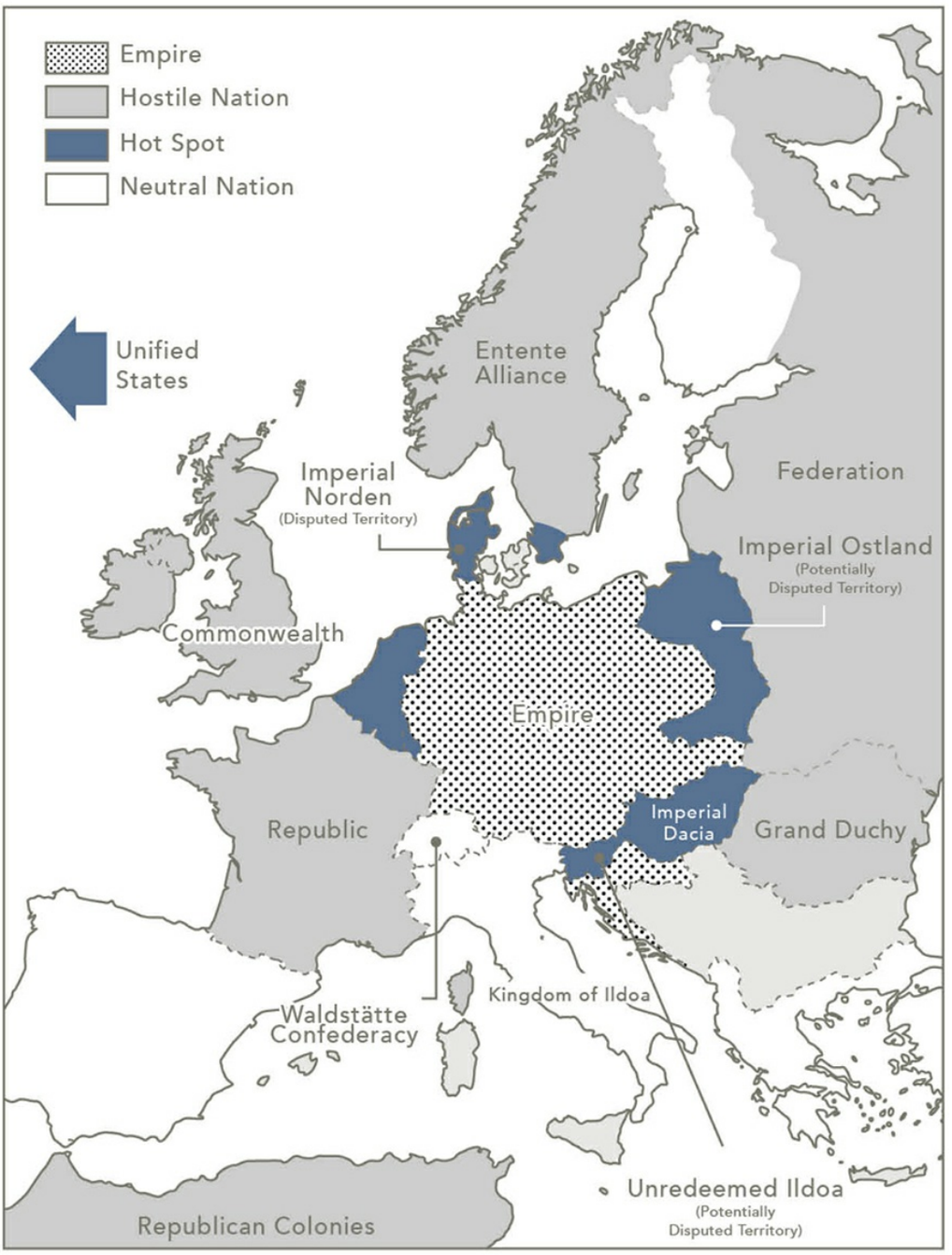
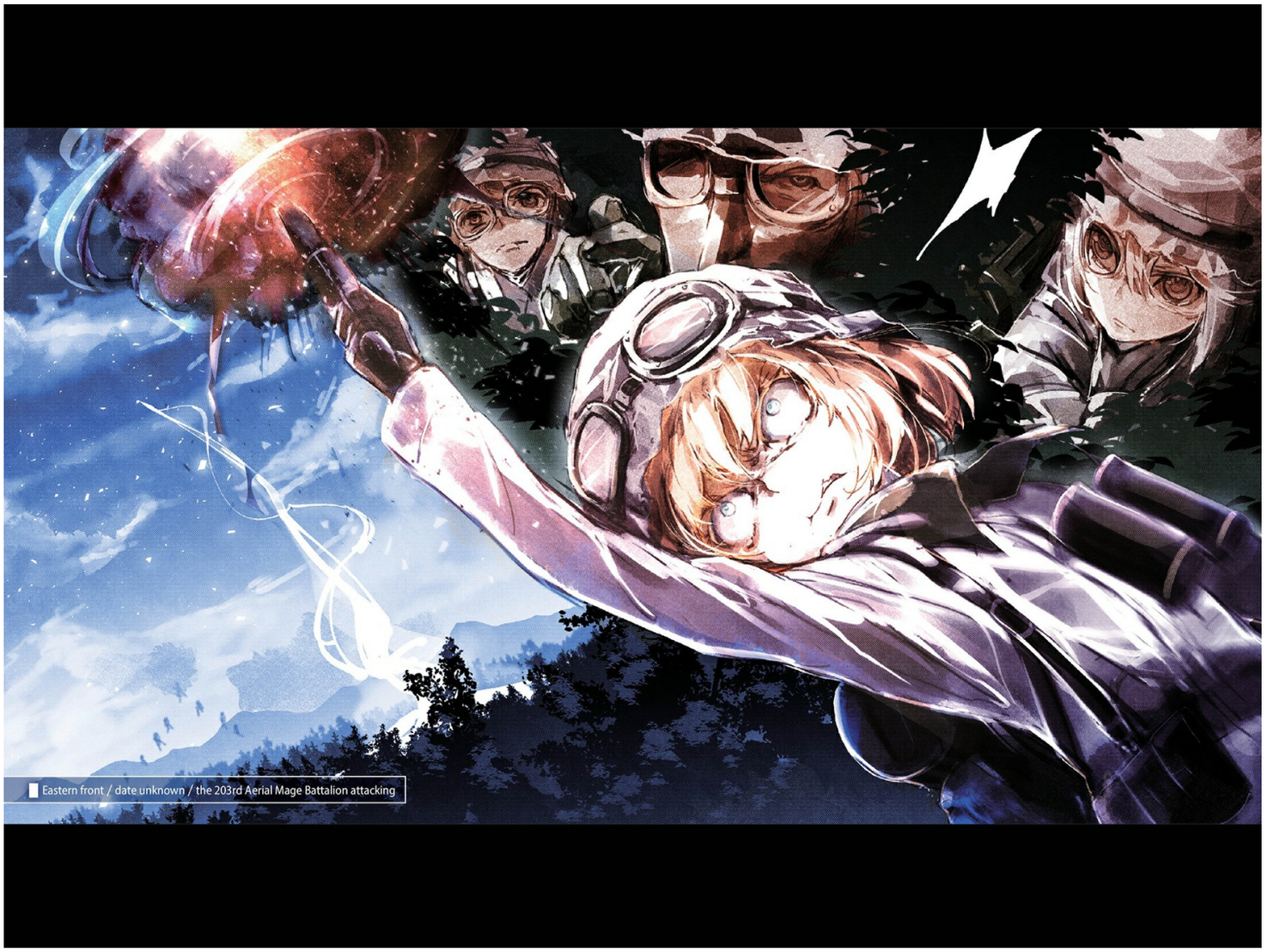

