. And that is how he managed to achieve a definitive rise unhindered by anyone. Until the critical moment, no one saw him as anything but an office worker.

But he held literally every power.

Yes, his famed seniors with illustrious careers were nominally employed in higher-ranking positions, but directly beneath each of those people was one of his men actually managing affairs.

In secret.

That was the modest yet critical key to his ambition. Without anyone knowing, he had taken control of the government's workings. And with that power, he became a force in government by his very nature.

It was right before his predecessors' deaths that they finally realized how dangerous he was, but it was too late.

They had ignored the warning. Everyone aiming to lead the government had let it go in one ear and out the other without bothering to consider it seriously. They paid for that—for what could be described as a "fatal" error—with their and their families' lives and assets.

That’s how the man called Josef snatched up one of the world’s leading nations, the Federation.

He believed he was the only legitimate leader of the Federation and that he had a mission in history, a mission to restore the Federation’s immense power.

He was a calculating man with a devious mind.

To him, the Empire was an allowable disorder. If the Empire didn’t exist, the world’s bourgeois hatred for Communism might have instigated an alliance against the Federation.

If, however, the Empire was there to meddle in their interests, the bourgeoisie would spend their time on the nearer object of their hate. Even the Federation Army, though reluctantly, acknowledged this strategy to be correct.

But suddenly, they were at war.

It was terribly sudden for the Federation, to say nothing of the Empire.

Every single person had been wanting to know what the dictator’s true intentions were; Josef had been brooding in isolation.

He’d been tormented by dreams.

It all started one night as he savored a glass of Georziyan wine, recalling the screams of the irritating, high-level military men he had successfully purged. He nodded off and then awoke with a start.

Someone had spoken to him.

He had experienced someone speaking to him, inviting yet certain. It was a kind voice, yet still horrifying for the listener.

“…’s…st…problem. …, …ink…”

The voice was making some sort of appeal to him. At first, he laughed it off. *It’s a bit late for that, isn’t it?*

He had stopped feeling anything about the purges a long time ago. The last bit of humanity left within Josef had vanished with the death of his beloved wife.

Even if he felt unsure about the purges, there was no way he could stop them now. At any rate, it was kill or be killed. If he stopped, he would die on the

blade of a traitor's knife.

"…, wh…think…, …simple."

Is it telling me to rethink things?

He had cast away the Bible and its ilk in his youth when it hadn't saved him.

The enlightenment of superstitious people would take time and effort, but eradicating them would solve everything, too. Loria was particularly talented in that realm, and Josef was satisfied for the first time.

"…w…sol…"

But the voice calling him didn't know when to quit. Perhaps, as he feared, it had something to do with the mages. Unlike the more replaceable soldiers—or to put it another way, the ones whose necks he could slit at any time—mages were harder to manage. Since even a single mage could resist the organization, letting any of them remain was like leaving live charcoal lying around.

That's why he made a proactive move to stop the dissidents ahead of time. Still, there seemed to be some kind of interference happening that he couldn't comprehend. He reached in annoyance for the receiver to call the head of security. Depending on the situation, he thought it might be better to put someone else in charge.

But he would regret picking up that receiver for the rest of his life. Up until then, the voice had been full of static, but now it rang clearly from the machine.

"It's because you all exist that there's a problem. Very well, let's think about that, then. Yes, after a little thought, it's simple. If none of you was here, there would be no problem."

He felt like something was watching him, a chilling fear… That was the moment his heart clenched.

"Death will solve everything. Therefore, you Communist dogs, this I pronounce unto ye: Dzhugashvili, apostate, God will punish thee. An apostle comes. Even now, an apostle approaches from the west. Thou and the rest of the eastern barbarians shall be eradicated. Fear the apostle's punishment."

"An apostle?" he retorted in spite of himself.

He'd heard the stories when he was a young child, that God sent apostles to both save and judge, but…he never believed them.

God is a fantasy.

God doesn't exist.

Of course he doesn't, he told himself. But before he knew it, he realized there was something he might be frightened of.

…The west.

Yes, the west. He couldn't ignore the Empire in the west.

It had been attacked from three directions and come out victorious each time. If they didn't stop the Empire now, whether God existed or not, the Federation…would have to face that immensely powerful Imperial Army alone.

I don't want to think about it, but on the off chance… His thoughts raced, but then he realized he was being deceived. *Who came up with this? This must be the work of those miscreants.*

"Ha, I'm not going to fall for that. Don't give me this horseshit."

He meant to slam the receiver down at the same time, but instead he found himself perplexed.

He heard something shattering on the floor. When he returned to himself, he saw he had dropped his glass of wine. There wasn't even any sign that he had touched the receiver to call security.

"Sir? What was that noise?!"

"Ah, nothing. I just dropped my glass."

He gave his subordinate a look that silenced the question about what had or hadn't happened—*Don't worry about it*.

In the eyes on the receiving end of this glare was the fear of being sent away. This learned behavior showed he understood that opening his mouth would be the man's ruin.

Josef firmly believed that the key to controlling people was this fear.

"Sorry, but do me a favor and clean it up."

It wasn’t hard for him to save face in this situation. No, not this one time.

But similar troubles continued for nights on end. It didn’t take long for even this man with nerves of steel to yield to the nightmares.

I must eliminate it.

I absolutely must eliminate it. Josef’s mind couldn’t tolerate foreign threats any longer.

Which is why…

Even though it was low on officers due to the purges, the farmers’ *ressentiment* stemming from the collectivization policy was about to explode, and he had just finished purging the mages; he had to mobilize the army.

He had to turn his imperfect military into the war machine that was the Empire.

Of course, in Josef’s country, soldiers grew on trees.

[chapter]

II

A Goodwill Visit

Love makes all pain and strife insignificant.

XXX's personal dispatch, a note
designated a secret by the Federation's Committee for State Security

[chapter] II A Goodwill Visit

MARCH 15, UNIFIED YEAR 1926, IMPERIAL ARMY GENERAL STAFF OFFICE, CONFERENCE ROOM 1

Conference Room 1 in the Imperial Army General Staff Office was filled with such clamor and panicked shouts from officers, it was as if it were the deck of a sailing ship that had just been hit by a typhoon.

The bad news of the full-scale military conflict with the Federation Army in the east had arrived.

After the ominous first report, the General Staff readied themselves like sailors who sensed a fearsome storm brewing; no preparations were left undone.

They had already made the huge mistake of allowing the Republican Army to sneak attack them on the Rhine front. Twiddling one's thumbs until a situation broke out would not be tolerated, a fact the army had already demonstrated, both internally and publicly, by purging all those involved in the previous debacle.

The General Staff cannot afford another mistake. The words were repeated like a pass phrase, giving a graphic account of the staffers' determination, as well as their clear rejection of their predecessors' mistake.

And in fact, none of the negligence associated with boasting was evident in their determination. They called a general mobilization that included even off-duty members and did everything they could to get a handle on the situation.

Their efforts were rewarded with the frontline troops' well-disciplined combat in defense of the east.

The close cooperation and coordination between Eastern Army Group Headquarters and the General Staff Office also yielded excellent results.

A fluid mobile battle was unfolding, and the officers of the Service Corps from Deputy Director von Zettour on down were maintaining the supply lines. When it came to the supply of shells to the front, the interior lines strategy was working, to an amazing degree, exactly as it was meant to; on the whole, they were successful in responding to circumstances without delay.

Even so…

Information came in obscured by the fog of the battlefield, and grasping the overall picture was an enormous task for their mortal minds.

There were emergency calls from each patrol station and updates from the regional armies. At the same time, conflicting inquiries came in from all directions. Naturally, even if they did everything in their power, there was still a limit to the General Staff's processing capabilities. Even if they tightened things up as much as they could, there had to be a maximum.

The torrent of status reports easily shattered their expectations for an exercise.

They had three times the number of analysts that they thought they would need, as redundancy, but it was way more work than even they expected, so processing had reached a saturation point.

But the true strength of the Empire's prized staff officers was none other than their ability to deal with the unexpected. Putting the ad hoc skills praised as the crux of their staff education on display, they discarded all trivial data the moment it became apparent their processing ability was being outpaced.

With a terrible clarity, the Imperial Army's core faction took the realistic attitude that priority was everything.

Thus, less important reports and requests were ruthlessly shunted aside, and the entire staff began handling things from highest priority down.

They started by sending the waiting Great Army to the east. Knowing that speed could decide wars, they put everything they had into the rapid deployment of their forces.

The Service Corps and the Railroad Department worked without sleep or rest to coordinate the timetables, and they had already started sending the units that were ready to go.

At the same time, the logistics officers in charge of supplies cursed the heavens as they tweaked the shipment schedule on the fly, which was no small feat. In response to the last-minute operation plan, the Railroad team members practically all collapsed but still managed to get it done.

In the army, they always said that the heart of interior lines strategy—that is, the swift deployment of equipment and troops—relied on the Railroad Department, and this feat proved it. On top of that, there was a depot set up as part of the Service Corps–led supply network maintenance, and the flights to take staffers over to confirm the situation were being arranged according to plan.

But not everything was proceeding as expected, as usual on the battlefield. Annoyingly enough, from the reports, things did indeed seem chaotic.

At any rate, it was a gambling den.

Would their actions produce good or bad results? It was almost like making a bet. There were officers with bloodshot eyes rushing around everywhere you looked.

And at the center of the maelstrom was the General Staff Office…

“Let’s make this quick. All right, gentlemen, I’d like to discuss the suggestion commander of the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion Major Tanya von Degurechaff sent over.” Lieutenant General von Zettour, who should have been busier than anyone, presided over the meeting. They were gathered to consider Tanya’s proposed plan for a raid on the capital of the Federation.

Even for a unit reporting directly to the General Staff, it was unusual for a request from a mere battalion to warrant such high-priority deliberations.

“Colonel von Lergen, let’s hear what you have to say.”

A battalion had gone over the regional armies’ heads to ask the General Staff for instructions. Given the way armies are structured as organizations, that would normally be most unwelcome.

But not only did they permit it, the officers of the General Staff, who were so busy that every second counted, were putting their heads together to debate the request seriously. It would be quite something…if they sent the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion to attack the Federation's capital.

"Sir, if there is a chance of success, I think it's worth letting her try it."

It was a plan to hit the capital directly.

The astonishing thing is Major von Degurechaff's way of thinking. That had been Lergen's honest appraisal when he was informed of her idea.

When ordered to join the eastern lines and fight a delaying battle, she responds by suggesting they raid the capital and give the enemy rear a good shock? Certainly, if they could draw the Federation's attention behind their own lines, that would be very effective in terms of strategy, but…it's a bit difficult for an ordinary person to follow her train of thought.

No, he amended, *I must have been sucked into her influence.*

If anyone else had said they were going to take a single battalion and attack the capital of the Federation, nobody would feel the need to debate the ridiculous boast.

"To be frank and ignore the risk for a moment, the returns are huge. And the chances of success aren't low by any means."

But far from reprimanding her for her forwardness, the General Staff promptly began considering the request—that is, they made harried specialists from all departments go out of their way to spend time on it.

Lergen believed it could be done, even if no one else did.

"…A direct attack on the capital. As a distraction, it's perfect."

The main lines are engaged in a delaying battle, and the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion is supposed to be supporting them, but apparently, its commander is running things in her usual way, Lergen grumbled inwardly but voiced his opinion that they should let her do it.

"Her message says she is requesting permission given political factors."

You can never tell what she's thinking. A magic officer appeared in Lergen's

tired mind. It wasn't as if all magic officers were that hard to understand.

This was definitely Major von Degurechaff's idea.

This was *that* major. It certainly wasn't the more usual case, where a commander under pressure from their officers appeals in a roundabout way to have the idea shot down.

She was probably asking for permission out of consideration for her unwilling subordinates. And perhaps also due to political situations. She had covered all her bases admirably.

Her talent for preventing political quarrels before they started had already been proven during the Commonwealth submarine sinking incident.

"There's a chance it works. And it will be a good distraction, so I say we let her do it."

Except for the political impact, an attack on the capital would be a perfect distraction. It would force the Federation to take some of its muscle and protect the city. They might even draw some off the front lines.

"Isn't this a classic example of something easier said than done? Colonel von Lergen, striking the capital directly will be no easy feat. No matter how impactful it sounds, actually accomplishing it will surely entail a mountain of difficulties."

"They succeeded in attacking the Dacian capital, the Republican Army HQ on the Rhine front, as well as the enemy HQ on the southern lines. Considering this proposal is coming from a specialist with no lack of achievements, don't you think there's a good chance they could do it?" Degurechaff and the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion had a brilliant track record for decapitation tactics. "And even if —*if*—the strike failed, the enemy would still have to send units to deal with it. In that case, if they can lure in some enemy forces, we can expect the Federation Army pressure on the main lines in the east to relax somewhat."

But at the same time, Degurechaff's glass-like eyes crossed his mind. Just the recollection of that inhuman gaze staring into nothingness was enough for him to realize that normal expectations were far too restrictive for this.

By appearance alone, you would think her an adorable little girl. But her eyes

gave Lergen an impression that was less human and more like a murderous doll.

“…Colonel, are you serious?”

“General von Zettour, please consider it. We’re talking about Degurechaff.” He responded to Zettour’s suspicion with a challenge. Normally, that would be incredibly rude—but they were talking about Degurechaff.

Supposedly she had laughed and danced on the Rhine. She was the crazy type who forced her way through the Republic’s air defenses and took out their army’s headquarters.

She was taking the time to solicit permission.

By then, it was no longer an issue of feasibility; she was simply checking whether politics would allow it or not.

There was no doubt in his mind she could do it.

“But the capital?”

“Are we just going to keep her chained up? Wouldn’t it be better to let her bite someone?”

Success was practically guaranteed. And even if they did fail, that mad dog’s need to go on the attack would surely provide enough distraction to increase their gains considerably. It was best to let hunting dogs, even the overly brutal ones, snap at their prey. She had already proven herself to be a commander who could pick up the scent of military opportunity when released into the wild.

As long as giving permission wouldn’t cause serious political problems, they ought to let her go. It was far more dangerous to hold her back without reason. Letting de Lugo get away was costing them dearly now. With that in mind, perhaps trusting the mad dog’s nose was the optimal course of action.

“What a horrible take. That’s no way to talk about a frontline commander.”

“You can only say that because you don’t know, Colonel.”

The one who admonished him with a sensible opinion was an older lieutenant colonel.

I'm pretty sure he's a communications officer for the Eastern Army Group, thought Lergen, at which point he scoffed at the argument.

If he had once, just once, come into contact with that anomaly Major von Degurechaff's true nature, he would understand immediately. She was a mad war dog who would take a magic blade to an officer in training if they weren't making themselves useful. If she realized someone was in her way, even an ally, she would probably blow them to smithereens. It wasn't uncommon for inept commanders to die in "accidents" on the front lines.

But she would do a proper job with a logical reason, he mused.

"Major von Degurechaff is a capable field officer, but let's look at this from a different angle, shall we?"

"Huh?"

"…She's *too* capable. I suggest you read the reports from the mobile battles on the southern continent. As far as I know, you can count the number of imperial units who could pull off those maneuvers *in an exercise* on one hand. Surely she's the only one who can make them happen in combat."

In that sense, Lergen felt General von Romel's discipline was fantastic. Instead of lamenting that she was a handful, he freed her to achieve as much as she could.

Without restrictions, she could work well, too.

…No, I shouldn't underrate her.

Apparently, she really works hard.

He had to think "apparently" because Major von Degurechaff's productivity had already surpassed any scale he could imagine.

"Oh, about that—the eastern armies had a question… Could the reports be somewhat lacking in accuracy? I don't mean to suggest that a brilliant field officer's achievements might be invalid, but I hope you would consider that results tend to be inflated…"

"I beg your pardon… What did you just say?"

"Some members of the Eastern Army Group wonder if the achievement

reports are being filed properly. I realize the home front needs a hero, but shouldn't the reports contain numbers that are a bit more realistic?"

For a moment, Lergen was rendered speechless. *Umm.* He looked to Zettour but found the same perplexed expression on his face.

Well, I can't blame him. He winced, ruminating on the Eastern Army Group communication officer's comment. In their achievement reports, Degurechaff and the rest of the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion came off a bit sensational. He could probably assume the issue was with the comment that Degurechaff had fought the Republic's colonial defense forces and the remnants of their main army with the fury of a lion.

"If you're that skeptical, why don't you dispatch an inspector from the Eastern Army Group to Degurechaff's battalion?"

"…May I?"

"Of course. But if you'll forgive my impertinence, allow me to give some advice from the kindness of my heart. I strongly recommend sending a veteran magic officer who has previously belonged to a long-range reconnaissance unit and has at least a week's worth of experience on missions penetrating deep into enemy territory."

He gave a sincere warning.

With the fury of a lion *is quite the metaphor. You frown at the accuracy of the report, but then there are those extraordinary achievement notes. Major von Degurechaff and her battalion always come back with scores like they've been out duck hunting.*

Apparently, an inspector who doubted the accuracy of their reports once accompanied them, but the poor administrative bureaucrat had a miserable time. Following a week of long-range recon and attacks in enemy territory, they dragged him along on a scrambled sortie, and he lost consciousness, so her men complained that their scores in the interception battle hadn't been properly recognized. In the end, the inspector fled back to the home country thoroughly battered.

This wasn't score padding or anything like that—the achievements were real.

Their performance should be deemed heroic.

But maybe it's good to take a step back and think some more.

Anyone who could do a week of penetrating raids unfazed—even though one wrong move could mean getting wiped out—had to be a little insane. Not only that, but during the opening battle with the Free Republican Army (as they had styled themselves at the start of the war in the south), there was that frontal breakthrough and strike on its headquarters; the timing was so perfect it didn't seem possible for a human.

The report about the battle was a parade of ideal tactical maneuvers that were perhaps, but just barely, theoretically possible. The right maneuvers happened at such the right time that it seemed like she was somehow overseeing everything from far above.

"That one's exceptional, in her own crazy way. If you don't at least send an inspector with exceptional abilities themselves, they might get shot for slowing the battalion down. I doubt that's the conclusion you're looking for."

"That can't be! She's the recipient of the Silver Wings Assault Badge with Oak Leaves!"

"And that's exactly why."

A child her age received the Silver Wings Assault Badge, plus the Oak Leaves, and lived.

Normally, even just that sentence would be bizarre; you could say it was impossible. If I had read the same sentence before the war, I would have scoffed at it as either an awful piece of fiction or a joke made by someone unfamiliar with how personnel works in the military and thought nothing of it.

The more he considered it, the stranger it seemed. Major Tanya von Degurechaff was a child, and yet…she was so terribly complete as a soldier.

Practically all he could think was that something inside her had come undone.

He understood from all that had happened so far that she was loyal to the army. What he didn't know was where exactly her loyalty was oriented. *Horrifying.*

"…Let's end it there. The clock is ticking even as we debate. As long as the only objections are emotional arguments, discussing any further is a waste of time."

Zettour cut the dispute short, the trace of a wry smile on his face. Then he dropped a bomb on the staffers and their blank looks.

"I also judge it fine to give her permission."

Lergen grinned. *He's the same as ever.*

""General?!"" At that remark, several people observing the proceedings finally had to interrupt.

That was hilarious to Lergen, but…apparently, they were actually worried.

Aren't the chances of success incredibly slim? they thought.

Won't this just end with us running an invaluable elite unit into the ground?

Or maybe they were concerned it would have a negative impact on morale.

All those questions were implicit in their calls to hold her back.

"She wouldn't ask unless she believed success was possible. I'd be willing to wage one of my favorite bottles on it."

"Are you serious?!"

Which is why they were shocked when he promptly rejected their fears.

The members of the General Staff were brilliant people who were able to think only within the bounds of common sense. They weren't much good at adapting to new ideas.

Well, I can see why, thought Lergen as it hit him. *The 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion is just something else.*

Getting involved with that one sure gives your common sense a jolt.

"Yes, I'm serious. Now authorize her."

There's no way to force them to understand, thought Lergen as he saluted and left. He was headed to the signaling room to send a telegram to Tanya, who he knew was waiting: *Is it here yet? Have we gotten permission?*

As he went, he thought, *I hope the Federation rots*.

MARCH 16, UNIFIED YEAR 1926, THE FEDERATION CAPITAL MOSKVA

Located in one corner of Moskva is the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, and its name alone was enough for any citizen of the Federation to steel themselves: *Am I next?* After all, unlike the lazier Federation agencies, there was no lack of results.

Some people in the world push forward very passionately with work that you definitely wouldn't want them to be passionate about. Surely everyone wants police and firefighters to be enthusiastic, but not many people would appreciate that same enthusiasm from the *secret* police.

So when it comes to "the people's friend," the Commissariat for Internal Affairs that is, the common people surely wish it wasn't so dedicated. No, even the privileged class of apparatchiks wish from the bottom of their hearts for this particular people's commissariat to be lazier. After all, the Commissariat for Internal Affairs is notorious for its decisive role in the cleansing of the party's central presidium.

If these guys had their eyes on you, whether you were a leading member of the military or the party, your life would be short indeed… As a power that could ruin anyone and everyone tomorrow if it so chose, the organization was feared and loathed by all Federation citizens. But the staff of the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs took no notice of the people's feelings and continued with the meticulous execution of their roles as cogs in the system.

From collectivizing agriculture, purging reactionary elements, and exposing sabotage to cracking down on secret communication with foreign agents—they worked devotedly on it all. They openly professed that rather than let a single criminal go free out of concern for harming ten potentially innocent people, they would prefer to condemn a hundred innocents to catch ten actual criminals.

And those same staff members could probably be said to be heading up the modern witch hunt. But even they trembled before their boss and manager, the People's Commissar for Internal Affairs Comrade Loria, hoping they wouldn't

make some kind of mistake.

In terms of appearance, he was an ordinary, lackluster man in his forties, if a bit short. But his name was enough to cause seasoned veterans to break out in a cold sweat and turn docile under the cruel thumb of the Commissariat for Internal Affairs.

Loria, however, matter-of-factly facing his duties with his pen in hand, defined himself as nothing more than an efficient bureaucrat applying himself to his work.

“Right. See to it that they’re handled in an acceptable manner.” As part of his administrative duties regarding the concentration camps in Sildberia, he warned a camp manager that the laborers were to be used properly—that is, with wear and tear kept to a gradual level—and slowly replaced the receiver.

Though he was aware a war was starting, the style with which he approached his duties didn’t change one bit from peacetime. He calmly viewed human beings as statistics and devoted himself to meeting his numbers whether for the front lines or the rear.

Thus, for Loria, as long as the war was a sure thing, he could only do his duty.

But even for him, without a doubt, the decision to declare war on the Empire was a happy event that cleared away the nightmares that had been occupying his mind. Apparently, the weight of being constantly on guard, never knowing when the Empire might strike, was far heavier than he imagined.

How long had he been tormented by that stress?

Ever since planning the declaration and sneak attack, he’d felt so much better. As a fortunate result, he was able to get through approvals faster and handle many more matters than before.

He had purged half the list, so he was confident and proud of the fact that the reactionary forces couldn’t make a move, even if the country shifted into war mode.

He wasn’t going to allow anyone to challenge the foundations of the Federation, whether it be the wavering class plotting sabotage or the antiestablishment faction. And since the camps needed as much labor as they

could get, he could simply send the imperial soldiers over.

“Great, everything’s going smoothly, so I should… Ah, but every now and then, it’s not so bad…”

At this moment, when war was just beginning on the front lines, he noticed… due to a slight quiver…that he was feeling unusually pent-up. He couldn’t suppress the urge to vent his impulses.

Once it occurred to him, he didn’t hesitate to act on it.

“It’s me. Yes, bring my car around.”

All he had left to do was wait for reports from the political commissars on the front lines. That would take some time. Waiting irritated him—he didn’t have the patience.

If he couldn’t stand it, *a bit of a break* for his nether regions became necessary.

Today wasn’t a bad day to wander the city for a new find. *Great men have great fondness for the sensual pleasures*—isn’t that what they say?

“Make sure this is handled by the time I get back. Pay particular attention to the cleansing of any people who’ve had contact with imperials.”

Quite so. And thus, since he was a great man, it was no wonder he had a great fondness for sensual pleasures. Loria was the type of person who didn’t hesitate to prioritize his tastes.

He left the rest of the work to his subordinates, telling them to do a thorough job on anyone connected to the Empire; got in his car; and gave the driver, who was aware of the particulars, concise instructions.

“I’d like to go for a drive. Just the usual.”

So the car leisurely proceeded toward the center of Moskva, occasionally interrupted by a checkpoint or air defense base. He couldn’t really complain about the obstructions to his fun, since he was the one who had arranged for the checkpoints and ordered the military to build the air defense bases.

Luckily, it didn’t take too long. Even if he was held up slightly now and then, some of the sentries were from the People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs.

Once they noticed he was in an official car with a special license plate number, they opened the roads to him.

He had the driver take him to a part of town with lots of students and began watching them with the anticipation of a beast hunting its prey. *Let's see…*

He'd been so busy lately he hadn't gotten to enjoy himself like this in some time.

I really have no patience anymore… He smiled wryly to himself. Still, that's why he was gazing lustfully at the schoolgirls going by in search of one who fit his ideal.

"What about that one? …Mm, not so much." He sighed.

For a moment, the back of one girl seemed good, but when he took a closer look, she wasn't what he was after.

It was a problem of seasoning. If she had been younger, she would have been his type. Unfortunately, she was far too grown-up for his taste.

She was more like a ripe fruit than a green one, just slightly outside the realm of his interest. She was very close. It wasn't as if she aroused nothing within him. But precisely because she was so nearly perfect, her faults were glaring.

"Not quite… If only I could have found her a bit sooner, she would have been delicious."

Before he knew it, he was lamenting the absurdity of fate. That beauty, that height—a few years earlier he would have surely wanted her; he would have plucked her off the street. The fact that she was so beautiful, he felt he might even be able to savor her despite her awkward partially grown-up-ness actually lessening his desire—what a tragedy.

"What's wrong?"

"Ah, they just aren't quite it. Keep driving."

This is what it meant to Loria, as he gazed at the girls walking down the street, to lose interest. He was looking for a flower to pick, but having seen a decayed form of his ideal, none of them was enough for him. From behind, one might look nice, but when he got closer, there was always something missing.

Should I try somewhere else? It was as he was trying to think of a way to improve his mood that it happened.

After staring at the earth for so long—*Ah, man*—he looked up and noticed dark spots hanging in the western sky. As he was thinking what strange spots they were, he realized they were clad in camouflage, certainly nothing like the plumage of any bird.

“Eh? What idiots are these?”

The entirety of Moskva had already been declared a no-fly zone. No one was supposed to be in the air if it wasn’t for a military parade or ceremony.

Naturally, this was a flagrant violation of the rules.

You reprobates! With eyes containing so much murder he could have killed someone with a glare, he vowed to punish the fools.

This is why I can’t trust the air forces or the mages. I’ve sent so many to the concentration camps, and they still don’t learn! After the thought occurred to him, Loria’s sly mind wondered something.

Mages?

There shouldn’t have been any mages left in the area. He himself had spearheaded the hunt—not for witches but mages. It should have been physically impossible for any mages to even be around to break the rules.

There couldn’t have been any left.

“What the—?!”

Actually…

He was shouting in spite of himself, lacking the wherewithal to care about appearances.

…what the hell is going on?

Even that dead-end question entered Loria’s head. But in the next moment, the movements of the mage-like spots before his eyes left no room for doubt.

The mages calmly assumed anti-surface strike formation. Even from the ground, he could tell it was a magnificent maneuver. Not a member was out of

place; you could have even called their attitude relaxed.

And Loria knew—that the Federation Army mages couldn't pull off such a well-ordered maneuver.

Of course he knew. He was the one who had purged and ruined them.

He did it so the class that had made the former mage establishment their allies would never have the power to oppose the party ever again. There were only a few reactionaries left in the Federation Army, and they had fallen so far that people gave them the cold shoulder. There were no units left that could perform such maneuvers, and if there were, he would have sent them to Sildberia to get them killed by the Akitsushima Dominion in the border conflict.

So these weren't Federation mages. In which case, by process of elimination, their identities were clear: *They're enemies. They're from the army of a hostile nation…* After that realization, this time he shouted with true abandon:

"The Imperial Army?! What?! That can't be!"

MARCH 16, UNIFIED YEAR 1926, OVER FEDERATION CAPITAL MOSKVA

Upon reaching the sky over the Federation's capital, Moskva, the commander of the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion, Major Tanya von Degurechaff, realizes she has won her bet.

In a *booyah* mood—smiling, even—Tanya looks out over the streets of Moskva they are about to greet as representatives of the Imperial Army. As she takes a good look, she notices the annoyingly gaudy bronze statues in "the world's most urban international airport."

The towering People's Palace can't have been built without heaps of gall; the twinkling red stars are in truly bad taste.

Well. Tanya smiles tolerantly.

I don't expect much sense from Communists to begin with, and I'm not the type who gets particular about the shape of my targets.

If there's one thing I'm particular about, it's that "A dead Red is a good Red."

If international agreements don't prevent Tanya from bombing the

Communist capital, that's plenty satisfying.

"Fairy 01 to all units."

Normally, flying in over a capital city so casually like this without meeting air defense, much less an interception, would be impossible.

Normally… I can't say things aren't complicated due to the outbreak of the war.

Still, Tanya has to crack a smile. They're succeeding on a long-distance penetrating raid with barely any preparation. If it's so easy to get in, Federation air defense is worthless.

"I won this bet, huh? I told you even a college kid could break this defense, didn't I?"

"02 to 01. You did indeed."

See? Tanya grins at Captain Weiss, who had disapproved of the Moskva bombing plan. In response to his commander's genial *Told ya!* Weiss knows he's been defeated and raises the white flag.

"I appreciate your sportsmanlike acceptance of the truth, but that doesn't mean you get any mercy. As such, troops, when we get back to base, all of 02's favorite bottles are yours for the drinking!"

"Wow, the vice commander is treating us? Looking forward to it!"

"Sounds like a good chance, so please count me in, as well."

At times like this, the way First Lieutenants Serebryakov and Grantz banter is fearless. It's a cheerful, harmonious flight over enemy territory. You nearly get the illusion that the sky is free, unlike the Commie-infested ground.

"If you're treating both of them, then don't forget me!"

"And drink them we will! This is our biggest mission since the one on the beach last summer. Against alcohol, you'll never catch me retreating—not even one step!"

"02 to all units. You guys have got some nerve!"

This is a promising vibe for workplace chatter to have. Being unexpectedly

blessed with ethyl alcohol improves the morale of Grantz and the other officers, which enhances the spirit of teamwork throughout the battalion; we can head to work in solidarity.

In that case.

We can do this. Tanya cracks a smile and thinks how dependable her troops are, staying appropriately relaxed but not dropping their guard as they fly. Then she barks orders. “01 to all units! It’s fine to look forward to 02’s kind offer, but before recreation comes the job. Form up immediately for an anti-surface strike. I say again, form up immediately for an anti-surface strike.”

They promptly organize themselves into a combat box. The 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion’s movements are outstanding. They maintain appropriate distance from one another as they begin to drive toward the center of Moskva.

That’s when Tanya has the feeling that maybe they could go one step further. So far, the only obstacles they’ve encountered in the sky have been birds or weather. Despite the long flight, her mages aren’t terribly exhausted; they have energy to spare.

Upon reaching their destination, their fighting power is much closer to usual than her best estimates indicated they would be. They should still have enough energy to withdraw even if they really go to town instead of just doing a hit-and-run. At this rate, maybe they can escape north into former Entente Alliance territory under Imperial Army control.

Tanya mumbles to herself and then tells the troops they are going to carry out some efficient destruction.

The original plan was to perform a flyby at most, a demonstration. Specifically, they were going to take a page from the John Bull’s handbook and fly circles over the enemy capital.

We’re up against Commies, so nothing would be better than knocking their pride down a few pegs, or rather, Tanya had been thinking of that as their goal. But in reality, she’s been given more options than a simple performance.

“I’m revising the plan. First Company, you’re with me. I’m going to blast the red stars on that big, irritating People’s Palace. The rest of you, attack whatever

government facilities you can find."

If we're not being intercepted, I can live out my dream of mopping up Moskva.

"Second Company, take out that eyesore of a bronze in the square and the mummies, if you can."

Toppling that bronze statue of Josef is another capitalist's dream.

I don't think that so many statues of this importance were knocked down in my own world…but there's no rule that says I can't do it here. *On the contrary, it's a great opportunity. We'll seize this chance to be the first to perform the historic deed of destroying Communist monuments.* Tanya chuckles to herself.

If possible, I want to get those mummies in the mausoleum that people worship as idols, too. That said, "if possible" is fine.

"Third Company, subdue and destroy the tallest building in Moskva, the one with a view of Sildberia. Eradicate the secret police."

And we'll bully the secret police. This is so fun I can hardly take it.

They say you can see Sildberia from the basement of this former insurance company office. Surely, burning all their classified documents is the nastiest thing we can do to them. Whoever said you can get ahead doing things other people don't like was right.

"Fourth Company, attack the Kremlin. Don't hold back. Cause as much damage as you can."

Apparently, the American Army had a rule against bombing the Imperial Palace, but we're not under any such restrictions. So what if the German Army didn't allow bombing of the British royal family? That has nothing to do with me.

We're the Imperial Army. Let's serve the human world by killing off the bears in the Kremlin.

"Battalion Commander to all units, this is a dream scenario for all capitalists. Future capitalists will be jealous of us at this moment."

This is definitely the sort of thing that would both impress hard-core anti-

Communists and make them wish they were here.

“All right, troops. Move out!”

“““Yes, ma’am!”””

When the units spread out and form up, we finally, *finally* start taking anti–air fire.

“Oh, so they do have air defense positions.”

The high-angle cannons shooting up from the ground certainly are a threat. Even an elite member of the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion would get more than burned by a direct hit.

“Keep a sharp eye on the ground,” urge the voices crisscrossing among units, but soon enough, the channels are full of nearly disappointed impressions.

“…It’s a pretty sporadic interception, and their aim is awful. Seems like they’re shooting willy-nilly. Shall we just hit their defensive positions?” Serebryakov approaches with a question.

It’s not as though Tanya isn’t tempted, but she shakes her head after a moment’s hesitation. “Even if the Commies’ anti–air fire is pathetic, it’s still anti–air fire. I can’t think of any reason to incur extra casualties.”

“Then please excuse the suggestion.”

“We can’t have too much fun and forget what time we need to go home… Oh, Lieutenant, you have personal reasons to hold a grudge against the Commies, don’t you?”

“Yes, Major, but that was back when I was a child.”

Realizing that fact, Tanya takes care to make herself clear.

“You don’t have to hide how much you hate them, Lieutenant.”

“Uh, ma’am?”

A peculiar blank look appears on Serebryakov’s face, and Tanya smiles as if to say she understands everything.

Serebryakov used to live in the Federation. Since she’s a decent human being, she surely must have suffered at the hands of the Commies. It’s easy to imagine

that she must be burning up with the desire to shoot them all dead.

“I won’t tell you to not let the hate rule you. As long as you’re faithful to your duty, I support your feelings. Of course, it’s best if you control yourself, but…as long as you follow the ROE, I’ve got your back.”

Her adjutant tries to say something, but Tanya tells her not to worry. Covering for my subordinates’ mistakes isn’t my hobby or anything, but if one of them is criticized even though they’re right, I won’t hesitate to support them.

“I know a bit of your history. I’ll be counting on your knowledge of the terrain. Do a good job out there. I expect we’ll be able to accomplish your long-cherished dream.”

Tanya pats Serebryakov on the shoulder and then mutters, “Time for war,” as she takes the lead and gives the order for strike formation.

“All units, wreak havoc as your company commander sees fit. I’ll announce our withdrawal via either a signal flare or transmission over a wide area.”

“What’s our tactical objective?”

“Do a moderate amount of damage and make fun of them to an extent. No more, no less. I want you to really show off. I have high expectations of your creative destruction.”

We’ve arrived over the skies of Moskva, but what we’re about to do is essentially the same thing as Doolittle’s Tokyo Raid.[9] It’s like we’re emulating the American Empire’s propaganda.

The Federation is a country with a coat of ostentation. Against the Federation, where the nation is fictional and the only thing supporting a sense of nationality is propaganda, disturbing the notion that the party is all-powerful is most effective. We’re essentially slinging mud balls at its reputation.

More than anything, for how strategically effective it is, you really get maximum impact for minimal effort. We can expect this sort of harassment to upset them.

After all, it’s these guys. Rather than send reinforcements to the main lines, they’ll probably waste precious time on preventing a reoccurrence and laying

blame. It would be great if they did a postmortem with tons of self-criticism.

And that's another reason… Tanya reminds her battalion of their operational objectives. "Our objective in this operation is to kick the shit out of the Federation's pride. Think of it as kicking in a rotten door."

They let the Imperial Army penetrate the airspace over the capital?

Surely, all the people in charge of preventing that have lost face in a spectacular way. They're definitely trying to cover it up, but…if we rampage through the skies and destroy the buildings and monuments they're so proud of, it'll be hard to gloss over.

If their ability to wage war is hindered by their futile cover-up efforts, that could be a decent secondary effect.

"Let's make them wish they'd never been born!"

"""Yes, ma'am!"""

"Okay, let's get this done right. Begin attacking!"

The combat box neatly splits into four, and Tanya has her company take their time advancing on the center of Moskva. The imperial mages fly back and forth across the sky in triumphant formation.

She even records a video with her computation orb for PR. Keeping both the city and her subordinates in the frame so it's clear that it's Moskva, she leans slowly into a turn.

Then she has an idea.

"First Company, why don't we sing the national anthem?"

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha. Wonderful. That's a great idea, Major. And let's amplify it!"

Her men react positively.

Very good. I'm not really into singing while operating in a group, but if it's to make fun of Commies while flying over their heads, I'm all for it.

We use a sound-amplifying formula for the benefit of the people of Moskva, who probably have no idea what is going on.

It feels just like conducting an orchestra. *This is kinda fun.* She belts out the

imperial anthem as her heightened emotions dictate, letting it ring throughout the skies of Moskva.

It's immensely pleasant, but what deepens her happiness even further is the good news that keeps coming in.

"Fairy 06 to 01. Got a great view of Sildberia!"

"01 to 06. Is it burning nicely?"

"06 to 01. Ah, it reminds me of wanting to burn my test scores as a child. The documents are exhibiting superior combustion."

A cheerful report from a subordinate in the area that—from the sky she can see—is enveloped in roaring flames.

The Commies must be panicking. Just the thought is invigorating. This is definitely worth a medal. When we get back, I'll have to apply for everyone's decorations.

"Ha-ha-ha. Terrific!"

"By the way, that's some delightful war music you have going on over there. We would love to join you…"

"Splendid. Let us sound the trumpets of civilization! Sing so they can hear you all the way in Sildberia!"

Let the trumpets be a warning to the Communists that their ruin is at hand. This can be our *Jericho-Trompete*. Singing with all their might, Tanya and her company approach their designated target, the People's Palace.

"01 to all units. Ready your formulas! Target: that lump of shit!"

""Target: that lump of shit!""

At the appropriate distance and altitude, Tanya merrily manifests her formula and lets it fly. There is no way she would miss a stationary target, and the explosion formula smashes directly into the reinforced concrete building.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha! What fun!"

Whether due to shoddy architecture or faulty materials, I'm not sure which, the high-rise People's Palace is already listing. She was sure it would take a few

volleys, but when she sees the building start to collapse already… Yeah, it has to be the result of rushed construction.

“These concrete buildings the Communists love so much are more fragile than I thought!” Tanya jeers, but a report from the Fourth Company throws a bucket of cold water over her smirk.

“Depends on the place, I think. Fairy 09 to Fairy 01. Sorry, but we’re having trouble with the Kremlin’s defenses. The outer wall is bizarrely sturdy.”

“You tried a deliberate attack?”

“Yes, but this thing is nuts. Even steel anti-base penetrating rounds bounce right off.”

“Sheesh, so the distribution of concrete was totally unbalanced, then. Guess the Kremlin is higher priority than the people.”

If the reinforced concrete is so thick it repels the attacks of Grantz’s Fourth Company, it’ll be really hard to get through without a cannon.

Multiple shaped charges would be something to consider, but we barely have any explosives. We’re equipped for a long-range reconnaissance mission. And in terms of formula bullets, we don’t even have that many steel rounds for penetrating fortification walls.

If it’s so troublesome to break through, does that make it even more important to attack? If I knew for sure that jerk Stalin was in there, we could run Grantz and all of the Fourth Company into the ground, and it’d still be worth it…but this is that jerk Stalin we’re talking about. If things are rough, he’ll have ducked out for sure.

In which case, it might be better to have the Fourth Company change objectives and head somewhere else. To make the most of our limited time, having them destroy a soft target might be more effective.

“09, have the Fourth Company change objectives on the double.”

“Yes, ma’am, on the double.”

Sheesh, that really rained on my parade, Tanya is thinking, but in the very next instant, the greatest news comes in.

“04 to 01. We crushed Mr. Josef. I say again, we crushed Mr. Josef.”

“Must feel good?”

“Couldn’t be more refreshed.”

Tanya does a quick calculation, going back over the situation to make sure they’re harassing the enemy as much as possible.

They’ve attacked the Kremlin enough to be a bother, and the People’s Palace and the headquarters of the secret police are in flames. The Second Company, who was sent to blow up that statue to the cult of personality, has accomplished its mission with ease.

It’s certainly a good thing to feel so refreshed. I’m jealous. Kicking over the statue of Josef must have felt great. Well, I thought for all the pride they had in this thing, it would be heavily guarded, but if it’s not, then maybe it’s worth going on a little adventure. Like maybe we could put up an imperial flag in the middle of the square, just like on Iwo Jima.

Not sure how I feel about imitating the Marines, but…

No, no, what’s good is good… Formal beauty *is* beauty. It’s wonderful that we can take the Commies down without even waiting for the philosophers to debate.

We’ll fly the fluttering imperial flag right inside every Commie’s hearts. The political impact will be huge. And it’s not even that big of a risk, since we’ve already taken the square.

Above all, the imperial flag will wave in the Federation capital. The Communists’ arrogant faces will probably go white as sheets. I’m sure they’ll turn Moskva into a fortress to avoid it from ever happening again—even if they have to yank a ton of matériel and personnel off the front lines to do it.

Thus, in terms of our assistance to the main lines, there is no better distraction we could create. I’m confident General von Zettour will be delighted.

“Very good. Now let’s plant a flag in the square and get out of here.”

“A flag? That’s a good idea, but…I don’t have one on me.”

Tanya nearly becomes discouraged at her subordinate’s unfortunate reply.

But she doesn't have to worry. She's not such a sloppy planner that she doesn't have a backup idea.

"No need to worry. I know where we can get one."

For those well versed in the habits of Commies, improvisation is no problem. Knowledge is power. Whether you know something or not changes the choices available to you.

In this case, if you know that Commies love propaganda, that they love movies, and that they also love censorship, the issue becomes quite simple. It's a matter of course that Commie movies are censored to be politically correct. In other words, for a while now, they've surely been making anti-Empire propaganda.

…You can't make a film about the evil Empire without its evil flag.

Naturally, they must have a pile of them somewhere for burning or whatnot. Surely, they'll have a bunch of the Commie red flags for what they consider their army of justice. It's great that we'll have flags for burning, too, in other words.

Even better if we can capture it on film.

"Where?"

"From the film studios the Commies are so proud of. I'm sure they have imperial flags to use in their anti-Empire propaganda."

"Oh, you're right, Major!"

And the fact that Serebryakov has an idea where the studio might be makes Tanya smile. *I thought you would.*

Figuring they shouldn't talk on the wireless, Tanya waves her over and asks her point-blank.

"Lieutenant, you know where it is, right?"

"If it's still where it used to be! I'm not sure if I remember exactly, but if it's the same as on the map they passed out before, then I know the spot!"

"Splendid. Then your orders are to requisition equipment on-site. Don't forget

military notes and a proof-of-payment slip.”

“…Understood. Of course, we’ll do a proper requisition and not loot the place!”

She must have grasped Tanya’s tasteless joke. With a model salute and her mission accepted, Serebryakov takes several soldiers and descends into the streets of Moskva.

We’ll make the propaganda film instead of the Commies.

With Commie cameras.

Well, we’ll burn Federation flags not the Empire’s. The Commie red flag is sure to glow brilliantly in the flames. Just imagining that scene is a thrill and a half.

Yep, this is what I’d call invigorating. And we’ll plant our flag in Commie Square. Ah, I really regret not bringing a journalist along. Yes, it’s sudden, but that doesn’t mean we can grab just anyone who happens to be around.

The next best plan is to procure equipment at our own expense.

“…Right, that makes sense.”

“I’m going to go pick up the flags and equipment. You guys stay here and bust up the mausoleum or something.”

“Understood! We’ll be waiting!”

Now, then. Time to head to the film studio and treat ourselves to some cultural exchange.

Do Commies have culture, you ask?

That’s a great question, but don’t worry. Even landlocked countries have navies, so theoretically, it wouldn’t be strange for Commies to have culture.

MARCH 16, UNIFIED YEAR 1926, ON THE STREET IN MOSKVA, THE FEDERATION

The praying voice rang out like a bell. It was like a believer who had been oppressed for so, so long in this land was now singing. A prayer in the official

language of the Federation so the people would understand.

A voice that purifies the impure, praises the king of heaven, and celebrates the salvation of our souls.

Followed by the attack on Moskva.

It was such a calamity that even nonbelievers were forced to wonder if purgatory had appeared in their world.

It was simply too much to take in. A military and secret police counterattack against an army, especially a battalion of mages, would just end in a beatdown. It had taken only an instant to thoroughly pulverize the honor of the great country so proud of its power.

Thus, the Imperial Army boots energetically striking the square in front of the building where Loria had been working until just a bit ago.

The mausoleum where the leaders of the revolution were laid to rest had been detonated; the Kremlin, where the general secretary was holed up, had nearly fallen.

The Federation's best had attempted to drive the enemy back, but their counterattack ended in crushing defeat. And their air defense positions proved that shooting blind was going to do about as much good as a papier-mâché tiger.

As far as Loria could tell, there were less than fifty enemies. So for a mage unit, that meant…about a battalion?

A mage battalion wasn't that many people.

And yet…

That little group was wreaking havoc unchecked. It was enough to utterly stun anyone high up in the party organization.

And this was the Federation. Any country would have accountability issues, but…in the Federation it would end in a literal purge.

"Agh! What the hell…?"

Any normal person would see that the fact that Loria was looking at the sky,

transfixed, spoke volumes to how serious the situation was.

The imperial soldiers calmly descended.

Before his eyes was an enemy unit carrying the imperial flag.

They all landed softly, beginning with the girl leading them. And the enemy commander with the courageous smile seemed, from where he was looking, to be no more than a child. Someone's daughter was trampling the capital.

How could such a blunder happen before Loria's very eyes? And in the capital with Josef himself present? If Loria was the one sowing unbounded fear as the administrator of the purges, then Josef was the one giving the execution orders.

When the leaders of the Federation Army heard that the capital had been attacked right in front of Josef and Loria, they all braced themselves for the doom to come.

Dozens of soldiers' heads literally rolling? In the Federation, that would be considered a peaceful solution. The fact that Federation Army officers took their focus off the front lines, even for a moment, to worry about the political situation in the rear really spoke to how deeply the terror had been pounded into them.

"…Wonderful. How lovely."

But Loria, feared by the Federation officers, currently felt…nothing akin to anger but rather joy. The words that spilled from his trembling lips as he gazed at the sky were pure and genuine.

Usually, he wore a strange, insincere smile that you might call the Communist grin. But now that mask had been torn off so entirely that he hesitantly expressed that most rare, pure, highest form of rapture.

The object of his gaze was the sweetest face tensed with conviction.

Just the thought of making her surrender drove Loria's self-control to its limits.

The more he looked, the crazier he went. Seized by an indescribable emotion, he sensed that his mind was transforming in an indescribable way.

Oh, this is love at first sight.

He wanted her. He wanted to pin that little girl beneath him. *Ahhh, I want to know—I want to know so badly, I can't take it.*

Loria had eyes for only her now. Nothing else mattered to him anymore.



"…I want her. I must have her. I've got to have her."

He'd seen her. He'd found the object of his longing.

From now on, all others would look like puppets. He was sure of it. No one could replace her.

Her bold expression was as pretty as a picture. It was radiant even in the war-torn streets of Moskva. Even unadorned, she had a beauty that couldn't be hidden.

And that voice, how charming! Her songlike prayer rang out like a soothing bell. Even singing the imperial anthem, her voice was magnificent.

I've got to make her gasp with that glorious voice.

Ah, no, that's fine, but…maybe before that I could make her twist up that pretty face. Ooh, wait, it would also be great to make that dignified visage blush in pleasured embarrassment.