THE SAGA OF TANYA THE EVIL
6
[STORY BY]
Carlo Zen
Nil Admirari
[ILLUSTRATION BY]
Shinobu Shinotsuki



Nil admirari


Eastern front / date unknown / the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion attacking


Child Officer
Lieutenant Colonel Tanya von Degurechaff
Staff Officer
Colonel von Lergen
Prime Minister
Churbull
Deputy Chief of Staff
Lieutenant General von Zettour
Line Officer
Lieutenant Colonel Drake

THE SAGA OF TANYA THE EVIL

Nil Admirari

〔6〕

Carlo Zen

Illustration by Shinobu Shinotsuki

YEN ON

New York

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The Saga of Tanya the Evil, Vol. 6

Carlo Zen

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Prepared by the Commissariat for Internal Affairs

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Loria (very respectful person)



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Commander de Lugo **(head of the Free Republic)**

Empire

【General Staff】

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- Lieutenant General von Rudersdorf **(Operations)** — Colonel von Lergen

〔Salamander Kampfgruppe〕

203rd Aerial Mage Battalion

Lieutenant Colonel Tanya von Degurechaff

- Major Weiss
  - First Lieutenant Serebryakov
  - First Lieutenant Grantz
  - (replacement) First Lieutenant Wüstemann



Captain Ahrens **(Armored)**

Captain Meybert **(Artillery)**

First Lieutenant Tospan **(Infantry)**

[chapter]

I

Winter Operation: Limited Offensive

**"At least send us stuff designed for Norden!
Are we supposed to cave in one another's skulls
with our frozen weapons like it's the Stone Age?!
This is no joke!"**

**Screamed by Lieutenant Colonel Tanya von Degurechaff
upon the arrival of snow**

[chapter] I Winter Operation: Limited Offensive

LATE NOVEMBER, UNIFIED YEAR 1926, IMPERIAL ARMY'S FRONTLINE AREA IN THE EAST, SALAMANDER KAMPFGRUPPE'S GARRISON

A vast number of horses and vehicles are dropping off the cargo they transported… It's the arrival of the supplies we've been hoping for.

I have to hand it to the supply unit, pulling off this superhuman feat despite the falling snow. The guys in the rear deserve praise for chipping away at this difficult job.

Everything is being unloaded in an organized fashion and promptly turned over to the Salamander Kampfgruppe. The shipment includes not only food and ammunition but cold-weather gear, among other matériel necessary for a winter battle.

For that in itself, I'm thankful.

But humans always put themselves first.

Commander of the Salamander Kampfgruppe Lieutenant Colonel Tanya von Degurechaff looks up at the gloomy sky, and a complaint slips out along with her sigh.

"All this is for use in the home country."

"Yes, Colonel."

Cotton-padded cold-weather gear is much too thin for winter in the Federation. The sight alone is enough to make her frown while she watches the brand-new gear getting unloaded.

This is no good. Tanya scans the receipt as her adjutant, First Lieutenant Serebryakov, nods awkwardly next to her.

It’s still essentially a list of things they don’t have.

In this ultrapractical wartime world, a major worry is how to obtain socks. To think that, driven to avoid frostbite though they may be, every single veteran officer from the lieutenant colonel on down would be worried about socks! The fact that Tanya had to rely on her connections to find any is a terribly unfunny joke.

Thanks to General Winter, even the idea of holding training flights that are essentially trips to smuggle socks isn’t beyond consideration.

As far as Tanya has been informed, the Salamander Kampfgruppe is actually getting preferential treatment when it comes to supplies. Since the group is serving directly under the General Staff, friends like Lieutenant Colonel Uger are offering the best possible already. There’s nothing better to hope for in the east.

And on top of that, the aerial mage battalion has received a replacement company of mages. We’re quite blessed, considering that by simply running little delivery errands, we’ve been able to make a name for ourselves and get extra accommodations.

“In other words, even we can only get stuff like this…”

The grumbling of the commander of the Salamander Kampfgruppe is indicative of the current situation in the east.

There’s an ancient saying about how meat and clothing make a man courteous, but sadly, in war, even clothing never works out the way you’d hope.

“I guess our only saving grace is that we have enough food and ammunition, but…”

Though Tanya is relieved to be resupplied, the gloomy state of the Imperial Army is enough to make her dizzy.

When she looks up without thinking, even the color of the sky annoys her, although she knows she’s venting her feelings. Even a single white cloud in the Federation sky would annoy her—she can’t help it.

“Colonel?”

“Oh, uh, it’s nothing.”

The supply personnel must have sensed Tanya’s dismay. In response to their concerned expressions, she puts on a wry smile as if to say there’s nothing to worry about.

Smiling calmly even when things are bad is a commander’s duty. It’s been a long time since she desynchronized her inner thoughts from her facial expressions. Having a fearless smile equipped as standard gear is a job she’s gotten used to.

“I’m glad I had a chance to be here to observe. Sorry if I got in your way. You can keep working.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

The soldiers swallow their questions and tactfully return to their tasks. It’s wonderful how disciplined they are. I suppose I should be relieved that this is what the Imperial Army is known for…but I need to make sure the troops don’t wear themselves out.

Though their complexions are still all right, I can’t deny that the snow and the cold are slowing them down. What would happen if we were cut off from supplies at this point?

Requesting high-calorie rations to replace the insufficient standard meals already puts additional strain on logistics. Most of the supplies the horses and vehicles are struggling to bring us go straight into the soldiers’ stomachs. Barely any progress has been made on updating the front’s winter gear or stockpiling ammunition for an offensive.

It’s not that I’m not grateful for the supplies that do arrive. It’s just that their transient nature gives me a headache.

But… Tanya shakes her head to clear away those pessimistic thoughts.

In this irritatingly cold weather, even sighs become visible. It’s time for her to leave before her gripes accidentally emerge as a cloud of white breath.

“Okay, Lieutenant Serebryakov, let’s head back.” Tanya calls her adjutant and sets off.

Her destination is the building their forces requisitioned to use as a headquarters building. The defensive positions have been erected throughout the garrison village with the usual aim of securing the settlement's perimeter.

Tanya smiles smugly at the thought of how much progress has been made if she can walk around openly without worrying about harassment attacks from enemy forces, partisans, or snipers.

Two officers freely walking side by side is truly a luxury.

If other units stationed on the eastern front hear about the conditions the Salamander Kampfgruppe is enjoying, the stories alone will make them jealous.

The level of safety that allows officers to come and go without needing escorts is enviable. This snapshot shows how incredibly unstable the situation has become in the east.

"…Anyhow, we need to prepare for winter. Let's be frank, Lieutenant Serebryakov. What did you think when you saw that gear?"

"…Colonel, with that stuff, we'll be…"

"Okay, I get it. That's fine. You don't need to say any more."

Serebryakov's voice is even gloomier than expected, so Tanya immediately ends the conversation.

Allowing the men to witness their superior walking around with such a grave expression can't exactly be called proper behavior for a commander.

Once your job entails leadership, you can't be openly agitated.

"Sheesh, I want to wash this down with some hot coffee."

"Luckily, some happened to be delivered with the supply shipment."

"Is that true, Lieutenant?" Tanya cracks a smile. *That's good news.*

The fact that supplies are still reaching the front means logistics is functioning properly and there's no doubt the army puts some thought into provisions but… for tense war zones like the eastern front, luxury items have a tendency to be low priority.