Agh, this is too much. I need her. I'm going to explode.

I must have her at any cost. He wanted to get his hands on her no matter what. He wouldn't say he didn't want power. But what a tiny, trivial urge that was compared to this one.

This was *love*.

"I will have her. Ah, yes, she will be mine."

My perfect doll. Ah, I can't wait. I'm so impatient I practically want to reach out to her right now. Brilliant; so this is romance. I'm so giddy, and at my age. Or perhaps restless? Anyhow, I'm sure this is what they mean about being unable to just sit still. I feel full of the drive and determination to overcome any struggle right now.

"I'll stop at nothing. I don't care what it takes. Yes, I'll do anything."

To reach his goal, he would stop at nothing. He wouldn't even consider stopping. To have her, he would make a deal with any devil.

He would compromise with any political rival. He would make use of any dissidents. He wanted her so badly he would even spare the mages he'd sent to

Sildberia for execution.

No, that's exactly what I should do. If I can take her away, I don't care who makes it happen, even if they're a menace to the ideology.

Ah, soon. I want to pick that flower as soon as possible.

MARCH 17, UNIFIED YEAR 1926, THE COMMONWEALTH, LONDINIUM

The misfortune of others tastes sweet as honey. Or at least, personal suffering tastes like arsenic. But for once, in a truly rare occurrence, the heads of the Commonwealth's government couldn't revel in another country's misery.

Well, not that they sympathized, but still.

"…There's no mistake, then?"

The rasping question of the first lord of the admiralty contained an extraordinary amount of exhaustion. The navy had been prepping in high gear ever since the war started, but there were already skirmishes breaking out along the trade lines.

Maintaining those lines of commerce was chipping away at even the first lord's tough psyche.

And then this report. He wanted to hole up in bed with a bottle of wine even though it wasn't his fault—that's how bad the news was.

"Yes, sir, it's the latest via the embassy."

Of course, bearing such news, Intelligence was an unwelcome messenger. Anyone wants to welcome someone with good news, not bad. So rather than being timid, it's better to be detached.

Having decided thusly, Major General Habergram of the Foreign Strategy Division worked to suppress his expression and drily gave the report.

An albeit small number of mage units had invaded and attacked Moskva. The first notice was an emergency report made by an Intelligence officer who had just been assigned to the embassy.

Imperial mages are circling over Moskva. The first time he heard it, he figured it was some kind of propaganda operation. Circling was for demonstration

purposes.

Everyone marveled, thinking it was propaganda to boost morale and brag about their wins against the Federation—marveled because they had managed to approach the capital of a country they were at war with.

“Moskva’s main government organizations have been thoroughly raided.”

But as things grew clearer, the wonder turned to fear and awe. It was supposedly just a small mage unit, but at some point, it became a regiment. Then it was multiple units that split up and charged simultaneously, and the incident was judged to be an actual attack rather than a demonstration.

What made it definite was the scale of the destruction.

According to personnel at the embassy in Moskva, at a minimum, the secret police and Revolution Square had been blasted to smithereens. They weren’t sure if it was true or not, but reports said an imperial flag had been planted in the square as well. At the same time, other unconfirmed reports came in, saying a huge attack had been carried out on the Kremlin and that it was driven to the brink of surrender.

The city was apparently in extreme panic, but because of that, details about the extent of the damage were unclear.

It was certain, however, that the perpetrators were imperial mages. Even if it was a regiment, that meant a hundred people at most. It was also possible to describe it as a penetrating sneak attack performed by a relatively small unit. That said, according to the report, the damage it dealt was intense.

This was where the tricky bit came in—a nightmare for those in charge of defense: There was no guarantee that the Commonwealth would avoid the losses suffered by the Federation.

“We need to rethink our air defense.”

It was a bit late, but the officials had recognized how frail Londinium’s air defense was. The seawall was still in fine shape; no maritime invasion would be allowed. The Commonwealth Navy would protect its waters.

But unless they could chase off invaders from the sky, they didn’t mean a

thing in this instance.

“Can we stop a regiment’s worth of enemy units?”

“I’m…not entirely sure if we could stop an invasion…”

Meanwhile, the faces of the army staffers being made to deal with the issue were one shade away from pale. Their air defense system, which really covered only the capital, at best, envisioned slow-flying bombers. They had built security positions, such as the radar sites on the southern edge of the mainland…but they weren’t designed with agile mages coming from afar on the scale of a regiment or a battalion in mind.

If, hypothetically, they were targeted in an attack on the scale of the one that happened in the east, it would be incredibly difficult to prevent an incursion of the skies over the capital.

And then what would happen? The Commonwealth would be exposed to the same disgrace as the Federation. The mere thought was horrific. And the staffers could see that they had no way to eliminate that possibility.

…And due to that realization, their moods plummeted.

“So we might be exposed to the same disgrace that befell the Federation?”

“At present, we can’t completely rule it out…”

That much goes without saying for everyone. With that irritation behind his fist, the prime minister pounded the table and cut off the complaints. What they needed were countermeasures.

“That’s fine. I want to hear how we’re going to deal with it.”

If there’s something you want, I’ll listen, so hurry up and tell me. If you don’t and anything happens, you’ll be the one taking full responsibility. Even a high-ranking military man must accept his fate and obediently list the necessary equipment when faced with a glare like that.

“Strengthening the air defense screen will be our highest priority. Additionally, we’d like to station fighter plane and mage units in a Homeland Defense Corps.”

And the chief of the General Staff switched gears with a promptness that

could be described as ease. Just the other day, he'd been full of confidence, but changing his mind was the one thing he could do quickly.

Or perhaps I should say he has a talent for learning his lesson? That's far better than the generals who stick to the classics and never learn. The prime minister decided to approve of him.

"But doing that will limit the number of troops we can send to the southern continent! The Inner Sea Fleet and the headquarters of the regional forces down there have submitted repeated, jointly signed requests."

"We still have a strategic buffer region up until Areq. I don't think there's any reason to sacrifice ourselves for the Republic."

The foreign secretary hurriedly protested, but the army's response was indifferent. Well, from their perspective, they were obliged to be considerate of the Foreign Office. But that didn't mean they had an obligation to accept this crisis threatening to seriously trample their honor.

The Foreign Office had its own position, its own reasons for bringing up the Free Republic's constant requests for more reinforcements on the southern continent. The Free Republic wasn't about to let its ally leave the battle lines and vice versa. The army also understood what was important. But the army had its own reasons and interests.

"I agree, but that can only work so well."

The one who chimed in with a slight additional reservation was from the naval staff. Hearing the comment, everyone recalled that the navy staff had a good impression of the combined forces of the Inner Sea Fleet and the remnants of the Republican Fleet.

At the very least, they wanted to maintain the strategic buffer region to some extent in order to protect the canal and the colonies. To that end, it would be best if they could have the remnants of the Republic continue fighting, whatever state they were in.

…Well, this train of thought is why the Republic hates us. Of course, it goes both ways.

"Conversely, what if we tried the same thing?"

Let's change the subject. That must have been the chancellor of the exchequer's thought. He proposed looking at the issue from a different angle with a flexible suggestion.

"…Indeed. I don't think it's a bad idea, myself, but…"

He's thrown out a lifeline, so I should take it. With that thought, he decided to include it in the debate.

"It seems difficult. Even just from what we know of their positioning, the Imperial Army has three battalions of mages in the capital."

But the army's reply was immediate. From the looks of it, they had considered the same idea but not proposed it because they had already reached that conclusion.

"…What a grand welcome."

"It appears to be the instructor unit, the technical arsenal, and a battalion of replacement recruits."

They seem to have an awful lot of fighting power to spare. The First Lord of the Admiralty heaved a sigh in spite of himself, representative of all the officials' growing distaste. Even though it made sense for those units to be in the capital, they couldn't help but lament their presence and wonder why it had to be that way.

"We can assume the instructor unit will have real competence. Regardless of what would happen if we were met by the recruits, if the instructor unit intercepted, we wouldn't be able to break through with equal numbers."

On top of that came Intelligence's nail in the coffin. From what the reports said, the instructor unit was made up of the elites of the elite. Though it didn't appear on the front lines very often, its members were all experienced veterans, so they were used to combat.

On the contrary, since they weren't exhausted, analysis indicated they would be even stronger than any random unit.

"Isn't that why we'd make it a sneak attack?"

It was a bit late in the discussion, but the chancellor of the exchequer raised a

question. Certainly, that was the point of a sneak attack. Since the Empire's attack on the Federation could be classified broadly as something akin to a sneak attack, then there was a chance, wasn't there?

That was the gist of the question.

That said, the comment was from a civilian.

"Because of the Battle of the Rhine, the Empire already has anti–air warning lines on the former Rhine front. It would be extremely difficult to get through their interception screen without being detected."

If you know even a little about the Battle of the Rhine—in other words, if you consider that any soldier would know about the defensive positions on those fronts—then you know that it would be hard to pull off a sneak attack.

The warning screens on the Rhine were so tight that even the Imperial Army had to attempt to brute force their way through rather than sneak attack. Just because the Empire already won on the Rhine front didn't mean they were required to abandon their defensive positions.

If anything, they've probably stuck fast to their warning lines. General Habergram has actually performed repeated inspections and never found a hole. In that case, it would be nearly impossible to get through without being detected.

At that point, it might actually be more worthwhile to purposely engage the warning lines in a harassment attack. They could get support from the navy and send in marine mages, but the chance of success was deemed low.

In any case, it was out of the question to subject the fleet to enemy air superiority in enemy territory. And considering how valuable marine mages were, it was too big a risk.

Well, they didn't even have to think about that, because there was no way the navy could be pulled off the front lines anyway.

"It is each service's conclusion that it would be too difficult for us to attack."

In the end, all the Commonwealth could do was buy time and build up its strength for a counteroffensive. They didn't want to admit it, but if the Empire

and the Federation didn't crush each other, the Commonwealth might not get its chance for quite a while. You could say the situation was rather uncomfortable.

"…All right. How should we handle the Federation?"

But in that case, a war of attrition between the Empire and the Federation was an absolute necessity. Annoyingly, the Empire had already shaken things up quite a bit with its attack on the Federation capital. The Federation would have to station many troops in the rear for defense, which meant their activities on the main lines against the Empire would be limited.

That was the biggest reason the Commonwealth couldn't delight in the Federation's misfortune.

"It seems they've already reassigned units to defend the capital."

In other words, loyal and decently competent troops had been diverted from some other place. The Commonwealth would much rather have had them on the main lines fighting the Imperial Army to the death.

"The imperial units that participated in the attack have already withdrawn."

"The Federation is being vague, but it seems the units they sent in pursuit were either shaken off or downed."

"We're of the same opinion. Intelligence has concluded that contact was lost."

And the fact that the units that participated in the attack retreated safely indicated the possibility of a reoccurrence. There was a fear that the elites of the Imperial Army would strike a capital again.

A despotic nation like the Federation would definitely not allow the same thing to happen twice. It would do too much harm to the nation's political and military authority.

They certainly didn't imagine the Federation military officers were itching to literally send their own heads rolling. Naturally, they would be burdened with operational restrictions and end up with tons of idle soldiers.

On top of that, the news that the Imperial Army attacked Moskva and then

leisurely returned to base would boost imperial morale without a doubt. Considering there was no way the Commonwealth's morale would rise, that was something else to be cautious of.

"Can we control the information?"

"A cover-up would be futile. Every pub is already buzzing with the news that Moskva has been trampled under Imperial Army boots."

The story had already made too big an impact to try to regulate the information now. The men Habergram had dispatched to pubs were reporting back with all sorts of stories about how the Empire invaded.

For instance: The Imperial Army calmly flew through the sky over Moskva singing the imperial anthem and raised their flag in triumph.

For instance: The Imperial Army kicked down the red flag on land that commemorated the revolution and planted an imperial flag there instead.

For instance: The Imperial Army raided a film distribution center and burned all the red flags in revenge.

For instance: The Imperial Army shouted that they were opposed to the cult of personality and blew up the tomb of the revolutionary leaders.

For instance: The Imperial Army destroyed the secret police and the cult of personality to avoid another revolution.

For instance: The Imperial Army is withdrawing "forward" with its tail between its legs, as reported by the Federation media.

For instance: The Imperial Army even took a commemorative photo at the Kremlin.

For instance: The Imperial Army plans to screen the film *They Don't Believe in Tears* as a form of cultural exchange or something of the sort.

Upon inquiry, it turned out that latter rumor was an ironic take on a saying: "No one will help you even if you cry." In other words, it was the Empire's dark mockery of the serially distressed Federation with its beaten pride or whatnot.

Apparently, the Empire's raid was magnificent enough to leave a bitter taste in General Habergram's mouth. By tomorrow, there would be jokes going

around about the imperial and Federation forces. It goes without saying, but the citizens of the Commonwealth would never forgive them if they got mixed up in such an idiotic situation.

They all knew that.

Mainland defense had to come before cooperation with their allies.

"…Get me the Free Republic's foreign affairs chap. Either way, we need to consider how to handle this."

It was the prime minister who spoke. Certainly, his awareness of his responsibility and willingness to take initiative showed grace. His well-bred spirit of taking responsibility as one in charge required it of him.

"I feel bad for General de Lugo, but it's clear that we must prioritize mainland defense. With this change in the situation, there's nothing else we can do."

If they had troops to defend the canal, then they had troops to send home. That decision was sure to breed opposition in the Free Republic. But if they didn't do it, the Commonwealth mainland was liable to get attacked. If that happened, the war would be over.

"That's the truth. Although just the question of who should be the one to tell him is depressing."

…Well, yes, the diplomat charged with delivering the message would feel abysmal. At least, to the Commonwealth diplomats, it was like a seed of trouble being sowed.

Of course, there was also the rational view that the beautiful, trusting relationship between the two countries couldn't come to an end from this trifling incident. That is to say, things were always this way.

MARCH 18, UNIFIED YEAR 1926, IMPERIAL ARMY GENERAL STAFF OFFICE

The men had pained faces.

Their clenched fists and distressed expressions spoke vividly to the intense worries tormenting them internally. Everyone was having extreme difficulties understanding how this could have happened.

It was a scene that brought to mind the sorrow of patriots informed their country has been defeated. It was like the almost peaceful, distant pathos of soldiers whose dreams have been shattered. So moving one could almost cry.

And…

Right next to the men immersed in their lamentations, striking a contrast with their grave mood, were people madly cheering.

They were all commending the Imperial Army for this great, historic deed. They expressed their support for the bold act of nailing the enemy capital as retaliation for the unilateral declaration of war.

Those on the far right, who normally shrieked about the army's kid gloves, praised them to the heavens. Meanwhile, on the far left, those who usually criticized the military were rendered speechless by the mighty achievement.

"An imperial special ops unit has attacked Moskva."

That one report sent the people into a frenzy. No, the feat itself was intoxicating.

But that was why—that was precisely why—the General Staff was stunned and troubled by the whole thing.

"Request for permission to attack out of consideration for political factors."

There was a decisive difference in the understanding of those words between Major von Degurechaff and the General Staff. When the General Staff gave her permission, the most they had had in mind was a threat.

After all, it was a country's capital city. As a target for a distracting raid, it was more significant than most. So why not do it as a feint?

Would it be misleading to say that was how lightly they took it? In any case, the most they envisioned was a flyby demonstration. Half the staffers had doubts it would even be possible to invade the capital at all.

Meanwhile, Major von Degurechaff's actions could only be called ruinous. Her battalion entered the airspace over the capital. That alone would have given the Federation considerable internal political issues. Well, if that had been all, it would have been good propaganda, and that would have been the end of it.

Yes, *if* that had been all.

A raid on a country's capital.

The political hub, the secret police headquarters, a political symbol—all crushed or otherwise damaged; a triumphant flying of their nation's flag. And on top of that, they sang the national anthem in the enemy capital, followed by three cheers, and even took a commemorative photo with equipment they scrounged up somewhere.

When she had reported that they had burned multiple red flags in pursuit of decent footage, they didn't understand what she meant.

Oh, but apparently, Major von Degurechaff herself brandished a camera and made a commemorative film. Perhaps just in terms of appearance, a little girl holding a camera is a heartwarming sight, but for reasons that go without saying, none of the General Staff officers found their hearts even a little warm.

Rather, they felt something difficult to describe—as if the camera had been weaponized.

"…I never expected her to go this far. Or that she could even be capable of this much, I should say…"

Having received the report, Lieutenant General von Zettour looked unwell. No, it's probably more accurate to say he was deathly pale. Thinking back on it, he recalled she had always been staunchly anti-Federation.

She argued more strongly than anyone when it came to total war that the Reds should be eliminated and their espionage protected against.

Not only that, she had been one of those sounding the traditional alarm against a two-front war. Her dogma was clear: If there was a chance to crush one side, then the other side should be thoroughly knocked out as well. Interior lines strategy and the strategy Major von Degurechaff called "attract and annihilate" had both been quite effective against the Republic.

But that's exactly why… Given a strategically free hand, what should the Empire do? If charged with answering that question, there was no doubt that Major von Degurechaff would launch a comprehensive strike on the Federation. *But*, it should be said, she had checked about political concerns.

Thanks to which, she carried out unbridled destruction, beating the Federation's pride into a pulp and burying it.

In a nutshell, she overdid it.

"…There's no doubt it's a great success. A direct attack on an enemy capital probably deserves a first-class order from the General Staff, but the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion has clearly gone overboard. They're competent, but they're also incorrigible troublemakers."

A direct attack on an enemy country's capital. That plus the albeit temporary raising of the imperial flag on its soil is a first-rate military achievement. And so thorough that the commander of the battalion even took up a camera to document it.

At least they certainly achieved their original objectives of boosting morale and providing a distraction.

"Do we have a plan for reconciliation?"

"…You think it's possible to grope around for one under these circumstances? Supreme Command is grumbling that the Foreign Office won't even be able to meet with them in a neutral country."

"I bet."

To the General Staff, who was hoping for a swift end, this was the worst possible news. Not only that, but any chance of negotiating toward an end to the war with the Federation Army, with whom it previously had a close relationship, had been completely obliterated in the span of just a few days.

They had taken an opponent who valued honor above all else and not only made them lose face but trampled their dignity underfoot.

The imperial subjects erupted in cheers, but even the applause gave the General Staff a headache. It wasn't the right mood for talking about peace; some voices even called on them to force the Federation to surrender.

What would have already been a difficult negotiation was now virtually impossible to realize. In chess terms, it was like being checkmated from the beginning.

“Speaking on behalf of Intelligence, I conclude that the chances of peace in the foreseeable future are nonexistent.”

It felt a little late in the discussion, but sounding somewhat resigned, Intelligence wrapped up its analysis of the situation. With this, all the hard work of the diplomats who had told them to concentrate on holding the border while they tried to find a solution was essentially meaningless—even though the army had been, until just the other day, reiterating that it would defend the borders.

“From Operations, I imagine things on the main lines will ease up somewhat, but we’ll face extremely fierce resistance once we break through.”

“The Service Corps is forced to worry that the Federation pressure on neutral countries will increase.”

In purely tactical terms, it was a great success. It was certainly more than enough of a distraction to support the main lines. But from a strategic standpoint, the Imperial Army General Staff ended up squirming in agony as the result of a raid they themselves authorized.

The Federation Army would approach this war as if its honor depended on it. No, their whole nation would. In a way, an entire second front had opened up while the Empire was already fighting the Republican remnants and the Commonwealth.

“Intelligence agrees. Additionally, the influence of the Empire-friendly faction has drastically declined, and it’s hampering our ability to gather intelligence.”

The Empire-friendly faction that had been steadily growing would probably be completely uprooted and purged.

There was no hope for friendship with the Federation anymore.

“…So, what’ll we do? I can’t imagine there’s a plan to attack them?”

Naturally, the solution would be to knock out the Federation. But how in the world would they do that? The Federation was so vast that any decent officer would be forced to consider logistics.

And the place was crawling with anti-Empire nationalists. The Imperial Army was liable to bleed out simply attempting to secure its supplies.

“Utterly out of the question. That alone would cause the supply lines to collapse.”

That remark summed up the consensus of all the staffers who were present. That’s precisely why they didn’t want to get into it with the Federation in the first place. They even warned all the regional armies to be prudent and not do anything to provoke it.

“…But the die is cast.”

Yes. They’d been forced into a stage from which there was no return. The Empire would surely pay a huge price for that tiny victory.

“I suppose we should try to encircle and annihilate them in the east, too, bleeding them out. What else can we do?”

When Degurechaff gets back, I’m going to throttle her, vowed Colonel von Lergen internally as he looked to General von Zettour for a decision.

Either way, we don’t have many choices.

She really is a mad dog. No, a mad lion.

With those thoughts in his mind, Lergen looked drearily down at his proposal that had just been approved.

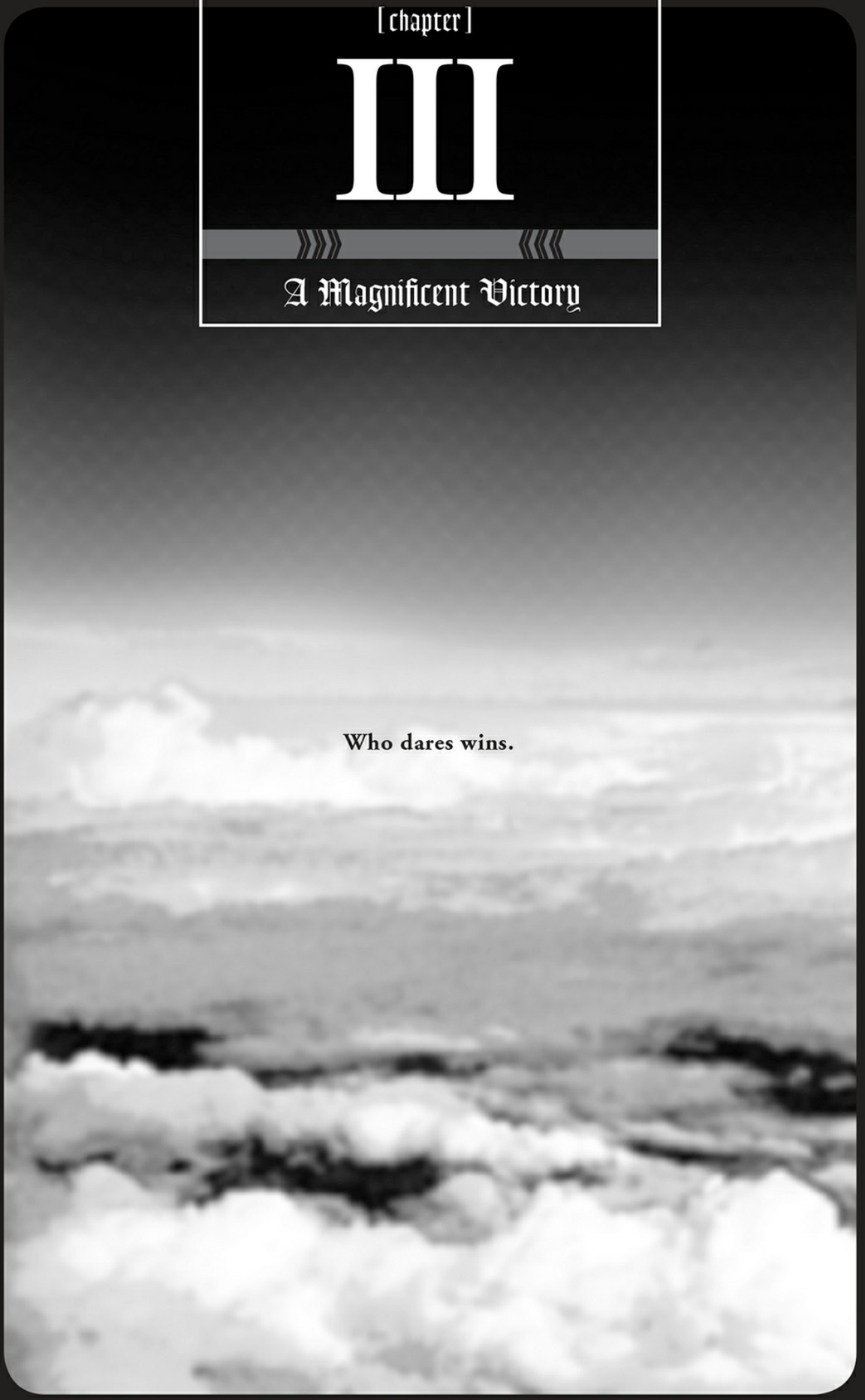
A huge war…

A war that will only grow bigger and bigger. He shuddered at the thought that they had just rushed headlong into its second act.

[chapter]

III

A Magnificent Victory



[chapter] III A Magnificent Victory

MARCH 25, UNIFIED YEAR 1926, GENERAL STAFF OFFICE WAR ROOM

Deep inside the Empire's General Staff Office, in the War Room…

It had been ten days since they'd plunged into combat in the east with the Federation. The map with everyone's positions scribbled on it spread out on the table showed how far the Imperial Army had fallen back during that time.

It was evident from the repeatedly redrawn lines that the Eastern Army Group's defensive positions had been gradually receding from the border. Of course, the Imperial Army General Staff had been prepared for the likelihood of getting pushed back by the Federation's first attack.

They were aware of how immense their enemy was, and they had a plan. Still, the reports from the front lines and the shift of the war showed, whether they wanted it to or not, that the strength of the fearsome attacking Federation Army was far beyond what they expected.

Which was why Lieutenant General von Rudersdorf, who was planning their interception strategy, was forced to grumble that he wanted to concentrate more troops in the east.

"The scale of the enemy is greater than we imagined. The Eastern Army Group has come crying to me; they've given up all their strategic reserves. At this rate, we'll be chronically undermanned on every front. We'll probably have to retreat farther than our initial plan."

"If you're saying we should have prioritized stationing more troops in the east in the first place, I'll take it." But Lieutenant General von Zettour replied that there wasn't anything else they could have done. "The Intelligence Division

could use some help, I think. Here's the latest information they rushed over." Zettour continued, exasperated. "It's a big army," he said, watching Rudersdorf's eyes pop at the documents he'd handed him. "They're about a hundred and fifty divisions, and that's only facing us in the east. They have another twenty-five divisions marching south to Dacia. Intelligence's preliminary estimate was a hundred and twenty divisions total, but in reality they have about 50 percent more than that."

There was no mistake in acknowledging the Federation Army as gigantic. Zettour himself, as the one in charge of logistics, felt that if the Federation could move such a huge army so fast, its national strength couldn't be taken lightly.

The most astonishing thing was the concentration of forces. Due to its vast territory, the Federation had to split up its troops even more than the Empire did. Despite that, however—Zettour was genuinely in awe—they somehow managed to commit 175 divisions to one front. They had either tremendous confidence in the security of their other regions or other forces in reserve.

"The horrifying part is that they aren't even fully mobilized yet. These numbers are just absurd. How many do we have?" Rudersdorf grumbled in disgust.

Zettour could only frown and nod—because there was a good chance that the Federation Army could still expand its forces for one more phase.

When the Federation decided to sneak attack the Empire, it had worked to keep its intentions secret as long as possible. *As a result*, it should probably be said, until the safety canaries sang, despite being on guard against Federation activity, somehow the General Staff had failed to notice it.

The Federation had managed to hold back from mobilizing until right before it opened hostilities, keeping its shift to wartime organization hidden from the Empire. With a sigh, Zettour told his friend and colleague the situation they were facing.

"Things are pretty rough even on the main front in the east. The Eastern Army Group has been strengthened since the western front has quieted down, but they still only have sixty divisions. I sent over five from the former Entente

Alliance front, plus three mechanized divisions and three infantry divisions from the homeland response reserves, but it's still not even half of what we need."

"So only sending in the hundred divisions of the Great Army would let us catch a breath."

"About that, here's the latest report. The situation is apparently not what we planned."

What? Rudersdorf asked with his eyes, and Zettour handed him documents from an envelope under his arm, stating his concise conclusion.

"Full mobilization is probably not doable. They can move sixty."

The ideal was a hundred divisions, but the Imperial Army could actually offer only 60 percent of that. Zettour, from the Service Corps, found it exceedingly regrettable, but even that 60 percent would be made up of divisions patched with new recruits and reserves from the home front.

They probably wouldn't be as strong as they should be.

"Sixty?! Zettour, that's nothing like what we discussed!"

"With two more weeks, we can move another thirty, but there's no way for the last ten. They haven't had enough key officers since the battles on the Rhine front and the western offensives. There is just no way to have a full roster."

He continued with an "On top of that.

"You should feel lucky if those thirty are even usable, since they'll be second-string security divisions from the rear. And I'm sorry to say the artillery they're using is just what we could seize from the former Republican Army. As for machine guns, they're even more poorly equipped than the troops were before we got into the trench battles on the Rhine."

"I've heard all about the equipment problems from you multiple times. That's fine. But General von Zettour, this is the first time I'm hearing of the personnel shortage. Why didn't you tell me?"

"I don't want to admit this, but the first I heard of it was also just twenty minutes ago. The deputy director of the Service Corps' jurisdiction is gear and training… I don't do personnel affairs. That would be Supreme Command and

the Personnel Division."

That's bureaucracy in action for you. They both grinned wryly, but it was no joke to either of them. Even if it was just accounting issues, limits on the amount of personnel they could use were intolerable at this point.

When Rudersdorf reached the distressing conclusion that they needed to rethink their plan, Zettour responded that he wasn't completely out of ideas.

"This is just a thought, but…perhaps we should consider diverting the reinforcements meant for Dacia to the east instead. The way I see it, we can stand to reassign two or three heavy divisions."

"Yeah. It'd be nice if we could have the fourteen occupying divisions do something. From my perspective, even if we defend Dacia in depth, losses to the homeland will be minimal."

Hmm. Zettour wrote the friendly units and potential routes of Federation unit attacks on the map and considered them in silence.

The eastern front was too big to defend in depth with trenches—they didn't have enough soldiers. And even if they could dig the trenches, they didn't have enough men to defend them.

In which case, the only option for the eastern armies was to fight a retreating battle with a focus on delaying. The point was to be in the right place at the right time to intercept.

"General von Rudersdorf, before I get your opinion on this, I want to review where we're at. Broadly speaking, we're up against three groups of attacking enemy forces. Group A is en route to Norden in the north, Group B is preparing to break through the eastern border and attack us at home, and Group C is heading south to Dacia."

"I agree with your diagnosis."

"Which do you think is the main attack?"

"In numerical terms, B is the overwhelming focus. It must be around a hundred divisions. Considering the territory they need to cover, it's probably an appropriate number, but it's still more than the combined seventy divisions of A

and C.”

Zettour nodded gravely in response to Rudersdorf’s groaned comment. Putting together the photos from reconnaissance planes, reports from the front lines, and SIGINT, they were forced to conclude that a sickening number of Federation troops were surging toward them.

The possibility of taking out each unit via the Imperial Army’s forte, interior lines strategy, was there, but even if they could get units separated, the enemy army could put up numbers that the General Staff was right to fear as a nightmare.

“…Could be a multifront attack with their matériel superiority or human wave tactics by matériel saturation—at some point they’ll overwhelm the Imperial Army’s limited fighting power and brute force our lines back. It’s quite the practical strategy.” Smoking his cigar, Zettour leaned slowly back in his chair and noted calmly that it was only natural the Federation adopt a strategy that took the difference in raw power between the two nations into account. “In theory, I should probably add,” he couldn’t help but murmur as he offered Rudersdorf a cigar.

If the Federation Army was trained and equipped equally to the Imperial Army, the Empire’s lines would probably collapse that very day. But though they grumbled about the surplus of enemies, the troops were fighting an organized defensive battle as they retreated.

The situation strongly suggested—and this was another surprise for the Imperial Army—that Federation troops were even more inferior in terms of training and equipment than assumed. Even if the numbers were a giant to threaten the Imperial Army…it wasn’t fatal.

“How can you say that, General von Zettour?”

“Surely you have an idea, General von Rudersdorf.”

The pair of friends smirked deviously at each other. The confidence and certainty that they could do it filled the air between them. Officers of the General Staff have the nastiest personalities—there’s no helping it. It’s the typical outcome of a staff education system that seeks only genius.

“Now then, to discuss things a bit more seriously… In a way, this will be a collection of assumptions we’re familiar with. As envisioned by interior lines strategy, we’ll neutralize the attacking enemy groups one by one.”

But Rudersdorf’s confident pronouncement rather irritated Zettour. His tone was so reassuring, and that’s precisely what caused Zettour to frown. He was only dimly aware of it, but the heads of Operations in the General Staff had this tendency to…be obsessed with solving everything in one push. It wasn’t as if he didn’t understand at all, but he worried that they focused too much on operational license and the long view.

“First, we’ll annihilate Group A up in Norden. From there, we’ll hit what we can, moving on to B. I want to nail Group C in part to keep the Dacian region in check as well.”

“I agree. First, we’ll crush A with the Great Army; then, in the same swooping motion, they’ll annihilate B along with the eastern armies. But shouldn’t we leave C alone and move those troops up to join with the Eastern Army Group? Consolidating troops is one of the basic principles.”

“Are you out of your mind, Zettour? In terms of comparative fighting power, that would be asking the impossible of the forces in Dacia. Asking them to make do with half their numbers is one thing, but pull any more soldiers out from under them and the Dacian front will surely stagnate.

“If it were just transferring some reinforcements, that would be fine,” Rudersdorf commented negatively. Zettour was still on about defeating the enemy in one blow. Rudersdorf refused to accept a plan that would take time and delay progress in one area.

“I understand what you’re trying to say, but we don’t even have the wherewithal to mount an offensive in Dacia right now. I’m sure it’s fine if we leave it alone.”

“The Imperial Army proved how mobile it can be in Dacia, even with limited railroads, when it gained control of the country in the first place, didn’t it?”

“Most of the horses we used for that were lost somewhere in the Republic.”

“You know we don’t have horses,” Zettour pressed. It was the same thing he

had told him anytime they were executing an offensive on the Rhine.

He had only just barely been able to secure supplies by requisitioning horses from every region and running them into the ground. You could look all you wanted, but you wouldn't find any extra horses around.

"…So then…?"

"We only have very limited infrastructure on the Dacian front. It doesn't compare to home. I agree that given the circumstances, we should be fighting a mobile battle of interception on the eastern border, but what about sticking with mainly delaying combat in Dacia? We should be able to buy time if we defend our positions and draw them into a trench battle."

For the Imperial Army, designed as it was with interior line strategy in mind, a long-range attacking battle would be a huge burden. It was already too hard for them to move in regions where the railroads weren't properly maintained.

That's why he had to say these things that the heads of Operations wouldn't like.

"Zettour, are you serious?"

"Of course."

It's the only way.

He continued assertively, choosing words that accurately conveyed his intentions. "Delaying combat, attritional containment, and solid lines—I believe this is our only realistic option in Dacia."

"I beg to differ. In fact, as someone working in Operations, I won't even beg. For starters, the one in charge of the operation would never accept an option like that."

"…The reason being?" He spoke slowly and turned to look at Rudersdorf with a sigh, waiting for the counterargument he knew was coming.

"Zettour, I'll be frank, since this is you and me talking here!"

"All right."

"The key to interior lines strategy is the strategic leeway to move manpower

as flexibly as possible! Should we continue to leave enough troops down there to pin down a mere portion of the Federation Army? The answer is no, no, no! We can't allow men to be wasted like that!"

Though he nodded at "You understand that, don't you?" Zettour was nonetheless compelled to voice his argument.

He himself had once been part of the Operations organization. He understood where Rudersdorf was coming from—the fear that troops might be stationed inefficiently, the necessity of securing the initiative.

Interior lines strategy is, in the end, a craft that involves working out every trick in the book to run as safely as possible over thin ice. Optimization by eliminating even the slightest uncertainties or waste. These basic principles had been thoroughly beaten into all staff officers' heads, so Zettour understood so much it hurt—they were a part of him.

But he also understood logistics.

"You're not taking the infrastructure deficiencies seriously enough. The Railroad Department is going crazy about how badly maintained the rails are. If we assume a scorched-earth policy using air and mage units, we won't need that many."

"You want us to allocate air forces to a scorched-earth battle? Absolutely not. I want to focus our usage of the fleet—on pinning down Group B in the east, especially. Taking into account the differences in fighting power, we should be able to crush the Federation's eastern defenses instantly if we consolidate our air forces there."

"Having air forces in Dacia would *not* be a waste. I'm not taking defense of the eastern front lightly, but can't you even spare the aerial strength to escort a bomber unit?"

Protecting the east vs. burning Dacia down to stagnate the lines. The key to either plan was air forces, and the General Staff had a hard time deciding how to allocate them because all the fronts were so desperate to have them.

What made it more difficult was that it wasn't a simple debate of how many soldiers to deploy. In any time and place, military men worry about new

weapons. That is, there are always meandering discussions about how to use them.

Just as Zettour and Rudersdorf couldn't agree on how the air forces should be used, it was a troublesome debate in general.

"I'm not averse to considering the Service Corps' requests, but do you have any idea how much our entire situation will suffer if we put in the effort to knock them out one by one? Time, Zettour. We don't have time."

"We already have the depth on the eastern border to fight a delaying battle, don't we? That's why we have a national defense plan and border control. It's certainly not impossible to use air forces to slow the enemy down."

"Zettour, I don't deny your view. But from mine in Operations, it would be hard. The entire army along the border has shifted to delaying combat, but the matériel disparity is huge. It's too big."

Rudersdorf's opinion that air forces should be allocated for air defense missions and gaining command of the sky to support swiftly operating ground forces was correct in terms of attempting to optimize a definitive battle.

But Zettour's rebuttal wasn't wrong. Air forces could cooperate with ground forces, but they were also plenty capable of achieving things on their own, especially when it came to putting a halt on an advancing enemy army.

Their discussion was going nowhere, but that was where their discussions usually went. That was why when Rudersdorf muttered, "Good grief," it represented the true feelings of the heads of Operations.

"I keep thinking, *Well, if half the ones in Dacia were amateurs…* If they were imbeciles, we could probably route them from head-on…"

"That would be impossible. True, the Federation Army isn't highly trained, but they still rank as a leading power. We won't be able to repel them with border security–level personnel and equipment."

"I know. I guess our only option is to draw troops from the Great Army and other groups to surround and annihilate them, render them powerless. That's why I want ready fighting power. I'll be blunt. I don't care where you get it, but I want more troops."

“I’m pretty sure I already sent you the list of what’s available.”

Zettour emphasized that he couldn’t give him any more. But Rudersdorf ignored him and barreled on, describing his own circumstances.

“I need you to squeeze harder. General von Zettour, you have a pool of units and reserves in your jurisdiction, don’t you?”

“You’ve got to be kidding me! That’s the instructor unit and the evaluation unit! I don’t even want to use those to defend the capital if I don’t have to! Are you saying we should throw units engaged in training and research onto the front lines?! Or did you mean someone else? The only other units we have are cadets! Are you telling me to accelerate children through their unfinished training and send them to the front?!”

“Homeland defense should take priority. I believe we should get as many reinforcements for the eastern front as possible.”

“Rudersdorf, I don’t disagree that homeland security should be our top priority, but—! If you’ll allow me to be frank, you’re putting too much emphasis on driving out our enemies. The homeland is going to lose its strategic flexibility. There’s still the possibility of a Commonwealth counterattack in the west!” Zettour continued with the same severe expression, *I know you know that*, compelled to relay the changes occurring on the western front. “The Commonwealth Army isn’t just a papier-mâché tiger anymore! Those numbskulls in Intelligence barely catch anything, and even counting just what they found, there are already fifty divisions conscripted and trained! If you add the remnants of the Republican Army, the Commonwealth’s colonial forces, plus voluntary soldiers from self-governing territories, that’s another twenty!”

It was too dangerous to disregard the Commonwealth’s rapidly growing fighting power. The troops garrisoned in the west were fierce Rhine front vets, but their strength couldn’t be guaranteed given reorgs and reinforcements being sent east. They weren’t in a position to be sleeping easy.

Add to that the disparity in naval power in the west, and the Imperial Army needed to assume an attitude of passive defense. Under those circumstances, it was only natural to hesitate about sending their full strength east.

“I understand the situation with our manpower in the west. We can leave the

bare minimum. But the bare minimum we need is what's already there now."

"That's out of the question!"

Zettour elaborated on his argument, but Rudersdorf repeated his views from the ground up.

Extreme differences of opinion began to factor into their argument. Rudersdorf from Operations sought the fastest victory on the front lines, while Zettour from the Service Corps wanted to keep their options open in the rear.

They understood each other's views, but the debate was going on forever, and Rudersdorf finally snapped, "General von Zettour, it seems you're forgetting one thing."

"And that is?"

It's that… Rudersdorf stood, pointed at the window next to him, then balled up his fist and struck the glass.

Even strong glass is still glass.

"…*This* is how you fight a war!"



The window shattered with a rhythmic tinkling.

Paying no mind to the shards injuring his hand, he thrust it at Zettour and declared, “This! Impact! Can you win if you’re worried about hurting your fist?!”

“I’m not about to get my arm broken that way. The Imperial Army is already as much of a mess as your hand.”

Zettour was as matter-of-fact as ever, but Rudersdorf sniffed at him.

“Ha, then what’s the problem? I’m plenty capable of boxing with this arm.”

“Sheesh, thinking like a barbarian as usual, I see.”

“And Professor von Zettour is still around, too, isn’t he? Why don’t you resign and hole up in a research office somewhere?”

Rudersdorf didn’t hesitate to press Zettour, who had been mercilessly teased for his self-possession and sober honesty, telling him their only option was to act. They had known each other for a long time, which was why they understood each other so well.

“Old friends are the most troublesome kind, huh? Well, if you go that far, it’s hard for me to argue back.” If Rudersdorf was going to make those kind of remarks, Zettour would have to remove his helmet. “But Rudersdorf, it’s still my duty to warn you.”

Prefacing with an offer of cooperation, Zettour reestablished what exactly the unpleasant situation with logistics was.

“I understand what you’re intending with this operation, but there are limits. I’m speaking from the logistics perspective, so I need you to hear me out on this. If we can’t secure air supremacy, supply lines to Dacia will be unreliable. If the Federation Army finds a weak spot, like the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion did, they could take out our supply depots!”

“The Federation’s air power hasn’t changed. They’ve been functioning particularly poorly ever since officers of the previous rule, including aerial mages, were purged.”

“Are you mixing up supply depots and fortresses? They’re piles of flammables like ammo and fuel—incredibly vulnerable to air strikes!”

Rudersdorf's look said, *I understand, but can't you do something about it?* To which Zettour replied, "I get it," and continued, "We're doing everything we can, and this is the result. Listen, General von Rudersdorf, I understand what Operations is trying to do. I will do everything I can to build a system to support it, just like I have before. So please just let me say one thing: that we are bending over backward."

With regard to maintaining supply lines, the Imperial Army had been optimized from the beginning for a domestic interior lines doctrine. To put it another way, as long as the defensive lines were in their own territory, a foundation that could handle a large burden had been maintained for years.

But that went for the east where they had invested a lot of time and money in building a border—it had that infrastructure. The infrastructure in Dacia hadn't been maintained at all.

The Imperial Army, by its nature, relied too heavily on railroads. The one who felt that most keenly was the one responsible for them, Zettour. Even if he wanted to improve that, the only alternative land transportation options were trucks and horses.

They didn't have enough oil for trucks, and rubber for tires was scarce.

Even if he tried to get horses, he'd be competing with other industries like agriculture. How was he supposed to fix anything under those circumstances? It made him want to scream more than anything.

"If you're saying that, then I know it must be true."

"So…?"

"But it doesn't matter. The Empire can't politically afford to let the enemy have the upper hand any longer."

Ohhh, I see, thought Zettour, realizing where the problem facing them lay.

"…In Norden and Dacia, we did a fine job fending them off, so this is about that one time on the Rhine we got caught off guard?"

Rudersdorf nodded to say, *Exactly*. Something like exasperation came through in his expression, but it was no wonder. The officers currently in the General

Staff had cleaned up after their predecessors' accident and stabilized the crisis on the Rhine.

The same pointless, futile precedents were still holding them back. The General Staff would not be allowed to make the same mistake again… In other words, losing territory would be unforgivable.

Saying *Sheesh* with chagrin—that would probably be allowed.

"I've heard the Federation Army always behaves badly. It must be awful in the border battles. Insane rumors from evacuees who didn't flee in time are practically the only topic of conversation in the palace."

"In the palace? Are you certain? I just want to make sure."

"I guess they made their way to high-ranking government officials, mainly beginning with the ones from the east. Zettour, we'll be branded as useless fools who can't even protect our own people."

In response to Rudersdorf's warning not to ignore political factors, Zettour expressed his understanding but replied that war was war.

"We can ignore that. We're not fighting to receive good reviews."

"I think we need to make good use of our military might before politics intervenes."

"Soldiers don't need be involved in political decisions, right? The opposite is also true. We're all doing our best, so I don't think we should get in one another's way…"

Only Zettour would make that statement; as a military official, he valued mutual trust among bureaucrats.

He was also a soldier who valued practicality and reason. To put it another way, he made a mistake only rational people make: He naively believed that no one with half a brain would even think of something so stupid.

"…I think there's something I should tell you."

"What's that?"

"Several people in government are saying that your 203rd Aerial Mage

Battalion went overboard in Moskva. Watch out for your critics in the rear."

Which was why he didn't quite understand the severity of what Rudersdorf was saying.

"Ah, right."

"Hmm? You knew?"

"No, your Colonel von Lergen was saying something similar."

She was a bit too talented of a magic officer, but he still couldn't really understand what they were getting at. Zettour replied with a wry grin and a nod. *I can understand being anxious about her, though.*

"I don't deny that her actions can seem excessive."

There, he recalled that she was rather indifferent to how people interpreted her actions.

Major von Degurechaff is, for better or worse, overly accustomed to the military way. It's no wonder other people have trouble understanding how she thinks—young though she may be, the military forms the sum and total of her life experience.

"Major von Degurechaff is by nature a brilliant magic officer and a genius General Staff officer. If she deems something necessary, then I trust unwaveringly that it is an appropriate use of military strength. You know how talented she is, Rudersdorf."

"In the military realm, yes."

"Ha-ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"What's tickling your funny bone all of a sudden, Zettour?"

"I thought the same thing. That she's a mad dog. But now I think her specialty is actually strategy. She understands politics and can also use military force in a rational way. Really, she's an ideal General Staff officer." He muttered, "Wait, that's not it," and added, "or rather, in as much as she employs violence correctly, ever loyal to raison d'état, Major von Degurechaff is perfect. In another ten years, I'll probably be preparing her a section chief position in the Service Corps so she doesn't get snatched up by the Operations Division."

Actually, for a child who knew nothing but the army, she was surprisingly intelligent. She was probably so capable that he could leave things to her and rest easy. More than anything, her wealth of combat experience plus her natural preoccupation with winning and losing on the strategic level rather than the tactical level made her ideal as a General Staff officer.

He was being serious when he said he wanted her to eventually walk the path of a proper member of the General Staff.

“You seem to think quite a lot of her.”

“Because she exhibits so much talent. Weren’t you strongly recommending her for the war college back then?”

“I just thought she was a capable soldier. And I knew you had a high opinion of her… Oh, why don’t we see if the 203rd can clear up that misunderstanding for us?”

So that’s where this was going. Zettour nodded, satisfied that he understood. *He’s going to ask me to borrow her again.*

“I want to try entrusting them with a mobile mission—as the vanguard, naturally.”

“I don’t mind, but theory would dictate you choose a unit that knows the lay of the land. Wouldn’t it be better to pick one from the Eastern Army Group that’s been stationed out on the border for so long?”

“The armies in the east tend to lack experience, so I’m not sure whether they can handle a breakthrough,” Rudersdorf practically spat.

And Zettour agreed, “That’s true.”

“With this, the 203rd will have been active on all the fronts, right? I really appreciate this, General von Zettour. I realize it’s the General Staff’s mobile force, but this unit you put together through your good offices is awfully easy to use.”

“It is the Service Corps’ fervent hope that everyone can delight in flexibly drawing the forces they need. Down the line, I’d like to establish a General Staff reserve group that can be used as strategic reserves.”

“That can be your next project.”

“Right. So what do you think about the idea of whacking Groups A and B in succession?”

“It’s flawless. In a way, it’s our element. An interior lines plan has already been drawn up most carefully. We even have our rail timetable requests ready!”

In response to Rudersdorf’s *Leave it to me*, Zettour gave a slight nod that meant, *I’m counting on you*. The longtime buddies were bound by the belief *If anyone can do it, he can*. No other words were necessary.

“Well, you work fast. All right, I’ll go tell the Railroad Department to do the impossible, so you find me a box of candy or something for them.”

MARCH 26, UNIFIED YEAR 1926, IMPERIAL ARMY EASTERN ARMY GROUP TEMPORARY CAMP 21

After the Moskva raid, the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion spent about ten days in unconventional combat, then triumphantly reentered an area under friendly control—a hero’s return.