"The coffee rations are military-grade, or… How should I put this? It meets the

lowest standards possible while still being the genuine article."

"I won't ask for anything more, given our circumstances… As long as it's not that nightmarish ersatz stuff they serve in the General Staff dining room, I'll be happy to have it."

"Understood. Leave it to me." Serebryakov wears a winning smile. What an encouraging reply.

"Looking forward to it."

Smiles are proof of composure. Hearing bad news all the time by choice is poor for mental health. Some amount of stress can be motivational, but too much of it is just as debilitating as not having enough.

Time for a break. Tanya cheers up and follows Serebryakov back to their provisional headquarters.

It's nice to have something to look forward to, no matter how small.

"If nothing else, happiness."

"Ma'am?"

Tanya brushes the snow off her clothes, hangs her socks in front of the hearth to dry, exchanges them for a spare pair, and then settles in as she finally gets to enjoy a chance to catch her breath.

I empathize with that poet who missed the sun so well that it makes me sick.

"Ahhh, give me more sun."

"I didn't know you were a poet, Colonel."

"I used to look down on poetry as a pursuit that was creative but unproductive. I was wrong. It's a very human, civilized way of thinking that deserves respect."

It's because we inhabit the extraordinary that we can find joy in how easygoing the ordinary can be.

"So are you going to serve me up some coffee?"

"I'll aim to make it black as the devil, hot as hell, pure as an angel, and sweet as love."

“Thanks.”

Serebryakov’s only joking, but the quip, redolent with her wit and education, is utterly delightful.

She leaves the room with a salute—what a capable adjutant.

Ever since we were paired up on the Rhine front, I’ve been dragging her around everywhere, and, well…from a human capital perspective, she’s making the investment truly worthwhile.

Following the completion of her training, she accumulated a host of experience and is undoubtedly a veteran.

At least we can say that it’s not a bad thing for the NCOs who form the foundation of the military to have their act together.

The problem is that it’s not the volunteer mages but the conscripts who have evolved into veterans.

Ahhh, Tanya wants to cradle her head and moan. But the shortage of old-hand volunteers is a reality she has to deal with.

“War is lousy, but that doesn’t mean we have to be lousy, too. I want to get out of here, but it’s tricky. The eastern front right now is a literal quagmire. There’s no way out.”

They can send tons of personnel to bulk up the front lines, and they can send a whole mountain of supplies to support those personnel, but all of it will simply be swallowed up by the enemy and the snow.

Winter is dreary even in the Empire but it’s a world apart from the Federation’s winter. If the former is a gloomy sky, then the latter is an endless battle for survival against General Winter. Since neither side seems to mind squandering resources despite the season, this madness continues.

Tanya, who loathes waste by her nature, is simply astounded. *Way to go, everyone.*

“It’s ridiculous to fight a war in weather like this.”

Though military rationale demands it, the lack of regard for the national economy is absolutely staggering.

The way each warring country is pouring their budgets into this and racking up debts doesn't strike her as sane. It's less like military expenses are eating into the national budget and more like the budget is military expenses plus a couple of extras—insanity.

Of course, if you're sane and fighting a war, something else is wrong with you.

In the extraordinary, sanity is extremely rare. As a representative example, take the complete breakdown of supply and demand during wartime.

It's quite a vexing problem, deciding whether to call it a failure of the market, curse it as a warping of economic principles caused by government intervention, or classify it as an exception that occurs only under certain circumstances.

As a problem in the fields of economics and ethics, this battle is complex enough that I could probably aim for a doctorate with it. That is, if I get to write a thesis after the war.

What little remaining sanity I have is terribly precious. I can only hurl myself into the world of philosophy and sacrifice my sanity for a degree once this war is over and things return to normal.

On the battlefield, all you can do is keep attrition to a minimum and sleep when sleep can be had. The duties demanded of Tanya now are fighting with all her might, resting as much as possible, and keeping herself in good condition however she can.

In that sense, a luxury item like coffee is certainly a welcome refreshment.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting, Colonel."

It's here? Tanya looks up without thinking; she's missed coffee for so long. Getting to drink real, hot coffee in a war zone—and at the frontline headquarters of the Kampfgruppe—is priceless.

When Serebryakov returns, Tanya smells a fragrance she had nearly forgotten.

"I'm surprised, Lieutenant. Could this be…?"

"Yes, I don't think they've managed to replicate the scent artificially yet."

Tanya's eyes pop open because it catches her off guard. She looks at the cup of coffee she's been offered and murmurs, "It sure doesn't smell like the military stuff."

Even with a body overwhelmed by the snow and cold, there's no way she would mistake it. This beautiful fragrance is coffee. When she takes a sip, she thinks, *Ahhh, this is what it means to get emotional!* Unfamiliar, alien flavors are minimal, while the taste of the coffee has kept well enough that it's palatable.

Any coffee lover would be able to tell the difference between this and an ersatz version immediately.

"Can I ask if this is really…government ration?"

"Um, I understand how you feel, but…it is government ration."

Serebryakov notes that you never know what you'll get sometimes, but I'm also sure the fact that she was the one who prepared it for me is an important factor in the taste.

Finding someone who can make a good cup of coffee is another difficult thing to do without investing in human capital. Usually, though, the bottleneck is the beans.

It is my firm belief that making a drinkable cup of coffee from miserable coffee substitute or poor-quality beans is a feat approaching the realm of alchemy.

"Where is this imported from? I'm surprised they were able to get enough for a whole army, even if that only includes the troops on the eastern front. It must have been quite the challenge."

This is what it means to be grateful yet taken aback.

Tanya had only just been explaining in the document she's writing how frostbite eats into the fighting capacity of the Kampfgruppe.

When your job is to write a petition requesting socks and cold-weather gear while drinking nice coffee, you're bound to feel a little cognitive dissonance.

"Personally, I'm glad the coffee has gotten tastier, but I'd really prefer if command could supply us with what we need to make it through the winter…"

It’s fine that they value the effect luxury goods have on frontline morale. But the fact of the matter is that proper food, clothing, and shelter are the most basic necessities, and not having those needs met will be a problem.

Plus, the food, clothing, and shelter usually offered to soldiers are not particularly luxurious.

The bare minimum of civilized conditions and only enough nutrients to do light work will leave them short on calories.

In the army, eating is a duty. To be a good soldier, one must eat. Being able to sleep as required is another quality perennially sought in soldiers.

The reasons are clear.

Energy must always be maintained and combat strength should constantly be kept as high as possible.

Shortages of cold-weather gear and food shouldn’t ever happen.

“Should I just have them avoid unnecessary exercise and nap instead? It’s not as if we’re underwater in a submarine…”

“Excuse me for saying so, ma’am, but though we may not go hungry that way…I think not having the chance to warm up our bodies will also cause problems.”

“So you’re saying it’d be better to have them outside exercising?”

“Regardless of what we do in the summer, I think it’s unavoidable in the winter.”

She’s right, thinks Tanya, shaking her head to change gears.

It’s great that cold-weather and other gear are being sent over with a winter battle in mind.

Issues are piling up little by little, but we don’t have to despair yet.

“…Maybe what we have is better than nothing. Lieutenant Serebryakov, do you think the measures we’ve taken are good enough?”

“…Regardless of how things go in November, it’ll probably be rough in the long run. I imagine the situation will get dicey in January and February once it

really gets cold.”

Tanya understands what her troubled adjutant is saying between the lines. “It was a mistake to not anticipate needing to fight a winter battle in Federation territory. I guess even for the Service Corps led by General von Zettour, shipping existing cold-weather gear to us is the best they can do.”

That said, it’s the same thing as the headquarters not understanding what conditions are like out in the field.

Since no research was done on what a winter battle in the Federation would be like, they ended up sending cold-weather gear that was only marginally better than nothing. Whether socks, underwear, or anything else, the gear was based on the environment the home country expected rather than the realities on the ground.

It’s better than not getting anything. I have to admit that.

Half a loaf is better than none.

“I’m not sure whether the Service Corps slipped up here or if we should be relieved that they came through with the bare minimum at all.”

There’s no question that they’re taking what measures they can with the limited railroad situation, pushing the supply lines to their breaking points. I can tell the higher-ups are putting in an uncommon amount of effort.

Still, to Tanya, the problem is clear.

“It’s still not enough.”

A thin overcoat won’t cut it. The leadership may be working hard, but these results won’t do.

These clothes simply weren’t designed for cold that sinks into bones. Maybe if we layered up, we would finally be able to protect ourselves. Hard work may be noble, but if results aren’t forthcoming, it’s just wasted effort.

“How about procuring our own cold-weather gear?”

“…We’re working on it using classified funds. Mainly we’ve bought stolen Federation gear from the Council for Self-Government, but they don’t have much to spare.”

“So even if we have the money, there’s nothing to buy, huh?”

“No.” Lieutenant Serebryakov shakes her head regretfully.

Tanya lightly waves off her apology. “It’s not your fault.”

The Council for Self-Government established in Federation territory should have a whole pile of cold-weather gear.

Should…?

Considering all the disputes popping up here and there during the war, there must be some truth in their claim that they don’t have a sizable stockpile.

I guess we have to be glad we were able to get what we got.

“If the items don’t exist, then it’s no wonder we can’t procure them… Let’s just hope the home country will send us socks made for the Federation’s weather.”

My irritation is growing more severe as the cold deepens.

“General Winter, huh?” Tanya mumbles to herself with her coffee cup at her lips.

Frostbite and the cold feature in any book about war or history.

Lieutenant Colonel Tanya von Degurechaff knows better than the others what the effects of winter will be…but a picture is still worth a thousand words.

“This is a huge pain. I can’t imagine what it’ll be like just from reading about it in books. I guess it’s only natural, then, that I’d long for spring.”

She intended to say that only to herself, but Serebryakov answers as if she had been addressed. “Don’t forget about General Mud, Colonel.”