The moment they reached the base, the rear personnel waiting for them gave a toast and deafening cheers.

The victory celebration was the place to be, so much so that base command even dropped by with one of their favorite bottles. But what delighted the battalion members more than anything was that their superior tacitly approved of them partying.

Major von Degurechaff normally required adherence to regulation so strict it’s as if the rules were alive. After proposing a toast as a formality, she readily made her exit, claiming she felt “suddenly indisposed.”

“This will definitely take longer than twenty-four hours to recover from,” she calmly declared, adding, “Don’t wake me up for anything that isn’t military business.”

The battalion took the opportunity to toast their commander’s health…and drain bottle after bottle.

Captain Weiss, with his usual sense of self-control as an officer, was on duty… which meant that, to put it bluntly, all the officers but him wholeheartedly enjoyed a reunion with their beloved beer.

And so they dreamed of peace in their cozy beds…or rather, they were supposed to. Sound sleep in a warm bed… It took only half a day for that tranquility to be shattered—

“All units, up and at ’em!”

—by the sound of a bugle and that adorable yet fearsome voice all members of the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion grew accustomed to within a few days of joining.

Thus, when Major von Degurechaff’s longtime fellow soldiers Captain Weiss and First Lieutenant Serebryakov jump up, grab their gear, and hustle to battalion headquarters, the unit is prepping for combat whether they’re hungover or otherwise indisposed.

“Battalion, gather up! Gather up, troops!”

“Captain Weiss…? What’s all the noise?”

“There you are—perfect, Lieutenant Grantz! Round up the battalion on the double!”

“But…”

Catching sight of Grantz, who is still half-asleep, and Weiss, who must have kicked him out of bed, Tanya is furious at the state of her officers.

It’s true that she told them they could drink as much as they wanted.

But Grantz apparently has a weakness. He’s an officer, but he’d been sleeping curled up with a bottle. Even if that’s just where he happened to pass out after enjoying the victory celebration… He’s got a lot of nerve if he’s still out of it.

“Lieutenant Grantz! I thought I trained you on the Rhine front, but it seems like it wasn’t enough! You’re getting reeducated!”

“Er, M-Major?!”

“Drag everyone out of bed! Fifteen minutes! The briefing is in fifteen

minutes!”

“Y-yes, ma’am!”

The piercing intimidation in her eyes must have alerted him that this was no normal state of affairs. Though still groggy, Grantz has the brains to leap to his feet and acknowledge the order.

“I’m leaving this up to you, Lieutenant.”

“Understood!”

“Lieutenant Serebryakov, emergency contact from the government. I want you to pick up the documents from the Eastern Army Group. If you bring them this, they should hand them over.”

“Right away! Excuse me, then!”

Grantz runs off in a panic, and Serebryakov jogs briskly away. *Well, they’ve grown into people I can use.*

You can’t create talented people overnight.

Which is why we have to get through this crisis with who we have on hand…

I sure have rotten luck with people pushing their problems off on me.

We’ve received a general notice regarding the situation in the east, as well as standby orders from the General Staff.

Tanya’s inner feelings as she pores over the map with Weiss, grouchily sipping ersatz coffee at battalion headquarters, match her expression exactly.

Since the war started, they’ve switched from delaying defense in the east to a retreating battle, looking for an opportunity to counterattack. So the front lines falling back is…permissible enough.

But the problem is the speed and pacing. If you asked me if the front lines should fall back exactly as far as they are pushed, I’d really have to wonder.

“…The eastern border sure is a mess.”

“There’s nothing we can do about it. It’s a matter of course that even the Eastern Army Group would have to retreat in the face of this quantitative disparity. I had some idea before, but the Federation Army is really just huge…”

“Yes, it makes you wonder if Communists grow on trees. Still, they sure managed to scrape together a pile of soldiers.”

She and Weiss are grumbling about a report on the current state of the war that has just come in. As far as we know, the ratio of imperial to Federation divisions on the eastern front is currently one to two.

“This is what they mean when they say to overwhelm your opponent with strategy by making numbers your tactics. The Federation Army is far better maintained than we imagined. What a pain,” Weiss comments with a frown.

But Tanya bursts out laughing. This is what it means to laugh off your worries when you’ve been overly anxious.

“…Ha-ha-ha, Captain Weiss. You’re an excellent soldier, but it’s because you’re an excellent soldier that you seem to be forgetting something important.” At his perplexed look, Tanya responds, “I don’t blame you for not knowing what. You should remember this, Captain: The guys who bring trouble from the rear onto the battlefield have no chance of winning. In the Empire, the General Staff and the government keep their distance from each other, so our army tends to forget it, but a soldier has to have nothing to do with domestic politics.”

“I thought I knew that, but—”

“The Federation is a giant with both its arms and legs tied. Poking it in the eyes will be easy.”

The political commissars oversee things, and they report to the rear, so it’s this terrible command structure where no one wants to admit defeat. How bad is it? Probably as harsh as fighting under Tsugene in the old Imperial Army or being in a unit that reported to General Full-of-shit-guchi.

…Aside from numbers and firepower, there’s nothing so scary about these guys. Of course, those two things require us to be on our guard, but still.

“And then once the giant with its arms and legs tied can’t see, we kill it?”

“We must, before the ties come loose.”

Just then, a subordinate’s voice requests permission to enter, and Tanya looks

up with an *Oh?*

She calls toward the entrance that he should enter, and the messenger soldier tells her that Grantz has finished rounding up the troops. Tanya responds with a "Good" and orders to have them stand by to sortie. *I'm glad things are going smoothly, but still*, she murmurs to herself.

As she watches the messenger turn on his heel and leave, Tanya's focus is to gain an understanding of the situation by the time orders come from the General Staff. When fighting Communists, it's best to be prepared.

"…Major von Degurechaff! Dispatch from the eastern armies—it's urgent."

But her train of thought regarding the documents at hand is interrupted when Serebryakov returns practically shrieking her report.

"What is it?"

"The Third and Thirty-Second Divisions—the rear guards for the eastern armies' delaying combat—have been surrounded in Tiegenhoff and need help breaking free!"

"Give me the map. I want to check the war situation."

But in comes a messenger from command.

"Major von Degurechaff! I have your orders from the General Staff! Prepare for a mobile mission and form up for a long-range advance!"

"Thanks, got it." With that brief reply, Tanya snatches the message up, runs her eyes over it, and realizes she's caught between a rock and a hard place.

"Wait a second, Lieutenant Serebryakov."

"Yes, ma'am."

Before her quiet subordinate, Tanya silently considers the situation and her cards.

I want to turn down the rescue request, but if there's a combat mission waiting from the General Staff, then the important question is whether the rescue can be used as an excuse to get out of a more strenuous task. If I'm going to get run around and overworked either way, I might as well keep it to a

minimum.

Now here's the question: Is rescuing the troops surrounded in Tiegenhoff a good enough reason to skip the mobile mission?

For a moment, she is tempted…but after considering it further, Tanya shakes her head. Her conclusion is that, for one, it's not possible. If it's about saving the entire army, she knows that a couple of friends in harm's way won't stop them from ordering her battalion back to do the bigger rescue.

"Saving our friends in Tiegenhoff is important, too…"

"Yes, Major. But the General Staff has ordered us to prepare for the operation and to sortie as soon as possible."

Be it Lieutenant General von Zettour or Lieutenant General von Rudersdorf, the generals of the General Staff may try to avoid adopting a policy of minimizing harm, but they aren't the type to actively eschew the idea. The reason they hesitate to accept losses is a moral one, and they aren't the type to get so emotional that morals trump the needs of reality. And surely, I'm lucky that they aren't the sort of superiors to get their priorities mixed up.

But neither can I get out of this mission with the excuse of saving friendlies.

"It's too bad, but…our allies in Tiegenhoff will simply have to…" Weiss sounds contrite but urges the difficult conclusion to abandon their fellow soldiers, when Tanya reemphasizes, "Wait!"

If that's what the General Staff is ordering, then we either ignore the request from the Eastern Army Group to rescue the two divisions or refuse. Thinking responsibly, the latter is probably the proper thing to do.

But one thing is bothering her: Tiegenhoff's location. As far as she can tell on the map, the town where the two divisions are holed up is in a very interesting place. The more she looks at it, the more it looks like key terrain.[10]

"Hmm, this location sure is interesting."

"…But it's so cut off from everything."

"Tiegenhoff is a bit isolated, isn't it?"

Weiss's remark is correct. Tiegenhoff is a city in the rear that the troops

retreating from the eastern border just happened to hole up in. Well, the lines were being pushed back farther than the original defense plan, so it was probably impossible to expect them to establish a staging point around here.

"But the location isn't bad. Lieutenant Serebryakov, find me a detailed city map. And don't forget to fill in Lieutenant Grantz."

Serebryakov jogs off with a "Yes, ma'am," and while her adjutant is fetching what she's been asked for, Tanya turns back to the map to try to get a better understanding of the situation.

"It's what you see here, Captain Weiss. As long as the General Staff doesn't intend to make this a total retreating battle, don't you think Tiegenhoff will become a life-and-death position?"

"…You're right. But assuming it's already under heavy siege, it'll be difficult to rescue those troops."

Tiegenhoff is an easy city to defend because it's on a river…and it's also near the sea, which is handy. On top of that, it has some distance from the border and is extremely close to a transportation hub. At one time, it must have been on a trade route from a port city.

Like this, it would be easy for the city to receive maritime support…and it would put pressure on that transportation hub everyone would be scrambling for in a mobile battle.

"I can't have you forgetting that our fellow countrymen are trapped there. Imperial soldiers as well as civilians. Tiegenhoff isn't a Federation city, you know!"

"I'm sorry."

"Practically speaking, Captain Weiss, you make a valid point. They are definitely surrounded. But allow me to point out something else: Tiegenhoff hasn't fallen yet."

The two divisions are able to expect some degree of support from the rear, given that a city of their own country is under siege. Even the civilians can put up some resistance in an urban battle. Well, if heavy artillery decided to burn the whole city down, it would be futile resistance, but still.

Even with General von Zettour making the arrangements, it was impossible to take heavy artillery in the advance against the Republic. The siege guns always end up being available once things have already calmed down.

“S-sorry to keep you waiting.”

“Thanks, Visha… Uh, what’s all this?”

“The eastern armies gave me these aerial photos along with the map, Captain. They want us to understand the situation the trapped troops are in.”

Answering Weiss’s question, Serebryakov holds out a sheaf of documents categorized and plastered with all sorts of labels.

…When their head count is low, it’s easy to understand why the eastern armies would give us such materials. They must be desperate for us to help them with this rescue.

“Thanks. What about Lieutenant Grantz?”

“He’s currently occupied with an eastern army communications officer’s endless pleas for us to save those troops. If need be, I can show him in…”

“Wait just a moment.”

Saving allied troops…isn’t really our job. But we should be faithful to fellow freedom fighters confronting the evil of Communism. A liberal who would abandon warriors fighting for freedom and the market isn’t a liberal at all.

You can’t defend the world if you lose that stubborn refusal to back down a single step against the Communists.

If that’s the case… Tanya is determined.

“Captain Weiss, line up all the aerial photos and recon results. Let’s also look at the full reports from the Third and Thirty-Second Divisions.”

If there’s a chance the rescues will succeed, Tiegenhoff should be saved. Tanya prompts Serebryakov and Weiss to look at the map. “Let’s consider the area around Tiegenhoff as if we’re going to do the rescue.”

At least, that’s how the liberal camp Tanya knew worked. Now, with no threat of nuclear war—now was the time for good people to take up arms and put

their bodies on the line to nip Communism in the bud. Of course, there are only limited reasons for Tanya to volunteer personally. It would be fine for her to support from the rear.

But standing by while in a position to lend a hand is unforgivable. As long as that's true, then it's your duty to lend one if you can.

"Major, what are you looking for?"

"Heavy artillery, Captain. It's something we learned on the Rhine… Big guns sent up to the front lines from positions in the rear are always late. I expect the Federation Army does no better."

"With all due respect, Major von Degurechaff, I don't think our operations should count too much on the enemy making a mistake."

Every word Weiss said was absolutely true, and Tanya smiles and tells him, "Of course not." Your enemy being a fool and you expecting your enemy to be a fool are two different things. Even if they seem like the same, it's too huge a risk to underestimate a potential enemy.

"I don't mean to disparage the basic principle of preparing pessimistically and acting optimistically. I agree that we should assume it won't work out. But…," Tanya continues with a bit of conviction in her voice, "…if you'll consult your fond memories of our battle to subdue the Republican Army, weren't we under strict orders to assume we had no heavy artillery? The Imperial Army has a tendency to forget this, since we won, but…heavy artillery pieces are hopelessly slow. They never show up on time."

The slowpoke artillerists are always late for decisive junctures. They're a credit to the defense, and they contribute to offense, but…firepower in critical battles never manages to reach the itch.

"General von Zettour took pains to arrange them for us, but we were still often lacking firepower. Let's see if the Federation Army is capable of having heavy artillery accompany their advancing infantry." After frowning at the maps for some time, Tanya speaks again as if to say, *I was right!* "The enemy artillery seems to be lagging behind… There are two pieces of evidence here that back that up: I can't see any heavy artillery in the aerial photographs, and there are no reports from our troops that they've been shelled."

Assuming an absence of enemy heavy artillery is wishful thinking.

But in this situation, there is a real possibility that it's actually absent. In any case, we can be confident that it hasn't been detected yet.

"So they weren't advancing with the intention of a siege battle, huh?"

The moment Weiss, also frowning at the map, nods that he thinks they can do it, Tanya murmurs her agreement.

Communists tend to be big on armies with lots of firepower, but this time even they're without the heavy artillery they're so proud of. In war, if the other side's specialty, artillery, is missing and there are enough resources to wage our side's specialty, mobile battles, then this is easy. We force our enemies to do what they're bad at and what we're good at.

"So, if that's the case, Captain Weiss, wouldn't Tiegenhoff make an even better forward position than we thought?"

"For the mobile mission, you mean? If, as you say, the enemy heavy artillery really hasn't advanced…"

Tanya and Weiss murmur that they can hit the city, but then Serebryakov, who has been paying them no mind, her attention silently focused on the map, speaks up with an argument for caution.

"Please wait. Certainly, that's how they appear to be equipped, but can we really rule out the possibility? For instance, there are a number of movements along the border. Please consider the chance that long-range units including railway guns might be getting deployed."

"Lieutenant Serebryakov, I find it hard to imagine railway guns would advance. Do you really think our enemies are stupid enough to move such large equipment through an area where they don't have air supremacy?"

"I'm not talking about their intentions, ma'am. Please consider their ability."

The Federation Army has already positioned a number of railway guns along the border. The unit the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion fought—or more like trampled—earlier was Federation railway guns. "And," continues Serebryakov with a grave look on her face.

“Even on the Rhine, enemy railway guns in the rear were a serious threat. Please take into account that even artillery positions and communications trenches fortified with concrete couldn’t take a direct hit from a railway gun.”

Certainly, neither Tanya nor Weiss could deny that. Perhaps recalling his time on the Rhine, Weiss makes a bitter face, while Tanya remembers how Dora raged in Warsaw.

“Major, Tiegenhoff has far weaker defenses than we did on the Rhine. And if this estimate of their railway gun positioning is correct, there’s a good chance we would be in range.”

Though they’re lacking the artillery making the long advance, they do have an extended range with their railway guns. Serebryakov’s comment that we might just barely enter it is correct.

For a moment, Tanya fears the dearth of enemy firepower upon which the rescue would be premised may be short-lived, but then she finally realizes—*Oh.*

“Lieutenant Serebryakov, you’re right to point out the possibility that enemy heavy artillery may exist, but I don’t think it will be a significant threat. You let your Rhine experience influence your thinking too much.”

“Do excuse me, Major, but what do you mean by that?”

“Captain Weiss, you feel the same way?”

Tanya smiles wryly. *They’ve learned too much from their experiences.*

“It’s simple. Indirect fire becomes possible only with incomparable teamwork. Remember that on the Rhine front both the Empire and the Republic had artillery scouts stationed on the forward-most lines or had aerial mages like ourselves flying around as observers to collect data in peril of being shot down; only then was effective fire possible.”

Cannons fired at random…won’t find their mark. Without a scout to give you adjustments and observe your impacts, you’re only wasting shells. If there’s an exception, it’s strictly the times you want to fire at a large city on a map, like Paris, so that it’s fine as long as it lands in the ballpark, and you let loose with your Paris Gun.

“Oh yeah, now that you mention it… I took it for granted and just assumed indirect fire could happen anytime.”

“That’s what I’m talking about, Captain Weiss. If you read the frontline reports closely, the scariest thing for ground troops—observer scouts—weren’t spotted.”

“I heard that Federation Army artillery operate as a group…so it’s doubtful the frontline units have spotters, then.”

Weiss nods—*It’s just as you say, Major*—and Serebryakov looks as though she understands. Tanya is satisfied that she has managed to remind them that the battalion’s priority is to eliminate enemy observers should they appear.

…The mobile mission and the rescue of the Third and Thirty-Second aren’t actually conflicting objectives. The two divisions have been overwhelmed by enemy wave attacks in an isolated location, but…that position can be used as a stepping-stone to attack the rear enemy lines.

“I say that rescuing these two divisions contributes to the General Staff’s objectives with the mobile mission. I’m asking permission.”

If you can consider the risks and returns and still decide it sounds worthwhile, there’s no reason not to do it.

Tanya declares they’re going in for the rescue.

The fact that Weiss and Serebryakov happily approve is a good indication that the battalion’s opinion isn’t split.

Tanya’s subordinate officers are raring to fight as usual, and she’s happy that she knows that she can count on them even in a difficult situation.

Almost as an afterthought, she directs Serebryakov to prepare first aid supplies.

“Lieutenant Serebryakov, have your unit take as many medical supplies as you can. We’re planning on a long-range advance, but we may have to air-drop them, so attach parachutes.”

In other words, Tanya says to herself. “Guess we gotta try some kindness.”

“Major?”

When Serebryakov asks her, “Is anything the matter?” she replies, admitting that it’s uncharacteristic of her, “Ah, I just thought if they’re in a jam, they might have run out of some of this stuff. It would be nice to take them whiskey and cigarettes, too, but I figure in the thick of a fight, they need medical supplies.”

When Tanya continues, lamenting that they don’t have any whiskey or cigarettes, anyway, she ends up nearly scowling at a comment from Weiss.

“I don’t doubt that. But, Major, there should be alcohol from the southern continent in the battalion treasury.”

“Captain Weiss, what are you talking about? Nobody told me that!”

Everyone brought back a little something with them as a souvenir, or they could have even had something sent via military post, but…bottles in the battalion treasury? The fact that she hadn’t approved the expense or sanctioned the purchase is, to Tanya, almost embarrassing.

“A member of the battalion won it in a poker game at the headquarters of the staff of the southern continent expeditionary forces, so I’ve been holding on to it. And it’s just the kind of thing you’d expect HQ to have—nice stuff.”

“You’ll have to excuse me, Captain. I thought you were the serious type who wouldn’t even touch gambling.”

Upon receiving Tanya’s glare that all but demands details, Weiss gets a bit flustered and hurriedly says, “Actually, it was Lieutenant Serebryakov who won it…”

“What? Is that true?”

“Umm, I was just playing for fun…”

She bows and explains that she somehow won big and she took the alcohol because of the general mood at the time; she didn’t have anything to do with it, so she tossed it into the battalion treasury. Since they’re dealing with an emergency, Tanya shelves the issue for now but is forced to make a mental note to talk to the troops later.

That’ll be for after we complete this rescue mission. In reply to Tanya’s

proposal, the General Staff say they approve of the idea, in addition to authorizing it. And since the orders are official, the General Staff will take care of making adjustments to other areas.

The Eastern Army Group assists with weapons and ammunition, which Serebryakov handles. Once Grantz and his unit receive a briefing on documentation about the region from the eastern staff, Tanya gives the battalion details on their objectives and itinerary.

Basically, we're delivering hope. When she finishes telling them that, the veterans are all pumped, as expected. "Let's do it!" they shout aloud, and implicitly they cry, *If our troops are in trouble, we'll run to the rescue! That's what mages live for!* Their fighting spirit is running high.

Normally, mages hate delivery missions because of how much fatigue they entail, but this time it's only natural that delivery should be a part of the mission, so they shoulder the first aid supplies and other goods without a single complaint.

Unexpected additional supplies show up right as Tanya and the battalion are lined up on the runway ready to take off. The Eastern Army Group staffers who came to see off the already heavily laden battalion brought bottles and cigarette packs as if they'd just remembered they had them. Officially, Tanya declines their request to take the items to their friends on the front lines because they would be too heavy, but she announces that she'll honor her subordinates' free will.

Her men put the slightly off-the-record goods into their packs—the alcohol and cigarettes are treated as personal items—and with a farewell a bit grander than usual, the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion takes off and begins their push toward besieged Tiegenhoff.

Their goal, naturally, is to break the encirclement.

Maintaining combat formation in anticipation of encounter battles and invading the occupied area at full speed is a chance for the battalion to apply the search-and-destroy skills they polished on the Rhine and down south.

And so the hammer of this augmented battalion is wielded by the Imperial Army and brought down with all its might on the Federation Army.

To get straight to the point, the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion succeeds in smashing into the encircling Federation Army units with perfect timing.

“Advance, advance! Cut right through!” Tanya roars at the front of her unit, and they begin an anti-surface strike to all but obliterate the units attacking the imperials, starting with their flank.

“Ready suppressive fire! Choose your own targets!”

With one call from Tanya, who’s not about to let them engage in organized combat, enemies who appear to be the commanders are, to the last man, wiped out by a mix of scattered explosion formulas and optical sniping formulas raining mercilessly down on the ground.

As long as the return fire is sporadic, there’s no need to pay attention to it, so the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion dominates the battlefield as if they own it.

Even a mage in a defensive shell will be shot down if they get careless on a battlefield where bullets are flying. But if the shooting isn’t done in a structured way, the chances they connect are thankfully microscopically slim.

Kicking apart the Federation Army, now incapable of organized combat, is like child’s play to these elites who toyed with the Republican Army on the Rhine front.

“Major, look!”

Tanya follows Serebryakov’s prompt to see a corner of the enemy army crumbling and nods at the punctuality.

“Our troops! Great timing!”

Though surrounded, the trapped divisions were still fit to fight. It was only natural for them to hit the enemy where they were weak. As the friendly mages fly out in response and begin raining formulas down on the Federation troops’ heads, Tanya confirms that it’s a rout.

“Act together! Punch through! Pry their lines apart!”

The 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion concentrates their fire on a single point and supports the breakthrough while moving into position to join up with the others. Meanwhile, the friendly units are quick to pick up on the objective and

readily begin to cooperate.

Thus, the breakthrough and combining of forces gets accomplished quite easily.

Satisfied with the coordination that could have been pulled off only among pros, Tanya walks over to greet a man with a big smile on his face, whom she guesses is the commander.

“Major Hofen, Third Division, 213th Mage Battalion! Thank you for coming! That was a close call!”

“I’m sorry we were late. I’m Major von Degurechaff, 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion reporting to the General Staff. We were ordered to make a counterattack and just barely managed to rush over here—I’m so relieved. And by the way, nice job surviving such a heavy encirclement.”

Tanya and Hofen shake hands, wishing each other luck in future battles. Of course, the exchange is a formal courtesy, but the gratitude and praise are genuine. Unlike etiquette that remains only as a shell of its sentiments, on the front lines, it helps officers bond through their shared experiences.

“We escaped right before the heavy artillery showed up.”

“I’m just glad we made it in time. In the academy, they drilled it into us that tardiness was not tolerated so much that even just the word *late* frightens me!”

Hofen remarks how terrifying it was, and Tanya responds with a comment about how badly they might have been chewed out if they hadn’t made it in time. With this exchange, the two officers are still feeling each other out, but both are satisfied with the results.

“Which way is divisional headquarters?” Tanya gets right to the point and informs Hofen of her battalion’s situation. It’s true that they came on orders to perform the rescue, but now it’s more important to prepare for their next operation.

“Allow me to escort you. We’ll be here keeping a check on the enemy remnants, but what about you?”

“We have orders from the General Staff to advance farther. I imagine it’s so

those who come after us will have an easier time.”

“After seeing in that fight how skilled your units are, I would say so. Major von Degurechaff, I’m so grateful to you and your battalion. I’m impressed that you pulled off that breakthrough and saved us. It’s too bad we can’t treat you to drinks, ma’am, but please allow us to treat your subordinates once you can take a break from operations.”

He quips with a big grin that they’ll protect the 203rd until their mobile mission is over, and Tanya smiles wryly, commenting on his cleverness.

“Not to be presumptuous, but my units can drink. Unfortunately, when they get a chance to, they down enough to make up for their usual abstinence. They’re so hard-core that once, on the southern continent, they downed an enemy transport unit just for beer… I’m afraid you might go bankrupt if you treat them, Major Hofen.”

“Ha-ha, they sound like they know how to party. All right, then, all the officers of my battalion will pool together to treat you guys. Drink as much as you like!”

Every nonchalant gesture he makes is filled with a veteran’s tact and wit. A colleague like that is a priceless partner. Honestly, even just one seasoned officer is enough to make things go so much more smoothly.

“That sounds fun. Oh, this is nothing much, but…”

Even Tanya wants to get closer to someone she feels she can get along with. She casually produces the bottles and cigarettes entrusted to them by the staffers as a sign of that pleasant impression.

“Ha-ha-ha. It’s too bad you can’t have such a tasty drink. Let’s both live through this and I’ll treat you when you’re older.”

“I’ll be looking forward to it. Well, I’d better be going.”

“Thanks. I’ll be hoping we don’t go broke.”

They part like pros, with an exchange of respectful salutes, and Tanya, with her subordinates trailing behind her, makes a dignified exit from the battlefield. *Okay, on to the next job.*

As he watches her go—*Sheesh*—his expression breaks, and he murmurs, “So

the rumors were true.”

“How did it go, Commander?”

“…I never would have thought those dubious rumors about the officer of unknown age were true…”

Met with the blank stare of his subordinate, he realizes that the man hadn’t met Major von Degurechaff or any of the mages who had come to their rescue.

Grinning wryly, he explains what he has seen—the presence of a child officer.

“Huh?”

“I mean I met the commander who came to rescue us, and…what can I even say? She looked about the same age as my daughter!”

“C’mon, you must be kidding! A General Staff officer? She has to be in at least her late twenties if she graduated war college.”

All Hofen can say is that it was what he really saw.

True, his subordinate is correct. It wasn’t rare for someone out of the academy and war college to be in their early thirties by the time they wore the General Staff officer insignia.

Who would believe him if he said she looked like his ten-year-old daughter?

“Sheesh. I guess some battlefield legends have unexpected truth to them.”

“I…see, sir.”

“Well, more importantly, we’ve got work to do. Work. We all fought so hard to drive out these enemies; we’re gonna blow them apart before they regroup!”

MARCH 28, UNIFIED YEAR 1926, IMPERIAL ARMY GENERAL STAFF OFFICE, WAR ROOM

“The breakthrough is a success! They did it!”

It was the report that the vanguard unit, the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion, had reached Tiegenhoff. The Third and Thirty-Second Divisions, who were at one point feared annihilated, would probably be saved. This was what it truly meant

to be thankful for God's protection.

"What about the encirclement?!"

"We're not sure! According to the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion, they all seemed equipped like standard infantry, apart from a few mechanized units."

"Wonderful! In that case, we can win!"

Still, there were probably few people as grateful as Rudersdorf, Deputy Director of Operations in the General Staff.

Whether they lost both the Third and Thirty-Second Divisions, and Tiegenhoff along with them, depended entirely on the Federation Army's fire support.

But though he braced himself for the worst, as he often did, this time it seemed Lady Luck would smile on the Empire. When they took the lid off the situation, the Federation Army's immensely powerful bombardment abilities were nowhere to be found.

"We have plenty of shells from Zettour, and we have full run of the rails… Sheesh, at this rate, settling things after we win will be more of a pain than the battle itself."

"General von Rudersdorf?"

The 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion did a magnificent job with the rescue mission. All they did was liberate a city under siege, but now…the Federation troops who were going to invade the Empire would suffer arteriosclerosis. The threat of their supply lines being attacked from the rear was a nightmare for officers and men alike.

Even a surrounded point could become a base for mounting a counterattack, if it could connect with other units. In the vast war zone of the east, that was certainly a lesson learned.

It seemed that now that victory was in sight, his tongue was getting a stretch. On top of that, the idea of artillery being allocated for mobile operations he'd been discussing with Lieutenant General von Zettour came to mind.

"If we can crush the infantry before the artillery gets set up… Shit, I keep wishing we had self-propelled guns. Cannons are so slow—their one weakness

—but there's nothing we can do about it…"

Heavy guns or superior firepower? Rudersdorf smiled wryly at the eternally unsolvable dilemma.

…And just as dismay began to set in, a rare piece of good news arrived. Rudersdorf was one of the first to thank God.

Relaxing one's attention frequently causes a winning battle to end in tragedy… No, perhaps it should be past tense. At least, Rudersdorf had no shortage of reasons to believe that.

This was a defensive battle making the best use of the interior lines maneuvers anticipated and planned for by the Imperial Army General Staff. But, though only to an extent, they had grasped the signs of their enemy's offensive.

"…I'm surprised at how little there is for a General Staff officer to do in a winning battle. Honestly, being a deskbound hero is so uncomfortable. It was the same with Norden and the Rhine, but I think I would feel better out on the front lines with the troops."

Providing is preventing.

It was just a saying, but at the same time, he had to trust in the work they had done to prepare and wait for the results. It wasn't easy to take responsibility for the lives of the troops. Even people who don't like to write letters get used to writing to the bereaved families of their subordinates; it wasn't a pleasant experience.

"We can only hope for success and that our losses are few."

"Yes, General."

But, some wisely continued.

"Luckily, our troops have a measure of heavy artillery support now, and the imperial air forces have indisputable supremacy in the skies. We could even borrow some troops from Tiegenhoff and use them to pincer the enemy—that is, if we need more. Our advantage in firepower is already apparent."

They would control the sky, amass their firepower, make the terrain their ally, and resist the enemy who outnumbered them. It was a classic route, but there

was a reason it was so well tread.

“The only problem is the Federation Army’s decentralized attack. We imagine much of it has to do with balancing out the attack routes with supplies, but there are also several strange movements that we can’t rule out as dissemblance.”

“Agh, what a pain. They could have stayed bunched together and made it easier on us. These bastards and their clumsy tricks.”

“General von Rudersdorf, with all due respect, I should point out that there’s nothing incompetent about the Federation’s attack plan.”

Rudersdorf winced because he knew it was true and picked up on the other man’s implications. “Yes, there’s no doubt that the plan itself is trouble.”

Since the fighting broke out, he could tell the Federation’s attack routes were meticulous and prepared with considerable zeal. The practical issue was that they were coming on routes he wished they weren’t. Not only was their major invasion following the sneak attack an attention-grabber, but the way they were actually going about it was formidable.

“But you’re not taking into account that critical factor—the Federation Army’s level of training… It’s strange, but this seems like a first-rate intellect devised a plan with no regard for what his troops are actually capable of.”

The problem was the vague incongruity he felt here and there. He wondered if perhaps they used a previously prepared plan and prioritized the sneak-attack effect…but any commander should still know the status of his troops on the border.

Then either it was an awfully secretive plan, or they used it because they had no others. But it wasn’t Rudersdorf’s job to think about it any more than that. The rest was for Zettour and those fellows.

Good grief. Smoking a cigarette, he turned his attention back to his own area of expertise and looked at the map depicting the war situation.

“I wouldn’t have expected this position to be around still… Who would have thought a city would make such a good resistance base?”

The murmured remarks acknowledged how troublesome it was when an opponent unhindered by the laws of war attacked a city.

“…Aside from Arene, the Imperial Army doesn’t have much experience with urban warfare. Well, neither does the Federation Army, but they also don’t seem to have any qualms about breaking international law to attack cities.”

“Legally speaking, the Federation hasn’t signed the convention respecting the laws of war on land.”

“That’s problematic.”

The staffer affixed the question *Why?* to his face, and Rudersdorf spelled it out for him, exasperated in spite of himself.

“What’ll they do with prisoners?”

“Huh? Prisoners, sir?”

Rudersdorf broke it down for the blank-faced officer: *This war has no rules!* There may have been norms and standards written down on a scrap of paper, but they wouldn’t apply to war in the east.

“In terms of international law, there are no rules governing this slugfest between the Federation and the Empire. The Service Corps has said we should follow the convention just in case, but it’s doubtful our opponents believe in reciprocity.”

“We just have to hope the Communist Party or whoever is progressive.”

“Expecting nothing of these specialists in firing squads and internal Gewalt is probably better for your mental health.”

MARCH 28, UNIFIED YEAR 1926, MAIN ATTACK GROUP HEADQUARTERS

The forces the Imperial Army called Group B were called the Main Attack Group on the Federation side. Ever since the fighting started, taking control of imperial lands and wiping out the Imperial Army were the goals of the Main Attack Group as they broke through the border like troops who’d lived their whole lives for this reckless advance.

They forced their way through the Imperial Army’s Eastern Army Group’s

delaying action with numbers and continued their single-minded advance with no regard for losses. But the expressions on the officers' faces were tense in a strange way that was difficult to describe, far removed from elation.

And precisely because they were advancing, their grim expressions became more and more severe.

It was clear on the faces of the generals and staffers in the war council meeting held by the brains of the Main Attack Group at headquarters that they were near their breaking point.

"Although our advancing forces are currently facing quite a bit of resistance, the imperial units are retreating, meaning it's still possible to push on as we have been."

"Ideally, we would wait for the heavy artillery to arrive, but we have troops filled with the desire and determination to offer themselves up for the revolution. Of course, I think brave, loyal men like that should have artillery support…"

It was a war council, so naturally the reports were about the war.

So here's something.

It goes without saying that it's essential to use appropriate wording and keep reports brief so as not to invite misunderstanding. Even the most hurriedly cultivated and deployed Federation Army officers knew that (even if whether they could implement it or not was a different story).

"Comrade Generals, I beg your pardon, but how exactly is the war proceeding?"

"Just as you heard in the report, Comrade Political Commissar."

Actually, they had a tendency to talk too much, and the Federation Army wasn't so amateurish as to allow for loose-lipped high-level officers and political officers. If anything, perhaps the issue was that these were neither amateurs nor fools.

"So, Comrade Generals, what is your view on the situation, then?"

"We'd like to hear from you regarding party directives. I think you're the

expert there."

"It's true that I'm in charge of military politics, of course…"

The exchange is all very roundabout, with hidden meanings.

"…This council is getting awfully heated. Let's relax a bit, gentlemen."

After the trickle of acidic conversation ran dry into an awkward silence, the chairman exercised his wit. Everyone stood as if they had been saved and huddled together, talking among themselves with faces that said, *Sheesh*.

In whispers, of course. But even now that the war council was clearly livelier, the conversations were still grim, because everyone was glancing around and knew that the others were sounding them out, too.

…No, everyone was sighing internally, feeling helpless.

The government's announcement that they were keeping the pressure on the Imperial Army had to be a mistake.

Yes, it was true that they broke through the border in their initial offensive.

And it was true that the Imperial Army units were retreating.

But anyone in the Federation Army with decent military knowledge feared the embellishments in the reports sent to Moskva.

On the individual level, well, it was probably done to protect their position. They'd just write something to sound a bit braver.

Given the "special political environment" the Federation Army was operating in, they could understand why the men on the front lines would write such things. And because they understood…it was easy to imagine what kinds of changes would get passed on from the rear.

Probably something like, "The Imperial Army's morale has collapsed for the most part. We're currently eradicating fanatic resistance as we push forward."

In other words, the Imperial Army was losing, and the Federation Army was putting down the fanatics resisting along its smooth advance.

One could only call it *removed from reality*.

"…So what's *really* going on?"

“Nothing much different than by you. The Imperial Army moves a lot faster than we thought.”

They were unable to crush organized opposition, and their only enemy was the Eastern Army Group right now. Considering the Imperial Army’s doctrine and geographical circumstances, they wouldn’t be able to avoid the extremely problematic arrival of the Great Army as reinforcements.

And worst of all…, several people thought grimly, swallowing the words they couldn’t say.

There were indications that the Great Army would show up much faster than expected.

“It’s also incredibly problematic that we have no way to win an air battle. I realize that we’ve been forced by ‘pressing circumstances’ to transfer the few mage units we have—I know we had no choice—but it’s still hard.”

“…Mage units?”

“I knew these guys were trouble, but there’s a big difference between hearing something and seeing it. What the hell did the political officers mean when they told us they have less firepower than artillery, are slower than planes, and are fewer than infantry, so they wouldn’t be a threat?”

“That’s going a bit far. You might want to watch it… That said, I agree with you. Our supply situation was already bad enough, but thanks to the mages tearing through in the rear, the lines have nearly collapsed.”

And the losses in aerial battles, always reported to Moskva as negligible, were gnawing away at the Federation Army’s offensive resources.

The Imperial Army air fleet could boast of its power, while the Federation Army air forces had no choice but to fight at a disadvantage. Well, it could be said they were still just barely putting up a desperate resistance, even if all they could do was offer support from above.

The Federation’s handling of magic forces was the worst of what was coming back to bite it. The shackles of the past were heavy, and the Federation Army’s mage forces were behind. For that reason, a few old-fashioned units were the most it could operate with.

“Oh, right. I wanted to ask you something… Is the rumor true, that a political officer applied to send mage units our way?”

“If you’re talking about Officer Chobarkov, apparently it’s true… Which is why he’s been taken back home to the Commissariat for Internal Affairs for a hearing or whatnot.”

When the limited number of mages was taken away, a breaking point had been reached. The rumor that someone had finally protested to be allowed their few units wasn’t a rumor after all.

Sadly, things were far worse than the rumors said. The man who objected had been taken away, and a new political officer was probably being briefed with unrealistic reports as his replacement.

“…Oh, I see.”

His sigh was a lament for their world, where a man with common sense was crushed the moment he mustered the courage to bring up reality.

These were professional soldiers with a modern education. Though ideological education[11] is biased, anyone who fought on the front lines could see their gear was inferior to their enemy’s—they understood it so well it made them sick. The only problem was one that could be grasped with a glance at the atmosphere in the meeting room.

They couldn’t object to the party’s decisions… Not only that, but they couldn’t even express any doubt about the party’s perceptions. To the officers having restricted conversations here and there around the room, wary of the observing political officers, it was extremely frustrating…but that’s what it was like in the Federation Army.

“Do the political officers who are left understand the situation?”

“Of course. They may adhere idiotically to the ideology, but how much of an ignoramus would you have to be to not grasp what’s going on?”

“…If they would just tell us to pull back. If they would just tell us not to chase too far and hold instead.”

The Imperial Army’s retreat, like when they beat the Republic, should probably

be viewed as a tactical retreat. On that point, all the generals agreed.

To them, one look at the map made it clear.

The Federation Army was flooding into a pretty half-moon dent in the center, but the Imperial Army defensive line units, the left and right edges, were putting up an oddly strong resistance—especially in Tiegenhoff, which at one time was completely surrounded but then received a fresh mage unit as reinforcements.

Even now they were attacking…but they had started to feel a chill, like they were gradually charging farther and farther into the Imperial Army's encirclement.

As soldiers, what they really wanted was to halt immediately and rearrange their defenses. *But.* They all hesitated to say so. They couldn't help it.

Because they knew that the first person to open their mouth, to call for a halt, would be deemed an unforgivable traitor by the Communist Party!

And this was after Moskva had been raided by a mage unit. The party elites had to be eager for a scapegoat. None of these men wanted to be the one to fall under their gaze—they were instinctively scared.

Hence, the desperate glances at the political officers.

One word from them, the party will incarnate, and we'd be saved.

And as one side has one thing on their minds, the other side is thinking the same.

Humans are, on the whole, similar creatures, and their thought processes often resemble one another's. To the political officers, who had been on the receiving end of silent looks for a while now, the military officers' intentions were crystal clear.

"…What's our status?"

"Utter crisis. The front lines keep sending us spirited reports, but it's obvious if you actually go on inspection. The Imperial Army isn't collapsing… I'm fairly certain they're simply falling back to lure us in while waiting for reinforcements."

Contrary to the reports being sent to Moskva, the situation on the front lines was far from what they wanted to see.

The political officers had some military education, too.

If they walked around the actual battleground and talked to the soldiers, even if they were detested…there was no way to misunderstand the situation the Federation Army was in.

“I guess it’s obvious from a look at the map. There’s a stubborn defense in the direction we want to go. The enemy is herding us where they want.”

The remarks were bitter, and the drags on their cigarettes were silent. In this room swirling with indescribable irritation and smoke, the hopeless situation found the men wanting to cradle their heads in despair.

“…If the generals would tell us to fall back…”

“Whether they’ll be able to convince Moskva is unknown. But if we could make it a fait accompli…”

“That’d be difficult. The damned generals want to make us bring it up again.”

Who would take responsibility for reporting the defeat to Moskva?

What was tearing apart Main Attack Group headquarters, in the end, was everyone’s true feelings and fear—no one wanted Moskva’s eyes on them. If they made a report, Moskva might rethink things. But the enemy was on a rampage with the insolence to trample Moskva, and they were failing to stop them.

“Political Officer Chobarkov already tried it, right? Next, it’s the army’s turn to handle it. Military strategy is their problem to begin with, isn’t it?”

Under the circumstances, even just objecting to the party transferring mage units to defend Moskva was doing the most a political officer could do for the front lines… At least, they had sacrificed one of theirs.

Now it’s your turn.

In their positions, it was taboo to say as much, but that was the political officers’ keenly felt opinion on the matter.

The inadvertent groans spoke volumes as to how uncomfortable their situation was.

To the political officers, the danger of opening one's mouth at this point was clear. But they were also scared of looking like they had no plan.

What would happen if the Federation Army continued with these reckless attacks?

If the Commissariat for Internal Affairs gave them the evil eye, they were finished. Anyone who could envision the punishment waiting for them if they were defeated had an extraordinarily hard time being proactive. They knew how the apparatchiks and the presidium thought, which left them with no choice but fear.

They writhed and struggled, and then finally, they found a way.

"There is one bit of good news. The unit in Tiegenhoff reports directly to their General Staff."

One of the men going through documents, groping for a plan, discovered a positive report. They found a way to use the information in a report about the enemy chain of command.

"Directly to the General Staff?"

"Yes. You'd probably understand if I say it's the unit that did *you-know-what*."

It was the mage unit that had struck Moskva and made a grand show of obliterating the Federation and the Communist Party's dignity and authority. Upon hearing the culprits were in Tiegenhoff, they had their excuse.

"…Let's suggest attacking Tiegenhoff. If we do it right, we'll avoid the encirclement crisis and prove to the army that it needs us."

THE SAME DAY IN TIEGENHOFF

"M-Major!"

Tanya is literally smacked awake by Lieutenant Serebryakov, who is staying in the same billet as her in Tiegenhoff.

"Lieutenant Serebryakov? What is it?"

"An offensive! The Federation Army is on the move!"

Judging from how pale she is, it's obvious this is no small move.

Sensing the crisis, Tanya hurls off her blanket and jumps out of bed. Fortunately, or perhaps unfortunately, there were no children's pajamas anywhere to be found, so she sleeps in her uniform. Her low blood pressure upon waking is annoying, but she has no time to fret about things like that now.

Swallowing her cold coffee, Tanya asks some quick questions to get a sense of their situation.

"How many?"

"…According to the air fleet, it's eight divisions at minimum."

"What? Eight at *minimum*?"

It's an offensive of, with the most optimistic estimate, four times their own two divisions. Tanya was sure their offensive would be carried out with some degree of numbers, but even she has to parrot back that amount in disbelief. *That's way too many.* She doubts the veracity of the reconnaissance plane's report for a moment but then shakes her head. *No.*

"A major offensive? If they send that many troops our way at this point, they can certainly protect their flanks, but…have they seen through our maneuver plans?"

If the enemy is changing up their movements, there must be a reason for it. As far as Tanya knows, the rigidity of Communist thought and command chain is legendary.

That they would abandon their reckless breakthrough on the central lines and mount a major offensive on Tiegenhoff, off to the side, is completely

unexpected.

“This will leave their central offensive dead in the water… Should we assume if they are transferring this many forces around, there’s been an intelligence leak? Well, but they’re going so slowly. They must have figured out what we’re doing and are moving in response.”

Anyone can guess that the Imperial Army’s aim to surround and annihilate the Federation Army is a maneuver battle. Traditionally, the General Staff can be considered believers in Cannae—that is, disciples of the double envelopment. It’s only reasonable, then, that the Federation Army is on guard against it.

Even if there was a leak, Tanya’s suggestion of maneuvers with Tiegenhoff as the base was only just adopted.

…They must have sensed they were in danger of being surrounded.

Man, underestimating the Federation Army as a bunch of good-for-nothings who move in adherence to their inflexible command structure like the Red Army was a total mistake.

If Communists can react on the fly…this war won’t be so straightforward.

“Ngh, no time to think about that. How do the rest of the troops see the enemy situation?”

“Both divisions’ headquarters have concluded there are signs of a major offensive. Captain Weiss is waiting outside…”

“…How thoughtful of him.”

That my warmonger[12] subordinates have the delicacy to mind sex differences comes as a bit of a surprise. That said, it’s important to act when the time comes.

“Sorry I’m late!”

Jumping out of her room and seeing Weiss fully outfitted, Tanya grasps her role completely.

“I’ve been informed of the situation. For now, I’m going to joint divisional headquarters. Under the circumstances, I need to confirm what the division commanders’ plans are.”

Tanya and her troops are reinforcements that just arrived. Originally, Tanya's battalion had been planning on supporting only the two divisions in Tiegenhoff until further reinforcements showed up.

So if she doesn't figure out what everyone's moves are, this war won't happen. It's irritating, but it was Tanya's mistake to think the enemy army wouldn't act this quickly. She can only grind her teeth at her naivete, laughing at the Communists' tendency to be fools.

"Captain Weiss, while I do that, I'm leaving the unit up to you! Prepare to sortie immediately and be ready to get a jump on the enemy vanguard in the sky!"

"Yes, ma'am. We'll shift into scramble prep on the double."

"If you feel it's necessary, you can attack without waiting for my instructions. But keep defense of the city in mind when judging how far to go. We're aiming for command of the sky, but don't do any more than intercept. I don't want the battalion taking any pointless losses."

"Understood, Major!"

Leaving him with an "I'm counting on you," Tanya rushes over to the joint divisional headquarters of the Third and Thirty-Second Divisions and is stuck being shocked again the moment she arrives.

Aerial recon shows multiple enemy units made up of infantry divisions on the approach. Astonishingly, the Federation hasn't even bothered with heavy equipment and dares to raid the city with light units.

The serious issue, however, is that the defending side has only two divisions. Two undermanned divisions mid-retreat, that is. Considering they were practically cut off until the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion arrived, circumstances are awfully severe.

For one, it will be impossible to expect them to have the concentration of force to prevent approaches from all directions.

At this rate, we'll be defending from within the city. The majority of civilians have evacuated, but even so, it will be a huge hassle to weather the Federation Army's wave attacks while protecting the remnants.

On top of that, the Federation isn't a signatory on several international treaties. The law of war doesn't apply.

"…So our battalion is advancing to defend the city. We'll lure the enemy and engage in delaying combat on the outskirts of Tiegenhoff."

Thus, upon returning to her battalion, though frustrated, Tanya is explaining the unavoidable interception plan to Weiss, Serebryakov, and Grantz. Of course, it isn't as if they grasp their enemy's situation well enough to do terribly complicated maneuvers.

They'll advance and buy time as they get a handle on things. The modern mage battalion is taking on the role of the traditional light cavalry—seems about right.

"Are you sure? The General Staff instructed us to be the vanguard in the mobile battle. If we use up our energy on delaying combat here, the original plan will fall apart."

"We're not just talking about a breach—the whole advance base on our flank is about to get swallowed up. We have no choice but to intercept. I think the General Staff will understand." *Not to mention.* Tanya puts on a defiant smile. "We can also read this as the enemy sending in the rest of their reserves. If we get through this, all that's left will be to make short work of the Federation Army minus their backup."

"You've got grit, but this plan seems too intense."

"Whoa, whoa, Lieutenant Grantz. Have you forgotten the Rhine front? You cut loose against an entire corps, forget divisions! This isn't impossible. If you're going to try to get out of it by saying it's too intense, I don't mind sending you out against them on your own—how about it?"

"Commander, if you could please stop messing with me…"

"Sheesh, Lieutenant Grantz. Be a pain in the ass somewhere else, not on the battlefield. You need to learn some work ethic."