Setting down her half-finished coffee, Tanya nods.

“General Mud? Ohhh, I see. When the snow melts, it’ll be a mess as well.”

She doesn’t even have to look out the window.

Snow is a crystallization of moisture.

Once warmed up, the result would hardly differ from someone splashing water all over the ground.

“He has a tendency to be underestimated, but I think General Mud might actually be a greater threat to the Empire than General Winter.”

It’s logic she can agree with. Mud is incredibly troublesome. No wonder the German-Soviet lines in the east were cursed as a swamp.

But I still have to wonder about Serebryakov’s opinion. When I remember all the stories of how much trouble the cold caused the Germans, it makes me think we should be more worried about surviving the winter.

“You have a point, but there’s room for doubt in that conclusion. I think our greatest challenge will be getting through the winter.”

“With all due respect, I disagree.”

“Hmm, tell me more about your position.”

It’s rare for Tanya’s adjutant to hold out so stubbornly, so she is particularly interested to hear what she has to say. Serebryakov is an outstanding soldier, and more than that, she’s an officer who is quite well-informed on most issues connected to the Federation.

It’s possible that she knows the military maps better than most everyone.

“The Imperial Army is too dependent on mobility, and we’re no exception, Colonel.”

“From the time our military was founded, its doctrine was the optimization of the interior lines strategy. It’s not an exaggeration to say that mobility is part of our organization’s very makeup.”

“Which is why we won’t be compatible with a battlefield where we can’t maneuver.”

Tanya nods as if to say, *That makes sense…* I guess this is another harmful effect of the Imperial Army’s Galápagos syndrome.

“…You mean a swamp, huh? I see. I guess it does sound a bit more concerning than General Winter. But the mud will slow down the Federation Army’s large units, as well.”

But she refutes her own words the moment they’re out of her mouth. “So it’s just the difference between human wave tactics and a mobile battle? Try as it

might, the latter can't escape the impact of the environment… So the major offensive the General Staff is planning for spring is also at risk?" *Hmm*, she thinks and nods, then laughs off her own comment. "If we make it through the winter, that is."

In Japan, they say that if you speak of the future, malevolent gods laugh…but even as someone who doesn't believe in malevolent gods, I see merit in the idea that there is a limit to human knowledge and foresight. It's pointless for the General Staff to be planning a major spring offensive when so many of us are stressing about how to protect ourselves from the coming cold.

"All right, Lieutenant Serebryakov. Your view is quite interesting. I'd like you to write it up as a report. I'll try submitting it to the General Staff."

"A-are you sure?"

"I'm pretty sure I haven't turned into such a narrow-minded commander that I would ignore sound reasoning. Staff officers, myself included, have a tendency to pursue doctrine optimization to extremes. Additionally, if we criticize the higher-ups with the views of an officer in the field, I'm sure they'll listen. After all, you've worked your way up the ladder. Since you don't have any weird preconceptions of how things should be, you can offer a fresh perspective."

In other words, a deconstructed view.

Every last one of the officers in the General Staff was trained at the war college to cultivate and perfect the same way of thinking. For better or worse, the homogeneity of ideas leads to a weakness against the unexpected.

It's like an immune system. Specializing to handle only one pathogen means that any other disease can wipe it out.

"Variety is the essential factor in winning a war."

Problematically… Tanya conveys the fact of the matter she can't put into words via an expression like she had sucked a dozen lemons.

…the Empire has become too homogenous.

Their home country is a war machine of unparalleled precision, but by its nature, it is overly specialized in interior lines strategy—in other words,

operations within its own territory. If these unanticipated foreign campaigns continue, that problematic contradiction will grow to a point where brilliance in the field can no longer make up for it. A little precision in an organization can actually make it harder to correct distortions.

We're about as unlucky as you can get.

There are so many problems with equipment that's optimized only for the climate and terrain of our home country. The more I think about it, the more those issues seem to pile up.

"…Are we reaching the saturation point?"

Before Tanya realizes it, she's practically groaning. Turning her leaden eyes to the scene outside the window, she sees the unit covered in flurries of white as the soldiers struggle to distribute supplies.

"This snow is really a curse… I guess those who came before us said that weather was the most formidable factor."

The accumulating snow is already disturbing. Whoever said, *When it rains, it pours*, really knew what they were talking about. Even after all this melts, the Imperial Army will be trapped in the quagmire.

"It won't be anything to laugh at when the earth itself becomes unreliable."

Neither the infantry, the armored units, nor the horses and trains used for transportation can escape what happens on the ground.

Aerial mages are an exception in the Imperial Army, whereas armor is the main thrust; the ground troops are liable to have their mobile combat units stuck fighting a war against the mud.

Until Serebryakov pointed it out to me, I was too focused on the immediate problem of making it through the winter. This tunnel vision is worrying.

"I'm terrified of armored unit attrition—to the point that I don't even want to think about what might happen. It's a bigger problem than the limits of our maintenance capabilities… This is…simply hopeless."