She pats dejected Grantz on the shoulder. Thanks to him, the rest of the unit finds some humor to chuckle at despite the fact that they're about to face the overwhelmingly huge Federation Army. It's good to have that bit of emotional

wiggle room. Especially for a difficult job, it's best to have the proper degree of tension paired with the proper degree of calm.

Panic will always cause mistakes.

"All right, battalion. As usual, we're going to get in the enemy's way. You learned this at school—the part about aggressively doing things your opponent hates." *After all.* Tanya grins before continuing, "I'm a good girl, you know. Naturally, I take the initiative to do what others hate."

"Ha-ha-ha-ha. You've hit the nail on the head, ma'am."

"Right? Okay, Captain Weiss. This operation is go. Our opponents in the Federation Army are more flexible than we thought. Now then, shall we see what they can do?"

The Communists are outstanding opponents.

So no carelessness, no extraneous thoughts—we've got to kill them, in order to never be bothered again and to make it safely to tomorrow morning.

These guys kill for their ideology. We can't lose to idiots who don't know the harm principle.

With renewed enthusiasm, the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion takes off and advances to meet the approaching Federation units. Before long, a unit that seems to be the vanguard comes into sight, but Tanya is incredibly confused.

"What the—? We're this close, and they still haven't sent up their aerial mage units?"

Her grumble sums up the reason.

When she turns to her adjutant, Serebryakov, who is on lookout duty, she gets a head shake in answer.

"Lieutenant, we aren't over Dacia, you know!"

"I understand what you mean, but Major…I'm not detecting anything. Are you picking anything up?"

"No," she replies, but she's so taken aback that the word lacks strength.

Still, Serebryakov, with an equally mystified look on her face, must feel the

same way. Regardless of how it would go if they were invading the enemy's rear areas, they're coming at them head-on with the added objective of recon-in-force.

Since it's recon-in-force, and the whole point is to see how the enemy handles them, they were prepared to battle Federation aerial mages, but this is what they get. Even Tanya didn't imagine there would be no one to meet them.

"We still have to be on guard against an ambush, but…are they trying to draw us in? This is the Federation Army! Are they really going to just take anti-surface attacks undefended like Dacia and its lack of air or mage forces?"

And they're the ones attacking. Tanya figured that given their meager heavy artillery, they would throw in all the air and mage forces they had to make up for it. That's how you would usually do it, and without control of the skies, this fight would be a one-sided massacre.

The whole reason Tanya decided to engage and sound out their strength was to figure out the scale and determination of their forces. But this is a waste. Even if they were to try to discern how the enemy is thinking, or if Tanya were to make her own judgments, no contact with enemy mages is potentially fatal to either objective.

There's no way to predict their tactics.

"We're flying here right out in the open! If we're not being intercepted, then… stay on your guard for ambushes and ready anti-surface attacks. Let's rule out the possibility of any enemies lying in wait."

All we can do is strike, cautiously but unhesitatingly.

Tanya considers a number of ways to deal with potential enemies and prepares herself to respond whether they're present or not.

"This is Fairy 01 with a notice for the battalion! Ready anti-surface attacks by company! Don't forget to watch your flanks. Support one another and keep a sharp eye on the air around you!"

This is sort of like playing dual-hammer Whack-a-Mole with one hand tied behind your back. *Here we go!* Tanya shouts and waves the hand holding her rifle to signal everyone to be ready to charge.

“Assume strike formation! Company members, follow me!”

The calmly gathered unit begins a steep dive on her orders. In preparation for the most dangerous part—withdrawing after the descent—Tanya has her unit behind her, essentially a wall of meat. *Having the commander go out front is great.* Tanya laughs as her altitude plummets, and when she reaches point-blank range—where she can see her enemies’ eyes—she seizes the chance she’s been waiting for.

The panicking enemy land army’s return fire is limited, so it’s easy for her to pick out the commander by watching the confused soldiers.

Her company’s members line up their gleaming barrels, wondering when they can fire their formula bullets—*Now? Now?*—and Tanya’s voice booms as if she’s delivering a message from heaven. “On me! Manifest your explosive formulas! Anti-surface attack—now!”

She computes the formula with her Type 97 and manifests it at the appropriate coordinates.

Loosed with perfect timing, the formula flies true, into the middle of the enemy infantry, literally blowing away an area that had just barely been maintaining discipline.

Tanya’s formula flashes and bangs, followed by a chain of explosion formulas fired by her company that pour down with model—you could even say quintessential—density. Given the secondary explosions and the flying shrapnel, she doesn’t need to ask the observing escorts to know that they’ve gotten some results… The enemies are crushed all too easily.

Soldiers flee in a panic on the ground, just like the Dacian soldiers who broke ranks and ran. *It really takes me back to that one-sided game in Dacia.*

But. There Tanya exercises self-restraint and shouts over the wireless that it’s time to pull out.

“Withdraw! Withdraw!”

“08 to 01. Their anti–air fire is limited! Requesting permission for a second strike!”

“Denied, 08! We’re not here to increase our gains! Prepare to withdraw!”

A proposal from her subordinate to achieve more comes flying in over the wireless.

It’s not bad to bask in the joy of kicking Commie ass in combat, but the battlefield wasn’t made for the pursuit of individual happiness.

“Major?!”

“Let’s hit them as much as we can! We should attack again!”

I understand how they feel, but we can’t go mixing up our objective and our method. Tanya has the wherewithal for a wry grin.

For whatever reason, the members of the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion really are warmongers. Once they spot an enemy, all they can think of is sinking their teeth into them and not letting go.

“Fairy 01 to all units! Prepare to withdraw! We’re withdrawing! Pull out with your company. Once we regroup, we’ll swing by the enemy lines. Make searching for and destroying mage forces your top priority!”

She shouts not to turn around as she looks out for anyone in pursuit, and when they regroup up in the air, she checks everyone’s gear.

Though everyone regrouped efficiently, Tanya finds Weiss keenly focused on the ground. So he thinks we should strike the Commies now, too, then.

Is he overly eager to fight? Marvelously brave? Either way, Weiss is a sensible person who finds it hard to object to his superior officer directly. This is one of those times a boss has to step in and be considerate. *Fine.* Tanya shrugs and discreetly calls him over.

“Vice Commander, are you one of the ones who thinks we should reopen fire?”

“…May I tell you what I think, Major? These will probably be the only units without air cover. If we don’t hit them now, our troops will suffer later.”

When Tanya asks Weiss directly if he is dissatisfied with withdrawing, he makes an argument. And what he says is correct. It’s not as if Tanya hasn’t considered that their opponent may have dropped the ball. And it’s because

she followed the same train of thought that the battalion is withdrawing.

"It could be a trap, couldn't it? These are Communists we're talking about. We can't rule out the possibility that while we're playing with the division in charge of getting beat up, they send in the real fighters."

Even the United States Navy used radar picket ships almost like targets for beatings; using them for the defense of the fleet was simply reality.

As long as the opponents are Communists, the possibility that they would use some random unit as a decoy and then attack with their real forces can't be ruled out.

"Okay, let's continue with the search-and-destroy procedure. I just hope it goes well."

With that, she tells her troops to follow and sneaks in repeated anti-surface attacks on what appears to be a Federation Army attack route.

This is what it's like to achieve great success—and against virtual swarms of enemies.

The battalion notices new enemy ground divisions seven times, but they never meet any enemy air or mage forces.

The plan was to search and destroy, to lure the enemy like a violent light trap, but though they rain punishment on the ground, the enemy never appears.

Upon reporting as much to the Third and Thirty-Second Divisions holed up in Tiegenhoff, Tanya spots what seems like a new batch of ground forces. *There are still more?* She's practically lost patience by now.

"More fresh troops? What are you even thinking at this point, you Federation jerks? You're going to expose all these combat resources as targets for anti-surface attacks? I don't get it."

If the Federation really doesn't care about losing eight divisions, then I wonder about the extent of their reserve forces. *How many are there, even in just this district we're covering?*

No. There, Tanya switches gears and whips her exhausted body into shape for another anti-surface strike.

As if it was her intention all along, she carries out a strike on the eighth division of the day in order to continue searching for mages.

The results are the same.

And the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion must have gotten used to the Federation's anti–air interception. They cruise for a few minutes on the edge of the guns' range, and when the Federation troops start to shoot in panic, the mages are calmly observing their targets.

Is this just how they do things?

While they exhibit unexpected self-control in not shooting blindly when the mages are out of their range, they have a tendency to shoot all they have the moment we just barely enter it. If you remember these kinds of peculiarities about enemy armies, they're surprisingly handy. Making a mental note, Tanya nods at Serebryakov's exhausted-sounding report that the battalion has regrouped and no one is missing.

"Nice work, Lieutenant Serebryakov. No losses, but how about fatigue?"

"…Major, we're pretty tired." Serebryakov almost never complains, but she admits now that she's exhausted.

Guess it's that time. Tanya is forced to accept that even her battalion has limits when it comes to their ability to sustain tenacious combat.

Since they're performing recon-in-force, they're carrying weapons and ammo under the assumption there will be combat. And it's an aerial mage unit. With their computation orbs alone, they have a number of anti–surface strike options—they don't even have to use formula bullets. She's been coaxing the limits further up as they continue fighting, but…her subordinates really are nearing dangerous levels of exhaustion, not to mention running out of ammo.

"What was that division just now?"

"As expected, it was a new one, not one of the seven we've already hit… Guess we should take the air fleet's reconnaissance seriously."

"So this is eight divisions?"

Talking with Serebryakov and facing the truth that the estimate of eight

divisions can't go any lower, Tanya, being Tanya, still has to murmur, "I don't get it, though. I wonder where their air forces are. The question's giving me a headache."

"…I beg your pardon, Major, but if they haven't come out after we've attacked them this much, maybe… Maybe…there aren't any here?"

Serebryakov's remark leaves Tanya dazed for a moment. *The Federation Army has no aerial mage forces?*

She laughs it off as impossible. "But Lieutenant Serebryakov, that can't be true. They're the ones who went on the offensive.

"And besides…," Tanya continues to explain. Unlike the premodern Dacian army, the Federation Army may be Communist, but the Federation still manages to count as a major power. Regardless of the quality, it does employ aerial forces, and there have been reports from various units that they were fairly tough.

"Have you read the combat reports from the air fleet deployed in the east? They say they're currently battling it out for air superiority with Federation air forces, including mage units!"

"Yes, Major. But that means the Federation Army should understand the importance of air superiority."

That's true. Tanya nods. Though the war is going in their favor, she hears that the aerial battles are difficult. After all, many of the imperial mages are stationed at important points in the west, having a staring contest with the Commonwealth. Not that there are so few in the east, but…having to deal with the entire Federation Army head-on is intense.

"They've left us alone all this time… I mean, I tried to think of various perspectives the Federation might have, but I can't come up with any reasons for this besides an absence of forces."

"…That makes sense, but… No, you're right."

In that case, I guess I misread the situation. Tanya regrets having such generous expectations. *Instead of worrying about searching, we should have concentrated our efforts on anti-surface strikes.*

Hindsight is twenty-twenty, but it bothers her that she missed that chance.

Even if they were to restart the attacks now, her unit is utterly spent, and that's an optimistic description. If she pushes them too hard, they won't be able to exhibit their full capabilities even if restarting is possible.

Tanya's logical calculation of pros and cons flatly rejects pointlessly thrusting elites such as the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion into a mass of enemies as a meaningless sacrifice. It's a terrible shame, but they need rest and supplies.

"We'll withdraw… Ask Tiegenhoff for rest and supplies. We'll leave the job of attacking the ground forces to another mage unit. Oh," Tanya continues. "Tell Major Hofen of the 213th Mage Battalion we decline his offer of drinks."

Serebryakov, wincing, and Grantz, looking disappointed, acknowledge the orders.

Grantz seems to really have a thing for booze. That's no good, muses Tanya. Overindulging in alcohol is immoral, and although it's a matter of personal preference, Tanya is about to tell him that maybe he should pay a bit more attention to his health when she catches herself in shock.

Was I about to interfere with someone's personal freedoms?

…And on dubious moral grounds?

MARCH 29, UNIFIED YEAR 1926, IMPERIAL ARMY GENERAL STAFF OFFICE

At about the same time Major Tanya von Degurechaff was having some internal conflict about her mental status and returning her unit back to Tiegenhoff…Lieutenant General von Rudersdorf was knocked out of bed with the news that Federation forces were approaching Tiegenhoff. The following report, that the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion had intercepted and had its way with them, made him smile.

The mages gave a thorough beating to eight enemy divisions. With just the two divisions holed up in Tiegenhoff, the city might have fallen…but apparently, in the end, Degurechaff had employed quintessential mobile defense.

She had gone so far as to send a report apologizing for acting to lure out the enemy mages and realizing too late that there weren't any, but…that was just

her being a perfectionist. Rudersdorf even chuckled at the bizarre apology.

She had taken on a massive army, upset them so much they would have trouble advancing, and proven the absence of enemy mage forces. As a result, the Federation Army's many available reserves were being held up.

"Splendid! Magnificent!"

He was sure, then, that they would be victorious.

We've won.

There was only one thing to do now.

Send in a torrent of soldiers, all the men the Empire could move, to hit the exhausted Federation Army's enervated weak points.

[chapter]

IV

Reorganization

Our target is Communism!
—Federation Army Artillery Shooting Range slogan

Our target is bureaucracy!
—Imperial Army General Staff Shooting Range slogan

[chapter] IV Reorganization

APRIL 10, UNIFIED YEAR 1926, GENERAL STAFF OFFICE

Colonel von Lergen was proud of his work as a General Staff officer. As a soldier, as an officer, and most of all as a human being, he had no doubt that faithfully carrying out his assignments was his duty. Perhaps that was the problem.

With a gloomy face, he mentally sighed for the umpteenth time—he had lost count—that day. *This must be how it feels to want to escape to alcohol and cigarettes if it was allowed.* It seemed he wasn't the only one who felt that way.

The details were truly absurd.

The military was being restrained by political request. Though he knew it was a farce, he found himself in the position of having to force several high-ranking officers to become clowns.

People have a tendency to misuse these inquiries, thought Lergen, heaving a sigh as he took the seat prepared for him. He glanced around the room and noticed that the faces to his left and right were all nearly twitching. From their expressions, it was obvious that everyone was reluctant to be there.

Both high-ranking officers of the General Staff and staffers in charge of day-to-day business were in attendance. There may have been a lull on the eastern front, but that didn't mean their time was infinite. Lergen understood their irritation at having to squander it on such a foolish endeavor.

That must have been why. The wooden mallet signaling the beginning of the meeting sounded almost like a call to get it over with.

"Everyone's here? Good, let's begin."

It was Lieutenant General von Zettour himself calling the meeting to order, after all. Maybe that's how he meant it.

"All right, Major von Degurechaff. This court of inquiry will hereby investigate your recent behavior in order to clear up Supreme Command's questions."

And Lergen couldn't blame him. Everything about this inquiry was irregular. The one who carried out the attack on the Federation capital, what would normally be considered a successful operation, was being reprimanded, albeit in a roundabout way.

The army's logic said her actions were forgivable. Which was why originally, the entire General Staff vehemently opposed this meeting. The reason it got pushed through was probably that the civil officials who spent all their time in the rear didn't understand what war was.

Since Zettour was presiding, the verdict was sure to be innocent. The difficult-to-bridge gap among the General Staff, the government, and the politicians was clear, both from the fact that the nonurgent matter was viewed as problematic, regardless, and that a need for an inquiry was felt at all, if only to have a story ready.

Well, it makes sense. Lergen accepted the situation with a sigh.

The sole cause of this issue was that Major von Degurechaff's actions could be seen as overkill.

From a military perspective, attacking the enemy capital was logical. Any staff officer could nod in approval of the incredibly significant contribution she had made. But when he heard that some of her conduct would invite controversy from a political perspective, Lergen could understand that reasoning as well.

If the aim was to pulverize the enemy's honor, then attacking symbols of their country was difficult to avoid. The politicians probably thought it would just provoke the Federation… They were missing the point, but neither could he deny what they were saying.

"In this inquiry, Major von Degurechaff, the allegations against you are that you used excessive military force in an urban area and took military actions at your own discretion. Do you admit the truth of these things?"

The criticisms of going too far and doing so independently, as Zettour had just read in a skillful monotone, were based on reason.

Most of the officers present, however, would promptly dismiss that reasoning as distorted. Lergen himself was confident that the strict orders regarding Degurechaff's innocence from his direct superior, Lieutenant General von Rudersdorf, would be carried out.

The attack on Moskva was necessary. That was Lergen's firm belief.

"General. I am both shocked at the two allegations you've presented to me and adamant that they are not true—I swear it."

"That's fine. Then, Major von Degurechaff, let's clear up the allegation of acting on your own discretion first."

Everyone believed that although the operation conducted by the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion as a threat and a distraction ended up being a long-range raid that was more threatening and distracting than anticipated, it did not deviate in a significant way from what you would call harassment attacks.

Even if she did act on her own, all the General Staff officers would say it was within the scope of her orders. Why? Because she had reached the goals of those orders. This was what you called thinking on your toes, not disobedience.

Which must have been why Zettour nodded as if he understood.

"Prosecutor, get going." Unlike the calm, familiar voice he'd been using up until now, his tone abruptly switched to harsh and forceful.

Well, he didn't need to hide it. The moment he addressed the army's judicial officer in such a stern tone, his true feelings were clear. After all, he himself had been involved in establishing the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion. Even in this inquiry, if the General Staff hadn't forced him to take it on the pretext that he was the one responsible for her, he never would have been given the presiding role.

"Oh, Prosecutor, before I forget, I have a warning. No observers are allowed to leave their seats during the proceedings. If Major von Degurechaff's honor is in question, then as an Imperial Army officer, I prefer that all officers are present to witness the discussion. I'm sure you know this, but," he continued,

and what he said next was, from the view of the army judicial officers, quite difficult, “personally, if need be or anyone would like to, I’m fine with making the logs public. All right. You may begin.”

His method was extraordinarily thorough. Before the judicial officer, representing the will of Supreme Command, could even open his mouth, Zettour got in a terribly fierce opening jab.

It proved how against the inquiry Zettour and all the General Staff officers were, but at the same time, regardless of their opposition, the meeting was still being held.

By clearing Degurechaff’s name, they would protect everyone else’s from being disparaged as well. Even if they had ultimately overcome the General Staff and Eastern Army Group’s resistance for that purpose, they still felt the Supreme Command was being too cutthroat in its treatment of Degurechaff.

“Then I’ll start with the matter of her independent actions…”

And then, looking at the list of charges the judicial officer presented one by one, Lergen had to sigh. *I knew it.*

The tension in the meeting room was the officers’ anger. It was easy to guess the target of the inquiry felt the same way, though she maintained a sober, sincere exterior.

“…This is giving me a headache.”

To Lergen, it was self-evident that the conclusion reached today would not reproach Degurechaff. How many people were there who could withstand the gazes of Zettour as he presided and the others, and strip her of her honor and qualifications as an officer?

The head of the inquiry committee was nominally the head of the General Staff. Zettour, as the one leading the inquiry in practical terms, was a critical member of the General Staff.

It had to be obvious that everyone felt the inquiry was a farce. Zettour, probably in the spirit of protest, began eyeing his nearby cigarette case while the judicial officer was talking and ended up borrowing a light from someone next to him.

The majority of the officers thought the inquiry was absurd. While they sneered at every word the judicial officer said, they nodded at everything the defense said. There were even some who went so far as to applaud.

When Zettour dutifully banged the mallet for order, the comedy was unavoidable.

That was why—why Lergen had to grumble.

"…Couldn't we have avoided this? This whole inquiry?"

He was caught in the throes of shameful regret.

There had been multiple hints of the danger. There was a severe disparity in awareness between the army and the rear. He had been convinced he was being careful.

He had done his utmost to exchange opinions on the war situation with those in the rear and keep abreast of both the army's position and circumstances on the home front. Those might have been abnormal activities for a staff officer in Operations, but he strongly believed that a unified rear was necessary in order to take military action smoothly. And when the attacking Federation Army was annihilated in an unconventional maneuver battle, he had proudly drunk to the clearly functioning coordination between the front lines and the home front.

And then this. *How did we get here?* Why did they even need this defense's fierce rebuttal and the overwhelmed judicial officer? He could only find it extremely regrettable that they couldn't have avoided this inquiry. *All it's doing is exacerbating the discord.*

After all, just watching, he knew what the outcome would be. Degurechaff answered each insulting question matter-of-factly, suppressing her emotions. The moderator was neutral in name only and persistently hurled sarcasm at the prosecutor. The defense didn't even try to hide their determination to oppose this unjust attack on an officer's honor.

Regarding her solo actions, the General Staff officers proclaimed for the record that they had no problem. And about the excessiveness of the attack, the defense ended up laying tenaciously into the prosecution using the precedent of strikes on military facilities as well as quotes from army memos.

The following even made it into the record: “She avoided civilian facilities. We should officially praise her hard work in limiting the attack only to party or military facilities.”

When the badly sweating prosecutor leaned over his desk and his counterarguments trailed off, Zettour finally brought the farce to an end.

“Well, it seems like we’ve run out of things to debate.” After making a formal remark that everyone had presented their arguments in detail, he turned to the main topic at hand. “This inquiry reaches the following conclusion. Major Tanya von Degurechaff, we regard the allegations against you as refuted.”

Zettour gave the verdict in a tone that said, *The charade is over*, and the officers nodded as if that was only natural… Was the reason every last one of them was wearing the Field Service Badges given for combat experience pinned to their uniforms to tacitly express the fury of the front lines?

“Major Tanya von Degurechaff, your name has been cleared. I hereby bring this inquiry to a close. May you continue to fight in the fiercest battles and devote yourself to our cause. That is all.”

For now, the matter had come to a close.

But as he left the meeting room to attend to his next tasks, Lergen was feeling horribly weighed down. All he could think was how wrong he had been.

He never thought Supreme Command, especially Foreign Intelligence and the cabinet, would not only express anger about the attack on Moskva and Major von Degurechaff’s other military actions but also have such a disconnect with the army that they would demand an inquiry.

…When he received the first report, he’d screamed that he couldn’t believe it. Once he’d calmed down, he finally started to understand the nature of the problem. He understood that Degurechaff was apt to carry out unyielding plans in order to get results. Sometimes he worried about it. But not like that.

He may have had reason to be anxious, but it was her means—he had no thought of reproaching her for her ends. Actually, apart from his qualms about her character, she was outstanding. You could even call her a model Imperial Army officer.

"…Did I just get used to her way of thinking somewhere along the line? Does that mean…she's right?"

If we can hit Moskva, we can pull at least some of the Federation troops out of the eastern border fight.

"In a way, she was trying to re-create what happened on the Rhine front… And all you can say is that she did a great job. Thanks to her attack, many of the aerial forces on the eastern front were pulled back. It's a magnificent feat, and there's nothing problematic about it."

…Of course, he had to add that this was a soldier's perspective.

By coming from a distance and raiding important facilities and bases in their country, they forced the enemy to strengthen their defenses in the rear, which resulted in their being able to send only limited resources to the forward-most lines. That's a harassment attack.

From the Imperial Army's point of view, by demonstrating that they could attack Moskva at any time, they pinned Federation troops to the vicinity of the capital.

He never in a million years thought that authorizing Degurechaff's attack plan would cause so much trouble, so he couldn't help but be puzzled by the internal arguments.

Then once he recovered from his confusion and understood, he felt hopeless. Probably the Empire's rear was controlled by prewar logic. They weren't changing their minds according to the reports that came in the newspapers or over the radio, they were simply making calls using prewar logic!

What spectacular cross-purposes they were at in this debate.

War is something soldiers fight through with the support of the home front. But of late, war had become the army's jurisdiction, and the rear was indifferent to the army's situation.

To put it nicely, perhaps they trust the army… To be less generous, they simply don't understand.

"Either way, something must be done or we'll be in trouble…" He continued,

“No, first comes the matter of Major von Degurechaff.”

Lergen casually switched gears and refocused on the task before him.

At present, the court of inquiry had looked into Degurechaff’s past and showed there were no problems. As a result, various papers were handed out to members of the court, and they were notified that Degurechaff’s acquittal would be noted in the public record.

With that, it would be official that she had never done anything problematic. The army had denied the rear and the authority of Supreme High Command. If the home front and the front lines had to clash, Lergen regretted that he couldn’t have had it happen in a more subdued way.

But at the same time, he had to be “considerate” and think of where to send Degurechaff and her battalion next. They wanted to ask her opinion, so since he and she were acquaintances, the job fell to him. *Well, it’s a good opportunity.* At the very least, it was definitely a chance to understand her and get a handle on her intentions.

It was when he stepped into the room at the General Staff Office where he’d had her wait for him that he finally realized he should have brought Major Uger with him. *Maybe even someone who’s irritated from an unwanted inquiry would relax somewhat if a classmate from war college was there.*

But he was already running late.

Degurechaff stood and gave him a precise textbook salute. He winced as he returned her salute.

“I guess it’s been a while. Sorry for the wait, Major.”

She was much calmer than he expected as she replied that she didn’t mind.

“Great, then let’s talk about where you’ll be stationed. Any requests?”

Her reply, however, was so shocking, he nearly fell over backward.

“You’d like to do something besides frontline duty… Is that correct?”

“Yes, sir,” she responded matter-of-factly with no hesitation or scheming in her eyes. *The war is hot and Major von Degurechaff…doesn’t want to serve on the front lines?* If she were a new recruit or a replacement, he could reprove her

for being scared, but if a tough-as-nails commander who charged the Republican Army's headquarters on the Rhine front was avoiding the front, that was a different story.

Thus, confirming her intention was simply administrative procedure—his opening move, if you would.

"All right. Then, Major, I have a question I'd like you to answer."

"Yes, sir."

"Feel free to consider this a personal conversation. Major von Degurechaff, why would a soldier as outstanding as yourself want to avoid the forward-most line?"

He wanted to know just one thing: the reason. His own interest also lay there. No, you could say it lay only there.

So, though he wasn't sure how to go about it, he had to ask.

It was a perfectly natural question to have: Why would she, feared as Rusted Silver, choose service in the rear?

"To put it exceedingly briefly, frontline duty is annoying. I'm requesting rear service for entirely personal reasons. Also, I meant to say so sooner, but I have a suggestion about who my successor should be—the new commander of the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion, I mean. I would like to recommend my second-in-command, Captain Weiss."

The news went around the General Staff Office in a flash. Major Tanya von Degurechaff, commander of the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion, earnestly desired to work in the rear! The reason? The inquiry over her achievements in battle used up the last of her patience.

For a moment, everyone could understand—*Makes sense*—but to those who worked with her, it was no joke. At the head of that pack was General von Zettour.

When he received the report from Lergen and flew into the colonel's office looking for her, the first words out of his mouth were firm. "…Let's say what we mean. What…is this?"

In his hand was the memo Lergen had dashed off just a few moments ago regarding Degurechaff's assignment preference.

When she looked at him unfazed, he hurled the report, where it said her inclination was toward rear service, to the floor.

His demeanor changed so fast, any normal officer would have gone deathly pale. As if expressing Zettour's anger, the bundle of papers broke apart as it slammed into the floor, and the sheets scattered in a fluttering mess. This was probably the first exhibition of such rage Lergen had seen since joining the army.

Could the sergeants attached to training platoons even manifest such striking fury? Frankly, he didn't know it was possible for someone to get so mad.

But.

Anyone who noticed what happened next was amazed… Degurechaff was staring at him, dumbfounded. Not calmly, not furious at being denied, but dumbfounded.

That…that combat doll. That human in a monster's clothing. She looks shocked.

"Answer me, Major. What possible reason do you have to abandon your duty?"

"General, I don't understand the intent of your question."

The question's intent was clear. Even if the rear was interfering, this behavior was far beyond the code of the permissible. What purpose could she have for betraying the expectations of the army and the General Staff, then launching such a bullish verbal attack on top of it all?

"And I'll ask this, too: You not only want to avoid combat duty in the east but in the west and at home as well?"

"Yes, General. I intend to continue to give my all in the course of duty. Please allow me to say that I'm surprised you would doubt me enough to say I would abandon it."

"Sorry, so that's what you meant when you said you couldn't understand?"

“Yes, sir, that’s right. I don’t understand.”

You have no explanation of why you would request something that is practically equivalent to abandoning your duty? Even Lergen could understand the tacit intent of Zettour’s question.

And yet…

And yet.

She doesn’t get it?

Degurechaff’s answer was so unexpected that for a moment, everyone froze in spite of themselves. *What is she saying?* The being before his eyes suddenly seemed like an incomprehensible monster. *What just came out of her mouth?*

“…What? You don’t understand? It’s just what I asked, Major. Why would an elite like you, with an alias, volunteer for rear service?”

Yes.

Yes, that was exactly it.

Major Tanya von Degurechaff’s career as a mage was practically equivalent to her life. In that way, she had spent half her existence with the army and most of that in the gambling den of the forward-most lines.

And now she’s trying to evade combat service?

What Zettour was doing was less like asking what caused her mind to change and more like grilling her, and he wouldn’t stop. Maybe that was why… Degurechaff, seeming resigned at last, mumbled her true feelings.

“General, the orders I received were to attack the Federation capital. All I did was follow the General Staff’s orders. I followed the orders and got an inquiry opened on me, so it seems to me like people doubt my very capacity to obey.”

“Are you being serious?”

“Of course, General.”

Her reply on that point was childlike, in the sense that she was so assured of her own correctness, but from a soldier’s perspective, it was an incredibly suspicious thing to say.

Just looking at her, she seemed like a kid who had run her first errand, chest puffed proudly out. It was almost as if she was saying, *I went and bought the potatoes you asked for!*

…The vibe felt very odd in this context.

"So you're saying you made this remark because you followed the General Staff's orders, but the result was a court of inquiry?"

If Lergen looked closely, he could see Zettour's temples pulsing. *Mm, you don't even have to look.* He winced. No one would want to stand before the general like he was now. His rage was rolling off his entire body.

"Yes, General. I carried out the distraction mission to support the main lines in the east. But I feel like if any officer has doubts about even one of my military actions, then maybe I lack the aptitude to serve in operations."

"…Do you not realize what you're saying? Or are you playing with fire in full comprehension of what you're doing?"

This must be what it feels like to watch someone play with matches near a powder magazine. To nervously wonder when it will explode. Less like butterflies in the chest, more like a stabbing pain in the gut.

Lergen could only feel sorry for himself that he happened to be witness to this confrontation. If he was lucky, he would drink whiskey—stronger than wine—and forget it.

…If forgetting it would even be possible.

"No, General. I'm a soldier, and as such, I believe only in following the code of conduct."

The major answered as if she didn't know what she was being asked, as if she hadn't understood what the question was getting at. And she didn't look guilty at all. Her face was a mask of confusion at getting the third degree from her superior officer.

"Major, is there anything else you'd like to say in response to that question?" the general replied.

He had poured so much anger into his expression that it seemed like no

individual would ever be able to top such a display of the emotion.

If Lergen had had a choice, he wouldn't have been within a hundred meters of this scene.

Is that really what's on my mind right now?

…Lergen sensed that in some corner of his brain he was having escapist thoughts, but he couldn't make them stop.

"General, I've been saying this for a while now, but I don't have anything else to add."

"…Major, I value your eye for strategy."

With a marvelous show of self-restraint, Zettour just barely managed to keep from exploding—with a rage that would have melted an iron will. Historians should praise him in posterity for that moment.

"I'm honored, General." And surely historians would also make note of Degurechaff's even reply.

Let's be honest. Lergen had never felt successful verbal communication to be such a wonder until this moment. What Degurechaff meant with that remark was outside the realm of his comprehension.

You're acting like a child trying to get her way, he nearly complained, but then it hit him.

…A child trying to get her way?

He didn't think it could be possible, but when he glanced over at the major, her cheeks were puffed out in frustration. She calmly faced Zettour, but the difference in their height meant she was looking up at him.

It was easy to forget, but Major von Degurechaff was…little.

And she didn't have much life experience, so if the military made up the majority of it, and then this inquiry questioned her suitability for her role… *Could she be going through a rebellious phase?*

You've got to be kidding me. Lergen suddenly felt very confused.

"Tell me, in detail, what you believe was the military significance of the raid

on Moskva.”

“Yes, sir. It was the optimal way to support the troops on the main lines in the east. I also take pride in it as a step toward exhausting the Federation.”

It was easy to guess how Degurechaff felt as she confronted Zettour with that restrained response and magnificently expressionless face.

Actually, her declaration of pride was probably genuine. But that was precisely why Lergen suddenly wanted a painkiller.

You’re proud of it but simultaneously pouting because you’re being criticized for it?

That. *If the monster leading an aerial mage battalion is a soldier with this mentality, that’s awfully ironic. She has the Silver Wings with Oak. Her achievements virtually require her to be described as a hero.*

But her alias White Silver is perhaps too far from the truth. Rather than the elegant White Silver, she’s a terrible foe corroded by splattered blood and worthy of the name Rusted Silver.

That notwithstanding, inside she’s a child whining that she doesn’t want to go to the front lines because someone got mad at her?

“All right. I understand how you feel.”

“I’m honored.”

Lergen had no idea what to say anymore, but before his eyes, Zettour seemed to have understood something and abruptly changed the subject.

Unable to grasp the context, Lergen had no choice but to observe in silence.

“Now then, about your request for rear service…I’d like to first confirm a few things about your intentions.”

In reply to Degurechaff’s “Yes, sir,” Zettour nodded like a friendly old man.

“I’d like to ask if you think an early peace is possible.”

“It’s out of the question. I believe it’s pointless to even consider.”

“Huh?” It slipped out before Lergen realized.

“And why do you think that?”

“First, this premise: There is no logical reason for the Federation to have started this war with us, as far as we know. Yes?”

“Go on.”

Lergen was left by the wayside at a loss, unable to read where the conversation was going, while Degurechaff and Zettour continued the discussion between themselves with their own understanding.

But even Lergen could grasp what Degurechaff had pointed out about the Federation—he had a hard time understanding why it had opened hostilities, too. If the Federation wanted to hit the Empire, it should have come out swinging earlier. There was no explanation for why, if it had the will to fight, it had stood by until the Empire defeated the Republic.

It should be noted that both powers took pains to refrain from accidental clashes at the border. That was why, when the first report came in, all the staff officers at the General Staff Office, including Lergen, had shouted, *Why?!* in confusion.

“There is no logical reason, General. At least, *not that we know of*.”

“Not that we know of?”

“Yes, General. Regardless of how our research has progressed, there must be some reason we don’t know.”

Actually, as far as Lergen knew, research hadn’t been progressing. Understandably, dealing with the invasion was being prioritized over figuring out the reason for it. And in the General Staff, a full investigation had been put off because they were short on manpower. Under the urgent circumstances of an enemy closing in, they were forced to choose pouring all their might into repelling them rather than leisurely analyzing their motives.

“Therefore, we shouldn’t negotiate using the existing paradigm. Until we grasp the paradigm, it’s unclear if it’s even possible to negotiate with that country.”

“Some think if we get through the first attack, we’ll find a way…”

“…With all due respect, a cease-fire would mean death to the Federation. Why? Because in a state with a political system like the Federation’s, the government won’t accept that failure.”

Lergen furrowed his brow at the direction of a conversation he thought was going to be a rabbit trail… At this rate, it was more like a strategy meeting and on an extremely realistic level.

Degurechaff led them to an obvious answer. With this lack of clarity, it was impossible to negotiate. And more importantly, if they didn’t know the root reason, it was impossible to investigate.

And Zettour nodded with a “Right,” as if he understood everything.

“Therefore, negotiating an early cease-fire is a total fantasy. I would guess that even small-scale negotiations on the front lines will be extremely difficult.”

“Your point about the difficulty makes sense. But don’t you think it’s your Moskva strike that rendered negotiations impossible due to their loss of face?”

Virtually all their work had been obliterated by that attack.

Strictly speaking, the move had been a military necessity. You could say that for the defense of the east, it was an indispensable action. But was the price perhaps too high?

Now that its honor had been kicked, trampled, and minced, the Federation couldn’t back down. And with the Empire’s fighting spirit running so high, the army wouldn’t be able to quit the war so easily. The public was eager for victory and further results.

Wasn’t the trigger for all that Degurechaff’s action? Surely, at least part of the responsibility lay with her.

“No, General.”

Zettour’s question, regardless of the logic of it, was one that Lergen had been somewhat curious about as well, on an emotional level.

Should it be described as some sort of warning from his instincts, which knew the extent of Degurechaff’s abnormality? *Her response is going to be garbage.* Strangely, Lergen was able to foresee that much.

“Hmm… Then tell me, Major, what do you think?”

For a moment, he couldn’t help but feel like Zettour’s question was like a hand reaching for Pandora’s box. It was an emotion virtually unknown to him. He wanted to ask so badly, and yet his emotions shrieked not to. He thought that he’d been ready to fight for his nation ever since joining the army.

“General, the Federation sees the world in a different way than we do. It’s a nation with a tendency to be exclusionary and paranoid.”

“…And?”

“So the values governing its conduct probably emphasize survival. It’s scared of the Empire. Or scared of being attacked. If you hypothesize that it took the initiative to attack for that reason, the choice begins to make sense.”

But what’s this? Degurechaff’s giving a calm reply before his eyes?

Lergen did his best to organize the disordered thoughts in his muddled mind. *She is Major Tanya von Degurechaff. She’s a magic officer and has also completed her education as a General Staff officer.*

And she’s a child.

…Something was very strange. Yet, there she was, as if it was the most natural thing in the world. *Is this the final form of the nation’s ideal soldier?*

The angle of her analysis was clear. At least, her reputation within the General Staff as something of an expert on the Federation’s unique outlook was already established.

Or perhaps “as a strategist” was more accurate? She had overwhelmed the General Staff with her new concept of total war and its accompanying logistical concerns. Her strategy to bleed out enemy nations via attrition, sacrificing both honor and humanity, was horrifically effective.

Watching the annihilation of the Republican field army and the subsequent collapse of the Republican military that went along with the bloodletting had rendered him speechless. Her success with decapitation tactics and her performance on the Rhine front proved that she was not only a skilled strategist but an outstanding field officer as well.

“To go further—emotions. General, the main cause of their actions is fear. Military actions are no exception.”

This officer who could read the battlefield like no other… This talent bowling over the geniuses of the army with her keen eye for strategy…

Even if she’s within reach of the truth, what do we do then?

“What are you trying to say?”

“General, the existence of the Empire is cause for a fear the Federation can no longer tolerate. If that is the case, the Federation will only lay down its swords when we are destroyed.”

Zettour smiled wryly. *I see. Fear?* He was silent for a moment, apparently choosing his words carefully, and then asked a question. “I understand for the most part, but I have a question.”

“What might that be, sir?”

“It’s simple. Major, why didn’t the Federation stab us in the back while we were fighting the Republic? If the Empire is the object of their fear, what were they waiting for?”

Lergen nodded, wondering the same thing. But Degurechaff smiled as if to say, *That’s a very good question, but…*

“You’re quite right; however, that’s a rational decision in the military realm. General, what if the Federation was frightened of the immensely powerful Empire’s intention of going so far as to destroy the Republic?”

…The significance of that is, in other words…

When Lergen’s thoughts hit on a terrible possibility he couldn’t deny, he finally had to interject. “General von Zettour, please forgive an interruption.”

When his superior answered that he didn’t mind, Lergen took advantage of his chance to ask a question.

“You mean to say that the Federation was so scared to fight us that they stood by while we destroyed the Republic and then couldn’t bear the idea of facing a giant Empire on their own?! What kind of absurd logic is that?!”

“Colonel von Lergen, this is all just a hypothesis. But as I see it, this was inevitable. They’re desperate to survive. I would guess that they’re determined to fight until either the Federation or the Empire falls.”

“So there’s no way to peacefully come to terms?”

A huge war. A huge war that will only get bigger.

The question of why the major before his eyes had an innocent smile on her face crossed his mind.

How can she smile? How can she smile at me so calmly?

“No, Colonel.”

It was almost as if she was saying, *I’m glad you see things my way.*

He wanted to believe it wasn’t true, but at the same time, the thought that it was welled up from somewhere within him.

A huge, horrific war. Will we create another hell like the Rhine?

“Achieving peace at all seems impossible. Either we collapse or they do—one or the other.”

“A war of annihilation?”

“Isn’t that what total war is in the first place?” she answered without pause, much less uncertainty.

In her assured, total conviction was that manner particular to people who are stating something self-evident. *If she can reply that confidently, then…I misread her.*

She has to be either a hopelessly shortsighted idiot or a lunatic fit for this insane reality.

Having thought as much, Lergen grew truly afraid.

Reality is mad. Which means in this crazy reality, she…

She, crazy Major von Degurechaff, might be the rational one.

In other words, she understands the twisted logic in this deranged world?

Perhaps Zettour is able to control his anger because he has considered that.

Having reached that conclusion, Lergen braced himself and regained the resolve to consider her a rational person.

He abandoned his preconceptions and simply tried to understand.

Of course, he was only one person, so he didn't really think he could fully comprehend it.

Even so. His ability to understand this world where every piece of the paradigm was different can be said to be a successful manifestation of his intellectual flexibility as a high-ranking imperial soldier.

Ohhh, ohhh, oh God. How could you let this happen?

"Major von Degurechaff, you say you wish to serve in the rear knowing that we're currently in a crisis. I'll ask you directly: What do you want to do?"

"Military might has to be used properly. I want to make sure that when we need ways to contribute to such proper usage, we have them."

"…I'll give you two months."

"Sir?"

"I'll station you on the western front on my authority. You won't be completely in the rear, but on the western lines, you'll be able to work on combat skill research and apply your energies to investigating the lessons we've learned in action. After two months, write up whatever's on your mind and turn it in to the Strategic Research Office. We'll decide your assignment based on that."

Ah, damn, thought Lergen as he read his superior's intentions. *Even if her eye for strategy is deranged, it's solid. So he wants to know that for sure? He must mean to see how this lunatic analyzes this insane world and decide what to do with her based on that.*

APRIL 3, UNIFIED YEAR 1926, SOMEWHERE IN THE FEDERATION CAPITAL, MOSKVA

At a meeting in a bunker far below Moskva, the distinguished members of the true core of the party gathered. *But*, perhaps it should be said, despite the

power and authority these *nomenklatura*[13] possessed, all but one of them were white as a sheet in the face, just sitting in terror.

A major incident in their one-party regime had dragged the honor of their great dictator and the party members through the mud. Moskva getting attacked directly would most certainly…not blow over like a mere storm.

And what's more, their westwardly attacking army's Main Attack Group was met with an imperial counterattack, took heavy losses, and was falling apart. With the Federation Army at the Imperial Army's mercy in that way, a moderate political solution was virtually hopeless.

Everyone still remembered. They remembered how many of their colleagues and predecessors were forced to "confess" to "counterrevolutionary crimes" and fell victim to the Great Purge several years ago.

When the incident was this big, someone was definitely going to be made a scapegoat, whether they had erred or not.

There were more than a couple from the top of the Federation Army and national defense matters who had bid their families good-bye before coming.

For those in attendance, who were feeling a mix of grim determination and resignation, the presence of the furious Comrade General Secretary Josef was rightly enough to bring back their nightmares. But what was even more terrifying was the presence of the grinning purge enforcer, Loria.

Just the sight of that bloodthirsty duo made it easy to jump to the conclusion that they were going to die this day, so the atmosphere was frigid.

"Comrade General Secretary, permission to speak, please."

"Yes, what is it?"

"An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. We must show the scoundrels who caused this situation the fury of the people."

Just as someone bemoaned their fate with a groan…

When everyone was prepared for the traitors and culprits to be reprimanded, Loria said something no one expected.

"So what we need is solidarity of the people."

"…Comrade Loria, did you just say 'solidarity'?"

"Yes, Comrade General Secretary. Our motherland is in crisis. As such, we must unite. We are one nation, one party, and we must fight for one victory."

Everyone was sure he would say that there had to be a purge, or punishment, or executions, or disposal. When they were all scared stiff that they would be blamed…

Comrade Loria continued with a proposal no one had anticipated. His remarks surprised even General Secretary Josef.

"We're in pursuit of an idea. Perhaps, then, we should give our dishonored former comrades, who should be pursuing it with us, a chance to atone. We must overcome our petty differences and face this crisis for the sake of our motherland, our mother party, and the party's triumph."

As Loria of the Commissariat for Internal Affairs continued, everyone was astonished.

"An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Therefore, I recommend that in order to reach that goal, we use the mages currently interned for their offenses against the previous regime. We should also reinstate the imprisoned officers and give them back their commands."

For a moment, the remarks boggled even the general secretary's mind. It was neither a purge nor a judgment on those responsible but an actually constructive proposal. From Loria, of all people!

The man whose fellow political commissar secretly thought him a brute—*that* Loria—made a constructive proposal. Several people reacted with a hint surprise despite being in public because it was just so out of the blue.

If—if they weren't in the presence of Comrade General Secretary Josef, who would declare even averting one's eyes a treasonous sentiment, everyone would have turned to the person next to them with a look that said, *Has he lost his mind?* That's how strange and shocking this was.

"…Comrade Loria, do you mean that? They're counterrevolutionaries!"

The response from the party member who just barely managed to hide his

mental distress was an ideological one. At least, he didn't want anyone to think he was clamming up because he was plotting something. And thankfully, for the other attendees, his remarks provided a jumpstart for their own brains.

"Think about it, though. We'll just have the counterrevolutionaries kill one another. Of course, the people's resources are ours to use, but we can reduce our bullet consumption this way."

But Comrade Loria's answer was articulate. It was a clear idea presented without a moment's hesitation.

They honestly couldn't sense any reluctance at all. *Could it be that that was also Comrade General Secretary's will? Are you even allowed to give your own opinion like that in this dictatorship?*

He was so confident that everyone was seized by these thoughts.

"But you never know when they'll betray us!"

"Isn't that what the political officers are there to supervise? I think our comrades the political officers are dauntlessly, aggressively standing up to those sorts of reactionary plots."

Are these…

Are these the words of a man who, until just the other day, had his political officers make accusations? Who sent most of the mages to concentration camps in Sildberia or had them shot? It was as if he was saying, *Why are you asking something so obvious?* It was unfathomable.

"…No, I'm against it. It's too dangerous."

As one of the attendees mumbled…this would be turning back the clock. It was too great a risk for the Federation and the Communist Party.

What is the right way to approach this?

At that point, they all were stuck picking a side. But they couldn't pick the wrong one.

Displeasing Comrade General Secretary Josef could mean the end of their lives. At the very least, they wouldn't be able to avoid ruin. *How should we think? No, we need to figure out what Comrade Loria was thinking in the first*

place. What is he—no, the general secretary thinking?

"Too dangerous? You just said it's too dangerous, but can you prevent the next strike?"

"…What?"

"Do you mean to say that our comrades in charge of defense have enough fighting power already? Then whom should I hold responsible for not preventing this strike?"

But sullen Loria's remark obliterated any extra time they would have had to think.

…If they refused, they would be charged with defending Moskva with their current forces. But if that were possible, then the incident that already happened would probably be due to negligence. In that case, saying they could do it and then not being able to would be deemed irresponsible. The best that would be waiting for them was a concentration camp.

"Comrade General Secretary Josef, what do you think? I'd like to ask our comrades their opinion…"

"Go ahead, Comrade… This is to defeat the Empire. You should use any means necessary."

At that point, the political commissars in attendance had braced themselves. You could say they had no other choice.

All they could do was agree to the plan to free the rebels they had put in camps, the rabble they had denounced as enemies of the state, in order to have them fight an external threat. If they didn't, someone among them would probably—no, almost definitely—be purged as the dissident who compromised the army.

…Or it could be that someone was already the target.

"It's unanimous."

On that day…

The Federation's politburo unanimously decided to release the magic officers and soldiers they had previously deemed enemies of the state and incorporate

them into the military.

They even twisted the principles behind their actions, their “politics,” in order to resist the Empire. Well, principles and rules bend to priorities.

In the Federation, that made things very simple and clear. Be purged or obey. In the Federation, those were the only two options.

No, actually, you were pretty lucky if you had an option.

After all, in the case of most of the Federation’s citizens, it was decided for them.

A DAY IN APRIL, UNIFIED YEAR 1926, SOMEWHERE IN SOME COUNTRY

In a certain factory in a certain country…

In a factory of the nation worthy of being called the highest temple of capitalism, John was applying his energies to a shopping trip—what fun! Naturally, he wasn’t paying for anything out of his own pocket.

His friend Philadel was covering it. Well, the bill would go to the state, so he couldn’t spend too much. That said, necessary purchases were necessary purchases.

For example, the newest “tractor.” It weighed 41.9 tons, but five hundred horsepower wasn’t bad. Though he was also considering some faster models, the Commonwealth was most often engaged in defensive battles, so it sought durability over speed.

“Mr. Johnson, I’m afraid that would be unfair.”

But even in the Unified States, just because he said he wanted to buy something didn’t mean they had the inventory to sell. Production on the new model had only just begun. Plus, since it was so new, it contained a pile of industrial secrets.

It was only natural for John’s contact to be unwilling to negotiate.

“Oh? Is it so thoughtless of me to say I want to buy your company’s ‘newest tractor’?”

“Yes, and it is the newest! Exporting when we haven’t even filled domestic

demand yet would be a bit…”

This wasn’t a case of selling off stock the States Army didn’t need—the army’s needs weren’t even met yet. Under the circumstances, selling off “tractors” to a “neutral” nation would be difficult.

“I’m not saying give them to us for free. I’ll pay properly. Philadel is buying. There’s no more reliable payment than that, is there?”

“Could you at least choose an older model? We have plenty of those in stock.”

Of course, the salesman didn’t know when to give up. John had deep pockets. You don’t even have to be a capitalist to want to sell if someone has needs.

He proposed buying slightly older tractors as a business move.

Luckily, they had more than ample inventory. Productivity was even good, so they could manufacture more. If they could get production lines moving, that in itself was good news—at least for the seller.

“Alas, I’ve heard they can’t be used in deserts or hot, humid climates—and worst of all, that they’re weak.”

But in John’s catalog, that model was on the “do not buy” list. According to the experts, not only were they soft, but they couldn’t deliver a punch, either.

In the end, some of them even denounced such a “tractor” as not a “tractor” at all. Certainly, they were mechanically sound, but being only four hundred horsepower was another mark against them.

“…That’s too bad for us, too.”

Well, let’s try something else. John was a gentleman who could change gears.

If need be, he could consider settling for the old “medium tractors” rather than the worst-case “heavy tractors.”

But he also wanted to pursue another topic of discussion in parallel. For example, there was a pressing need for “precision pocket watches,” which could cost more than a flagship tank or aircraft, so they could proceed with that first.

“Hmm, what to do? You don’t handle ‘precision pocket watches,’ do you?”

“No, the Skunk Association does those.”

Then the man’s counterpart, an engineer from the Skunk Association, came out with a smile, and John was able to have a pleasant consultation with him. It was so much easier to do business when the seller was friendly and well versed in technology.

This is good customer service. John applauded the Skunk Association in his head. He already intended to give them a good review in the report he would write back to the home country.

“I’ll be direct: How many ‘6F water-resistant precision pocket watches’ do you have?”

The men on the boats wanted the 6F if at all possible. Well, it was very popular.

It wouldn’t rust in the salty ocean breezes, and on top of that, its movements were very reliable—the men who sailed were desperate to get their hands on it.

It was at the top of the “buy this” list.

“The 6F? It only just got on the production line. Honestly, it’s going to be a while before we’re able to sell any.”

But sadly, they apparently didn’t have enough units for their own country yet. *Geez, no this, no that. When will I be able to buy something we can actually use?* John sulked.

Happily, the Skunk Association man was a more zealous salesman.

“But how about the ‘4U general-purpose precision pocket watch’?”

That one wasn’t very popular.

Of course, it wasn’t optimized for oceans and bad weather, and its performance was only so-so. At the same time, for an emergency import that could work in most situations, maybe the 4U wasn’t so bad.

“Oh? You have inventory?”

“Yes, five hundred. If need be, I can deliver them as early as tomorrow.”

Fortunately, the Skunk Association had a large number of these “precision pocket watches” on hand due to their relative unpopularity.

When one door shuts, another opens. John decided to buy immediately. The ready payment made the Skunk Association man want to throw in a bonus.

“Wonderful. Any other notable items?”

“If you don’t mind a model that didn’t get selected in the competition, I have a few of the trial run ‘G58 precision pocket watches.’ The performance isn’t any different from the winning design.”

He brought out something equivalent to the new model as the bonus. John had no problems with spending money.

And the Skunk Association guys were technicians. If they made something, it was in their nature to want to test it out. In that sense, the agent’s idea to try to sell the units was lucky for both parties.

“Interesting. What’s the difference?”

“We prioritized stability, and on top of poor peripheral compatibility, the manufacturing costs were too high.”

They created it as a potential new model. The results weren’t bad. But due to the costs and the peripheral issues, upon verification, the Skunk Association’s prototype wasn’t adopted.

While the official selection lacked stability, it boasted extraordinary peripheral compatibility, so the Skunk Association was feeling miffed. That played into it: Basically, they wanted to get back at everyone and show off what their product could do.

And so John was blessed with the offer of something better than he expected. It was like being shown a department store clerk’s secret stash. He had no hang-ups about brands, so he didn’t hesitate to buy.

“It’s great to have stability with those specs. Hmm, can I take your entire inventory?”

“If an advance test lot of twenty is all right, I can have them for you tomorrow. If we can get operational data, I’ll sell you them at cost.”

We can definitely get him as a regular customer. With that thought, the man instantly offered a discount. Skunk Association agents were also quite skillful salesmen.

We want to know how it feels to actually use it. That's what the agent was thinking. Not only would they not have to pay for testing, they would make back some of their manufacturing costs. With this forward-thinking idea, the Skunk Association requested data, and John saved some money.

"Oh, that would be much appreciated."

"It's no trouble. We'll be looking forward to your impressions."

I'll give them the highest praise in my report. He smiled and took out a pen in response to the beaming Skunk Association agent proffering the contract.

Then he signed with a flourish: Johnson. It would later be said that it was a great contract, and he was thankful for such a wonderful friendship.

APRIL 18, UNIFIED YEAR 1926, THE COMMONWEALTH, HORTON BARD TRAINING BASE

The cadets were told by their superior officer to take advantage of their first free time in a while and write a letter to their families or something, and one of them was Mary Sue.

It was a little bit of a break during which they each wrote the first news to whomever they most wanted to contact, with a little bit of ribbing. The instructors who normally guided them through every little detail quit nagging for this brief time.

In the part of the barracks she was allotted, where she somehow managed to secure a bit of privacy with a corner desk, Mary grumbled about how small the army-issued military-use stationery was as she wrote her neat, round letters.

Dear Mother and Grandmother,

I'm still doing well in the Commonwealth. And how are you faring? Please take care of yourselves.

Er, I guess that was pretty stiff. I get scolded a lot in the army for the way I

talk. But life here is more fulfilling than I expected.

If there's anything I worry about, it's the food. I've gotten a bit more used to it, but still. It's the army, so if nothing else, the portion sizes are big, but I miss the apple pies we used to bake, Grandma.

After she'd written as much, Mary stopped her hand with a groan and winced. *Maybe I should've been honest, and instead of saying I miss it, I could have said I've been having dreams about it.*

Since arriving on Commonwealth soil, Mary had been undergoing lots of military training, and she'd had some tough, painful times, but the thing that really got to her was the food.

It was only a matter of taste, and Mary knew she couldn't be picky.

The only reason recruits were given three meals a day while so many people were suffering in the war was national defense; Mary felt bad even without her unit instructor's lectures.

"But it just doesn't taste good… Seriously, why won't they let us cook for ourselves?"

In the Unified States, some of the differences from Entente Alliance cuisine made her hesitate, but her grandmother's cooking had a gentle flavor that she liked. The neighbors had given her fruit, and she had cooked with her grandmother for her mother.

It's no wonder that feels like so long ago, thought Mary, remembering what had been on the menu recently.

"Seriously, ever since I got here, we've been having practically the same thing for every meal… I don't have to worry about my weight, but other than that…"

She knew that was probably just how it was in the army, but when breakfast, lunch, and dinner were all identical, she started to get sick of it.

Training was also tiring…but somehow it was a fulfilling sort of tiredness, so she didn't mind it. *On the other hand…* Mary recalled the baked beans she would rather not have. *I wanna eat something sweet.* She missed dessert just a teeny, tiny bit.

And another thing: She hadn't gotten to taste that tea she'd been looking forward to. The expeditionary volunteer force was specially issued coffee because that's what people from the former Entente Alliance zone and the Unified States were used to drinking. It was a weird way to be considerate.

"They're going about this wrong, or at least things aren't quite what they think…" Maybe getting special treatment was better than being treated like a nuisance, but *I'd still like to try tea and biscuits…* Mary daydreamed.

After this casual day, they would be back to the never-ending drills. Lately, they had been focused on shooting in particular.

During their firing drills, the importance of sighting your target and learning to eyeball distances was pounded into them over and over.

Mary understood why the moment she held a gun.

Shooting seemed easy, but the gun was heavier than she expected. And even if she tried to follow the textbook to measure a hundred meters by sight, unless she learned whereabouts a hundred meters was, she would end up aiming at the fifty-meter or two hundred–meter target.

After a string of terrible failures, her instructor would often tease her, "You know you're aiming at the two-hundred target, right?" Hearing rumors that the instructors were constantly moving the hundred-meter target around to get them used to different distances, Mary felt like they might not be far off.

Prompted one by one into the shooting range being used as the exam venue, the orderly sound of complete cartridges being fired had indicated they were shooting live ammo.

She had learned in the classroom that getting used to standing by was part of being a soldier, but Mary didn't really like having all this idle time.

But—she smiled wryly—*at least today we haven't been told to stand by holding our heavy rifles.*

If she made the mistake of restlessly looking around, the sharp-eyed instructor would spit fire at her. After two or three times, she had learned her lesson. This time, when she discreetly moved her eyes, she could tell the mood wasn't right for chatting to her neighbor.

With the understanding that this would take some time—*I bet our standby posture is part of the test*—she looked reproachfully up at the once again overcast sky.

If it started to drizzle, shooting conditions would deteriorate…and even worse, the exercise would continue even if they got soaking wet. That was something she hadn't anticipated when bravely making the oath of loyalty in the Unified States recruitment office.

When she'd left her grandmother's house, which was so clean and orderly, she'd thought she would encounter all kinds of trying situations, but apparently, her imagination didn't go far enough to be reliable.

"…Mary, it's almost your turn."

Her cadet friend patting her shoulder startled her. She had assumed that since it was an exam, it would drag on forever, but when she hurriedly checked the line, she saw that at some point the number of waiting cadets had started decreasing at a fair clip.

Mary switched gears in her head with a "Thanks."

Packing away the carefree memories of her hometown, she recalled the mage handbook. She'd read it a zillion times, and ever since she'd arrived in the Commonwealth, she'd had it beaten into her during exercises, so when she checked it again in her mind, she felt—just a little—confident she could follow it.

While her rifle still weighed her down, she was sure she could perform the correct movements.

"Next! Cadet Mary Sue!"

She gave a brisk acknowledgment and jogged toward the exam shooting range. On her way, she glanced at the gun and target that had been prepared for her.

It was the usual range and the usual rifle. She'd heard that for some reason their own rifles would be taken into custody and they would have to use an exam rifle, but…as far as she could see, the gun was normal.

It wouldn’t do to let her eyes wander for too long, so she went straight in front of the instructor.

“Good. All right, Cadet Sue! We will now begin your shooting evaluation.”

Luckily, perhaps it can be said, she didn’t get scolded for some unfathomable thing, and the instructor turned his gaze on the booth and had her enter. She was about to move to follow his eyes when she remembered the procedure and its detailed regulations.

“Yes, sir! Requesting permission to enter the firing booth, sir!”

“Permission granted.”

This was the army. They probably didn’t want anyone shooting without permission. “That’s a high mark for not getting caught,” murmured the instructor with a proud grin and nodded at her to enter the booth.

“This is the practical skill exam, so measure the distance to the target by sight. Naturally, you’ll correct your own errors.” The instructor casually piling on the pressure like, *Naturally, you won’t betray our expectations*, was standard practice.

Mary had fallen for it enough times in the past to let this go in one ear and out the other.

“Show me the results of your training. Okay, you may fire at will.”

Mary acknowledged energetically, and the instructor told her to begin with a bored look.

Upon stepping into the firing booth, Mary did a safety check per the regulations. No empty shell casings on the floor, no overt traps. The complete cartridges she’d been issued also appeared, as far as she could tell by looking, to be normal.

Just as Mary lifted up her rifle to find the sight and eyeball the distance to the target, she noticed something.

We’re firing one at a time because it’s an exam, but there isn’t enough time between to adjust the target.

Which means maybe they’re making the firing conditions the same for

everyone. So the test is to check if we can put the results of our daily practice on display.

Huh? Then Mary felt something else was strange: *I wonder who has been cleaning the gun.*

At first, she thought the words *correct your own errors* had to do with eyeballing the distance. But now she had another idea.

What if…the gun itself has something wrong with it? Well, I doubt it would be a very big error at a hundred meters, but when they specifically tell us to correct errors…

"U-uhhh, Instructor?"

"What is it, Cadet Sue?"

Mary nearly shrank from his gaze that said, *Cut the chitchat and shoot already!* but resolved to speak.

"C-could I borrow tools for taking apart and cleaning the gun?"

"You want to take apart and clean the gun?"

"Yes, I'd like to make sure the rifle won't induce any errors."

The instructor stared at her for several seconds. It was only a short time, but to Mary, it felt like hours.

Time passed intensely, and she felt like her face might twitch from the tension.

She expected the instructor would yell at her—*What are you talking about?!*—and began to regret opening her mouth. *Why did I say something so stupid?*



Just as an apology was on the tip of her tongue, the instructor's gaze, so severe as to be physically oppressive, softened, and he laughed.

"Very well…is what I'd like to say, but it's not necessary."

When Mary looked surprised, his smile grew awkward and he murmured, "Think about it. Look, Cadet Sue. If every cadet realized that, not only would it take time to clean the gun, but the ones waiting would get a hint that there was some time-consuming element involved."

So. He pointed at wooden boxes on the floor next to her. Following his finger out of habit, she finally noticed that the boxes were the same size as the cases they stored their rifles in. When she'd entered the range, her attention had been on the gun and the target, so she hadn't even noticed them.

"Don't slack on your inspection. Well, it's a problem all new recruits have. When your field of vision is small, you guys don't look at what's there—you can only find the things you expect to find.

"A little lesson before the exam," crowed the instructor as he checked the numbers stamped on the boxes.

He must have been satisfied, because he smiled and said, "Must be this one." Flustered, Mary took the rifle he held out—her own rifle.

"If you've been taking care of it regularly according to the textbook, you'll be fine."

Aim and fire as usual. You couldn't call it a great shot, but the results weren't too bad. Nodding in approval, the instructor said she hadn't done too shabbily. Mary was really happy to get the grade she expected.

She mingled with the people who could move on to the next course and shared the modest happiness of having made it through the exercise. She hadn't been sure she would be cut out for military life. She still had lots of worries. But if she worked at it, she would be able to keep going.

Even in her worst subject, shooting…she managed to pass with decent results.

"Hmm, guess I feel kind of relieved," she had calmly remarked after the tension was over, and her pals peppered her with comments somewhere

between teasing and making fun.

“Hey, Mary, if you’re relieved with those grades, then we should be terrified!”

“Ha-ha-ha. Ain’t that the truth? Mary, you look so sweet and gentle, but you’re pretty handy with a gun, huh?”

The young recruits had been given a half day off, nominally to reflect on their training so far. In their rooms, chatting up a storm, was the one time they could forget about training and goof around like kids their age.

After all, for the longest time they’d been just doing laps between the exercise grounds and the barracks. Drills, drills, and more drills. The days were so hard it felt like the only thing left in the world was training.

Freed from their harsh conditioning, the moment they relaxed they began talking to make up for lost time. But whether positive or negative, the topics discussed by friends who all coexisted in a cramped space tended to be very similar. As such, they were hungry for rumors from the outside world.

That’s when it happened.

“Hey, did you hear the news? It’s horrific. A nearby Commonwealth mage company got totally wiped out!”

The cadet who popped his head in had news about what was happening with the war nearby, so it grabbed everyone’s attention.

“They say it was the Devil of the Rhine!”

“Huh? What’s that?”

“It’s, I mean… Well, it’s one of those—a battlefield legend, don’t you think? That list of achievements has to be padded!”

“But she’s a Named! It could be true!”

The cadets gathered around to hear more—*We can’t miss this!* As everyone exchanged fragments of stories they had overheard from veterans and instructors, Mary smiled wryly and quietly sipped tea out of her mug.

“Mary? What’s wrong?”

“Mm, I dunno. I guess…she just feels like a being from another world or

something—I can't keep up. I've got my hands full just flying and shooting."

During flight training, she just did her best to stay in the air, and by the time she was casting a formula, she was exhausted. Even with a gun, she didn't feel like she had so much talent.

Multiple people had told her, "*Your father was an outstanding magic officer*," but no matter how many times she was told that her father, who couldn't do a lick of housework at home, would zoom through the skies handily deploying formulas, she couldn't help but just stare blankly.

"Ha-ha-ha, but that in itself makes you pretty great!"

"Yeah, Mary, you can fly any which way you like, can't you?"

"You think so?" Mary replied, remembering the moment she'd flown across the sky with her fellow cadets. When they'd soared through the air, it was such an invigorating feeling, like she could go anywhere. But once she tried mock battle with the instructor, she learned just how sluggish her movements really were.

"But, hmm. I don't want to meet anyone so horrible."

"Hey now, that's awfully wimpy-sounding. If you knock her down, you'll be hailed as a hero who took out a Named! It would be more optimistic of us to all think of ways to stop her!"

Even we could do it! Someone laughed.

"You mean get decorated and brag about it?"

"You're all taking the danger too lightly. If we're up against an enemy Named, let's think of a way for everyone to come out of it alive."

"Mary, you're such a good girl… Boys, you should take after her."

"Damn right, we should!" someone shouted, and everyone burst out laughing—in this little space. In a foreign land, volunteer soldiers from the Entente Alliance enjoyed a happy moment because they didn't know the battlefield yet.

Even if the storm had come right up next to them…

This moment gave these guys and girls an abnormal day that was infinitely

close to normal life. Here, there was nothing to stop young people from dreaming, talking big, or fantasizing as young people should.

Their baptism by combat was not yet at hand.

[chapter]

V

The Battle of Dodobird

Is the top brass stupid? They're certainly not smart enough to keep our accelerated grads from ending up as target practice! The Imperial Army is crafty like the devil. A ton of newbies die, but all they say is to accelerate their education and give them more newbies?! The brass is made up of evil idiots!

The griping of an anonymous instructor

[chapter] V The Battle of Dodobird

APRIL 28, UNIFIED YEAR 1926, OVER THE STRAIT

Cloudy with a chance of mages.

The Imperial Army mage units taking off from a base in the former Republic, now under military government, and flying all the way to Londinium for some sightseeing are used to rain mixed with plasma. If they get hit over enemy land, the best they can hope for when they fall is to be captured. If they don't fall well, it's either getting lynched or receiving a joyous double promotion on impact.

And since mages are considered "fighting power" even once they're downed, if they don't do a hell of a job of surrendering, they'll be quickly crushed by the militia rushing to the scene. Ever since that tragic truth was confirmed, imperial mages have loathed being shot down in enemy territory.

And among the units covering the west, the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion reporting directly to the General Staff—universally recognized as the elites of the elite—is no exception.

"This area is clear! All units, gather up! Regroup!"

The battalion commander, Major Tanya von Degurechaff, is also such an excellent aerial mage in her own right that she's listed among the Named. After a fight with an enemy unit, she raises her voice to call her troops together.

"Fairy 01 to all units! Report your losses."

"Major, the battalion has finished regrouping. No one's missing. Only a few light shot wounds; they won't interfere with further combat."

Good. Nodding at Vice Commander Captain Weiss's report, Tanya continues with a call to start heading back. "Let's go back while we have the energy! Watch out for any creeps following us home!"

"Roger that."

"Back on the Rhine front, we only had to fly a few minutes to be accommodated by friendly troops, but…now we have the Dodobird Strait below us. I'm no good at long-distance swimming, and I don't feel like paddling home through waters swarming with enemy ships and planes."

Captain Weiss nods as if he understands. As he flies off to directly supervise the watch at the rear, Tanya glances at her subordinates First Lieutenants Grantz and Serebryakov and thinks to herself, *In terms of ability, Grantz isn't bad…but unfortunately the group that joined us on the Rhine doesn't have anti-ship combat experience.*

It would be more convenient to have my adjutant nearby. But Tanya accepts unavoidable reality. A safe return route is more important than a little discomfort.

"Lieutenant Serebryakov, I'm leaving the unit to you. Lead 'em home."

"Y-yes, ma'am! Understood."

"Vice Commander! Be careful out there in the rear!"

"Never fear, Commander! I am a radical heterosexualist, and I am prepared to die for my beliefs!"

"Faith is all well and good, but we're warriors of God… Er, never mind."

"Are you tired, Major?"

"Don't worry about it, Lieutenant Serebryakov. We're going back to base. I don't want to hang around after a force recon mission that ended in an aerial annihilation battle and get creeps sent after us."

"Understood."

"…I can't believe I actually said that," she spits, full of hatred. To Tanya von Degurechaff, the world is just too absurd—hence her desire to keep at least her mind resolutely noble.

Yet, the minimum line, my mind, won't do what I want it to. Having my mind manipulated is an intolerable torment. I am myself. I am the only one who can stop someone else from interfering with my will.

"I… Me? Of all people? I nearly praised Being X. Shit, how long are you going to undermine humans before you're happy?"

That's why this is so unforgivable. If I relax, my psychological contamination can cause me to praise Being X as God. On the battlefield, where the abnormality of war becomes normal, my psyche is corroded by the Elinium Type 95 against my will.

But Tanya's melancholy is forcibly booted out of her brain by Weiss's message over the wireless. "Fairy 02 to Fairy 01! We've got silhouettes approaching from six o'clock! Judging from the speed and altitude, they're fighter planes! They're coming in at full speed!"

The 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion is mid-withdrawal. An aerial unit rapidly approaches from behind. Like the pieces of a puzzle snapping into place, Tanya's thoughts are overwritten with those of an anti–air unit commander.

No matter what they do, aerial mages are slower than aircraft. Trying to outrun or outclimb a plane as a human, you are fundamentally doomed to lose. The only area in which mages are superior is tricky 3-D maneuvers.

"01 to all units! Drop altitude! Hug the surface of the water! Give me some perfect 3-D maneuvers! In the worst case, you can dive into the sea and ambush them! Prepare to dump your heavy gear—"

"C-Commander! Please wait!" Weiss interrupts Tanya's orders to drop down and cast off heavy gear, sounding somewhat frantic. "We've received confirmation that the formation approaching from six o'clock is a friendly air force unit on their way back to base!"

"Fairy 01, roger. Everyone, it's as you heard. No need to drop your gear. Let's head back together."

Tanya was wondering what was going on, but when the confirmation comes back, it's unexpectedly good news. Glancing at the formation coming into view, she sees that they must have ID'd her battalion as well.

The formation that had been coming in at full combat speed, as if to engage, banks to show off the identification marks on its hazy, camouflaged wings and moves smoothly into a route flying parallel to the mages.

“Friendlies? Until I saw your identification signal, I was scared half to death you were enemy marine mages on patrol. Don’t do that to me—my heart can’t take it.”

“This is Fairy 01. Your cold remarks are about to make me cry. We were afraid we had some hungry wolves on our asses!”

“Ha-ha-ha! You guys, afraid? Was that supposed to be a joke, Fairy 01? This is Mosquito 01. We’re happy to meet up with elites like yourselves again.”

The two commanders greet each other over the wireless per battlefield etiquette. But partway through, Tanya realizes that she remembers Mosquito 01’s unit.

The Rhine is where Tanya has spent the most time. Because of that, though it’s only a matter of having overlapping mission areas, she’s familiar with units in the west. The connection between units who were uprooted and mobilized to respond to the Republic’s sneak attack is particularly strong.

“Mosquito 01, you say? Then we haven’t been together since the Rhine, huh?”

If she remembers correctly, they’re part of the Western Army Group’s 103rd Fighter Wing. As one of the people pressed into responding, Tanya remembers nearly all the units on the battlefield at the time, if only their names. This one, she recalls, had been praised multiple times during the Empire and Republic’s fierce battle for air supremacy.

And given the speed and formation with which they were approaching when her battalion assumed they were enemies, they must have maintained their level of discipline from that time. There are many tough old hands on the western front, to be sure.

“What a coincidence. But with this difference in altitude… Oh, but you guys always could fly at this height, huh? I wondered if maybe we should fly lower and support you.”

“No need to worry.”

An aerial mage flying fairly fast goes about a fighter plane’s cruising speed. Tanya’s not averse to hurrying home, so she has her unit reorganize themselves for the way back. After that, nothing particularly notable happens. Once she’s taken care of post-arrival meetings and reminded her subordinates to turn in their combat documents, Tanya glances up at the clock on the wall and nods.

Grantz is fretting and moaning over his paperwork, while Weiss and Serebryakov get through theirs efficiently. *I suppose I should have the two who have finished do something else.*

“Captain Weiss, Lieutenant Serebryakov! Let’s thank our friends who accompanied us on that pleasant ramble today. I want the two of you to go pop in on the Western Army Group’s 103rd Fighter Wing. Use some battalion funds to arrange a modest gift.”

“Understood. Are you coming along, Major?”

“Sorry, but I’ve got a commanders meeting. Apparently, we’ve sighted a Unified States mage unit, so there’s an urgent joint playbook conference.”

After all, we were sent here as a combat skills research unit. Tanya winces. When someone new comes on the scene, the way we do combat needs to be reexamined. A person with experience on all fronts is handy to have around.

When people like what you do and have high expectations, you have no choice but to work hard.

“We’re a special verification unit, part instructor unit, part combat unit. We report directly to the General Staff, so of course they run us around according to their convenience.”

“I have no doubt. Very well, Lieutenant Serebryakov and I will take charge of diplomacy with the 103rd Fighter Wing. We’ll try to hear a bit about how their battles went, as well.”

“Great. Oh, what will you do with the rest of your work?”

Both Weiss and Serebryakov have gotten quite proficient in cumbersome post-combat reports under Tanya. Well, it was mainly a matter of increasing the

types of forms they could fill in so they got used to producing a large number of various patterns, but still.

“Grantz is staying behind, so we’ll leave it up to him.”

“…Understood.” Grantz responded gloomily to Weiss, like an officer who had just been given hopeless combat orders.

He’s so wet behind the ears. As far as Tanya can tell, it’s not that he doesn’t have aptitude…just that he’s missing the concept of working efficiently.

Should he be praised as an earnest youth or cursed as clumsy? No, frankly, he’s just inept as far as administrative work goes. If Tanya had her way, she would like to get a veteran with the know-how, but…people are scarce.

Since she has no choice but to use who she has, all she can do is encourage Grantz.

“Be glad you’ve grown as an officer to the point where you can be entrusted with the rest of the work!”

“Th-thank you!”

She doesn’t really get paid quite enough to play the part of the hard-ass superior with a kind heart, but keeping her own workload from increasing is another reason for Tanya to train Grantz into someone she can use, so she cheers him on with an *I’m counting on you*.

Then she announces that she’s heading to the commanders meeting, manages to find a way to get her oversize hat neatly on top of her head, and has a brief word with her adjutant as she accepts her bag from her. “Lieutenant Serebryakov, do you have a moment?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Lieutenant Grantz isn’t as good at this sort of work as you. When you get back from the party, don’t help him.” Tanya tells her she must be tired and that she should get whatever rest she needs after meeting with the fighter wing.

“Understood, Major, but may I ask why? If Captain Weiss and I don’t help him…I have the feeling he’ll have to stay up all night.”

“That’s fine. Lieutenant Serebryakov, this sounds like something an old person

would say, and I don't really like the words as such, but…young people should be made to suffer."

"Huh?"

At the point Serebryakov repeats, "Y-young people must…suffer?" back at her with an uncomprehending look, it hits Tanya. *Ah, she probably thinks I'm the type to force my subordinates to believe that all you need is grit. I spooked her.* She realizes she needs to explain.

"…Don't look at me like that. It's not like I'm saying where there's a will, there's a way." She smiles and reassures Serebryakov that it's precisely because they're an investigative research unit that they are allowed to make mistakes. "The experience of failure is essential in improving coping ability. If we don't kick Grantz into a bit of a ravine while we have the flexibility to deal with it now, who knows when we'll get another chance?"

"Oh yes, I see what you mean."

"I'm delighted to have this freedom to cultivate my men. Oh, and I should mention, Lieutenant, that this get-together with the 103rd Fighter Wing isn't going to be easy. Since we report directly to the General Staff, our command chain is too different from theirs. I want to take good care of our lateral relationships."

Lamenting that they must always be tossed from one front to another, Tanya adds that on the battlefield, the bonds you can trust the most are those of friendship.

"You're right. On the Rhine front, we all knew one another."

"As we experienced in Norden, we're the parachute for when things go wrong. I don't want to be the ones with the short end of the stick, and I don't want to screw up due to poor coordination."

"Yes, ma'am. Leave it to us."

Tanya pats Serebryakov's shoulder with a "Go get 'em" and whispers to Weiss, who is standing next to her. "Captain Weiss, take Lieutenant Serebryakov and pay them a nice visit. They don't like being interviewed, but she's a veteran of the Rhine and cute besides."

Other units hate the investigation groups because they are always trying to conduct pointless interviews when everyone is busy. Well, duh. Consultants tend to make mistakes. Some of them can actually do the work, but there are way too many who get paid to spout impracticable bullshit.

If you cooperate with the interview and the results get twisted and a patchwork collage of cherry-picked quotes is presented as some kind of conclusion, it's no wonder no one wants to participate.

But Tanya has to take it seriously.

"We've been charged with the big job of combat skill research. Data, Captain. I want you to get data from the field, no matter what it takes."

What happened is that when she took advantage of the inquiry they conducted on her to tell Lieutenant General von Zettour she wanted to work in the rear, she'd been denied the placement. That said, Tanya isn't too upset about that. She knew it would be difficult to get stationed in the rear.

The compromise was a temporary assignment to the less harsh western lines. On the whole, she's satisfied with this. Happiest of all, their mission is combat skill research. And she was promised that after the duration has elapsed, her results will determine where she gets sent next.

Which is why Tanya is instructing Weiss so earnestly: *I need you to do a good job.*

"Teach them that we're better interviewers than those idiots in the rear. Tell them we require data for analysis based on reality."

The men in the fray have a tendency to be skeptical of the ability of those in the rear to do a proper survey.

And understandably so. I've read articles on the trends and omissions in the business models consultants recommend, and they were spot-on. Most of them basically just unquestioningly evangelize popular models. The army's investigation teams have a hard time escaping that bad reputation.

Furthermore, people who don't know what it's like in the field can't understand voices from it. Sadly, there are too many good-for-nothings who convince themselves that it can't be true and analyze war regardless.

“Of course, with your quick wits, I have high expectations.”

“Ha-ha, you flatter me, ma’am. But thank you.”

“I’m serious. Looking forward to your report.”

Between talented, respectful professionals and guys with big heads, there are some things only the former understand. That’s why she’s sending two soldiers with combat experience going back to the Rhine front to socialize and exchange information.

Tanya genuinely feels that if anyone can do it, Weiss can. *He and Serebryakov are sure to be able to do a proper survey.*

Combat commanders don’t have a moment to waste, so they get right to the point. Since time is finite, they can dispense with politeness, and their topic of discussion is the confirmed newcomers.

“To sum up what we know, it seems a regiment-size voluntary force of mages is being deployed with some degree of rapidity.”

“Nationality?”

Pressed for an explanation, a specialist elaborates on a serpentine legal argument, to which Tanya listens with great interest, *hmm*ing, but the other officers take it poorly.

And in conclusion? They urge him on, and he exhibits that hesitation unique to someone trying to evade blame two or three times before finally spitting it out. “They appear to be citizens of the Unified States under Commonwealth command.”

“So? What’s important to us is which army they belong to. Are they Unified States Army or Commonwealth Army?”

As soldiers, the commanders have to be most interested in whether the mages can be considered enemies under the rules of engagement.

“…According to precedent and legal principle, they could be seen as enlisted in a country’s regular military. So if they take orders from the Commonwealth, then they aren’t Unified States Army,” the legal specialist responds timidly, suddenly the focus of attention.

With the comment that troops obeying military orders from the Commonwealth can be considered Commonwealth Army, the combat commanders murmur, *It's decided, then*.

But the legal specialists seem to have something they are hesitating to say. Realizing it would be unwise to miss hearing the experts' concerns, Tanya asks for additional explanation to keep the conversation flowing.

The officer nods numerous times as if to thank her, but then brings up a worry that is out of the blue even for Tanya: regulations regarding the treatment of prisoners.

Basically, the Empire isn't at war with the Unified States, so the rules aren't clear about how to handle prisoners.

But as far as Tanya knows, nationality is based not on the soldiers' heritage but their military affiliation.

The French Foreign Legion had French soldiers who were not from France. Or what about American green-card soldiers? They're also legally American soldiers.

"Are you saying we should be careful taking prisoners because the terms are vague? Could you explain why we can't just treat them as Commonwealth soldiers?"

In order to not get caught up in a war-crime mess, Tanya adheres as best she can to the law.

Which is precisely why she's not satisfied with their response.

Not that there haven't been times when nationality became an issue, but… honestly, in this situation, she can't see why country of origin need be taken into account.

"As far as I know, as long as someone meets the four qualifications of belligerents, their nationality doesn't matter. If they were irregular combatants, then the question would come up, but…"

Tanya's doubt is a sensible one about the rules and regulations of war. Under her expectant gaze, the expert glances around, seeking help for just a moment

before letting a resigned sigh slip out. “The Unified States’ official stance…is that although we’re not actually at war, they’d like to send in a humanitarian watch group to collect info on prisoners and injured from both sides.”

It’s a pretext that rightly causes everyone in the meeting to smirk.

“Well, that’s the definition of shameless. Are they serious?”

“Hmm! That’s the question, isn’t it?”

They couldn’t help but be a bit disparaging in their exchange—because surely the States were kidding. It’s such an absurd reason even Tanya finds herself casting aspersions. Sending in a humanitarian watch group to protect your citizens when the two countries aren’t even at war?

I’m pretty sure it’s the embassy’s job to take care of their citizens.

And boy, a neutral country that dispatches personnel who get caught by a warring state and then butts in because *they’re our citizens* is neutral in an awfully technical sense of the word.

I’m sure this neutral state is as “kind” as Stalin,[14] as much of an “honest broker” as Bismarck,[15] and as “good” as Fouché,[16] the bastards.

“It’s a proposal that’s got our dear General Staff officers grinding their teeth. They’re essentially declaring an intervention. It’s definitely fishy.”

“An enemy has arrived. Isn’t that all that matters for our job?”

“Without a doubt.”

The wryly smiling officers prefer a simple narrative: *All we have to do is shoot them*. Ignoring the dejected legal specialists, they begin to get excited about just whacking the newcomers as enemies.

And actually, Tanya admits that they have a point. Shoot the enemy. No further argument is needed, and their belief that other arguments shouldn’t even be broached speaks to their faithfulness to their duty.

They are soldiers and warriors.

“Well, politics is for the bigwigs and the government to handle. It’s not clear when the Supreme Command will have a decision, but we need to take care of

the enemies in front of us.”

Some voices *hear-hear*, but Tanya furrows her brow.

The view of the Imperial Army combat commanders in the west is correct for someone in the field. The problem is that as far as Tanya knows, awakening the Unified States would be a bad idea. She can understand the General Staff’s delicate, *we don’t want to provoke them* stance to a painful degree.

No, understanding it doesn’t make her feel better. But she can’t approve of dragging a political mess onto the battlefield.

“Can we declare them enemies? Don’t you think if we engage, the fact that the imperials attacked first would be used as anti-Empire propaganda for the public in neutral countries and the Unified States?”

Tanya points out the possibility in spite of herself, her tone urging caution. Thinking of Churchill hoping for a Pearl Harbor, it’s simple. The Commonwealth, and of course the Entente Alliance, the Grand Duchy, the Republic—all the countries fighting against the Empire—are all fervently hoping the Unified States will intervene.

So surely you can say they are desperate for any excuse.

“It’s a tricky situation, huh?”

“But conversely, couldn’t we take advantage of it, too? If one of ours was dropped by those pests, we could bang down the embassy’s door about the unfortunate victim.”

It’s only natural that some of them would start to say, *Well, if the enemy can do it, why can’t we?*

But perhaps it should be said.

No decent commander has a mental makeup that would allow for such a victim.

…At least, not at this point.

“That’s about enough of that. The slightly stronger language was inappropriate.”

Several people's comments, that it wouldn't do to count their subordinates as statistics, spoke to the prevailing view.

"Commanders in the field don't need to be thinking about that. All we need is the fact that there is a regiment of aerial mages under Commonwealth command out there trying to keep us from securing air supremacy."

"So then?"

"No changes. Tomorrow and thereafter, we follow the same plan we had and continue the annihilation battle. But increase the expected enemy count. We need to be aware of the worst-case possibility that there are Unified States voluntary forces."

In the end, they decide we'll handle things with the understanding that there are newcomers to the battlefield—a boring, exceedingly admin notice–like conclusion.

"Overall, I have no objections, but may I say one thing?"

"What is it, Major von Degurechaff?"

"This is a suggestion, since we're the investigative research unit under the General Staff, but couldn't we prioritize taking out the Unified States' voluntary army?"

"…You mean take the initiative and go after it?"

Yes. She nods and continues. "We're not familiar with that country's doctrine. It would be good to check them out and collect some data."

Actually, the usage of mage units is quite different among countries. Since the Rhine, the Imperial Army's mage policy has progressed from using them as support for infantry to using them on their own more often, but the Republican Army has always been using mages for strikes in special units.

In the Entente Alliance, which isn't a very useful reference, they were all in composite units, so a lot depended on the quality and personality of the commander. But it is worth mentioning that they tended to use mages more for aerial operations. You could think of it as reinforcing their air force, which was somewhat lacking in muscle.

“What we want to know is how Commonwealth mage units are used and how they fight. So I think confirming whether the voluntary army works the same as the units we already know will be useful.”

The Imperial Army has been fighting the Commonwealth in the west and south already… They figured out, albeit belatedly, that the army and navy have very different usage patterns.

In their army, mages are assumed to work jointly with other branches of the forces as essentially flying infantry, while in the navy, they’re worked hard as an independent branch.

Which is how you get things like attack squads dispatched from submarines, boarding parties between ships, close air support for marines, and so on. Commonwealth marine mages are tough even individually—not the type the Imperial Army wants to wrangle with.

“It’s only natural, but I still wonder whether the voluntary forces being sent to the Commonwealth will be used according to regular Unified States doctrine.”

“Right. But I think we can expect some secondary repercussions either way.”

When Tanya gets looks that ask what specifically, she makes a definite assertion. “The Unified States is not going to declare war on the Empire in the current situation. But the facts have gradually stacked up to show that there are actors who want it to participate on the anti-Empire side.”

The Unified States will hit us eventually.

Which is why, Tanya continues.

“In that case, one way to deal with it might be to show in no uncertain terms what the result of an escalation would be.”

“That’s an idea worth considering. What do you think?”

But the officers appear unable to reply to such an abrupt request. They think for a bit.

“I believe the proposal is too politically oriented. Our strategic objective is to secure air supremacy over Dodobird Strait. We shouldn’t deviate from that. Most importantly, any proposal that would allow the Commonwealth units long

stretches to recuperate would clash with our objective."

"Mm, I think we need to consider this on the grand strategy level. If you think that we could really deter the Unified States from intervening, then Major von Degurechaff's proposal is quite a keen insight."

Both the for and against arguments are reasonable. It's true that the units in the west have only been told to secure air supremacy over the strait. With those clear orders, deviation won't be allowed.

Air superiority is essential to the strategy. The sticking point is that Degurechaff's proposal actually has a good chance of assisting aerial battles in the west. In terms of regional air power, and especially with the not insignificant bonus of getting rid of the Unified States pest, the argument begins to heat up.

"I strongly agree with the 'keen insight' evaluation. If we could discourage intervention before it even begins in earnest, that would be great. I think this proposal could assist with achieving air supremacy over Dodobird Strait."

"Objection! Your evaluation of the effects is biased. If we shoot down a ton of Unified States nationals, its public will be galvanized. You're not taking that seriously enough."

"With all due respect, there's no guarantee public opinion in the Unified States would move in that direction. It's entirely possible that their government gets backlash due to the reckless deployment."

Both comments are intelligent and sincere. Both are correct, which is why it's difficult to reach a conclusion.

"Maybe we should get the Foreign Office to convince the States to remain neutral?"

"Hmm, but at that point, isn't this something that should be handled in the political realm?"

"Excuse me, may I say something?" Upon getting permission, Tanya stands up, acting as unconcerned as possible so she doesn't sound excitable. "While this is a political issue, it's also an issue that has been left to our discretion in the field. There is an attackable target within the attackable area. Rather than

turning this into a political problem and dragging the rear into it, why not just pretend that it was an unforeseen result of engaging?”

Hence Tanya chiming in to seek middle ground as if to say, *Let’s just sublate this*.

She suggests that handling it at their level makes the most sense. For better or worse, Tanya von Degurechaff loves legal loopholes. Hooray for gray zones. She won’t take a single step into black, but anything not black is white.

“That’s an interesting idea, but in the end, we’re just field commanders. Shouldn’t the General Staff have a unified plan?”

“If you’re a General Staff officer, wouldn’t you come out swinging like Major von Degurechaff suggests?”

“Please refrain from speculation.” The argument threatens to explode, but a senior officer mediates to calm things down. “That’s enough. We’re soldiers. Even if we are sometimes expected to deviate from our orders, this is a matter of legal principle not war.”

The conclusion being stated is, to Degurechaff, an unsurprising, commonsense answer. It’s a bit disappointing, but if she considers whether she should push any further, it seems extremely difficult. She isn’t averse to walking in the gray zone, but unless they’re your accomplice, you never know who will kick you into the black zone.

“Major von Degurechaff. Your idea is an interesting one, but I’d like to wait for the General Staff’s opinion. Until further orders, we’ll continue our quiet aerial annihilation battle. Any objections?”

“No, none. Understood. I’m sorry to have taken up your time. Then let’s get back to the main topics of combat skills and the aerial annihilation battle.”

I guess there’s no way around it. Though she secretly feels that way on the inside, she’s a sensible enough officer to apologize for the tactless suggestion and refocus the conversation on its original topics.

APRIL 29, UNIFIED YEAR 1926, TANYA VON DEGURECHAFF’S ROOM

The commanders meeting lasted long enough that the date has changed. The

discussion had a tendency to get heated, but now that it has safely ended and Tanya has repaired to her room, she is—rarely for her—conflicted.

"…Maybe I should just take my unit and… No, they would resent me if I did that. The risk versus the return is…"

She knows she's obsessing, but she's still tormented by the idea that they should attack the self-described voluntary army that the Commonwealth is sending in.

"This is tricky. But I still want us to be prepared for an encounter battle. The best would be to wallop them if we get the chance."

Ideally, the Unified States won't intervene, but is such a world war possible? The answer is simple and clear: no. In that case…we should give them a slap and demonstrate that if they reach out a hand, they'll get burned.

"Well, but I guess we should take provoking public opinion into account? … Ah, what am I doing?" She sighs.

Mocking her circular train of thought, Tanya reaches for the cup of coffee she previously abandoned on her desk and brings it to her mouth. The cold coffee cooling off her head feels nice. Once she calms down a bit, she understands that the senior officer's logic about not provoking the Unified States too much is correct.

Since she has connections to the central General Staff, she tends to forget, but she's only a major. Just a handy cog in the system.

…She may be important, but she's still just a worker, a part that can be replaced. She has known from the beginning that the military is such an organization, but that's precisely why she sometimes wants to run away so badly.

As far as she can tell by looking at the Empire's current status, it should be able to fight the Federation. At least, the eastern front is seeing drastic changes thanks to mobility and an envelopment maneuver that should properly be called military art, achieved by interior lines. It will depend on what sort of reserves the Federation has, but at least their frontline troops have hit the solid wall of the Imperial Army and splattered like a rotten egg.

On the southern lines, a limited number of troops led by a brilliant commander is keeping the pressure on the Republican remnants.

And in the west, Tanya and the rest are spending their days cracking down on the Commonwealth in their aerial battle of annihilation. Really, the Empire doesn't even feel the need to make a landing in the Commonwealth and force them to surrender at their castle walls. It would be all over if they cried uncle and accepted the peace terms.

…Thinking a bit optimistically, the Empire's situation is tough, but there's no need to despair and throw in the towel yet.

"It's just wishful thinking, though. I can't even fool myself…"

There is only one problem.

The Empire's national strength is already at the limits of its limits, with every front trying too hard. Troops are stationed in each region, but the offensives reached their culminating points long ago. With the general mobilization, there are plenty of soldiers, but truthfully, the Imperial Army is like a puffed-up frog. One poke with a needle, and it would be a struggle not to pop.

"As long as the situation in the west remains unresolved, the Empire can't commit its full strength to the east."

If they concentrated their power in the east with an enemy to their rear, they would end up reenacting the Rhine battles where the Republic attacked them from behind. She hears that even now on the continent, with air supremacy secured, they are still bothered by sporadic disturbances.

Showing any weakness would spell the end.

Even if the Unified States doesn't join the war, the Commonwealth will leisurely land their successfully mobilized army on the western coast.

"But as long as there's this immense pressure in the east, the Empire won't be able to secure enough forces to get the Commonwealth to surrender."

It's completely valid for the east to want even one more division to put on the main lines. Though the Great Army was mobilized and able to destroy the invading army for the most part…it affected the numbers only enough to make

it an actual fight.

And Tanya, she knows—that according to the other world's history, going up against the Federation is a quagmire. Under the circumstances, if the Empire is looking for a way out of this, the only route is to resolve the various issues in the east. In the history of Earth, Tanya knows, the real German Empire managed to do that. The Imperial Russian Army was obliterated on the eastern front and Imperial Russia dropped out of the fight due to the ensuing political unrest.

…*But.* Tanya is distressed.

In the first place, duplicating the prohibited move of sending in radical revolutionary elements, which was what finally brought down Imperial Russia, is not terribly likely given that the Communist Party is already firmly established in the Federation.

In the second place, even the Imperial German Army that ruined Imperial Russia…couldn't find a way to win against the matériel superiority of the U.S.A. It may have competed on the battlefield…but the poverty of the rear is well-documented.

"…Even if we clean up the east, can we achieve security in the west?"

The question that slips from Tanya's mouth in spite of herself is a manifestation of her anxiety. The reason behind the military strategy taboo against multifront operations is that they don't have the forces to support that many fronts.

It's only a matter of course. If they had the military might to prevail on multiple fronts, there would be no need for strategy in the first place. It would be a simple task of grinding down matériel; they would be able to trample the tiny enemy armies.

The Imperial Army is the strongest in the world, but it's not so infinitely strong it can stomp the world beneath its boots. Under these circumstances, the Empire must—in order to survive—eliminate the Commonwealth's interference, slay the Federation, and end the war before the Unified States gets involved.

But the Commonwealth's navy is too powerful. Even with the somewhat untrustworthy Ildoan Navy as an ally, the size disparity is too great. The High Seas Fleet—all imperial fleets put together—is the size of the Commonwealth's Home Fleet, which covers only one region. With that in mind, the idea of expecting anything out of a naval battle is pure fantasy.

If the Commonwealth felt like it, it could bring out its Inner and Outer Sea Fleets, or even the Norden blockade fleet. Even if the Imperial Navy challenged them, it would be a hard, losing fight, and then it would be over. About the only thing that can be expected of the navy at this point is to figure out how they will die.

There is only one thing Tanya can do in this case.

"Pointless struggle. It's a futile resistance."

With a sigh, she feels that her mental state of griping to her desk in her room is past all hope of salvation.

…Salvation? If I'm clinging to the fantasy of God, my mental health has definitely deteriorated—I'm surely weakened. I knew that, since I was human, I'd have my limits. After all, I'm only one of these Homo sapiens creatures.

"…Still, I'm an educated citizen. Will I submissively resign myself to my future like a fatalist just because it's 'destiny'?"

Plainly speaking:

"No."

Homo sapiens, the species we call humans, have no reason to agree to kill ourselves, and neither is there any reason we should have to assume the tragic role of a sacrifice to fate.

We choose to do whatever we can that will blaze the trail to the future.

Unballing her clenched fists on her desk, Tanya stares at the palms of her hands.

Her delicate little-girl fingers have bizarre calluses from her training. Luckily, they don't present any obstacle during combat.

…This is just fine. She smiles.

When the cards are dealt, whether you lament your hand or think how to use it depends on you. *I'm going to seize the future with my own two hands.*

That's the privilege humans have. **It's the condition for being human.** So all she has to do is seize her opportunity. To enjoy a happy, tranquil future, she has to work.

It's definitely a rough job, but can you really be upset if suffering and hard work are prerequisites for a respectable life?

I'll resist, even if I'm the only one.

As she is about to nod with determination, she remembers the rank insignia hanging on her uniform. *Oh.* She realizes she had carelessly missed something.