The Empire's armored units were formed under the assumption that they would be deployed domestically. To put it another way, it's assumed that they'll

operate in environments where maintenance facilities are relatively nearby. In the east, that's a dream beyond hope.

"In the end, we'll be swallowed by the mud?"

As Tanya grumbles, she looks up at the ceiling.

The Imperial Army General Staff may not be as clueless as Being X, but that doesn't change the fact that it's struggling with a change to its business model.

"Lieutenant Serebryakov, in the list of equipment that the Council for Self-Government or whatever can offer us…was there anything about maintenance facilities?"

"There are two if it's for simpler Federation-made vehicles they seized. I'm sure there was something in the official notice about that. But…" She shakes her head apologetically. "There still aren't any factories where we can fix our own vehicles. We're operating under the assumption that anything damaged beyond what the repair company can handle will be sent back to the rear."

"And where do we get the truck that can do that kind of recovery mission?"

"According to the report…"

But Tanya doesn't need to ask Serebryakov to know. She's being sarcastic. With a look of disappointment and not so much as a chuckle, Tanya answers her own question. "You don't need to answer that, Lieutenant."

"Do you know already?"

This is what it means to have to wince, like, *clearly*.

"Having been operating the tank recovery vehicles at full capacity for so long, there's no lack of rumors that they're down, too. It's painfully obvious."

So many tanks have broken down that we need a vehicle to recover the tank recovery vehicle. That's the harsh reality we must face.

At least I can wash it down with bitter coffee, she thinks, reaching for her cup, but right as she takes a sip…

The phone line she recently had the field engineers install begins to ring.

Perhaps Serebryakov intends to give Tanya time to finish her coffee, because

she moves to answer it. She has a brief exchange with the caller before summarizing for Tanya. “Captain Ahrens has a suggestion for you.”

Tanya says she’ll take the call and reaches for the receiver.

The signal quality itself is good.

But when she gets the report from one of her trusted commanders, she has the feeling there is noise mixed in.

“Due to a shortage of antifreeze, the number of realistically operable tanks has plummeted?”

“Yes, that’s correct, Commander,” her subordinate answers, his voice coming through clear. If that wasn’t the case, she really would have asked again.

“…So? How many do we have?”

“In terms of combat ability, all tanks are functional as cannons.”

“What I want to know is how many we can use in maneuvers. Can we assume they’re all fit for combat maneuvers?”

“We have so little antifreeze. Honestly, it’s impossible for all of them to sortie fully operational.”

“How many can?”

He must not want to say. In a reluctant voice, Ahrens conveys the numbers the company of tanks is facing. “Six. Plus another five more we can probably get moving somehow.”

“Wait, Captain Ahrens.” She interrupts his report without thinking. “The most optimistic estimate you can give me, out of a unit of twenty-four, is eleven?”

“As you say, ma’am.”

His report, delivered as if he were frozen solid, causes Tanya to furrow her brow in spite of herself. When she absentmindedly lifts her cup to her mouth, the coffee is already gone.

Clicking her tongue, she glances at Serebryakov to order a refill and then turns her attention back to the receiver.

“That’s quite a shock, Captain Ahrens. You’re essentially combat ineffective,

then?”

The Salamander Kampfgruppe has a single armored company.

The number of tanks originally assigned the company was twenty-four.

And now, even an optimistic estimate says that over half are immobile. In other words, not even 50 percent are left. From a military perspective, that’s annihilation.

At least it’s not as if we lost tankers, who take many hours to train. If we could acquire vehicles for them, reorganizing the company wouldn’t be difficult. That’s the only silver lining in this whole mess.

Still…

Tanya feels dizzy but can’t stop herself from asking, “The problem can’t be wear and tear from combat, so how did this happen?”

“We’re experiencing too much mechanical trouble. We have nearly a full complement of tanks with twenty-one vehicles, but we’re not sure when we’ll be able to repair the ten that have broken down.”

“What do the factories say? Never mind, I already know. It’s chaos. Their schedule has been slammed with requests from the entire army for a while now.”

“Yes.” Captain Ahrens’s voice is strained. *Of course it is*, I think internally, wincing with the realization that Tanya’s face must be tense as well.

“…General Winter is a terrible foe, isn’t it? This is what it means for something to be worse than the stories. It’s probably safer to think of it as a particular environment, like Norden.”

“I barely have any experience in Norden. Formally, I did some training there, but it only consisted of patrolling the border during summer.”

“This is what we get for pushing people through the accelerated program, huh?”

The shortened program was designed to cover the critical points for the moment, but it clearly wasn’t up to snuff. At the same time, the General Staff can’t really be blamed. They’re doing the best they can under the

circumstances.

In fact, Captain Ahrens is an outstanding officer.

Disciplined officers who can resolutely lead from the front when the need arises are precious. You could safely call him the ideal armored forces specialist.

The problem is that there's a limit even to that. Accelerated training is inescapably biased. When the program is too focused on achieving quick results, their investments in human capital become too specialized in a single field.

She can't help but anticipate that a lack of variation in personnel development will come back to bite them hard in the long run. To put it in extremes, it's like building an entire accounting department out of people with abacus credentials.