I'm not alone.

I have fantastic friends. What great news, she thinks, laughing as she drains the bottle of sparkling water in her hand.

And that's why, it should probably be said…

The next morning, Tanya appears before the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion and looks each one of her subordinates in the eye with unusual resolve. I have no intention of sacrificing myself for the Empire. But this isn't such a predicament that we have to run just yet.

I don't want an entirely Communist world, and I'm also not interested in falling as one of the cornerstones of a free world, so there is only one thing Tanya can do: stomp the world under imperial boots. Even though she was forced to pick the best of the worst options, Tanya has no regrets about walking the path she's chosen.

"Attention, all units!"

With one shout from Captain Weiss, the unit comes together in perfect order. As usual, the posture of the members of the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion says they are worthy of infinite trust when it comes to matters of war.

"Our commander has a few words for us!"

"At ease. Troops, there's been a small disturbance in the state of the war. A new unit has barged in on our aerial annihilation battle. These guys don't know

how to wait their turn. They must have a pretty messed up understanding of the word *freedom*."

Tanya's announcement of the newcomers is met with unperturbed silence. Even just the ability to be quiet and listen to someone talk is pretty good…but taking bad news without getting upset is great. These guys are just so dependable.

"Headquarters wants us to finish wiping out the enemy and seize control of the sky. We can't allow any more time for interventions from outside. Still, that isn't our main task. Our mission continues to be assessment. As part of our combat skill research, I'm going to have you perform an anti-surface attack mission."

Tanya barely finishes asking if anyone has questions when Grantz jumps in as usual.

"Commander, may I ask something?"

"Sure, Lieutenant Grantz."

"From what I hear, combat is getting fiercer and fiercer in the west. So despite that, our mission is still changing to anti-surface strikes?"

"That's the right way to think about it. However, it includes anti-surface attacks from Commonwealth airspace. Since it's actually for combat skill research, remember that the strikes themselves are not the main point."

"Major, under the circumstances, shouldn't we be supporting the rest of the troops?"

"It's simple, my dear battalion. In order to control the sky, ground facilities may need to be destroyed. Our mission is to verify the potential of ground strikes accompanying air superiority missions."

Everyone seems to begin to understand, and Weiss's voice rings out at just the right moment. "That's all from our commander. All units, outfit yourselves for an anti-surface strike. Get your gear and be ready to sortie—on the double!"

Weiss gives instructions at a good tempo; he's a great deputy commander. Not that Grantz and Serebryakov don't work well; the skill with which they

obliquely ease the troops' doubts while focusing them on the mission at hand is praiseworthy.

"Major…this really is a rather sudden change. Did something happen?"

"You can't tell the troops, Captain Weiss. Really, it's questionable whether I should even tell you, but…the situation being what it is…"

As long as Weiss is around, Tanya feels she has someone she can recommend as her successor. The unit doesn't seem like it would mind, either. If so, she can leave knowing there won't be liability issues.

Which is why, after glancing around, she slips Weiss a few documents.

"…What's this? Details on the voluntary army?"

Weiss is her reliable vice commander but also the human sacrifice that will facilitate her comfortable service in the rear. Tanya passes on as much of the info she has been given as she can, with the idea that he'll take over for her.

"They mean to get in our way as Unified States citizens reporting to the Commonwealth. But they're enemies. Going forward, we're probably going to have to keep shooing away similar rabble."

It really bugs me how unfairly these guys play.

"So, Captain Weiss, this leisurely move to intimidate the Commonwealth via air superiority will do more harm than good. We need the will to crush them, and we must carry out a plan to do so."

"Understood. I guess our victory is still a ways away, then, huh, Major?"

The way he's talking, Tanya feels the need to reemphasize some things. She has him bend down and whispers the truth in his ear. "Victory? For better or worse, Captain Weiss, you're a soldier with common sense, huh? We don't need anything except to be left standing at the end."

The ones alive at the end, the ones standing, are the great ones. Tanya points it out to him with zero affectation.

"We should try to be the victors in the end."

"Without a doubt, but…I want to prioritize the survival of the battalion over

winning," she adds with a nod of agreement. *If possible. Our survival is more important than victory.*

"Major?" Weiss stood as he asked, sounding puzzled.

Tanya laughed to cover herself. "Ah, just griping. When we go on the attack, we'll do it just like we always do. Make sure you have all your gear. Our mission this time is an anti-surface strike."

One of the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion's new directives, as part of their combat skill research, is to study anti-surface attacks. All different types of strikes have been requested, with targets from bases to harbors. The top must want to reconsider our assumptions and refine our findings into an anti-surface attack doctrine.

"It's a combat mission in enemy territory. We can't just go back for more bullets if we don't have enough."

We just have to do what we must. Commenting that she has to get ready herself, Tanya also reaches for her equipment. Contrary to her tone of voice, however, her expression is a bit weary.

"M-Major…is that an anti-tank sniper gun?"

"Apparently, it's an anti-armor sniper rifle. I heard you can expect it to pierce defensive shells."

Weiss's question is accompanied by a surprised glance at her gun. Well, anyone who saw Tanya stuck carrying this gun bigger than her would probably feel the same way.

"…If it was a positional warfare with trenches or something, it might be pretty useful, but…"

"I'm with you, Captain Weiss."

"Are the guys at home mistaking mage fights for fortress battles or something?"

Tanya wonders something similar, herself.

"I feel more like they've pushed unwanted inventory on me. This huge thing, it shoots bullets that are only 14.5 millimeters long, but it's single shot! You can

tell me it'll pierce a defensive shell in one hit, but how am I supposed to use it in the middle of a highly mobile battle?"

Well, it's my job to figure that out, grumbles Tanya in her head.

Their combat skill research includes a few testing missions. She's been asked to evaluate various pieces of equipment and items mages don't usually use to give an idea of how they work for aerial mages in combat.

This is always how it goes, but considering they are invading enemy territory and normally there would never be any use for this sort of weapon, she does sort of feel as though they've just shoved inventory off on her under the pretext of reevaluation.

She's weighed down by the ammo belt and the various attachments.

It's a bit surreal; she feels like a cartoon in an American comic.

But this is reality. Absurdly, the weight of her gear is about the same as if she were wearing full-body armor.

But reality is even more ridiculous.

There exists a battlefield where even this much ammo will be consumed in the blink of an eye. Still, this is a bajillion times better than running out of bullets in enemy territory, so she's compelled to urge everyone to wear even just one extra ammo belt.

And this is why Tanya has absolutely no interest in evaluating some weapon that may or may not be useful.

That said, there is one saving grace. A different sort of saving grace from the time she was test personnel on the Elinium Type 95. And that is that the weapons she is being asked to test out are existing weapons.

She really appreciates the fact that she is allowed to toss it partway through the mission. But it does feel like a waste. She's sure that even if she can't use it this time, there might be a chance in the future…

"…It's a misuse of tax money and national power. I should give the government pointers on how we can use those things better. That's something to consider later."

She can write it after the mission in the comments section of her combat skill research report. For now, she has to prioritize evaluating anti-surface strikes.

“Major, all personnel are prepared to sortie! Everyone can move out on your orders!”

“Thanks, Lieutenant Serebryakov! Contact Control for details on the weather!”

Efficiently delegating the routine pre-sortie work, half complaining, she still laughs at how cartoonish she looks. Her bag completely packed with bullets, the anti-armor sniper rifle is longer than she is tall. They’ve been generously issued hand grenades, explosives for destroying facilities on the ground, and even small amounts of the newest shaped charges. *What a fancy war we’re going to fight.* She imagines the consumption of resources will be equally extravagant.

It does mean, though, that she has a lot of options, personally. *It isn’t efficient overall, but the dilemma is that it’s pretty handy for those in the field.* She accepts the fact with a wince and takes off on her mission.

With her, she brings the usual elite crew. The 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion heads directly through the sky to the Commonwealth mainland in order to perform their anti-surface attack mission test. But not too long after they leave, the weather seems to be taking a turn for the worse.

Tanya already regrets carrying so much equipment.

Perhaps because there isn’t enough meteorological data, the army’s weather report is hit or miss over Dodobird Strait. She was aware of that, but when the clouds, wind speed, and humidity are all worse than indicated, she has a mind to make a complaint.

“Fairy 01 to Galba Control. Fairy 01 to Galba Control. Come in!”

She calls into the static-ridden wireless over and over again, trying to get a weather update, but there’s no answer.

“It’s no good… Sferics? Either way, this connection is the worst.”



Tanya repeats her call a few more times in vain before reluctantly admitting that they are in a tough situation if they can't even make contact with ground control.

"Fairy 02 to Fairy 01. Do you copy?"

"Just barely," Tanya replies and consults with Weiss, who has approached to within direct conversation distance, about remedial measures they can take. It's less a problem with their wireless units than an issue of atmospheric obstruction. There are so many clouds, and it seems liable to rain. These are the worst conditions for trying to signal.

"This is the best quality we can get just for short-distance intra-unit communications? The noise is awful. I guess long-range will be pretty useless at this rate."

"Should we go back? Even if this weather isn't bad enough for a no-fly warning, I wouldn't be surprised if the operation was canceled."

"You have a point, but…we haven't received a cancelation order. Plus, our battalion has plenty of experience operating under radio silence. Chances are that ground control assumes we're going ahead with the operation. If we leave now, we might confuse the others."

It isn't that she's denying the conclusion of the officers on site. But Tanya has had more than enough experiences where the people on site made their own decisions, and the result was a total mess.

"Considering all we're doing is mingling with everyone else's wave attack and performing anti-surface strikes, we'll just run this operation at our own pace."

"Understood. Given the poor visibility, what if we pulled our formation in tighter and communicated more closely?"

Tanya is about to nod but thinks, *Wait a minute!* and interjects, "…No, we can't do that. That would send our risk of an unexpected attack skyrocketing."

If their formation was denser, they would be more orderly. But a well-equipped observation base with good ground facilities would be able to spot them even in this awful weather.

The Commonwealth has an extremely good reputation when it comes to wireless interception technology. She can't allow for the risk that the enemy gets on top of them because they knew her battalion was coming.

"Hmm. Give strict orders to maintain the formation, but keep an extra eye out for enemies. Remember what happened when we ran into the Entente Alliance fleet with no warning. We can't make the same mistake twice. Keep a careful watch. We'll carry out the strike in combat formation."

"Understood, Major."

"Oh, wait. About the wireless situation. Let's keep radio silence until we run into the enemy. The weather is bad, so I'm sure their radar is full of noise, anyhow, but…I'd rather keep things easy."

"So we'll work hard to make things easier? Yes, ma'am!"

Given the choice between suffering to avoid a known risk or avoiding suffering to take on a risk that could have been avoided, they choose the former. That's the kind of training and experience the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion has amassed.

APRIL 29, UNIFIED YEAR 1926, THE COMMONWEALTH

Mary and her fellow cadets had finished their basic training and were now training with their units. For better or worse, they had a tangible sense that combat was just around the corner. They all felt, if vaguely, that the day they knew would come was on its way.

But for Mary…it came far too suddenly.

"I'll explain our situation! Two minutes ago, the southern radar site as well as the detection line picked up an imperial aerial mage unit and a large air force unit approaching the southernmost air defense line!"

Their normally cool and collected leader read the latest report with a tense expression. When Mary's brain comprehended the words *two minutes ago*, *southernmost air defense line*, her whole body stiffened. They'd had the airspace map pounded into them all this time.

If she remembered correctly…the only units that would make it there on time

to intercept were ones like her own on standby in the rear. The enemy had already penetrated too far for the mainland air defense units to intercept in an organized way.

“There’s no time! And this is really bad, but judging from the enemy mage signatures, there’s a good chance that they’re the Imperial Army’s most elite unit!”

That news was terrible enough that even the officers had the instinct to run for it. Really, a briefing should be conducted with more composure, but they were short on calm at the moment.

Man…, thought Mary anxiously. Then she suddenly noticed something weird—an officer was observing them from the side of the room. She didn’t recognize him, but from his insignia she could see he was a lieutenant colonel. From his uniform, he seemed to be a Commonwealth marine mage.

“What do we know about the enemy, sir?”

“It’s been tentatively identified as the Devil of the Rhine.”

“The Devil of the Rhine?”

One of the officers scrunched up his face to ask, *Huh?* but Mary had heard of her. It was the imperial Named who everyone had been talking about shooting down. But she never in a million years thought the mage from that discussion would suddenly show up in their airspace for a fight.

“According to the Commonwealth officer in charge of that intelligence, this Named is extremely dangerous even compared to other Named. She was first sighted in Norden. Since then, she’s been on the Rhine front, in Dacia, on the southern continent, and there are even unconfirmed whispers that she was deployed against the Federation, so she’s a seasoned vet.”

Hearsay? The officers frowned. As the tension built, the Commonwealth marine magic officer having a nonchalant smoke by the wall spoke up, somewhat aloof.

“Excuse me, may I say something?”

“And you are?”

It was a pertinent question, and the unit leader jumped in with an *Oh*.

“I should have introduced him sooner. This is Lieutenant Colonel Drake from the Commonwealth’s marine mage force. We’ll probably be doing joint operations for a while. If they need anything, you’re to cooperate closely with them.”

Having finally remembered to introduce the lieutenant colonel, the unit leader turned the floor over to him. Even their normally efficient leader was off today.

…It’s almost time to head into combat. It finally hit Mary how excited and nervous she was.

“As he said, I’m your liaison officer, Lieutenant Colonel Drake. I want you Unified States troops to bear in mind that…the Devil of the Rhine is a real Named who made officers and men alike tremble in fear on the Rhine front. Don’t write her off as a battlefield rumor—I hope you understand that she’s a grave threat.”

“…Colonel Drake, I didn’t expect to hear that from you. What are we dealing with?” the unit leader asked, puzzled. Her face said just as much as her mouth could have: *Surely you’re overreacting.*

“With all due respect, Colonel, whatever you imagine her to be, please expect worse. She’s an outstanding magic officer with both leadership skills and individual combat prowess. And her unit moves quite well, too.”

“She’s a talented commander?”

“Frankly, she can do both. The unit we’ve seen her with is a real handful. If you meet them with equal numbers, I strongly recommend taking shelter. Their combat altitude is eight thousand, and the battalion attacks in perfect order like a single organism. The tactical threat is nightmarish.”

But Drake’s answer was clear. His tone of caution with regard to the imperial Named was extremely earnest. There was no exaggeration or joke about this officer’s fear of the Devil of the Rhine.

“Colonel Drake, may I ask a question?”

“Sure, and what’s your name?”

“I’m Second Lieutenant Mary Sue, sir.”

“Go ahead, Lieutenant. What is it?”

That’s why the question came so naturally to her.

“What should we do if we can’t run away?”

“That’s a good question. Get shot down.”

Mary was starting to wonder what he meant when he continued with an, “It’s simple.

“Luckily, we’re defending the mainland. Unlike on enemy soil, friendlies can recover you. As long as you’re alive, you can heal up and rejoin the lines. So prioritize survival and gracefully take that fall. Got it?”

After he broke it down for her, she finally understood. For the Commonwealth, the sky over the Commonwealth was home field. Staying alive would be a win. Even if you crashed, if you stayed alive, you could fight another day.

“Did you hear what he said, troops? We have the advantage, since we’re intercepting!” The unit leader nodded and shouted encouragement. “Don’t forget that the people of the Commonwealth are behind us. We’ve already lost one home. Let’s not lose another one. Here, we have people who need protecting and our ally’s territory. Let’s do our best so the good people of the Commonwealth don’t laugh at us!”

“”””Yes, sir!”””””

“Galba Control to Fairy Battalion. Galba Control to Fairy Battalion—it’s urgent. Come in. I say again, it’s urgent. Please respond.”

“Fairy 01 to Galba Control. Contact. Reception is horrible. But it’s not bad enough that we can’t have a conversation.”

As soon as the waves are getting through, in comes a call from Control. The exchange is still filled with static, but the moment ground control finally made contact with them, Tanya is sure she heard a sigh of relief.

“Galba Control, roger. This is Galba 15.”

“Fairy 01, roger. Go ahead, Galba 15.”

“Due to the bad weather and reception, all the units are doing their own things. The existing operation plan has been aborted. I say again, the existing operation plan has been aborted.”

Oh, I see. Tanya realizes why ground control has been trying to call them. The unified operation collapsed due to the deterioration of the weather, so perhaps they’re going to regroup and try again.

“Fairy 01 to Galba 15. Roger on the operation being aborted. Requesting permission to return.”

We shouldn’t have problems getting permission to head back to base. That’s what Tanya had been thinking, but her hopes are dashed all too easily.

“Galba 15 to Fairy 01. Sorry, but I can’t authorize that. The Fairy Battalion is getting a new mission.”

The other units get their missions canceled, but we get a new one? What kind of awful is the news going to be now? Tanya secretly braces herself, but even she is petrified by the words that come out of the controller’s mouth next.

“The commander of the 114th Air Division was shot down and crash-landed to the southeast in district α 13. That your unit is out and about is a silver lining. Your mission is the combat search and rescue to recover the five passengers.”

The way the controller says he will send over the details makes it sound like the orders are already set in stone. But from Tanya’s perspective, there is no reason she should have to listen to something so unreasonable.

“Fairy 01 to Galba 15. I should warn you, my battalion and the 114th Air Division don’t use the same signal code! If we can’t even communicate, I don’t see how we have much of a chance to complete a rescue mission—not to mention in enemy territory.”

Regardless of how a search and rescue mission might go in friendly territory, it would be awfully reckless to poke around the Commonwealth mainland looking for the downed pilots.

“And my battalion’s mission was to evaluate anti-surface attacks in the first place! I understand the need for a rescue, but we’re not even outfitted correctly for it.”

Worst of all, they don’t have the gear necessary to perform a rescue. Tanya tries to continue complaining about how reckless it would be to go, under the circumstances, but the ground controller’s impatient reply interrupts and leaves her at a loss.

“Galba 15 to Fairy 01. I understand the circumstances. But all the nearby mage units have almost no experience conducting operations in enemy territory. Your battalion has the most expertise of any in the airspace.”

Unluckily, perhaps it should be said…most of the aerial mages have been pulled out and sent to the east, and since the air force in the west isn’t in great shape, the controller probably doesn’t have too many choices.

“Fairy 01, roger. We’ll RTB immediately, switch up our gear, and go back out to conduct the CSAR mission.”

“Galba 15 to Fairy 01. My apologies, but this is an order. Begin the combat search and rescue mission as soon as possible.”

“Fairy 01 to Galba 15. Is that an order with the understanding of the authority my unit has to act?”

“It’s a formal order. The General Staff has also approved it… Sorry, but please go now.”

…Of all the…, Tanya nearly replies but swallows her argument. She has no way to know the truth of it, but since she’s been told that they’re directions approved via official channels with the General Staff…she has no choice but to obey.

Not that she can’t get away with lying, but…if she left friendlies for dead and returned, she would catch hell from the General Staff. No, all she would do is lower the standing of the Western Army Group, and then they would probably be even more reluctant to cooperate with her combat skill research.

“Fairy 01, roger. We’ll be off on the rescue mission, then… You’re treating us when we get back. I hope you’ll be ready.”

Socializing for work is so uncomfortable. Peer pressure forces you into doing things you don't even want to do. But if you're going to play the game, you have to give it all you've got.

At least when we get back alive, they'll owe us.

"Did you hear that, troops? We're off to recover some big shots."

"Understood. This sure is a…pain, though, huh?" Captain Weiss murmurs. First Lieutenants Serebryakov and Grantz next to him seem to find the problem hopelessly difficult. It's easy enough to say, *Save these friendlies*, but this is in enemy territory, and who knows where they've fallen?

I'd really like to tell them to use a specialized unit. The 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion may be elite, but they perform combat missions, so they simply aren't suited to this kind of task.

"Drop all your heavy equipment immediately. That goes for the eval equipment as well. We're diverting our energies to searching on the ground. Anything that won't be useful you should blow up along with your heavy gear."

"Understood, Major, but if it's a combat search and rescue mission in enemy territory…"

"I'll take a unit and act as direct support. You can have either Grantz or Serebryakov. Captain Weiss, select search party members on the double."

"Are you sure?"

"You mean you want to trade? C'mon, I'm pretty sure I can cover my subordinates' backs."

Why should I have to descend to the surface, where there's nowhere to run? Not that I don't trust Weiss's support, but if the alternative is giving up a position from which I can escape if need be, then I'd rather risk losing my able vice commander.

…Although lately I've realized no one will praise you for having an idea like that.

"Understood. Then I'd like to take Lieutenant Grantz."

"Are you sure you don't want Lieutenant Serebryakov? She has more

experience with this sort of thing from her time on the Rhine. She's probably more used to it than Lieutenant Grantz."

"But she's paired with you. I think we should maintain formation."

"…Okay. Split the battalion in two. Captain Weiss, you're handling the search. Lieutenant Serebryakov, you're with direct support as my adjutant. We'll be providing support from the air."

"Yes, ma'am!"

And so, with heroic resolve, Captain Weiss and First Lieutenant Grantz undertook the annoying ground search mission, but they soon received notice that things were getting worse by the second.

"Captain Weiss, I have some bad news from Control. We've got two Commonwealth aerial mage battalions coming in fast. The ground army is also on the move."

Weiss's reaction to Grantz's heavy remarks was to look to the sky. It was reassuring to have Major von Degurechaff and the other two companies up there on patrol.

But it hit him again that time wasn't on their side. Well, of course it wasn't. They were in enemy territory. Obviously if they hung around for too long, enemy reinforcements would show up.

"The hits just keep coming… What does the commander have to say?"

"It seems like she intends to intercept. She said that her and Lieutenant Serebryakov's companies will distract them, so we should continue searching."

"I think I found something." With that bitter grumble, he sighed and bit back the rest of his displeasure at being given such an impossible mission. He had just barely managed to spot some wreckage on the surface, but that was it.

"There are signs of people moving after the crash, but how can we search without a dog? Lieutenant Grantz, can you spot any footprints?"

"It's not that I can't, but…we're going to follow them? I don't really think the battalion is…" He was about to say, *…capable of this sort of tracking mission*, but realized he couldn't and fell silent.

Weiss wordlessly patted Grantz's shoulder and sighed in his head. *We just have to.*

Major Tanya von Degurechaff, their battalion commander, was the kind of person who brute forced her way through impossible situations with sheer ability. As one of her followers, Weiss felt that if anyone could pull this off, she could.

Saving friendly troops is a soldier's pride and a duty to their fellows.

That sentimental thought did clash with Weiss's realist nature. He had learned through experience how important it was to declare impossible things impossible. Searching any more was too big a risk. It could result in levels of attrition the battalion wouldn't be able to ignore.

Grantz wasn't saying anything, but he seemed to feel it, too. Though he maintained that uncomfortable silence, the way his eyes appealed to Weiss made it easy to tell.

Perhaps it was time for Weiss to consider calling off the search on his own authority.

"…Fairy 01 to all units. Everyone gather up on the double. I say again, gather up on the double."

"If she's calling, then let's go up."

The pair headed back to Major von Degurechaff, jumping to the conclusion that they must be withdrawing. Which is why in the next moment, they were completely stunned.

""Huh?!""

What did you just say, ma'am? Captain Weiss's and Lieutenant Grantz's dumbstruck faces ask. Maybe they just don't get it, or maybe their combat experience is getting in the way.

If that's the case, then I need to break it down for them, Tanya realizes, and she begins to explain again about the police wireless they just picked up.

"It's Commonwealth police communications. Apparently, they took in the passengers of a crashed imperial plane. How lax. I can't believe they put such

critical intel on the police wireless."

"Well, I mean…if they weren't expecting their police wireless to get intercepted in the first place, then it sort of makes sense…"

"Yes, you're quite right, Captain Weiss… It's unexpected, but…it's definitely good news. Not only have they saved us the time and effort of looking, but we even know where they are and where they're taking them."

I think we can do this. With that conviction, Tanya gives her decision. "Lieutenant Serebryakov, aside from me, you're the one with the most knowledge in this area. Given your experience with rescues on the Rhine, what do you think? Tell me your estimate of the enemy fighting force and how many troops we need."

"It'll be militia or a police peacekeeping force. A platoon should be enough to subdue them."

"That's reasonable analysis, but you're relying too much on the enemy making a mistake. Considering we'll have to escort the package, it's worth sending a company, so that's what I'm giving you. Lead them and do whatever it takes to secure the package."

"Yes, Major. You can count on me."

She gives a ready response in the affirmative. Serebryakov has grown into the type of officer who understands what must be done and what she is capable of. Tanya knew her back when the old hands would tease her as "Princess Visha," so she joyfully welcomes the magnificent growth of the girl's human capital.

…Humans really are capable of learning—under their own steam, thinking for themselves.

If I'm having personal feelings on this battlefield, I'm probably not cut out to be a soldier.

Even as she runs over these essential things in her head, she begins to focus on the task at hand and clear her mind of distractions.

"Lieutenant Grantz, support Lieutenant Serebryakov's unit. Whatever you do, don't accidentally hit the package."

“Understood.”

The prisoners have been found, so now we rescue them. My apologies to the Commonwealth police officers, but…they won’t be able to drive back the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion.

“Okay. Captain Weiss, you’ll stay with me to intercept the approaching enemy air forces with the rest of the battalion. We’ll secure the relevant airspace. But you’re in charge of supporting everyone on the ground. I’ll handle the attacking.”

Tanya briskly gives orders, but there is still something worrying her.

The biggest problem is what to do after securing the package—or more precisely…how to deliver the package safely to the rear.

If it was an injured magic officer, a mage could carry them.

The high-ranking officers of the 114th Air Division, however, are pilots. They may be used to the sky, but they’re used to flying as pilots—which means being inside an airplane.

Can we fly carrying their unprotected bodies? What if they’re injured? It’s probably too risky even if they’re not. Trying to carry an unprotected high-ranking officer is like a creative punishment for all involved.

Considering the kinds of accidents that could occur, we should be ready for the worst-case scenario.

But really, this is impossible. As long as it’s an order, though, we aren’t allowed to fail. At that point, we really need to get them on a plane somehow. Could we request a rescue plane? No, I highly doubt anyone would come.

Penetrating enemy territory and landing…? And as soon as she thinks it, Tanya breaks into a smile. *Ah, what the heck. This is simple! We’ve done this before.*

“Vice Commander!”

“Ma’am!”

“The 103rd Fighter Wing is nearby, right? Give me their frequency!”

Weiss looks at her, wondering why in the world she would need that, and

Tanya smiles. *You'll understand when the time comes.*

"Fairy 01, this is Mosquito 01. All I can say about the reception is that it's awful. But I can hear you somehow. Go ahead!"

"Thanks, Mosquito 01. To be frank, I'd like your assistance with a special mission. I want to borrow three planes with fuel to spare and competent pilots…"

Thus, Tanya gets straight to the point over the wireless with Mosquito 01.

The response, delivered instantaneously, is willing consent. The Empire is proud of the cooperation among its officers in the field, and this time it's functioning perfectly.

"Understood, Fairy 01. I have confidence in your skill and reputation. Three, right? *Kette* tactics…? But I think for a special mission, you should take a *Schwärme*. I'll give you four, a flight. Treat us when you get back!"

"Fairy 01 to Mosquito 01. I'd love to treat you guys, but please make the receipt out to Galba Control. I don't think they're cheapskates who would deny my payment request after these ridiculous orders!"

"No, ma'am, but that's quite a thing to say."

They exchange light banter because they've been on the battlefield long enough to trust each other. From Tanya's perspective, this is what makes the Imperial Army's organization great. It's a miracle of allowing those in the field a measure of authority and everyone coming together to work toward bigger objectives. Of course, if it ever lost this unity, it would be nothing more than a papier-mâché tiger, but…

"Fairy 02 to Fairy 01. Friendly fighter planes at four o'clock. It's four, as we were told."

"Fairy 01, roger. I really gotta hand it to the Mosquitoes."

Before long, Tanya receives word from Weiss that the planes she requested are approaching. *Good, good.* She breaks into a grin.

This is a bit of a stunt she's pulling, but there have been pilots who landed in enemy airfields and then set them on fire. Landing in enemy territory and

recovering friendly pilots shouldn't be impossible.

"Come in, Fairy Battalion. This is Mosquito 06; this is Mosquito 06."

"This is Fairy 01. Reception is fine. There seems to be no problem with the wireless at the moment. Mosquito 06, thanks for your help."

"Nah, we have orders to work for free alcohol. At your service!"

So pilots run on booze? Tanya winces and is about to explain the situation when an airspace-wide warning interrupts.

"Urgent warning for all battalion members! I've detected two battalions of enemy mages! It's the ones we were warned about! As we heard, they're at an altitude of six thousand! They're rapidly approaching our position!"

One of her men on watch puts out a warning. When she focuses for a minute on finding enemies, sure enough, she picks up a large number of signatures. It's two mage battalions, as expected. And vexingly, they're on their home turf.

"Interception units, prepare to engage! Let's go! Mosquito 06, please take shelter! I want you to avoid combat if at all possible!"

"Why?!"

"No time to explain. Just hold tight for a minute!"

"Commander, Lieutenant Serebryakov says she's secured the package!"

"…Now? Shit, just a bit too late! How's it doing?"

"No serious injuries but a couple of bumps and sprains."

Just as Tanya was about to shout to gain altitude, Weiss reported the good news. Honestly…just collecting them is great. But she does feel a bit ambivalent, since they could have avoided this battle if they had recovered them just a little sooner.

"That's good news, but— Fuck, we're in enemy territory! We don't have much time…"

The two enemy mage battalions are closing in. All she has is one. Plus the deadweight package. It's no wonder she wants to call off the whole thing in despair. Who could collect their marks and get out under these circumstances?

But Tanya can’t give up.

She has to get through this somehow. And then she can’t rest until she’s argued using both her achievements and grievances so that she never has to do such an unreasonable mission ever again.

…Which means that, even for the sake of running away, her priorities must be clear. In this case, delivering the package to the rear has to be highest.

“Vice Commander, take your unit and secure a short runway. It can be a square or a park—I don’t care as long as a plane can land on it. Even just that field over there! Use Lieutenants Grantz and Serebryakov as you would!”

“Huh?! A-are you sure?!”

Weiss’s decision to object to Tanya’s move to have three companies take on a different mission right as the enemies arrive, while also keeping within the bounds of what’s acceptable, is truly sensible. Certainly, even for the elite 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion…fighting two battalions with a single company would end with a big checkmark next to “unfit to command.”

She understands it’s impossible. But there are some circumstances in which you have to accomplish something, even if it warps all logic.

“I’m well aware how foolish it is to take on two battalions with a single company! But our orders from home are to secure the package—we can’t ignore them!”

“…Is that…is that why you called the planes?”

“We’re going to have them land in enemy territory! If we didn’t cover them, it’d be a crime against morality! Do whatever it takes to secure a landing space and support them!”

You catch on quick. Tanya smiles, but Weiss frowns as if to say she’s being ridiculous. It’s so easy to imagine what’s on his mind; she wants to point out that it’s written all over his face: *You’re telling us to put those planes down in enemy territory?*

But the pair’s conversation is cut short by an incoming wireless message.

“Mosquito 06 to Fairy 01. Can I interpret that as you wanting us to perform a

forced landing in enemy territory?”

“Fairy 01 to Mosquito 06. Just as you heard. We have to pick up the downed 114th Air Division personnel.”

Bracing herself for complaints, she’s not against playing her trump card—using her military authority—if need be. She is so ready to respond to their protest that they catch her off guard.

“We got this!”

Over the wireless comes proud, reassuring acceptance.

“We’ll need you mages to pick up the pilots. We’ll all do our part, so thank you! I’m glad you decided to rely on us!”

Happy to find the members of the fighter wing so adventurous, she’s again convinced her decision was correct.

“Mosquito 06 to Fairy 01. I’m moved by your concern, but it’s too much. You don’t need to roll out a red carpet for us just so we can pick up our guys! Just give us the location, and we’ll take care of the rest! All we ask is minimal support!”

“Fairy 01 to Mosquito 06. Thanks for the offer, but we have to guarantee the package’s safety as well. And if we extend our full services, it should help avoid a secondary crash. I’d like us to try for a swift withdrawal.”

“…Mosquito 06, roger!”

The emotional response is eager—wonderful. I love the passion of someone who knows what their job is. This is the model for what a worker should be. At this moment, even Tanya is smiling in spite of herself. She has sensible colleagues and unfussy subordinates.

With this, they are capable. There are no better working conditions than these.

“Just like you heard, Captain. Find them a place to land as fast as you can.”

“Roger!”

When Tanya urges him to get going, he zooms away; I’m sure he’ll get the job

done. Serebryakov will make it with the package in time. Even Grantz should be able to handle supporting the others.

All that's left, then, is for the Mosquitoes to land, and things should work out.

So basically, she has sent off her friends with her trust, and all she has to do is buy time for them to get results. Anyone can do that.

"All right, so we're one company up against two battalions. If our altitude difference is two thousand…then we'll crush them from above."

The name of the game is harassment. If our task is to hold them up, then there's no need to wage serious war; this is doable. Luckily, the soldiers I'm leading are old hands. The vets of the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion, which has had almost no personnel attrition, really shine at times like this.

"…Ha-ha-ha. This'll be a cinch. Troops, time to make ourselves a nuisance and entertain our guests!"

If an outsider had been listening to that wireless contact, they would have interpreted the frantic call as nothing short of a desperate entreaty.

"Pirate 01 to Yankee Battalion HQ. Urgent. Increase your altitude now. I say again, increase altitude."

And Lieutenant Colonel Drake himself, as he called the Yankee Battalion, would have willingly admitted that that was what it was.

"Yankee 01 to Pirate 01. Sorry, please explain. Climbing above our operating limit could seriously affect how long we'll be able to continue fighting."

"Pirate 01 to Yankee 01! Look out for the approaching enemy mage company. The signatures indicate they're Named. They're up at eight thousand!"

"I understand what you're saying, but it's only a company. Don't you think this is a delaying tactic to manipulate us into tiring ourselves out?"

Ah, shite. He was at wits' end with this awfully easygoing allied unit. And because the Commonwealth was respecting the Unified States' request that its voluntary army be able to operate independently…he was stuck suffering through long, pointless arguments with the two mage battalion commanders; it was pure torture.

But that said, he couldn't force them.

Originally…a Commonwealth mage battalion unit was supposed to come along to support, but they failed to coordinate, so there was no unit that understood where he was coming from.

It was like having to play a card game with a bad hand. Just unworkable.

"Commander! I'll ask again. Please at least have two companies climb to guard against the company at eight thousand."

"…Yankee 01 to Pirate 01. I'd appreciate if you'd leave your advice for us at that. Intercepting them with the disciplined fire of two battalions is surely far more useful than having two companies bend over backward."

The disgusted request to essentially knock it off made Drake want to throw in the towel. *Do the Yankees really think they're going to waltz in and scatter a bunch of mages who've a mind to try delaying combat at eight thousand? Dream on.*

Apologies to the unit leader, but even the marine mage unit I'm from was at the mercy of the Devil of the Rhine. The idea that these Yankees can put up a fight is just bollocks.

But Drake was in an extremely tough spot, since all he could do was try to persuade him. The critical issue was that this interception had to happen right as he arrived at his new post. They barely knew each other, and Drake was painfully aware how useless it was to get into repetitive arguments before they even built up any trust.

"Pirate 01, I respect your experience, but I'd like you to understand that we have our own doctrine and respect that."

I suppose this is what you'd call a proper lurch. I was dispatched to assist this less experienced commander, but he seems to take it like he's been saddled with an unnecessary supervisor.

Drake suppressed his urge to grumble and gave the situation some serious thought. His job was to keep the Yankee losses to a minimum. At this point, all he could do was wish for the Devil of the Rhine to go home.

…The problem was the Devil of the Rhine was not only not attempting to withdraw but leading a company right toward them.

The Yankees had decided their role was delaying combat—defense. *Why don't they understand that the enemy is coming over here to actively hunt us?*

The Devil of the Rhine is fast approaching. How can you talk so big about driving her off?

"Pirate 01, roger. Please forgive my rudeness. But I'd like to request permission to take command in the event that you become incapacitated, just in case."

"Please," Drake insisted, though he knew it wasn't a very polite request. Even if the command structure was nominally the same, the voluntary army was, in fact, the regular Unified States Army. If he took command, the brass would throw a fit.

"…If I get shot down, then go ahead."

"Thank you, Yankee 01."

"No need. But I have to record that you made such an offer… I don't mean to bring your ability into question, but I imagine I'll make a note that you don't seem cut out to be a liaison officer."

"Understood."

But to Drake, it was a necessary measure for attaining the best of the rotten futures in a worst-case scenario.

Drake had done his best.

In his position, he had done everything within his power to keep losses low, so he didn't have to fear reprimand or punishment. He had been faithful to his conscience.

Which was why…

"Th-the enemy company is still gaining altitude!"

"What?! Nine thousand five hundred?"

"A-assuming strike formation?!"

“Prepare to intercept! Calm down! Don’t get taken in! Keep our advantage in mind! We can beat them with numbers!”

Feeling ashamed, Drake had no choice but to accompany the Unified States mages on their charge into ruinous combat. He felt spineless, unable to shout at them to give up this idiotic endeavor.

How helpless it felt to simply lack the ability to stop something from happening.

“Prepare for disciplined fire! Pump these guys full of holes!”

“Ready to fire!”

The actions the Unified States mages took were perfectly neat and exactly according to training and the handbook. It was the best a unit with little live combat experience could do.

But when Drake glanced at the enemy movements, he had to sigh.

“…We’re not going to make it in time.”

The enemy mages charging at them from above were literally higher status. At a glance, it appeared they were striking in a scattered way, but they kept tight in their two-man cells. *How can they support one another so well diving from nine thousand five hundred at maximum combat speed?!*

Can disciplined fire even compete with…? Mid-thought, Drake’s eyes widened as he finally realized the Yankees’ fundamental error.

In disciplined fire, unit members aren’t able to move freely. In a marine mage battalion, individual mages can adjust their spacing at their own discretion, but the soldiers in this Yankee Battalion were all cadets until just recently. For them, the directive to maintain fire discipline will cause them to hold their ground, which will be fatal.

Holding their ground will mean sticking close together…

“No!”

Drake was about to order them to break, even if it meant overstepping his authority, but he was too late.

“Commence firing!”

With the unit leader’s order, the lines of fire shot out toward the enemy. They were astonishingly thin and feeble-looking for a force of two battalions. At that moment, Drake knew the enemy could infer the level of their training.

The enemy company returned fire still in strike formation, but…instead of the optical formulas you would expect in a highly mobile battle, they used three rounds of simple explosion formulas, optimal for shock and damage. It should have been possible to laugh them off as an attack that would never connect, but for the bunched-up Yankee Battalion, it was a different story.

The units’ internal communications filled with screams, and the panic rapidly swelled. To the commander and noncommissioned officers who were supposed to be calming them down, it was obvious everyone wanted to flee.

“Shit! They took out a whole company with one attack! This is Pirate 01! It’s urgent. Yankee 01, Yankee 01! Please respond!”

Trying to pull things back together, Drake called over the wireless, but he already knew.

“…These bastards have cursed us! They made sure to decapitate with the first strike!”

They took out the chain of command to turn this into a chaotic dogfight. Even among imperial mage units, the Devil of the Rhine’s was specialized in decapitation tactics.

Vexingly, even if you know the logic of it, it’s a brutal move that is hard to defend against. If he glanced over, he could see the enemy company shredding the Yankee command structure to ribbons. The numeric advantage had been overturned like it was a joke.

If he was to attempt to describe the company, he would say it seemed to move as a single colony of sheer force. Though they were his enemy, he had to applaud them. The charging imperial mages hurled out formulas freely, displaying their might unchallenged as if they were all organically connected.

They were displaying skill he wasn’t sure if even his own unit of marine mages could pull off. But he couldn’t just stand there being impressed.

After all, they were getting their arses kicked in present tense. Drake didn't have the luxury of throwing out compliments.

"Yankee Battalion, all units! This is Pirate 01! I'm deeming Yankee 01 incapacitated! I'm taking emergency command!"

"Yankee 05 to Pirate 01, do you actually have any authority over us…?"

Drake was about to protest God's absurdity with all the words he could think of after such an obnoxious argument, but in the next moment, he was compelled to do the opposite.

"Lloyd, you idiot! Shut the hell up!"

There was still someone with a lick of sense. And he was higher ranking than the stubborn one. Drake wanted to praise God for this blessing among his curses.

"Yankee 03 to Pirate 01, roger that. What's your plan?"

"Our losses will be too big in a dogfight! Prepare to withdraw immediately!"

"Understood. You got that, right? All units, we withdraw! A temporary withdrawal! We'll take some distance and regroup! We can't afford to lose any more of you for nothing!"

Everyone was scattered, and the loss of their command chain had caused confusion. *But…at the very least, we still have numbers. Escape should be manageable enough.*

"All commanders, have your troops fall back! Newbies, run for it! Vets and commanders, prepare for a fighting retreat! Let your new recruits escape!"

That was all Drake could hope for under the circumstances.

But the opposing side isn't about to let that happen.

"Commander, the enemy appears to be taking some distance!"

"…I was planning on mocking them for their weakness, but they changed gears pretty fast. They're quicker on their feet than I expected. I guess I misread them?" Tanya clicks her tongue and grumbles about how swiftly the enemy was able to regroup.

Since their discipline was so lousy for a Commonwealth unit, she expected a training unit or second-stringers. But having actually engaged, she's found that although they're weak, their chain of command thinks surprisingly fast. *Does that mean some vets or instructors are attached as support?*

"Major, what do you think we should do?"

"We can't pull out now! We'll just have to make the fight even more chaotic. Latch on and don't let go! If we allow them to take distance, then what was the point of coming in close?"

It's clear that despite her taking the initiative to swoop in and start a dogfight, the enemy is responding much more effectively. Almost none of them is hesitating about how to move… The simple decision to have the less trained mages flee and keeping the vets out as the rear guard is an optimal solution that reduces confusion.

It seems unlikely that they'll collapse out of shock and awe. Still, the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion improvises by concentrating their fire on the fleeing rookies to increase the chaos as much as they can.

It's not a bad call…aside from the fact that Tanya, in the vanguard, has to take on the most troublesome enemy.

"This is such a pain!"

Clicking her tongue in frustration, she manages to get in a couple of direct hits as they accelerate past one another. Then, following fast on their heels, she gets the backs of the enemy mages in range as they try to escape.

Tanya loads formula bullets to spray the careless mages with her submachine gun from a blind spot at an angle above them; they haven't even realized she is there. The assumption that she can't miss from so close turns out to be the beginning of her bad luck.

An enemy magic officer, defensive shell at full power, zooms into her line of fire. That will to shield their subordinates is commendable, and after Tanya's shots, the mages fire a few formulas in retaliation.

Luckily, they're shooting without really aiming, so she doesn't have to actively deal with them, but missing her initial mark was still a mistake.

“Ahhhhhh!”

The wide-eyed target looks to their slowly falling officer, then at Tanya, and with a shudder of rage, they charge in a way that can only be described as *obsessed*.

All she has on hand is a spent submachine gun. Meanwhile, the enemy mage coming at her with a battle cry has raised a magic blade.

It’s a dopey rush, but annoyingly, it also presents a danger to Tanya. She can request support, but Serebryakov is on the ground supporting the package.

Her subordinates are also split up in pursuit of other mages, so it doesn’t seem like she can rely on them as a source of nearby assistance. At this point, she’s stuck relying on herself in a hand-to-hand fight—which she hates. Tanya is about to manifest a magic blade even though it’s the last thing she wants to do, when she realizes something.

“Agh, this reminds me of that one awful time!”

When was that? What crosses her mind is that horrible experience where some apparent marine mages on direct support duty brought a fight into close quarters up in the Entente Alliance. Under the circumstances, getting into a bayonet fight would make it harder to move just by virtue of having someone riding her tail.

Back then she resolved it with her bayonet, but letting past experience influence you too much is a bad move. Her submachine gun doesn’t have a bayonet anyhow, but she’s really not keen on getting into a serious fencing match either way.

In that case… Having changed her mind, Tanya moves briskly. Promptly ejecting the empty magazine, she throws it at the enemy mage. The moment her opponent assumes a passive defensive position, unsure what the projectile is, Tanya grins: *You’re mine.*

The mage is caught off guard when nothing happens and Tanya speeds up and charges, wielding the wooden butt of her gun—a bayonet drill trick.

She sends her stock on an accelerated visit to the mage’s abdomen.

“Guh…”

Judging from the groan and the feeling in her hands, she’s definitely broken some bones. Any normal person would die right there…but apparently, it wasn’t quite enough against a mage with a defensive shell up. As she’s thinking what a pain close-quarters fights are, she finally makes out her opponent’s face.

The agonized gasps for oxygen are higher pitched than she would expect.

When she looks, she finds a young woman, not yet of age. Tanya somewhat regrets slamming the butt of her gun, wooden though it may be, into the woman’s abdomen.

But it’s just the way of the battlefield.

This would be the time to say, *You shouldn’t have come here.*

Once you’re in your gear and out on the battlefield, there’s no difference between a man and a woman. Kill the enemy or be killed.

Of course, Tanya’s unreserved personal opinion is that if there’s a provision for women and children, she wants it applied to herself.

Okay, this hand-to-hand combat is a pain, but I’ll take some distance and… As she’s thinking this, Tanya finally realizes the serious impact that single blow had on her opponent.

The enemy soldier gapes at the submachine gun Tanya thrust out at her.

Such a change has come over her that it’s hard to imagine she was full of fighting spirit only a moment ago. It’s such a surprise that, for just a second, Tanya doesn’t understand what the other girl is doing. But experience doesn’t let her down. Though her mind hesitates, her body remembers what to do when the enemy stops moving.

Tanya is so used to fighting that her arms and legs disregard her brain’s confusion; they know what to do—it’s simple: She slams in a fresh magazine and efficiently moves the first shot into the chamber.

Even with a submachine gun’s bloom problems, at this distance an attack should connect even if you’re shaken or confused.

“Good-bye, I guess?”

“Y-y-you’re—!”

Aiming at the enemy soldier who is saying some shit, she pulls the trigger. The rhythmic noises of the mechanisms and the shots themselves ring throughout the air, and a beat later, the bullets that connect pierce the mage’s protective film. But even though some of them smash into her defensive shell and bits of blood and flesh form a red flower blooming in the sky, it’s not enough.

One look, with her experience, tells her it’s not fatal.

“Tch, you’re a tough one.”

I emptied a whole magazine and couldn’t fatally injure her. Is it because I underestimated her defensive shell? Or does this submachine gun just not pack that much punch? Clicking her tongue, Tanya takes some distance.

“01, down and to your right!”

At the same time, when she twists around according to her subordinate’s shout, she sees an enemy mage about to cast an optical sniping formula. Virtually by instinct, Tanya performs evasive maneuvers and checks out the rest of the area.

“That’s enough! I won’t let you kill them! I won’t!”

A solo enemy is approaching with a scream. Is the idea to assist in the escape by distracting me? Formula deployment speed is average, but the aim and density speak volumes about what a talented shot this mage is. I suppose the choice of an optical sniping formula is admirable under these circumstances, as well. Indeed, with the two sides mixed up in a dogfight, being worried about hitting the wrong person is the correct tactic. *But…* Tanya grins.

But they’re fighting under different conditions. All Tanya has to do is take out the enemies, but the other one has to bend over backward to protect these two burdens.

This officer is textbook perfect—overly so.

After nimbly dodging, she counters immediately. She forms and casts an explosion formula with no hesitation. When she sees the blast swallow the enemy soldier trying to go for cover, she’s certain of the result. On top of losing

the signature, the body is falling headfirst. The officer is definitely powerless.

Tanya turns to set her sight back on the mage she didn't get to finish off before, but she realizes she's lost her target.

Either she descended or fell, but…it didn't feel like she had killed her. In fact, she was a better mage than Tanya had expected.

"Tough and quick to run. I really wanted to finish her."

The main assumption you can make of a talented mage who survives the battlefield is that they make it back alive and gain experience; that's only a matter of course.

The fish that got away can grow to be unexpectedly big. Tanya has to admit that she feels regret—in all sorts of ways. *What a waste.*

But she can feel bitter for only so long. *So I couldn't take her out*—Tanya clicks her tongue—*Guess I missed a point.* She sighs and shakes her head.

"We're going down! Any longer than this and we're stuck in a swamp. Prepare to pull out!"

At that point, Tanya's escaped prey had been shelved in her mind.

It's important to cut your losses.

As a commander, Tanya can quickly switch gears to considering the status of her unit. At a glance, it seems her troops are still fighting hard…but anyhow, it's an aerial battle. Aerial battles last only a few minutes and fatigue you so much more than you could ever imagine happening in a land battle. And fatigue rapidly increases the frequency of mistakes.

"Be aware of your limits! All units, if you drop out, it will be next to impossible to take care of you! Cover for each other in your pairs and get ready to withdraw!"

The situation being such that it is, they can't get out so easily, but neither can they stick around. That's what delaying combat is all about.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, 01! The unit has succeeded in getting the package safely off the ground! The package is now withdrawing at full speed!"

“Great! We’re pulling out, too! Band together quickly, and let’s cover one another as we go!”

So when Tanya finally receives the much-anticipated mission success notice, she decides it’s time to withdraw.

“The mission’s accomplished! Any further combat is too much risk! All companies, leave your parting gifts now! Give them two rounds of your explosion formula at max output!”

Upon receiving the order, her troops scatter smoke and noise—less to hit the enemy than to slow their pursuit—and skedaddle.

“Withdraw! We’re not picking up any dropouts!”

“Any numbskull who would drop out now isn’t a member of my battalion!”

“Huh? Are you telling us not to pick up any pets?”

“Right, you’ll have to put it back where you found it!”

The bantering unit is the very definition of elated. As for their status, no losses. All that needs to be taken care of is a written explanation for why they jettisoned their heavy gear and anti–surface strike equipment.

She can probably foist that fight on Galba Control.

Well, Tanya thinks optimistically, *I should call it a win that we learned something about combat rescue missions in enemy territory.*

A mage unit can perform anti-surface attacks as well as fish out any downed friendlies. In a way, you can almost say we pioneered a new realm of mage operation.

“Troops, it’s fine to enjoy yourselves, but cut the chatter! Withdraw, withdraw!”

“”””Yes, ma’am!”””””

Mary Sue experienced true hatred for the first time that day.

It hurt to fall to the ground.

“…Dad’s…”

It hurt more to be shot.

“…That was Dad’s gun.”

But compared to the pain in her heart… Compared to the overwhelming hatred…

“…She…she killed him!”

Mary Sue would never forget her. The gun that she gave her father… She thought it must have been lost the day he died…

…His hands were so warm.

It should have been held in those hands.

But instead, of all people, an imperial soldier…that devil was brandishing it!

“How dare you shoot that gun?! How could you? How could you? I gave it to my dad, and you…you!”

Dear God, why…?

“I’ll never forgive her. Not ever, not her!”

Dear God, please give me strength…

…Please give me strength to kill that devil.

[chapter]

VI

Operation Door Knocker

The Federation is a rotting door.
Kick it down.

— The Imperial Army General Staff —

[chapter] VI Operation Door Knocker

JUNE 25, UNIFIED YEAR 1926, A GENERAL STAFF RECUPERATION FACILITY ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF THE IMPERIAL CAPITAL

A military facility under the jurisdiction of the General Staff on the outskirts of the imperial capital… In this quiet, peaceful corner of the world, Lieutenant Colonel Tanya von Degurechaff is engaged in the desk work she had always dreamed of as rear personnel.

She's working on the combat skill research report from the aerial battle in the west they'd been fighting just the other day. The law of this world is for everyone to do what they are suited to, and it's Tanya's fervent wish to perform analysis in the rear.

To make that dream come true, she'll probably have to rely on her results for all sorts of organizations and keep the focus on them.

I'll get those results and obtain my place in the rear. As the first step, I'm achieving some things in the Strategic Research Office. Bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, she's spending yet another day sorting out paperwork in the office that has been temporarily assigned to her.

From Tanya's perspective, the Empire is currently *surrounded on all sides*.

Apparently, to our beloved imperial subjects and the great intellects of Supreme Command, it looks like we're taking one step forward for every step back…but I think the prescriptions on their glasses are off. Tanya strongly recommends swapping out those eyeballs as well, if they can't look directly at reality.

It's true that the Imperial Army is maintaining the lines in high spirits.

But does no one have the good sense to point out that being able to hold the lines is a whole different dimension from being able to win the war?

With a sigh, she picks up the mug she'd abandoned, and as she drinks the cold coffee, she makes a bitter face—*the coffee's all gone downhill, too.*

Currently, she's at a General Staff recuperative facility. For better or worse, the General Staff hangs on to its aristocratic tastes, so they don't stock ersatz coffee.

But the imports must have slowed to a trickle. With the Commonwealth Navy and the remnants of the Republican Navy controlling the sea, there probably isn't much that can be done…but if all we can get are these old, flavorless beans, it says a lot about the caffeine situation in the Empire.

The quality of the coffee we've been able to get has decreased year over year since the fighting began. Surely this is the most eloquent barometer of the state of the war. And in reality, year over year our enemies are only getting stronger.

For instance, the increased presence of the Unified States in the west is something we can't ignore. As for evidence that the difficulty of getting good coffee beans is their fault, take the regular army forces calling themselves a voluntary army that is basically made up of the Unified States vanguard.

Tanya was out there with fists flying like she meant to smash them with her coffee grudge, but finding them more powerful than expected, she was forced to acknowledge a brewing crisis.

But setting aside the General Staff's thoughts, Supreme Command doesn't understand the gravity of the situation. She prepared an official report with all the details and particulars and sent it in marked "urgent," but the response has been awfully muted.

It seems they're underestimating things, and their ignorance makes Tanya want to cradle her head in despair.

Being dense can be useful depending on the situation. But in the Empire's current one, it's not so great. If we continue to put up with this as it is, we'll be boiled frogs in no time.

"Sheesh," Tanya has to grumble.

Turning my attention to my personal situation, I'd like to be happy that Tanya's been promoted, but irritatingly enough, it's difficult to wholeheartedly enjoy.

No, a win is a win. There's no doubt about that. *Unit Usage and Operational Maneuvers in the Current War* (which she wrote based on the mobile battles in the south, the initial maneuvers in response to the situation in the east, and the surveys and other research she did in the air battle in the west) was accepted without a hitch, and both that and her promotion to magic lieutenant colonel were filled with the joy of hard work paying off.

Although it's unofficial, she's also received word from Lieutenant General von Zettour, along with his praise, that he looks forward to her participation in the newly established joint project between the Service Corps and Operations, the General Staff Strategic Research Office.

So all Tanya can do is hope that they can win or at least avoid a fatal defeat.

Defeated nations don't have much use for high-ranking soldiers and military careers, aside from in mercenary corporations. Tanya's been spending her precious time polishing her military record. In order to not waste this human capital investment, she hopes the Imperial Army will hang in there.

Much of that hope is placed in the next leader of the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion. So far there haven't been any instructions about a successor…but probably it will end up being Captain Weiss, like she suggested previously. The only potential issue is his rank.

He's been advancing at a pretty quick clip, too. According to the Imperial Army system, he'd have to be promoted to major to take command of the battalion…but apparently, they need a little time.

In Tanya's case, General von Zettour used a loophole in the system to promote her to major, ostensibly for forming the battalion. I suppose they can't use the same trick too many times.

They're not very flexible. Tanya sighs at her desk. She'd like to complain —*There are too many people trying to hold you back*—but she suppresses the thought.

That said, staying commander of the battalion a bit longer, at least in name, and letting Weiss collect more experience will help me avoid any griping about his promotion pace from the desk-work group in the rear, too.

Tanya stays on top of the necessary groundwork even though it's a pain.

Still, it's not a bad gig.

Having achieved a measure of success in the western aerial battle and so on, the members of the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion are resting in General Staff lodgings in the capital per standard rotation.

Since they're lucky enough to report directly to the General Staff, her subordinates are living it up in a recuperation facility that normally only staff officers get to use.

As for Tanya herself, until the General Staff finishes refereeing her paper, *Unit Usage and Operational Maneuvers in the Current War*, she's just filing the documents that come in from the Strategic Research Office, desk work that anyone could do, apart from needing security clearance.

Of course, you can't discount the element of trust. Glancing down at the papers spread across her desk, she sees they are all classified documents stamped "top secret, to be handled with caution."

She's glad she has access to these secrets.

Since she can deepen her knowledge of the Imperial Army's condition and foreign affairs by analyzing all the intelligence collected by the General Staff on each front, it's a pretty interesting job, and Tanya enjoys it. Best of all, unlike frontline duty, she gets to be done at quitting time each day.

Free from night interception patrol missions and going out to meet invaders at all hours, she relishes tranquil, safe sleep each night. To Tanya, keeping regular hours is the first step toward the return of normalcy.

And a proper lifestyle rhythm makes her office work fruitful.

For example, most recently, she'd been working on a booklet aimed at specialists titled *The Origins of Federation External Action*.

To outsiders, it may be surprising, but those tainted by Communism and its

party's ideology are in fact bigger believers in power politics than their ideology, and this pamphlet takes a critical look at that. I didn't have very high hopes for it, since given the subject matter, I figured only experts or people in diplomacy would look at it, if that, but apparently, it's had a great reception from all sorts of people, including within the Imperial Army.

Tanya is relieved that it seems her work is being properly acknowledged. She may be confident in her desk work and analysis abilities, but it's great to be able to rack up accomplishments.

Yes, I intend to do desk work for the rest of my life. The law of this world really is for everyone to do what they are suited to. Every organization should prioritize talent management.

After returning from the western battle lines, this is really almost like a vacation…but Tanya looks steadily through the documents as part of her voluntary service—although she's thinking all along that if failure is unavoidable, she can save up her assets in preparation for a worst-case scenario and consider defection.

But it should probably be said, the lines are apparently managing to hang in there. Luckily, according to reports from the front.

Analysis of the attrition ratio bears out that they're in a very good situation—overwhelmingly superior, even.

Said ratio is being maintained at seven to one.

And, I may add, this statistic is being measured according to rigorous standards, nothing like those of the absurdly inflated, sloppy Formosa Air Battle[17] reports.

General Staff officers are going there in person, and before worrying about our own attrition, they're estimating enemy losses by speaking with prisoners and counting actual corpses.

Even if soldiers grow on trees in the Federation, this rate of attrition has to be a heavy blow.

So Tanya trusts that if the current situation continues, victory isn't unachievable, and they won't lose.

If there's anything to worry about, it's the Unified States, the world's biggest weapons stockpile, attacking from behind.

Fortunately or unfortunately, imperial industry has a good relationship with Unified States industry despite being rivals in certain cutting-edge fields. It would be great if their industrial sector opposed the war, but in a military-industrial complex, industry doesn't have as much influence on politics as the world at large tends to think.

On top of that, while the idea that the munitions industry makes bank during a war is a partial misunderstanding… The truth of it needs to be confronted. Specifically, the problem is that even if the corporation as a whole is running a huge deficit, individual employees and their clients in the military will make bank.

Just the thought that they need to anticipate such people trying to incite participation in the war is enough to make Tanya gloomy.

The Empire has the fight against the Federation in the east as well as the confrontation in the west with the Commonwealth, which it hasn't managed to soundly solve yet. The Unified States boasts industrial productivity worthy of being called an arsenal; it joining on the enemy side when the Empire already has two fronts open would entail despair and only despair.

The Empire's foreign policy task is to peacefully soothe the States before its industry shifts into a wartime posture—even if the diplomatic effort takes a lot of kowtowing. I'd like to suggest that we do whatever it takes to appease public opinion there and buy time till it all breaks down.

After all, the Unified States is naturally a democracy. Democratic countries go to war only when they're really angry. In other words, if we make the Unified States mad, that's it. Conversely, as long as we don't anger voters, we can avoid a war.

She intends to make an argument regarding the Empire's strategic diplomacy with that as her main point in her next paper, but as she's taking her notes, she's interrupted by an unexpected visitor.

"Colonel von Degurechaff, may I?"

“Sure, come on in, Captain Weiss.”

Captain Weiss has essentially been put in command of the combat unit as of a few days ago.

Officially, the vice commander is still her subordinate after she foisted the unit and its issues off on him, but she’s given him much of the discretion.

He used to be the second-in-command.

The hand-off has been going so smoothly that Tanya can’t imagine what he’s come to ask her so urgently while they’re on leave in the rear on a personnel rotation.

She’s already told him to take charge as if he was in command.

Tanya openly explained to the General Staff that she was going to leave command up to her subordinate during their recuperation and reorganization period as part of his education. They approved it, so in a way, it was an official trial period.

Tanya hasn’t spared any pains to get him recognized early on as her successor, so really… *What is he here to see me about?*

“Sorry to bother you, Colonel. I came with a request.”

“For me? I’ll certainly cooperate in whatever way I can. Or are you here to tell me not to poach any of your men? Lieutenant Serebryakov is my adjutant, but I don’t plan on pulling anyone else out of the battalion.”

Not to brag, but the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion is an elite unit. Tanya built it that way.

With their combat experience, they’re seasoned vets with nothing to be ashamed of as direct reports to the General Staff. Surely, they’ll continue to fight with all their elite bravery.

And as far as Tanya knows, the internal conflicts or antagonism that tend to be the biggest problems in units such as this one are virtually nonexistent.

In a nutshell, it’s a very cozy battalion.

“Colonel von Degurechaff, I’m very grateful for all your kindness. But although

my request is related to that, it's something quite different."

"So then, what is it? It can't be that you want the instructor unit to teach, can it? I guarantee you're skilled enough."

Weiss is early in his career yet an old hand with the rare experience—in the Imperial Army—of having fought on every front. And although he's been under Tanya, his experience running the unit is the real deal.

He bows with a thank-you, but as far as she can tell from his expression, he was trying to bring up something difficult and couldn't find the words.

"Captain Weiss, this is you and me. If it's something within my authority, I'll spare no assistance. If it's hard to say, I'm not going to force you, but…I hope you can tell me what's on your mind."

So Tanya, as a good boss, takes it upon herself to face up to her subordinate's worries with sincerity.

Tanya is generous enough to help if she can.

When the trust is there, that is.

As a boss, there are some subordinates who are worth any amount of your time and some who aren't worth even one second. The former are those promising talents like Weiss, who think for themselves but still ask for advice. The latter are the idiots who make calls on their own without even reading what's in the handbook.

"You're too kind."

"You're an outstanding vice commander. So what is it?"

Therefore, Tanya von Degurechaff, who takes a liking to her subordinates based solely on their functionality, can be affectionate with them. Of course, it's kindness in the sense that she's not fool enough to shoot down her capable subordinates' fantastic ideas.

But it's true that she's kinder than you would expect. Knowing that, Weiss finally makes up his mind to speak.

"Please have the 203rd be a part of your Kampfgruppe. All of us in the battalion wish to continue serving under you."

His eyes—*Please, Colonel*—as he looks at her are earnest. She can tell he's not joking, but…she still finds herself asking for clarification.

"Kampfgruppe? Sorry, Captain, I know nothing about that. What's this Kampfgruppe you want to join?"

What can he possibly be talking about? Tanya cocks her head because she has no idea. She's supposed to be assigned to the Strategic Research Office in the rear. She's honored that they're volunteering to fight under her…

But Tanya has no intention of going to the front lines, and she doesn't see leading a Kampfgruppe anywhere on her horizon. Even if they volunteer, all she can do is say, *Sorry, but I don't understand.*

Frankly, Tanya's path shouldn't cross with the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion's.

"Actually, Captain, I'd like to ask you: Is this Kampfgruppe the one I proposed in my report? The General Staff is still reading that paper. And it was just one of many suggestions. Are you sure you're not misunderstanding something?"

"Don't worry, Colonel. I won't leak it."

Tanya's stance is to thoroughly deny it, but Weiss is apparently convinced she's being strict about maintaining confidentiality. By the time he is nodding and saying, "I'm a soldier, too, you know, Colonel. I don't mean to be impertinent, but I can imagine the sort of position you're in," Tanya is at a loss for words.

Weiss's head is bobbing as if to say, *You're so strict about your duties, Colonel, so I'm not surprised you would keep this under wraps*, while Tanya is simply bewildered that he's interpreting it as a matter of confidentiality.

Where could this bizarre story have come from…? It happens just as she is about to ask him.

God plays a prank on her right then.

One of the security guards dispatched by the General Staff to the recuperation facility calls for her with a knock. "What is it?" Tanya prompts him to enter and the young soldier briskly alerts her that she's being called.

"Colonel, General von Zettour is on the phone."

“What? I’m coming. Sorry, Captain, I’ll be back in a bit.”

Tanya’s “one ring” instinct kicks in, and she leaps out of the office. She practically runs down the hall to the communications room and picks up the receiver.

Since there isn’t much chance of their being tapped, the General Staff employs telephones for communications between facilities.

Well, it’s not as if every desk has one. Still, the receiver is one familiar to a corporate warrior. Tanya apologizes for keeping the general waiting, and Zettour laughs that there’s no need to.

“All right, Colonel, I’ll get straight to the point. Your report’s been approved. The General Staff Strategic Research Office will probably implement your suggestions wholesale.”

Tanya replies that it’s a great honor, and at that moment, she feels wonderful indeed. A boss who gets it, having her work properly valued—it’s almost too much.

“Therefore, Colonel von Degurechaff, both the Service Corps and the Operations Division feel that you should be the one to do the research you’ve proposed.”

That’s exactly what I want. *Oh, the joy of working full-time on investigative research!* Tanya envisions a fist pump in her mind, but externally she exhibits only a prudent nod. *The groundwork I laid paid off.*

“This is only an unofficial notice, but…the General Staff has approved of you working full-time on investigative research.”

“Thank you, General von Zettour. I intend to give this job everything I have.”

“Great. I have high hopes of the proposals you outlined in *Unit Usage and Operational Maneuvers in the Current War*. If you can verify them with even more rigorous investigations, I’ll spare nothing in reflecting those accomplishments across the entire army. Work hard, Colonel von Degurechaff.”

“Of course, sir,” she responds energetically, which is precisely why the next words out of his mouth freeze her solid.

“For the location, I’m thinking the eastern lines. Knowing you, I’m sure you’d prefer the familiar southern continent, but…this time I’ll be the one to apologize to General von Romel. The east is strained and could use a Kampfgruppe that can perform. I want to send you back to the eastern front.”

For a brief moment, Tanya begins to sorely regret even picking up the receiver.

There’s some kind of misunderstanding. There is a fatal discrepancy between my wishes and the General Staff’s plan. I sensed it before, but I thought I told Zettour multiple times that I wanted to work on investigative research *in the rear*.

Instead, I’ll be doing combat verification on the front lines?! Those are orders I wish I could have gone my whole life without hearing. No transfer to any branch office could be as shocking as this.

I survived that pain-in-the-ass inquiry and two months of fieldwork in the west. And my heart’s desire for rear service was supposed to be finally fulfilled for a while this month. But then I get reassigned after just two weeks?!

Do you mean to tell me the General Staff doesn’t know why Personnel prohibits abrupt changes in orders?!

A rage she mustn’t put into words wells up inside her. Even Tanya has a hard time controlling it.

But she manages to keep herself from shouting into the phone. She may be gripping the receiver abnormally tight, but her ostensible attitude is the perfect self-control of a soldier who accepts transfer orders despite not wanting them.

“…If it’s an order, I naturally have no objections. Who do I report to?”

Even if they don’t want to go, if that’s what they’re told to do, soldiers have no right to refuse.

She’s not allowed to say, *I can investigate from the rear*, or, *Don’t treat me as a handyman!*

But Tanya isn’t taking the crisis facing her seriously enough.

Her thoughts turned to molasses at the point she was told she would be sent

back to the east.

She misses the significance of Zettour uttering the horrible phrase “a Kampfgruppe that can perform.”

Once told to go, soldiers by nature don’t have the right to refuse. They talk about the “silent navy”; well, Tanya must obey the regulations of the silent army.

And Zettour keeps talking on the other end of the phone as if she’ll be happy to hear it. Lately she hasn’t been able to tell what’s on the general’s mind, so she can’t quite figure it out.

“You should be glad. We’re letting you form a new Kampfgruppe.”

Glad?…is Tanya’s true feeling on the matter.

I didn’t want to go to the front lines in the first place.

To Lieutenant Colonel Tanya von Degurechaff, there is no reason she should voluntarily throw herself onto the forward-most line. My earnest wish is to never set one foot outside the civilized and comparatively safe rear.

No, I’m not averse to joining the fight against Communism—that’s simply the duty of every good citizen. But. *I do have to wonder if I need to proactively take risks…* For one rare moment, Tanya indulges in escapism.

Because, I should probably say… Crushing Commies feels good, but I’d like someone else to take the risks.

And even if I’ve relied on others, I feel like I’ve contributed to the nation in a way that is beyond reproach.

“A Kampfgruppe?”

But Tanya is a soldier and a member of an organization, so she swallows her discontent—even though it would take an entire day to vent all her protests. That won’t help her get the orders withdrawn. Tanya is wise enough to find something constructive in this.

For the moment, couldn’t “forming” a “new Kampfgruppe” be an excuse to buy time? Remembering what happened when she formed her battalion, Tanya manages to be optimistic.

“Yes. We’re going to let you implement the Kampfgruppe doctrine you proposed in your report in the field. Show us results. As long as you make appropriate use of the unit, I’ll respect your discretion as much as possible.”

Ohhh. That’s when Tanya understood the cause of the discrepancy.

Zettour let her play around in the west for two months not because he was going to reassign her to the rear…but to have her lay the groundwork for performing investigative research in combat.

And then Tanya proposed that the Empire should form Kampfgruppen in her paper, *Unit Usage and Operational Maneuvers in the Current War*. It was full of lessons about how effectively forces could be used based on Germany’s World War II precedent for integrated operation.

Well, that must have made Lieutenant Generals von Zettour and von Rudersdorf happy. What an excellent pair. They must have found the proposal so wonderful, they got it into their heads to run an experiment in live combat.

Damn you.

If this was going to happen, maybe I should have turned the report in later.

Whoever said it’s no use crying over spilled milk sure knew what they were talking about. Tanya sincerely regrets her relative inattention lately and difficulty reading Zettour’s intentions.

…Next time I want to do better.

“We’re making your old crew, the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion, the key unit. This goes without saying, then, but we’re not taking them away from you, so no need to worry about that. We’re giving you a measure of discretion in personnel choices for the infantry battalion and artillery company, as well. I’ll send over candidates later, along with your official orders.”

Well, I understand what Captain Weiss was talking about now, Tanya thinks with a look of comprehension on her face as she acknowledges what Zettour is saying.

If I have to be stationed on the front lines, then being able to use my group of competent veterans is welcome news. If the higher-ups are being considerate in

that way, well, it means I'm receiving consideration. I suppose I should be grateful. For now, though, I need to figure out how sensible they are.

"If you don't mind my asking, what's the formation period? How many months do I have?"

"Sorry, Colonel. I'd like to explain, but per regulations, I can't over the phone."

"S-so?"

"I'll be straight with you. I must inform you I can't get you any time. And I can't accept any arguments, objections, or complaints. I hope you understand."

Tanya replies that there's nothing she can do if it's confidential but then freezes upon hearing what Zettour says next.

"Five days."

Yes, the sound reaching her ears petrifies her, if just for a moment.

She can't understand. She doesn't want to understand. So naturally, the urge to try never rises.

"Huh? I beg your pardon, General von Zettour, but what did you just say?"

"I said, 'Five days.' I'm really leaning on your skill here. Form the unit in the capital within five days and be in the eastern military district within five more. When we get the Kampfgruppe on the front will depend on the conditions on the lines, but we're planning on somewhere about three weeks from now at the latest, around July sixteenth."

She thought for a moment she had misheard, but when she asked him to repeat himself, the answer didn't change.

Behold, the rare sight of Rusted Silver in shock.

Well, whether someone would be happy to see that or not is a delicate issue that depends on their humanity.

…It's probably not very fun for anyone to interpret the psyche of a monster in shock.

In any case, the difficulty of the task has shaken Tanya—violently.

Five days… Only five days?!

And then to be sent into combat three weeks from now—what are they smoking? But “at the latest” must mean that getting sent into frontline service almost immediately upon arrival is also a possibility. In that case, we could literally be in combat in ten days. That’s practically no time.

To round them up, ship them out, and get them into battle in a few short days is a virtually impossible standard. No matter how you look at them, these orders are completely and utterly unreasonable. Anyone getting them would doubt their ears.

They would have to.

She is sure that any officer in the Imperial Army would react the way she is.

“General, if this is what you’re ordering, I’ll do everything I can, but…”

There’s no way we’ll make it on time. This isn’t just difficult; it’s impossible.

You could say that her implicit request that the orders be withdrawn is a peaceful protest.

Let’s set aside the question of whether or not she is really being told to build a Kampfgruppe for combat on the forward-most line. What Tanya wants to ask is exceedingly simple: *How am I even supposed to form this new type of unit?*

“Colonel, I realize I’m asking the impossible, but you yourself wrote that ‘Kampfgruppen are formed in an ad hoc way, and it would be desirable to do some investigative research into their swift formation.’ I want to know how fast the General Staff can put together units during wartime. Of course, since I know it’s unreasonable, I’ll treat this as an experiment and go a bit easy on you. Just do whatever it takes to get it done.”

“…Understood.”

Unfortunately, however, Zettour’s response over the phone to the counterargument Tanya was clinging to is a military order that brooks no misunderstanding.

In the organizational structure of the army, once an order is given, it invokes absolute authority.

After all, the military is the most strictly hierarchical organization in the world. It's great that you don't have to listen to your subordinate's complaints, but when an order comes down from the top, there's no room for your opinions, either.

It's easy to be the one giving the orders, but as the one having to swallow my sarcasm and protests, I want to cry. The restriction of freedom makes me want to scream, *This is why military states are so— Argh!*

The only good thing you can say is that it's better than the Commies. *That said.* Tanya is already bracing herself. She has to carry out her duty under the given conditions. If that's the case, then instead of crying, let's get to work with positivity.

If you have to do something you don't want to do, it's much more constructive to get it over with.

"Your establishment ceremony will be six days from now. It's a completely new unit. Congratulations—this will be the first Kampfgruppe reporting directly to the General Staff."

Zettour continues, saying the new unit, with the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion as its core, will be borrowing units from other areas. In other words, the General Staff will select appropriate units, which makes Tanya feel a bit more at ease.

Tanya indicates her understanding, and Zettour says he nearly forgot something and informs her in an administrative tone.

"The code name is Salamander. So you'll be commanding the Salamander Kampfgruppe. Officially, it's called the 'experimental Kampfgruppe under the General Staff,' but that's boring, so we decided on a code name."

"That's certainly a dramatic name. And associated with the element of fire. It sounds strong."

Tanya replies that she is pleased with the brave-sounding name, but what she's thinking about is the combination of that name plus the short amount of time.

…Is this some irony of history? For some reason, the words *People's Fighter*

Plane come to mind.

And the bad feeling she has turns out to be right on.

“Exactly. I trust you, but we really do need some results. Your troops are the only veterans. Everyone else is newbies with a little bit thicker skin. Make it happen.”

She doesn’t even have time to *Yes, sir*. Having apparently said everything he wanted to say, Zettour just hangs up.

For a few moments, Tanya stands there holding the receiver, wishing she could despair, but instead employs her iron spirit to confirm what she needs to do.

If there’s no time, she needs to start now—which means she doesn’t have a moment to spare. She hurries back to her office where her former subordinate is waiting and decides to put on a devilish smile.

“…Good news, Captain Weiss. Permission has been granted. I’ll be taking you with me to hell for a while.”

“I shall humbly accompany you, Kampfgruppe Commander!” Weiss salutes with an exhilarated smile. He’s a damn fine subordinate—one of that rare breed who have a wealth of experience and can be trusted. Unfortunately, he’s also a war nut who proactively volunteers to go to the battlefield for frontline service.

If such a promising talent as this loves combat so much, it has to be something fundamental about the Empire’s systems and culture.

Ahhh. It’s sad, but reality is cruel.

There may be a devil in this world, but there is no benevolent god.

NOVEMBER 28, UNIFIED YEAR 1980, NEW YAWK

Hello, everyone. Or perhaps, good evening?

This is WTN Special Correspondent Andrew.

Today is Black Friday, and I’m coming to you from New Yawk, where the Christmas sales battle is in full swing. It’s almost Christmas and just look at these crowds!

I'll be buying a whole mess of presents for my wife and kids, too. Honestly, I'd like to forget about my WTN duties and go shopping.

But sadly, I don't think my boss would approve of that. Instead, I'm here combining work and leisure. Naturally, our theme is the usual puzzle solving. No, just because it's Christmas doesn't mean we're doing anything differently.

Never fear. That said, have you ever wanted a funny little story to tell your kids? If you have, then the WTN Special Report Team recommends "The Salamander."

If your child isn't frightened by the usual Christmas threats of an elf's pranks on bad little kids, this should do the trick!

After all, this rumor is so sensational, even formidable soldiers fear it. I heard it from the fearless PMC personnel—who escorted us in the Middle East—as their number one fear!

That's how terrifying the legend of the Salamander is.

From what I heard, the Salamander is adorable and very clever. If you show it affection, it'll even get attached to you. Like a German shepherd, it can become a trustworthy member of the family.

Sometimes it begs or plays tricks, but apparently, everyone ends up overlooking those things. Of course, Mrs. Legen grew angry and screamed that it went too far, but…

Well, in the end, everyone doted on the Salamander. Because when it's even more reliable than a German shepherd, how could you not?

At some point, though, the Salamander's requests and pranks grew to be too much. But what do you think happened when no one was sympathetic to dependable Mrs. Legen, who had continued to angrily scold it the whole time?

That's right.

No one was able to stop the Salamander! Of course, the Salamander loved and cherished everyone.

But sadly, there was no one to teach it right from wrong.

So the Salamander never realized that everyone disliked it. Soon it had

exhausted everyone's patience.

But allow me to say, "Even so…"

Unfortunately, upon a closer look, the Salamander seemed very strong. It was like a German shepherd, after all.

Everyone started to wonder, *What should we do?*

The tale ends differently depending on who tells it.

But after hearing this story, parents can say this to their kids:

"Tom, aren't you being a bit of a Salamander?"

Incidentally, I asked the former soldier who told me this story, and he said the Salamander is actually children. Even soldiers have families. And I've heard that some of them who left their kids behind on the home front ended up spoiling them.

Yes, it must just be the perennial problem of parents around the world, these various worries about their children.

And so the moral of today's story is "Don't spoil your kids too much." Promise me you won't.

Now then, where did this legend come from?

You may be surprised to hear the answer is the battlefield.

It's a story that spread among soldiers during the Great War. But what is it about?

The truth seems to be, as just mentioned briefly, that soldiers on the front were thinking of their families at home. In other words, since they couldn't see their children, they ended up sending them too many presents and spoiling them.

So when the war ended and they went home, they were shocked to find their children transformed into total brats. And thus, we have anecdotes about the scolding of Salamander kids on the first Christmas after coming home.

Well, today we took a look at a timely story left to us from the war. I hope you can enjoy it when we take a bit of a different approach now and then.

Have a good day.

JUNE 27, UNIFIED YEAR 1926, GENERAL STAFF OFFICE MAIN BUILDING

Having swiftly relocated from the General Staff's recuperation facility to an office she was given in the main building in the capital, Tanya grapples with a sheaf of papers that spells out how not her way the situation is going.

She's been fearing Lieutenant General von Zettour's frightening remark about "newbies with a little bit thicker skin" but has been able to instinctively escape the terror temporarily by resolutely getting through all the procedures to set up the unit.

But now the moment when she must face that fear has arrived.

When First Lieutenant Grantz, whom she had sent running all over the General Staff office as a gofer, requests permission to enter, she is already prepared. When he quietly puts the envelope he has just received from the nearby Service Corps onto her desk, she realizes the foretold documents have arrived.

When Tanya opens the carefully sealed envelope, all her resolve is for naught, and her face stiffens.

For a moment, her white porcelainlike fingers tremble, and she stares at the list as if it's her sworn enemy.

What Grantz delivered was the list of units the General Staff had on hand and the personnel they could offer Tanya, which she had requested out of anxiety.

Considering how scared she was of Zettour's remark about thick-skinned newbies, she had braced herself for an awful allotment of troops. Well, she thought she had braced herself.

But when she actually takes a look, her readiness scatters to the wind.

"Of all the things…they could have given us…we get a newly formed second reserve infantry battalion with no combat experience and a company of replacement artillery?" she murmurs in a shaking voice. *Am I misreading it?* She stares down at the document, but the letters she sees don't change.

She's just barely able to control herself because Grantz is still standing by, but if she had her way, she would have ripped the list to shreds and hurled it into the wastepaper basket.

"W-we compromised on an armored unit…we compromised…but this is the newbie infantry battalion they give me?"

As far as she was told, the plan was to give the Salamander Kampfgruppe, with the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion as its key unit, a unit of infantry that could handle field engineer missions plus a company of supporting artillery. And despite being newly formed, they would be allotted an armored company.

Apparently, she has no choice in the matter. But it's pretty awful to be getting a newly formed pile of amateurs. As someone about to be flung into the east, notorious as a fierce fighting ground, she would like to protest. Even Grantz and the others she'd taken care of on the Rhine were trained before getting thrown in.

But these guys nowadays are drilled so quickly, "forced culturing" still seems too mild a metaphor.

"…This is not a joke."

She has an opinion or two, but having been told the war is bearing down on them, she has no choice but to accept things as they are. That's why she at least wanted decent infantry, but…from the document, it seems like that's out of the question.

Still, everything has limits, including how much one can tolerate.

The list in her hands is so awful that Tanya's graceful features warp as if she's been suddenly struck with a headache.

"This isn't funny! Infantry and artillery we can't even use for war?! I'm not even sure we could use them as shields! Have the General Staff officers mistaken me for some kind of recycling factory?!"

Grantz stands stiffly at attention next to her as she explodes, and his face twitches.

Well, it's no wonder. That's just how bad things are.

It's unclear whether this new unit will be of any use. On top of that, its core firepower, the replacement artillery, has ridiculously outdated guns. They probably scraped the bottom of the barrel for these guys.

Well, it's better than a completely new unit, but I'm still anxious about their gear and ability. Having thought that far, she can't find any point in thinking further.

She judges that anything more would just be griping. *Ah, I thought bankers were the ones who had to do legwork*, she mutters to herself as she stands up. But since she has no choice, she sets off to tough out the legwork of consulting with the General Staff about personnel.

I never thought I'd have to do this sort of thing in the army, she laments internally as she, accompanied by stiff-faced Grantz, makes a raid on the General Staff Equipment Section.

She grabs a group leader–class major who happens to be there and, while reproaching him for his easygoing work style, protests with a calm demeanor even as her resolve is unyielding.

To wit: "Unless we get the equipment we need to perform the General Staff's investigative research, we won't be able to meet their expectations."

Of course, not even Tanya wants to pick fights with staff in the rear. So though she protests, she keeps strict control of herself and doesn't deviate from proper etiquette.

…At least, not until the group leader says something he shouldn't have.

"You can say what you like, Colonel, but it's not as if we don't understand the hardship of the front. We always take great pains with our work, so I wish you would appreciate that. We do the best we can to issue equipment according to the quality of the troops."

The moment the major spouts that nonsense, relaxing on a sofa, drinking real coffee, Grantz—who is standing next to Tanya when she breathes an "Oh?"—unconsciously takes a step back. Later, he would whisper to the others that she had lost her temper.

"…What a terrific joke I've just heard."

It’s a bureaucrat’s reply, and not from an exhausted bureaucrat but an officer from the rear brimming with energy.

Tanya has a smile plastered on her face as a formality, but her tolerance has reached its boiling point. Casting off any semblance of politesse, her face goes expressionless, and she takes a step closer as she opens her mouth in a murderous rage.

“A battalion with no veterans?! If you’re saying that’s the best you can do, it would make more sense to replace you with a cat!”

Most of the personnel on the list are either reserves or brand-new recruits. The veterans who should be the key members pretty much all fall on the lowest level of the army’s evaluation scale. There are some NCOs who might be worth their salt, but they’ve only just recovered from their Rhine wounds.

Considering their decline in physical strength and how long they’ve been out of it, she’s pretty much at wits’ end. Honestly, at this rate, puppets to use as decoys would have been better.

“And the 15 cm guns may be 15 cm, but the old model? Not the new ones? That means their all-important range will be glaringly inferior. Maybe my battalion and the Equipment Section should have a live-ammo exercise?” Tanya continues, radiating waves of murder at the increasingly pale-faced Equipment Section major. “If we had a shoot-out, I think you’d get your shit together pretty quick!”

She can’t believe they were so superficial as to look only at the 15 cm and none of the other specs. If this idiot is going to say that was their best work, then to Tanya, they’re incorrigible slackers.

It’s insane to request someone to build up their firepower with old guns that have a short range. Tanya has too much experience suffering suppressive artillery fire on the Rhine, so a wave of bitterness is rising inside her at having a limit on how well they can compete when it comes to their own artillery.

Which is why, when they try to force this on her…

“Listen, Major. It’s a bit hard to take that from the numbskull hanging my unit and me out to dry with inferior equipment when he’s lounging like that!”

These guys from the rear who have never experienced a trench battle can't possibly understand the fear of being outranged.

"M-my apologies, Colonel, but we're doing our best to—"

"This is your best?! This isn't a joke. The Imperial Army General Staff doesn't need a mouth; it needs combat experience. The armored unit is a bit better. But IV Ds? On top of not packing much punch, those have weak armor!"

She openly bombards him with her anger. *Did he think I wouldn't understand anything about armored unit equipment?*

I can't believe he gave us the IV D tank—it's an old model already being used for training and security in the rear! Maybe if we were an instructor unit or a security squad, but for a unit that will be worked like horses out front on the pretext of investigative research, this is intolerable.

Tanya is getting posted to the forward-most line, not occupied territory. Maybe partisans won't bring out anti-tank guns and heavy artillery, but on the main lines, the enemy's big guns, air forces, and mages come out saying, *What can your armored troops do against us?*

"…Don't you have extra Gs like the ones they're using on the southern continent?"

If we don't at least get the current G model, we won't be able to do shit on the front lines. And luckily for Tanya, she received a personal letter from Corps Commander von Romel the other day.

What she heard from him was anger at the interruption of supplies and fear that the situation would only grow worse. And according to him, though the wear and tear on the tanks is minimal, they're in desperate need of fuel and ammunition.

But, he wrote, the Equipment Section won't change the ratio of tanks to other supplies. She had replied that bureaucratically it didn't make sense, but here we are. It's absolutely true.

"Please don't be unreasonable, Colonel! There aren't any extra supplies anywhere!"

The reply she receives is simple: There is no surplus. But Tanya knows that General von Romel refused two companies' worth of model Gs and said he wanted fuel.

"The Fifth Light Division on the southern continent owes me. I want their allotment of Gs. Send them the equivalent amount of fuel on their ship instead."

Tanya would be happy to get the equipment she needs. Romel would be happy to get the fuel he urgently needs. This is a proposal based on utilitarian logic that will make everyone happy.

Think about it. No one loses in this exchange. Only a Commie would refuse a deal like this. I can't understand an irrational refusal at all.

If humans slack off in their pursuit of happiness, then that's it for them.

"Do you mean that?! That's absurd! How many rules are you trying to make us break?"

Rule breaking? Tanya scoffs, thinking, *I'm sure you can manage to break any rule you want.* Contrary to what you might expect, if you look for the holes, rules are full of ways to justify your aims.

"Wait, maybe they're called the 211th Armored Division now. In any case, you should be able to give us the tanks on your discretion. I'll explain to General von Romel personally."

"If you can, then please do."

Who will be responsible for this? That is the look on the major's face as those words slip out of his mouth. *What a careless idiot.* Tanya smirks, seizing on his commitment.

"Oh? Then it's decided."

I can't believe he couldn't even manage an equivocal reply!

With a splendid grin, Tanya produces from her breast pocket a letter she has only just received from Romel.

"Excuse me, Colonel, but what's this?"

“It’s a personal letter, but that’s fine. I’ll let you read it, so give me what you’re supposed to.”

“Huh?”

Tanya thrusts the letter from the dear army corps commander she just said she would explain things to under the dazed numbskull’s nose.

When she’d received it the other day, she never dreamed she would use it like this. The connections you have can be handy in the most unexpected ways. Tanya reflects on how human society is ultimately about those connections, thankful for the one she has with General von Romel.

And since the major doesn’t seem to grasp the situation, Tanya is kind enough to read the letter to him.

“I’ll tell you what General von Romel said. ‘If they won’t make it here anyhow, I’d rather you use them.’ By the way, I propose allotting him some ammunition and fuel.”

Then she hits the stiffened major with her trump card.

“Deputy Director of the Service Corps General von Zettour has approved this idea, but…if you have a reason to reject it, I’d like to hear it.”

Being a little pushy is fine.

That’s what happens when you do what it takes.

Tanya brandishes the draft to which Lieutenant General von Zettour gave tacit approval, and she can see from the Equipment Section group leader’s frozen expression that he’s beginning to understand.

“Okay, let me confirm with you, Major. I’d really appreciate it if you’d understand and respect my request…”

It’s a request for a loan of firepower from the commander of a Kampfgruppe who reports directly to General Staff with support of the Service Corps boss, already agreed to by the army corps commander.

“O-of course, on behalf of the Equipment Section, I can say that we’d like to cooperate as much as possible, but, Colonel.”

“‘But, Colonel’?”

Is something wrong? Tanya asks with her gaze. In response, the Equipment Section group leader is disappointingly silent. Since he doesn’t have a counterargument, Tanya senses she can push him around as long as she watches to make sure he’s obeying.

Swindling a company of model Gs out of a manager in the bureaucratic Equipment Section shouldn’t be a problem. At least, she cleared that hurdle.

But then she has a thought.

I’m never going to get along with this guy. In that case, maybe it makes sense to treat this as a zero-sum game and get as much as I can out of him.

“While I’m here…”

There is only action. After all, asking doesn’t cost anything.

“I’d like to request your assistance regarding the loot we seized from the Republic in the big push in the West. There were tanks, weren’t there?”

“Huh? Oh, er, well, yes.”

“So we should have armored vehicles in reserve, right? I’d like those, too. Since they’re just stolen goods, anyhow, it’s not like the army will use them officially, so it should be possible.”

“Y-you’ll have to excuse me, Colonel von Degurechaff, but you already have infantry and an armored unit. I can’t give you additional armored vehicles…”

Unfortunately for the major insisting that he can’t break the rules, Tanya is versed in all their details. This guy’s declaring it can’t be done with the bravado of one who just cut off a demon’s head. I feel bad for him.

“I’d like you to fix the self-propelled guns. Regulations state that weapons can be repaired on the spot with the commander’s authorization. The armored vehicles aren’t for the infantry but to improve the outdated guns we have. So could you please promptly provide the fuel and vehicles?”

Yes, demanding to replace the old guns with new ones is impossible, but efforts to improve them are within the authority of the commander. Fixing guns to the armored vehicles seized from the Republic to make self-propelled guns

surely counts as improvement.

These vehicles are being stored because there is no use for them, anyhow, so unless the General Staff has some logical reason to reject her proposal, it should be approved. In that case, they'll run on fuel, so she'll need an additional allotment of supplies, too.

This much may be a gamble, but the Esti oil fields are in the east, so Tanya expects she'll be able to borrow some from the Eastern Army Group. In a defensive battle, she'll be able to feed her vehicles as much freshly pumped oil as she wants.

On that point, unlike the guys on the southern continent, she won't have to worry about fuel. Yeah, the more I think about it, the more sense it makes.

"P-please, don't be ridiculous, Colonel!"

"Fine, I won't ask you to make the improvements. We'll do them ourselves. So please get the armored vehicles out of the warehouse for us."

Perhaps it is a bit much to ask the Equipment Section to perform the "repairs," she realizes. If she was told that their job was management and not refurbishment, well, that may be true. She sees the logic of the argument, so she backs down.

I guess I'll have to bug the Technical Arsenal to do a rush job for us, Tanya decides. Luckily for her, she has tons of acquaintances she can't unmake back there. She could tap Schugel even. He may have that awful habit of praising God, but his skills are legitimate.

And if she insists to her connections in the instructor unit that it's a self-propelled-gun experiment, she can expect them to cover the costs of the improvements, too. So she extends a hand and urges the major to give up the goods.

"But that's crazy."

"No, I insist on taking them."

"With all due respect, Colonel, it's just…"

But for some reason, this guy doesn't seem to get it.

Even though Tanya is speaking humbly to him, he's gotten stubborn and keeps repeating, "I can't; I can't."

So Tanya gives a slight nod and gets to the point.

"Major, let's be blunt. Is it *ja* or *nein*?"

JUNE 28, UNIFIED YEAR 1926, GENERAL STAFF OFFICE, SERVICE CORPS DEPUTY DIRECTOR'S OFFICE

It was common to find subordinates coming in with a petition immediately after orders were issued. Any officer working in the General Staff undoubtedly had experienced a subordinate come crying to them that they didn't have enough troops.

But this time even Lieutenant General von Zettour couldn't understand his visitor's request.

More accurately, perhaps you could say that though he understood the request itself, it was practically the most brazen one he had ever received, one that defied comprehension.

"'…I want a replacement mage company'?" he murmured, stunned.

As long as his eyes weren't malfunctioning, no matter how he read it, the form was a request for a whole new mage company. There was no room for misunderstanding there. There were no errors in the composition, and the document was formatted perfectly.

Slowly placing it on his desk, Zettour, who lately sensed his fatigue building up, raised his head. Before his eyes, standing at attention, were Lieutenant Colonel von Degurechaff and a woman wearing the first lieutenant insignia. *Colonel von Degurechaff brought the other one with her, so she must be…uh, yes, her adjutant Lieutenant Serebryakov.*

"Is this a joke, Colonel von Degurechaff?"

Without even thinking, he replied that he couldn't grasp her intentions. After all, the Salamander Kampfgruppe was being formed with the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion as its key unit.

“I beg your pardon, General von Zettour, but it is no joke. I’ve concluded that in order to successfully operate in an integrated way, a company of mages is absolutely critical.”

“Colonel, you already have an augmented battalion. To put it another way, don’t you already own a weapon of unparalleled strength? Take as many companies as you want out of that.”

With that augmented battalion alone, the Kampfgruppe had the strength of a regiment’s or brigade’s worth of mages. Despite it being a newly formed unit, they were giving her a battalion of infantry and a company each of armored and artillery units. Yet she wanted more?

She was essentially asking for an independent, augmented mixed brigade’s worth of muscle. *Honestly, talk about overpowered.* It wasn’t the kind of force he could entrust to a lieutenant colonel.

“As you so wisely point out, that is correct. But if possible, we need a shield, even if it’s a weak one.”

But she didn’t even seem to react to his bothered tone. As far as he could tell, she seemed genuinely convinced that the company was necessary.

He couldn’t believe the gall it must take to request that a company of mages be squeezed out from somewhere at this stage in the war.

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“You said I could.”

Certainly, he said he would be somewhat forgiving, but this? No, if she really needed it, he would consider it, but she already had the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion—an *augmented* battalion. He’d had a hard enough time quieting the voices requesting companies for operations that were desperate for mages.

“Most of the usable mage units are on the front lines.”

The reason the augmented battalion was kept at full head count and the reason they’d been able to enjoy a rest in the capital was that despite going too far and being a handful, their achievements were simply that significant. That was also why they were so in demand on the front lines.

“This goes without saying, but I need you to understand that despite the rapid increase in mage units, commanders on the front lines are still complaining they don’t have enough personnel.”

“Is it really that serious?”

“Circumstances have changed since the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion was formed. We’re hopelessly low on mages. The eastern and western fronts are practically competing for them. Anyone with an aptitude is already assigned to a front, and the rest haven’t completed their education yet.”

Frankly, the mages they’d been able to cultivate were only a drop in the bucket of what they needed. The mage battalion of the Salamander Kampfgruppe was already augmented with an extra company, so giving them another was… How much more of an impossible thing could you ask for?

The army has already absorbed most everyone with any magic ability. Zettour grumbled in his head about the first place with a glance at Degurechaff.

Even if she was an extreme example, the army had been aggressively working to take in anyone with aptitude to expand their magic forces. The Empire simply didn’t have a surplus of mages.

Perhaps other countries had the option to conscript groups of talent that were yet untapped, but the Empire had already done that, so it was suffering a shortage of personnel. Well, maybe there were some undiscovered talents in the next generation, but it would take time for them to grow up.

Degurechaff, before him with her poker face, was certainly an exception.

Somehow, he didn’t think there could be that many damaged kids in the Empire like this young teen back from the battlefield. And actually, regardless of how he felt about it as a soldier, personally, the idea of interacting with them was terrifying.

“But, General, I need them.”

“Explain why in a bit more detail.”

“General, it’s the relationship between the hammer and the anvil. I can’t swing the hammer of the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion if the anvil is weak. Plus,

the battalion has been trained for and is used to operating as four companies together. Please think about it."

Aha. Zettour understood what Degurechaff was trying to say.

She wanted to strengthen her hammer, the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion. It could still be termed a selfish request, but the battalion probably was trained to work together in four companies, exactly as she said.

"I understand, but hold on… It's not that I don't have any ideas. It's just…"

"Yes, General."

There were some mages who weren't called up because the army wasn't sure if they were usable. They had also turned up the heat to raise a few out of season. If they scrounged those together, they could form a company.

Even if it was impossible to get their hands on those, there were other mage candidates who hadn't made the cut. They could probably manage to get a company out of those. If that was all, then pulling from that group wouldn't be impossible.

"Sorry, but these are less like soldiers and more like chicks. I'm telling you, they're barely out of the shell. I could give them to you, but wouldn't they just be in your way?"

"This time I won't ask for anything fancy. As long as they're mages, I'll take them."

…But apparently, she would use whatever she could. She was both an advocate for and manifestation of that philosophy. Before she had lived even ten years, she had leaped into the army and was spending her life on the battlefield.

Perhaps no one had the luxury of the right to be sane in this crazy world. Normalcy was an extravagance they would have to enjoy after the war.

"…If mages who are just barely capable of providing direct support to infantry are all right, I can gather a few together."

"That's fine. By all means."

They were new recruits who hadn't even completed their mage training,

never mind become capable of fighting in maneuver battles. They might be able to support infantry, but the current war situation was worse than cutthroat. They could probably be used only in limited defensive battles.

They would be such a crude unit that the acceptable attrition rate would have to be raised.

“But they really are green. They haven’t even completed their training. The instructors said they were useless. Really, we were planning on using them as infantry, but if that doesn’t bother you, you can have them.”

Normally, the training period was six months, but they had gone through only half that. They were infantry who, unable to keep up with the intense training, didn’t quite make it to mage level. Of course, the instructors had crammed what knowledge they could into them, but they’d only scratched the surface of formulas and mage-specific training.

The evaluation was that they might be good for catching bullets.

“Do they have firing squad experience?”

“They should…”

“Then that’s fine. I have no problems as long as they can kill the enemy. I’ll reeducate them in the field as we go.”

But Degurechaff was unfazed and inquired about their experience with killing people.

It was proof that she really was the singular anomaly known as Degurechaff.

She saw people as products, and she was asking if they had been tested—that was the nuance. Could such a completely utilitarian view of people even be taught?

Certainly, the army is an organization that pays attention to individual functions. Substitutability and cost consciousness are two factors hounding everyone. But can you really judge a human being by those criteria alone?

“…All right. I’ll make the arrangements right away. So? If there’s anything else, you can tell me now…”

“Thank you, but I think I need to confirm the condition of the infantry unit the

Salamander Kampfgruppe is getting before that. I'm grateful for your kindness."

And he got a polite word of gratitude. A salute that exhibited the model attitude an officer should have.

That innocent face and her straight back made her look something like a surreal doll.

Doesn't…

Doesn't anyone think this is strange?

When an officer learns their superior is back from an inspection in a violent rage, all they can do is pray the storm doesn't hit them.

That day, the officers of the Empire's most experienced and much decorated unit, the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion, received terrifying word from First Lieutenant Serebryakov that the one superior they feared was in a mood like a hurricane.

What fool played with fire on top of a powder magazine? It was with this lament that the officers of the battalion, in an effort to avoid setting off even the slightest spark, soberly went about finishing a thorough, perfectly synchronized inspection of their gear.

Having prepared for the worst, they could rest easy knowing there were no flaws the murderous Lieutenant Colonel von Degurechaff could reprimand them for when she came crashing into their temporary garrison; they mentally applauded Serebryakov for slickly sending word ahead.

Colonel von Degurechaff usually saluted mechanically with an expressionless face, so if she was overtly displaying her emotions, something serious was going on.

Degurechaff's wrath…

Those with good intuition escaped to training. As if unable to fathom being anywhere nearby, First Lieutenant Grantz and his company came up with the idea of a long-range, low-altitude, decentralized raid exercise.

It was a strenuous flight that involved concealing themselves and suppressing their mana signals to the greatest extent possible; normally even members of

the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion would balk at such difficult training, but that day it was hugely popular.

The ones who could flee were blessed indeed.

But the ones who couldn't, the duty personnel and Captain Weiss, had no choice but to enter the tiger's den despite the foreboding mood.

Stealing a glance at their superior, Weiss wholeheartedly bemoaned their situation. *Ahhh.*

"They're useless! I either want to retrain them immediately or shoot them all dead!"

The colonel must have been fantasizing about executions. Perhaps unconsciously, she actually said aloud that she wanted to shoot someone, and her hand reached for the pistol at her hip.

If she were a little girl reaching for her purse, it would have made for a pretty picture, but when her petite hand was unconsciously reaching for a firearm, all the scene inspired was fear.

"What in the world happened, ma'am?"

He didn't want to ask, but if he didn't, things were liable to get worse. He knew it was a land mine, but he cautiously spoke up—thinking that he would recommend Grantz, the sole defector, as the Kampfgruppe commander's adjutant.

"Disobedience and insubordination! Unbelievable!"

"…Huh? Someone disobeyed *you*, Colonel?"

But her furious response blew every other thought out of his head.

Disobedience and…insubordination? Degurechaff was such a stickler for regulations that it was hard for Weiss to believe. But judging from her face, beet red with rage, something must have happened.

Given that the colonel didn't hesitate to equate insubordination with execution by firing squad, Weiss was genuinely surprised that there was anyone in the Imperial Army stupid enough to disobey her.

Honestly, it was a huge pain in the neck to get caught up in the cross fire, but he wanted to call those imbeciles over. Really, he wondered how they were even alive.

I don't get it. Explain what's going on. He looked to Serebryakov, who had accompanied Degurechaff, in confusion.

"The infantry commanders say they have their own way of doing things."

Serebryakov answered, her face tense. Degurechaff urged her to go on, so she reluctantly continued.

She tentatively began to explain what happened in a matter-of-fact tone.

How the new infantry battalion commanders underestimated the colonel.

How they respectfully ignored the colonel's orders, citing their confidence as pros.

How they wanted the right to act on their own discretion.

"I couldn't believe it. It's not like the rules suddenly change when we're at war! How could they become officers without understanding that much? All the officers in the rear must be insane," Degurechaff snapped.

I want to shoot them. Her entire body was a manifestation of that thought. From the way Serebryakov flinched and cowered next to her, Weiss was able to imagine the scene quite naturally. It must have nearly given Serebryakov a heart attack.

"Who did such a thing?"

"All of them! All the officers of the 332nd Infantry Battalion!"

When Weiss gave the room a quick scan, it was obvious that the duty personnel were scared stiff.

…He had heard rumors that there weren't any good officers left in the rear. But were they really so stupid as to mistake a lion for a cat?

What the hell.

He found himself ever so slightly understanding why the colonel said she wanted to have the firing squad take care of the failures.

“Using those guys is out of the question, so I’m going to get replacements.”

“How will you do that?” Weiss was incredibly careful about how he asked, which was why her answer petrified him.

“That’s obvious! Go and bring back the Guard Division’s new Fallschirmjäger battalion!”

“…Huh?”

…What? Guard Division? Fallschirmjäger?

What is she even talking about?

“The Second Guard Division is on leave for reorg for a while, right?”

“Uh, yes, Colonel, that’s right,” Weiss had to reply.

“Wonderful.” Degurechaff smiled. “On the Rhine front, the Second Guard Division was too stupid to do anything but hide behind us. Makes me wonder how they can actually guard anything.”

“Uh, yes, Colonel, quite right.” Weiss found himself nodding, as he knew the relationship between the Guard Divisions and the court.

“We’re going to make meaningful use of that force. We’ll trade. Even these idiots should be able to pretend to do ornamental defensive missions.”

“Uh, yes, Colonel, it’s just as you say,” said Weiss with an emphatic nod. In his head, he prayed for her to stop unconsciously reaching for the computation orb around her neck.

“…So you’re going to ask the General Staff?”

Please, please don’t explode.

He was practically clinging to God as he nervously broached the question. He would have felt more optimistic leaping into a forest of swords and hails of bullets.

After all, in that scenario he wouldn’t be up against Colonel von Degurechaff.

Then a miracle occurred. At least, the members of the 203rd Aerial Assault Mage Battalion headquarters who were present that day thought so.

“No need to worry. The commander of the battalion in the Second Guard Division already approved it.”

Until just a moment ago, the colonel’s expression would have made even hell’s prison guards run for the hills, but now she was the picture of cheer. A sublime smile like an angel’s bloomed across her face.

“How in the world did you convince him?”

“Oh, it was easy. They’re war maniacs. They were so thirsty, it was a home run.”

…Correction: She’s a seductive devil*, no question.*

Or at the very least, she was terrifying. She was a great mage. She was a great commander.

Dear God, please allow me to thank you for not making the colonel our enemy.

“Plus, the one in charge of formation, Colonel von Lergen, knows what’s what. I don’t think there will be a problem.”

Weiss mentally decided that he would go to church this Sunday.

With no idea what he’s thinking, Tanya smiles happily at how smoothly things are going.

After all, she finally has an idea how things will go. *Ah. It pays to push people for a yes or no answer*, she reflects. Everyone said yes.

Apparently, there is a point to bowing your head and saying please. Now she’ll have a better chance of surviving the perilous front lines.

…I’m just going to do my best for a brighter future. If I manage to survive, I should be able to at least escape to the west.

JULY 1, UNIFIED YEAR 1926, GENERAL STAFF OFFICE, LARGE CONFERENCE ROOM

It was an awfully strange scene. We had been gathered for the ceremony to establish the new Kampfgruppe. The venue, perhaps as a sign of the General Staff’s sponsorship, was a room in the General Staff Office.

The higher-ups seemed plenty excited about it. High-ranking officers were sprinkled among the attendees.

That was fine. It simply meant we had guests to witness the establishment of the unit. The Guard Division had been on many assignments dealing with formal events, so we had experience.

"…Welcome, battalion members. I'll be counting on you."

But what is that? The commander had to get up on a specially ordered dais to survey the room or even see over the first row of attendees.

That absurd, expressionless, doll-like creature was giving orders to people who appeared to be bloodthirsty mages just back from a war zone.

She smiled at them, and they watched her every move so as not to miss a thing; something seemed very wrong.

"Colonel! Commander!"

The way they shouted, so focused, made us realize how much they trusted her—they would follow her to the depths of hell.

Even we Fallschirmjäger of the Second Guard Division who qualify as "elite" had to hand it to them. And yet there they were…

Yes, these soldiers who distinguished themselves in that hell on the Rhine…

…were paying their wholehearted respects to this little kid.

"My wonderful battalion, brothers who have gone with me to paint the town red. Let us celebrate the new friends joining our ranks."

This figure—smiling like a seasoned officer—was beyond the realm of our comprehension.

"New troops, welcome to the forward-most line."

Her smile was savage like a drill sergeant's.

Could it really… Could it really be possible for a child to wear such a smile?

"Welcome to my—our—battlefield. We invite you wholeheartedly."

Her hands were soft and would have looked more natural holding a doll, but

instead, this odd, human-shaped creature spread her arms as she delivered a welcoming address.

No one.

None of the high-ranking officers present could raise an objection to this *thing*. The veteran mages all obeyed this inhuman being in the form of a person.

Not that we should wonder why our war-freak battalion commander would go along with this.

We should have come prepared. We should have known that war nut had fallen under her spell!

“There are only two things I expect from you.”

It was almost like we had heard this before somewhere.

“Don’t get in my battalion’s way. Keep up. That is all.”

And then the colonel smiled. Or at least, we supposed that must be what she thought a smile was.

Whoever said “A smile is by nature a hostile action” was right.

Smiling is, without a doubt, the act of baring your fangs. It’s an unmistakable threat.

JULY 2, UNIFIED YEAR 1926, GENERAL STAFF OFFICE, SERVICE CORPS DEPUTY DIRECTOR’S OFFICE

Lieutenant General von Zettour was looking over the reports from the front lines while having a late meal in his office. Tense, hurried footsteps interrupted him in his duties.

When he looked up and saw his subordinate standing there, he was confused for a moment.

It was the promising talent Colonel von Lergen. The Service Corps and Operations in the General Staff had fought over him, and Zettour himself thought highly of the man.

When he flew furiously into his office, Zettour furrowed his brow slightly and

asked, “What is it?”

“General von Zettour! Are you really putting Colonel von Degurechaff in charge of a Kampfgruppe?!”

The question was cleared up the moment Lergen opened his mouth. For better or worse, he was one of the army’s sensible officers. To put it another way, he was someone who was apprehensive of Degurechaff’s more over-the-top actions… During the inquiry, he had defended Degurechaff’s conduct, but ultimately he thought she would inevitably ruin them; therefore, he didn’t trust her.

And his fears were well-founded. As was known both in and outside the General Staff, even Zettour, who valued her so highly, originally had the same worries as Lergen.

But to him, such concerns were already meaningless. In order to win, he was prepared to swallow any pill, no matter how bitter.

This was war. They couldn’t be picky about their methods. Zettour had decided that even if the side effects were agonizing, they could regret it as much as they wanted after winning the war.

“What I’d like to know,” said Zettour, “is where you heard about this, Colonel von Lergen. How did you gain access to this info from Operations? It should be confidential even within the Service Corps.”

“General, forgive me for saying so, but Colonel von Degurechaff has already gone too far. I’ve just received a report that she’s co-opted a battalion from the Second Guard Division garrisoned in the capital with the excuse that it’s necessary for her investigative research for the General Staff!” Spittle flew from his mouth, he was so furious.

Apparently, he had caught wind of the Kampfgruppe’s formation via an incident that affected his own department.

Well, I guess he’s as outstanding as always, thought Zettour with a sigh.

“But that must be Colonel von Degurechaff’s way of ‘appropriately’ handling things.”

In the army, “appropriate” use essentially meant exploiting everything available.

Though he had said “a measure” of discretion, this did happen directly after he told her they would give it to her. He realized they were lucky she hadn’t co-opted weapons.

It amounted to borderline interference in supreme command, but this was Degurechaff. Surely, she had some sort of justification prepared. In which case, there wasn’t any problem. He didn’t feel like complaining.

“Either way, the Second Guard Division is, along with the First, charged with defending the capital. Considering their connections with the court, they would never be deployed in combat, but they have high-quality equipment. Maybe we should be impressed with her taking advantage of what’s on hand.”

“…True, the Second Guard Division isn’t doing much of anything at the moment, but she’s clearly overstepping her authority.”

“That’s enough. You probably shouldn’t say any more, Colonel.”

He didn’t feel like hearing anything else, and he made that loud and clear.

“General?!”

“Colonel von Degurechaff is an expert field officer. The Guard Divisions soldiers are elite…unlike the key members connected to the court. Don’t you think that’s an optimal combination?”

“But—” Lergen tried to protest, but Zettour sighed at him.

“We can’t afford to let them twiddle their thumbs.”

The requests from the front lines conveyed how grave the situation had gotten. Degurechaff had offered a plan to ameliorate it. And it was to flexibly employ a Kampfgruppe made up of multiple military branches in the Imperial Army’s preferred efficient method.

That said, while Degurechaff’s report was brilliant, it was undeniable that at this rate, it would remain armchair theory. How much doctrine can you really claim if it’s untested?

“In order to actually verify its practicality in combat and mitigate the

difficulties on the front lines, it's hard to avoid employing the unit in a test, and the only way to do it is to put the one who came up with the idea in charge."

You understand that, right? Zettour asked with his eyes, and Lergen was left speechless. It was true; it was common understanding that there were virtually no magic officers who were also such outstanding commanders.

No, you could say they simply didn't exist.

And Degurechaff was essentially the only one who could use the General Staff's firefighting team, the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion, to its full potential. If the battalion built up by that great commander was going to be the core of the new Kampfgruppe, then ultimately, its commander would have to be Degurechaff.

"Since that's the case, I've decided that now is the time to deploy it on the front lines. Colonel von Lergen, I don't think a staff officer of your caliber would require any more explanation than that, but what do you say?"

"I humbly thank you for your kindness and the quite undeserved praise. But if that's how you feel, then please forgive me for offering you my opinion: You should at least station Colonel von Degurechaff and her Kampfgruppe on the southern continent!"

"We can't hold out down there anymore. General von Romel has been fighting for almost a year, but we can't get dragged into a matériel war."

The Southern Continent Expeditionary Army Corps had been dispatched as a way to gently shake up the status quo of the fight.

Zettour made the choice to send them unwillingly; it was for political purposes. They were managing to achieve continual tactical victories…but as expected, the reports that came in said they were struggling against the enemy's matériel strength.

The Commonwealth was propping up the Republicans substantially, and the insincere neutral stance of the Empire's dear ally, the Kingdom of Ildoa, was incredibly fishy.

And on top of that, due to the frequent raids on the transport fleet by the Commonwealth Navy and marine mages, the supply situation of the thinly

spread expeditionary forces had gone from beyond pitiable to nearly disastrous.

General von Romel was an expert in maneuver warfare, but with a fundamental force imbalance, there was little hope that he would be able to counteract strategic inferiority with tactical victories.

As they had already achieved their initial objective of creating a distraction, the idea of committing more troops at this point could be met only with confusion.

“But we can shore up the matériel disparity. Wouldn’t that be the place for Degurechaff to shine, as you believe she will? Couldn’t she take on the Commonwealth marine mages?”

“For a time, I’m sure she could, but it would only be a drop in the bucket.”

The fundamental quantities of matériel being committed were too different. All Zettour could do was make a face like he’d been sucking lemons and lament the shamefulness of the Imperial Army.

“Multiple reports are saying that matériel is being supplied directly to the Commonwealth Army and the remnants of the Republican Army—er, the Free Republic, was it?—from an unconfirmed source.”

It was exactly as they had feared.

He wanted to cry, *Is Degurechaff a devil?!* Just as her report had predicted, massive amounts of Unified States–made military goods were flowing into the southern continent via the Commonwealth as camouflage.

And apparently, they were coming from the Unified States directly.

What’s worse, they were purposely doing the deals with private enterprises and transporting things on ships of neutral nationality. Even if the Empire wanted to sink them, the ships were from a third country. Or that one.

Sinking or inspection could invite the Unified States into the war. At least, that’s what Degurechaff’s paper from so long ago claimed.

Her assertion that the executives of the Unified States were hoping the Imperial Army would do just that actually had a high probability of being true.

“…Colonel von Lergen. We know due to a curious leak that a certain country is

sending matériel directly to the southern continent.”

“Huh?”

“The leak was made on purpose.”

Basically, someone from either the Commonwealth or the Unified States with a perverted interest in provoking an imperial attack on Unified States ships was kind enough to tip them off.

The only way to avoid a conflict would be to bomb the port of discharge.

But on the southern continent, even that would be difficult. It would have to be a raid from high altitude. Given the slim chances of hitting their target, the only way to do it would be to carpet-bomb the area.

The imperial air fleet was already fully engaged on the western and eastern fronts.

Under the circumstances, concentrating the necessary amount of bombers on the southern continent was impossible.

And they were likewise strapped for mages. It would be too hard to pull a whole unit off the main lines.

Thus, currently, they had no move to make.

“There’s a leak regarding that country’s assistance. Apparently, the amount of supplies flowing in is undeniably huge. Vexingly, we have no way to stop it.”

“The Unified States is sending supplies to the southern continent directly? We know they have troops working with the Commonwealth forces, but…direct support to a combat zone is… Wasn’t Congress’s policy to be a neutral third party?”

“The president seems to have taken a different stance.”

Apparently, the good ladies and gentlemen of the Unified States considered their country to be neutral. And it was an utter pain in the ass, but they even wanted to continue normal trade relations with the Empire.

If that was all… Zettour winced.

If that was all, they would surely be desirable trading partners. But the

president of the Unified States seemed to be of a different mind than the voters.

"…What will you do?"

"Our Empire may be great, but we have our hands full with the Federation and the Commonwealth. I want to avoid starting anything else."

Ultimately, if they had no way to mitigate harm, getting involved would be too costly. He could only think that the Unified States' pro-war faction was openly provoking them. There was no need for the Empire to go biting that poisonous apple of their own accord.

"Of course, it's aggravating to helplessly watch our enemy enjoying those benefits."

Which was why they had to win in the east. If that could be achieved, nothing was off-limits. All that mattered was whether it would benefit the Empire or not. Everything had to be considered accordingly.

"That's how it is, Colonel. To win, we need to get results in the east. So I'm going to have Degurechaff wreak havoc on the eastern lines."

"…Yes, sir."

Midway through the Great War, a serious conflict arose within the Imperial Army General Staff regarding overall war policy. General von Zettour, who had led their efforts on the Rhine front overall, and his followers made up the western faction.

They advocated a bloodletting strategy, draining the enemy over time until it died.

On the other hand, the eastern faction, made up primarily of people involved in the eastern army, prioritized the eastern front. They advocated a decisive strategy to end the war quickly with encirclement and annihilation.

The western faction strongly condemned the idea of a decisive battle as too risky. Zettour, especially, who was an adherent of Attritional Containment Doctrine, wanted to avoid large-scale offensives. Trench warfare had taught them the merit of decentralized advances and encirclement tactics, but he was

extremely skeptical of going on an offensive while their enemy held the advantage.

Meanwhile, the eastern faction proposed their strategy on the premise that the Federation would have numerical superiority. Under that assumption, the western faction's proposed plan had to be deemed unrealistic.

What they set their sights on next was an attract and annihilate strategy employing their mobility along interior lines.

It was an application of a method proposed by Zettour, who had encircled and annihilated the bloodied and weakened Republican Army at the end of the first battle on the Rhine. The eastern faction focused on the mobile aspects and saw the tantalizing prospect of an encirclement.

While the Attritional Containment Doctrine endlessly piled up corpses, the Decisive Battle Doctrine would limit losses by ending everything in one victory. The eastern faction used that logic to rebel against the passivity of the mainstream General Staff faction. It ended up that they would test their theory in an operation on the eastern front against the Federation Army that had broken through imperial lines after the initial sneak attack.

They succeeded in surrounding an invading force of 400,000 Federation soldiers with a mere 150,000 in Trouncenberg. Compared to the imperial losses of 10,500, the Federation lost 150,000 (90,000 of which were taken prisoner).

Though tables hadn't completely overturned their numerical inferiority, and they let some remnants of their enemy escape, the battle was considered solid precedent for the eastern faction's theory.

On the heels of that success, the eastern faction began planning how to increase their gains and bring the war to an early close. At that time, a movement that supported any prospect of an early end to the war appeared in opposition to the cabinet and the imperial family's fears of heavy casualties.

As the mainstream group in the General Staff, the western faction tried to argue against them, but the eastern faction stressed their success in the Battle of Trouncenberg.

More than anything, the eastern faction's achievements were so much more

persuasive than the western faction's victory on the Rhine front, which had come at the cost of a mountain of imperial corpses.

Thus, the General Staff proposed and carried out a single plan. It was called "Operation Lakeside." The idea was to push up the front lines via a major offensive. It was emphatically criticized from several quarters for being high-risk, high-return, but in the end, they bulldozed the opposition and pushed it through.

It was ordered as Order No. 41. Thus, the Imperial Army's great offensive in the east became known as Operation No. 41, or colloquially as Operation Lakeside.

The Imperial Army General Staff's Order No. 41 was top secret; it was delivered by officers themselves.

Defensive combat in the Federation was nearing its end. We had already destroyed the Federation's reserves at Trouncenberg. The situation was fluid, but the Federation's surplus forces were drying up, and it had practically lost the advantage it had seized in the initial sneak attack.

Amid these circumstances, the Imperial Army was tasked with seizing the initiative as soon as weather and ground conditions improved. The objective was to thoroughly annihilate the remaining forces the Federation Army had been holding on to and, to the extent possible, incapacitate their critical field army.

In order to accomplish that, it first sent its main forces into the main operation in the east. Then, in order to defend their expanded lines, a mobile corps was formed. The general plan was to mop up the enemies on the front and take the road and supply base along the former forward-most line.

The top priority, however, was to take out the remaining enemy forces.

And at the very bottom, there was a comment that said:

"Troops, our counterattack is soon at hand."

JULY 8, UNIFIED YEAR 1926, FEDERATION CAPITAL MOSKVA, LARGE SUBTERRANEAN MEETING ROOM

Everyone present was clearly depressed.

All they needed to do was propose a single constructive idea, but they were useless failures worried only about what Comrade General Secretary Josef thought.

How utterly pathetic, lamented Mr. Loria, who was working diligently for the people, the nation, and the party on that day as well.

He had a dream. He would spare no effort in making it come true. His efforts were so great, he could boast that he was the hardest-working technocrat in all the Federation.

And it was because of that ambition that he felt young. Or rather, it was precisely because he had a dream that life was worth living. *What's the difference between a lazy oaf who doesn't know what they desire and someone in the* lageri*?*[18]

With that on his mind, Loria got down to work for the time being.

"To sum up the report, Comrade General Secretary, the Imperial Army is concentrating a large force in the region of the eastern border. It seems that, as you thought, they will launch a counteroffensive soon."

The report was so long it wasn't worth listening to. In the Commissariat for Internal Affairs, if a field report wasn't kept to three lines, he would send the author to the *lageri* for the crime of inefficiency.

Come to think of it, the Federation was too inefficient. Bureaucracy was already spreading, and regrettably, not a single system functioned in a simple way. He could understand very well why Comrade General Secretary was irritated.

"Thanks. Now then, comrades, that's our situation. What do you think?"

The question implicitly requested a plan for a solution.

Really, it was dangerous to answer Comrade General Secretary Josef's questions. If you gave an opinion and it went well, you could be given credit and authority. But if you were too successful, you could be purged as someone threatening his position. Even if that didn't happen, there was still the danger of

getting involved in and then ruined by internal party struggles.

If you failed, on the other hand, you'd be forced to suffer the consequences right then and there. With that in mind, it was obvious why everyone stared at Comrade General Secretary Josef with earnest resolve, yet no one opened their mouths.

That said…

Like this, the inepts might as well have had their necks on the chopping block.

He furiously clenched his pen and was seized by the urge to stab it right through the document. This was pointless. There was no time to lose, and things were far from ideal. *Eventually I'll send you all to the* lageri, he decided. But first, he made up his mind about what to do.

"Comrade General Secretary, we have succeeded in drawing the enemy in. Now I think we should make it so they can't pull out."

"And you would do that how?"

"Let's bait a hook and have them bite it. What if we ceded the region near the border?"

The Federation's territory was vast. But the development of its infrastructure was conveniently lagging behind. For the country, it was a problem, but by the same token, it also created poor conditions for an advancing army.

If the Federation could draw the Empire into an attritional battle, the advantage would be theirs. It was simple; even a child could understand by looking at the map. The Federation's vast territory, with which it could defend in depth, was a good ally.

Imagine ten people so strong it would take ten to beat each one. If those ten people could take on a hundred, it might be hard to beat them even with only a hundred people. But with a hundred against one, they could surely win.

If the enemy spread out, they could win with numbers. It was only a matter of course. There is no enemy who can't be crushed and killed with numbers, no matter how strong they are.

All they needed to do was draw in the thinned-out enemy forces and batter

them. Or perhaps create a place where they could lure them into a futile attrition battle. For example, a city whose capture would have significant political effects, a place they wouldn't be able to give up once they took it.

A city, in addition to having no resources, would be effective for drawing them into an urban battle of attrition. The most apt place near the front lines was Josefgrad. It would be typical for them to order the Federation Army to guard that city with their lives.

And if the Imperial Army captured the city, they would probably never let it go. *Especially if our propaganda kept saying that we would take it back.*

And regardless of what would happen if the Federation challenged the Empire's mobile army to a field battle, in a battle of attrition, the Federation's numerical advantage would take effect.

In other words, dropping back, for the Federation Army, would mean securing strategic depth.

The Imperial Army might get space, but the Federation Army would get time to reorganize.

"Comrade Loria! Say what you will, but that puts the Federation's honor at stake!"

"Are you seriously saying we should give land to the Empire under the direction of our great commander, Comrade General Secretary?!"

But the responses came from idiots who made his head hurt. If you looked, you could see how they flaunted their allegiance. It disgusted him to be contested by those imbeciles who were capable only of blind following.

"Shut up. Comrade General Secretary, may I please continue?" *I'll put those guys first on the list of people to send to the* lageri, he thought as he addressed the formal leader of the proceedings. At least Comrade Josef trusted him.

Even if he said something that displeased him, it was out of loyalty.

"…Go ahead, Loria."

And dictators tend to be sensitive to those sorts of things. Of course, Loria knew that only from experience, but still.

Anyhow, the highest authority figure present waved a hand to have the protestors settle down and allowed Loria to continue.

“Thank you.” Loria understood. He gave an exaggerated expression of gratitude, stood, and walked over to the map on the wall.

It was a map describing their situation. What pained him was the crushing blow the Federation forces had suffered in Trouncenberg due to the major offensive those morons had insisted on.

But apparently, the Imperial Army was also full of numbskulls.

The desire to attack on impulse is a defect of soldiers in general. Loria chuckled to himself in his head.

They didn’t understand the nature of invading enemy territory.

“Cutting to the chase, if we retreat, we can force the Imperial Army into a battle of attrition. Furthermore, only by retreating can we force them into urban combat in a number of strategically important points.”

There were some factories and the transportation network in the region to consider, but the chaos of an urban battle was optimal for the Federation right now.

Combat in cities would take place on a fairly large scale.

For the Federation Army, which was qualitatively inferior to the Imperial Army, that held a rather important meaning.

“This is my personal opinion, but I don’t see any reason we should have to fight in the ring our opponents feel at home in. We want the opposite. It’s in the tight quarters of urban combat that we can use the advantage of our numbers.”

Loria would guarantee that an urban battle was the optimal place if you wanted freshly conscripted troops to fight halfway decently. Or rather, it could be said that he had no other ideas how to wage an actual war with the Empire.

He had some of his political officers on the front lines reporting both imperial and Federation losses.

The ratios were never better than one to five.

But the scale of the Federation Army was overwhelming. When it came to slugging it out in a city, organized combat and mobile battles—all those disciplined actions the Imperial Army specialized in—would be of only limited use.

With the pure gaze of a mathematician, Loria calculated for their victory.

“If we can get our attrition ratios even slightly more equal, the Empire will be the ones who surrender.”

If they could lower their losses even slightly, hard math would give the Federation an overwhelming advantage. They could also increase their opponents’ losses a little bit.

Loria sneered at that point.

Ah, soldiers are such obnoxious creatures. They obsess over honor and appearance, plus pride—it’s too much.

“But as long as they keep winning, the importance of the land will grow on its own.”

Pyrrhus was great because he realized his victory was going to be Pyrrhic and had managed to retreat. Most generals would have been blinded by their success and expanded the lines in pursuit of further results.

Naturally, the Imperial Army would invade Federation territory to increase their gains. But to do that, it would be forced to engage in battles over cities.

“Once that happens, they won’t be able to retreat even if they want to.”

Then they would need to reinforce their units to tighten their defenses. Yes, they would be paralyzed. The mobile ones who were so skilled at encirclement tactics would be stuck allotting more and more manpower to defend a fixed position.

“Then all that’s left for us is to swoop in and retake our lost territory.”

The Federation Army would simply employ their numbers to encircle *them*.

And maybe it would be good to send in some spies via a third country to agitate public opinion in the Empire.

Then they really wouldn't be able to pull out.

"Of course, so that we can resist to the last, Internal Affairs plans to dispatch blocking units behind various units fighting in the city."

They also required some live bait to lure them in. He would take anyone who had made anti-Federation remarks, as well as ethnic nationalists and reactionaries, then grind them down to nothing against the Imperial Army. Loria spoke matter-of-factly, but internally he felt like bemoaning the silent, trembling party executives and their stupidity.

When he looked around, he saw a few horror-stricken faces among them.

You people with your fake morals only pretend to be virtuous. There couldn't possibly be a good person here, he wanted to jeer.

"I'm confident that we'll then be able to crush the imperials using a wall of civilians we'll force to volunteer for the army and the riffraff from the concentration camps."

They would preserve the soldiers who were loyal to the establishment while disposing of potentially dangerous elements at the same time.

"No, if we put it another way, all the Federation's people will heroically resist the invaders."

And it wouldn't be through a purge but sacrifice for the fatherland. It wasn't someone from the establishment who would perform the purges but the Imperial Army. There was no need for the party to get its hands dirty.

Loria was surprised by his own acumen.

When their hopes and dreams are the motivator, people exhibit unbelievable strength and abundant creativity.

"Under the leadership of Comrade General Secretary, all the Federation's civilians will rise up as partisans. Don't you think that would be wonderful?"

"…I see. That could be an effective proposal, yes."

At least everyone could understand that much. No one questioned the ethical values, whether he was right or wrong.

So the idea was accepted very easily.

“Thank you.”

“All right, I’ll put you in charge of that, Comrade Loria. But you know failure is unacceptable, don’t you?”

“Of course. Please leave everything to me.”

Failure is unacceptable—the warning was accompanied by a harsh gaze. A chill went up Loria’s spine, but he didn’t avert his eyes. He continued looking back, determined.

For him, this was part of fulfilling his dream.

“…Comrade General Secretary, I hate to ask for this in return, but there is one thing.”

“If there are supplies you need, I’ll approve them. What is it?”

“It’s about the criminal who bombed Moskva. I’d like to personally be the one to judge her.”

That…that fairy. I want her.

No matter what it takes—I’ll do anything.

I’ve got to have her for myself.

“We must proceed very carefully—yes, very carefully with that matter. I can’t promise you, Comrade Loria.”

Loria had brought up that detestable situation in front of the general secretary, of all people. That alone was stepping on the tiger’s tail. In fact, the hand holding his pen was visibly shaking from rage and humiliation.

“Comrade General Secretary. Then I’d at least like to have the little girl.”

He knew it was reckless.

But even so. There were times a man just had to act.

“…Comrade Loria, is she your type?”

“Of course! Er…that’s not exactly the right way to express it, but…”

There were things he had to do, even if it meant sacrificing everything.

There are times in life that you just have to speak up.

“What?”

“She’s what you could call my ideal. I would so much—so very much—like to make her gasp beneath me.”

Pure determination. Loria could only plead.

Was hoping all he could do? No, he acted. Would his hopes be allowed? That was something only God knew.

But Loria had made up his mind. He had already decided. If they wanted to laugh at him as a fool, he would let them.

“…Fine. If it will dispel your anxiety, then I’ll allow it.”

“You can count on me. I’ll eradicate every obstruction and enemy to make this operation a success. Guaranteed.”

And so Loria had acquired the wings he needed to make his dream come true. As soon as the meeting ended, he jumped into his car and sped back to headquarters, which was being rebuilt, to get back to work.

“The general secretary gave me permission. Now—now I just have to catch her.”

The situation was steadily evolving to make his dream a real possibility. That sense of fulfillment made him forget his age. He felt giddy.

He was convinced he had lost the purehearted anticipation of a child long ago, so he was genuinely surprised.

“The Imperial Army is walking right into my trap. If this goes well, I’m sure I’ll be able to lure that Salamander Kampfgruppe or whatever they call themselves deep into our territory.”

But at the same time, he had the caution of a mature adult. He had his unadulterated feelings, but he had also learned patience—which is not to say that he wasn’t looking forward to the fun at the end…

“I guess it’s one more reason to put up the best fight we can. I wonder how the army’s morale is…”

Loria wasn't about to spare any effort, so he called up the officers in charge to ask. To him, people could do only so much before the only thing left was waiting for fate. So he would do everything he possibly could in order to avoid regrets.

"Probably not very high. We have reports that desertions are on the rise."

"Hmm, I guess we should send more blocking units than originally planned. Choose the members from within Internal Affairs. Send them as soon as possible."

Naturally, he would make every move possible.

As a person chasing his dream, he would sacrifice everything he had for his ideal. His devotion was great enough that he was prepared to make an enemy of the entire world if necessary.

"Understood."

"And improve conditions in the concentration camps."

But he also understood.

He knew the importance of hopes and dreams. Without them, people couldn't live as humans.

"But that's…"

"Instead of throwing them in there for ten years, we should treat them well for a month and then pit them against the Imperial Army. Our national resources should be used in a meaningful way."

You don't understand even that much? Still, Loria was tolerant of even his fretting subordinate.

He was a missionary preaching hopes and dreams. People needed happiness. Which meant that people, including himself, needed to be happy.

"In other words, even prisoners should be used efficiently. If you understand, then get it done."

"D-do excuse me. I'll get on that right away."

"If necessary, punish some camp guards… If progress comes too slowly, you'll

be dealt with as well.”

Everyone needed to work hard. He knew that people valued the chance to pursue their dreams. If their dream was staying alive, they would work for it.

“Yes, sir.”

“Look, all you need to do is what needs to be done. Remember that.”

So, troops. Please hurry up and show me you can do this, he wished, just barely suppressing his inner conflict.

“All right. Get going.”

Hurry up and bring that fairy to me.

JULY 18, UNIFIED YEAR 1926, THE EASTERN LINES

Good day, everyone.

Do you like clean air and a beautiful night sky? Wouldn’t you like to lie down on the earth amid a soft, gentle breeze and watch clouds drifting off into forever?

The city is overly mechanized and rigid in its standardization—it has no personality. Let’s take a step into the outside world. I’m sure we’ll find an abundance of the nature we’re meant to return to.

Our addiction to machines and overreliance on cars might make you think walking on the earth is a little crazy.

But please remember: Our ancestors walked. And so do we. So why not learn from our forebears and take a stroll outside?

Ah, I apologize. My introductory remarks have gone on for too long. How embarrassing.

I am the officer in command of the General Staff’s Salamander Kampfgruppe, Lieutenant Colonel Tanya von Degurechaff.

My current job is armed hiking.

All I have to do is go on and on, by motorcycle or armored vehicle, across the muddy earth.

Our actual mission is to support the flank of the Imperial Eastern Army Group's Northern Cluster. You could say it's the newly formed Salamander Kampfgruppe's flank patrol mission.

Well, I heard our friends in the east beat the invading enemy's reserves in Trouncenberg. The General Staff doesn't imagine they'll show up again now, so let's relax and take it easy.

Yep, relax. I don't want to get too involved. To be specific, this should be like a game of Ding-Dong Ditch…so we can always just run away.

(The Saga of Tanya the Evil, Volume 4: Dabit Deus His Quoque Finem, fin)



Appendixes: Commentary

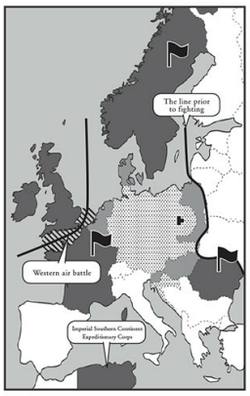
Appendixes

Commentary



Commentary

❶



March 15, Unified Year 1926

The Imperial Army General Staff orders an urgent cross-border operation after picking up signs that the Federation Army is actively mobilizing.

The 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion begins sneaking into the Federation.

❷

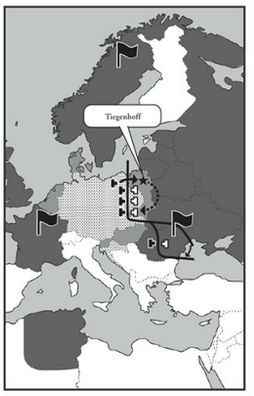


At the outset of the war, they incapacitate the Federation Army's artillery position, including their railway guns.

The same day, the on-guard Eastern Army Group abandons the border due to railway gun fire and other heavy bombardment. It shifts into delaying battles while waiting for the Great Army's arrival.

The 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion begins a distraction operation on orders from the General Staff. It succeeds in striking the Federation's capital, Moskva.

❸

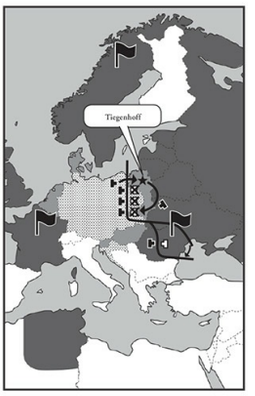


The Imperial Army continues its fighting retreat all along the eastern lines. The Federation Army continues advancing west along three routes. The Imperial Army General Staff plans to use the interior lines strategy to counter and destroy each group.

The 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion heads to Tiegenhoff per a rescue request from the Eastern Army Group. They engage in a mobile defense battle to aid the besieged town.

By clashing with the Federation's strategic reserves, the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion exhausts itself but manages to help hold Tiegenhoff as well as pinning and grinding down the enemy reserves.

❹



The Imperial Army launches a new mobile operation with Tiegenhoff as its axis.

It succeeds in striking the weakened Federation reserves in their weak point.

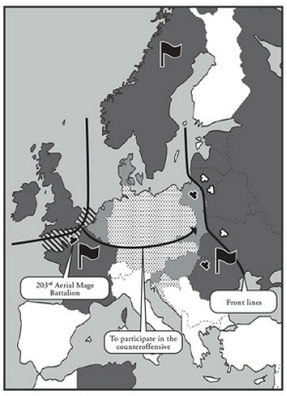
Commentary

❺



In the series of engagements known collectively as the Battle of Trouncenberg, the Imperial Army seizes the initiative in the east.

❻



Following the political fallout of the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion's attack on Moskva, Major von Degurechaff and her troops are transferred to the west.

The 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion participates in the western air battle as part of their combat skills research.

After a few skirmishes, they perform their first combat search and rescue mission over Commonwealth land. During the mission, Major Tanya von Degurechaff knocks Mary Sue out of the sky.

Lieutenant Colonel von Degurechaff forms the Salamander Kampfgruppe with the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion as its key unit. The Salamander Kampfgruppe heads for the fierce fighting on the eastern front.

General Commentary

During the early stages of the war in the east, the Imperial Army, which combined mobility and impact in an extremely successful way, was able to counterattack across all areas and seize the initiative.

Overall, the Empire seemed to have the advantage.

But the Imperial Army's systems were constantly overburdened, and the General Staff was aware that they couldn't be optimistic, especially when it came to the rate of attrition.

Meanwhile, though the Federation stumbled in the beginning, it has everything necessary to enact a good defense in depth.

Though the Imperial Army has the initiative, the situation is still fluid.

Both sides will probably aim for a more decisive victory from here on out.

Afterword

To everyone who picked up Volume 4, I'm sorry to have kept you waiting.

But I said I would put it out in early summer, and it's June! It's June (and I think it's fine to say that the last day of June is still undoubtedly early summer). So I don't think it's out of the question to make a strong argument and say I delivered perfectly according to plan.

One other thing—and due to space constraints, I can't get into all the details, but—beware of the crooked propaganda claiming that Carlo Zen is not a light novel author. *The Saga of Tanya the Evil* is unmistakably a light novel. By definition, it is definitely a light novel. This is important, so I'll say it again: It's totally a *light* novel regardless of how thick it is.

Now that the important announcements are out of the way, on to the meat of the afterword. Here we are on Volume 4 of *The Saga of Tanya the Evil*.

To be honest, it's such a wild title, I wasn't sure I would be able to keep going this long, so I feel I've been blessed with unexpected luck. I hope to receive your continued patronage—nothing would make me happier.

A warm thank-you to Tsubakiya Design for the design, Ukita for the proofing, my editor Fujita, and most of all to the illustrator who always does such wonderful illustrations, Shinotsuki.

Now then, I firmly believe I have a moral duty to take this opportunity to extend a heartfelt apology to Shinotsuki for the horrible thing I did. Shinotsuki, who didn't really understand the fascination of railway guns, is now tainted. Among the various factors, I can't deny my responsibility in convincing people to say, "Anti-matériel rifles are cool, huh?"

But how could I help it? Sorry, but railway guns are just poetry in action. I

can’t help it.

Readers, please don’t forget.

The Saga of Tanya the Evil is made by condensing that romance and hobby, adding water to create a soup stock of hobby and romance, carefully seasoning the romance with more hobby, and then throwing in an unbelievable amount of hard-core stuff.

And so the story is heading to the east. I told my editor the war on the eastern front “won’t take too long,” so I figure I’ll finish it off pretty quickly.

It’s only a little part of humanity’s long history since we began recording it, so in the grand scheme of things, it should be short.

But just because it’s short doesn’t mean you can let your guard down! If you let yourself get lured in without thinking, you might find yourself swooning over railway guns…

Of course, maybe that warning is coming a bit too late for those of you who have been kind enough to read up through Volume 4.

June 2015 ***Carlo Zen***

[1] **phony war** When two armies are officially at war yet simply stare at each other across the border. A typical example is the way Germany and the allies, Britain and France, faced off at the start of World War II with practically no land war. In the worst cases, countries actually forget they are at war with one another. There was even a long conflict called the Three Hundred and Thirty-Five Years' War during which not a single shot was fired!

[2] **Ricardian formulation of comparative advantage** Also known as the comparative cost theory. The basis of commerce theory. To put it in extremely simple terms, it says that everyone should make what they are good at and trade it.

[3] **Germans taken prisoner at the end of the war** At the end of World War II, all the Germans headed west…because they didn't know what would happen to them if they surrendered to the Soviet Army.

[4] **HUMINT standpoint** In a nutshell, HUMINT is the gathering of intelligence from interpersonal conversations and the media. There was once an era during which Communism was particularly attractive, and there were Communists milling about all over the place. Recruitment was so easy! By the way, Carlo Zen is hoping to recruit people as “Communthusiasts.” Keep your wits about you!

[5] **The people are your stone walls** According to Takeda Shingen, “The people are your castle, your stone walls, your moat. Protect them and they shall protect you.” No matter how solidly you build your castle, the ones holing up inside are people, in the end. If your defensive lines have no unity, that’s no good; therefore, it’s of utmost importance to win the hearts of your people. Incidentally, Stalin’s way was to exploit people as his castle, use a wall of them for protection, put them in other people’s way like a moat, trust only his sworn comrades, and destroy as an enemy anyone who might possibly have ill intentions.

[6] **Full-of-shit-guchi** I'll explain this! General Full-of-shit-guchi was one of the most fearsome generals in the entire world if you're counting only one specific aspect! His real name was Renya Mutaguchi. His skill in single-handedly destroying the Japanese Army's lines at Imphal made him feared as Brute-guchi even among the bravest of Japan's generals. Incidentally, he appears to have been a member of the Imperial Japanese Army.

[7] **John Bull spirit** A gentle, noble, undaunted spirit applicable to war or sports. But their food is questionable. If I had to explain it, I'd say it's a daily practice of not putting strain on Logistics.

[8] **Revisionists** The reaction against perfect, scientific Communism, which makes "changes" on the pretext of "revising errors." Incidentally, it seems that science is the process of revising errors.

[9] **Doolittle's Tokyo Raid** Yankee ogres who bombed Tokyo with conventional bombers launched from an aircraft carrier. They're probably the only ones who could pull off launching conventional planes from a carrier.

[10] **key terrain** An important piece of land military geographers want to take at all costs. For example, Mount Tennōzan in the Battle of Yamazaki, the 203 Meter Hill in the Siege of Port Arthur. If those locations were taken, the battle was lost.

But in history, there's this weirdo, Napoleon, who used key terrain as bait to lure the enemy. He abandoned the Pratzen Heights and pounded the enemy when they strolled over there… Normally, it doesn't work like that.

[11] **ideological education** *Let's study the party's political theory in order to establish correct socialism! Huh? We're in the army so it has nothing to do with us?! Revolt!* Such an enjoyable class.

Apparently, soldiers felt this "indoor training" wasn't so bad—because all they had to do was sit.

[12] **warmonger** War crazy. Those Shimazu clan vibes.

[13] ***nomenklatura*** The directory of Communist Party members. If you weren't registered in it, you couldn't use currency shops, and you couldn't be promoted. But please believe me. The Communist Party created a classless, equal society!

[14] **Stalin** The man of steel, Comrade Stalin. Leader of the Soviet Union. Probably took out more Soviet citizens and officers than anyone else.

[15] **Bismarck** A Prussian-made diplomacy machine. His efficiency in creating Germany was sort of insane. To break it down into three steps: First was his ingenious diplomatic work at dragging Austria into the fight with Denmark and eliminating English interference. Then he smacked Austria in the fight over who would control the territory swiped from Denmark, while having France and Russia remain neutral. Then, in the end, he had Austria maintain sympathetic neutrality while he smacked France and promptly installed the German emperor in the French palace!

[16] **Fouché** France's prized weathercock. If you can believe it, this chief of the secret police participated in the revolution from beginning to end and not only survived but came out a winner! …Seriously, how did he live through it?

[17] **Formosa Air Battle** An instance of mistakenly attributed military achievement. When Imperial Headquarters tabulated the reports from each unit, the total sunk or destroyed was “nineteen aircraft carriers, four battleships, seven merchant cruisers, and fifteen boats of uncertain type”—a major victory—except in reality they destroyed only two merchant cruisers.

Honestly, anyone who knows the battlefield would have taken such results with a grain of salt, but it also just comes down to the fact that people believe what they want to.

[18] **someone in the *lageri*** A *lageri* is a system of concentration and labor camps. By the way, the brilliant Soviets were against slave labor.

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