It's not as if abacus skills are completely useless, but it's clear that reeducation is necessary if the circumstances change. If those accountants learn something besides abacus, there could still be use for them yet.

But if they never do, that's a different story.

"Captain Ahrens, setting aside the issue of poor development of human capital, let's get back on topic. We should focus on flexing what military might we have on hand. Listen, we know how fragile these tanks are in the cold they weren't designed for. I want to hear what you think we should do about it."

"About that, I actually have a provisional solution."

"Oh?" Tanya sips the coffee Serebryakov has brought, only to choke in the next instant. "D-diesel as a coolant?!"

I get that we're out of antifreeze, but this man wants to use diesel in its place?

"Yes, Colonel. It's what we've come up with, so we'd like to try this if it's all right with you."

"Captain Ahrens, I want you to explain this to me. I'm sure we're getting periodic shipments of diesel to use as tank fuel. It makes sense that we probably have some stocked up, but…" Tanya is utterly serious as she questions

him over the line. “It’s diesel, you know? You’re planning to pour it in as antifreeze?”

“At the most basic level, in the absence of proper antifreeze, some other similar liquid is fine. I checked with the mechanics, and diesel should achieve the bare minimum of what we need.”

“But that diesel isn’t made for cold weather. I have no idea what the mechanics are thinking.”

Ahrens starts to explain further, but Tanya cuts him off.

“No, proposal rejected. Listen,” she continues. “The coolant pipes probably don’t even have the coating to handle nonstandard substances. Are you saying it’s fine to circulate diesel fuel so close to a diesel engine?”

The plan is difficult to fathom for Tanya.

They say necessity is the mother of invention, but isn’t this a bit reckless? She furrows her brow. If they weren’t speaking over the phone, she would have unreservedly sent him a look questioning his sanity.

“…I’d like to request permission to test this on one of the tanks currently in maintenance.”

“All right, hold on a minute, Captain Ahrens. If you’re that serious, I’ll consider it. You really have to do this?”

“My apologies, but please consider it.”

When Tanya’s eyes flit toward the window, the view that greets her is that of a land consumed by snow.

I see. It’s unbelievably cold out. He must be asking for a chance due to a truly pressing sense of urgency.

“You’re serious about using diesel as coolant…? Only one, you hear? I’ll take responsibility if something goes wrong. Just don’t lose any personnel.”

“Understood.”

“Let me know how it goes.”

Adding the formality about how she’s expecting good news, Tanya hangs up.

She nearly sighs, which is basically a conditioned reflex by this point.

I'm aware that she should suppress the urge, but holding in sighs is bad for mental health.

"Busted before we even get to use them? This is the absolute worst."

A sigh hidden behind complaints.

Tanya's only consolation is that since she's indoors, her breath isn't visible. There would be no hiding a telltale white cloud.

Switching gears, she gets ready to return to her usual, routine work when she hears a knock and looks up.

Commanders essentially have no time to themselves, but this is plain hectic.

Tanya hears the sound of footsteps and the rustling of someone brushing off their clothes. The one who asks to enter is a subordinate officer assigned to the infantry unit.

"It's Lieutenant Grantz, Colonel. May I have a moment of your time?"

"Sure, what is it?"

Grantz must have been brushing the snow off the overcoat that is little more than camouflage-esque sheets. If he came in without doing that, the coat would have gotten wet and heavy.

From his complexion, it's simple to gather that he was nervously stamping his feet earlier because he has a heavy report to give her.

"About the infantry unit, the gear we received may not—"

"Hold up, Lieutenant Grantz. I don't like having my time wasted with minced words. Just give me an accurate report."

When she interrupts his hesitant tone and gives him a stern warning, he seems to get it. As expected, the lieutenant straightens up and corrects himself with an apologetic look on his face.

"Excuse me, Commander. To be frank, the gear we've received isn't meant for winter battles in the Federation. As a result, there's been an outbreak of serious deficiencies. Here you go." He hands her a formal written report. It's a

document written jointly by First Lieutenants Grantz and Tospan detailing the struggles the infantry forces are facing.

Mages, who regularly move with blistering speed at high altitude, get gear that comes with a measure of cold protection, and they're adequately educated about how to protect themselves from the elements. So Tanya officially dispatched Grantz to look after the screwup Tospan, which seems to have produced results.

Unfortunately, they aren't the kind I can be genuinely satisfied to hear.

"Their weapons are freezing? Shit, I figured that might happen in the worst-case scenario, but…it's too soon. It's still November, for goodness' sake."

"Yes, it's just as you say. Of course, we're doing everything we can to make do with what we have…"

"*Is* there anything you can do?"

"The advisor sent from the Council for Self-Government told us to pour hot water over them."

Tanya's reaction is uncertain after the latest revelation in this sigh-worthy exchange.

The advice from the local specialist is fairly reasonable. If machinery oil freezes, solving the issue with hot water isn't necessarily a bad idea, if a little crude. Operating a firearm without adequate lubricant causes a degree of wear and tear that makes people want to cover their eyes, but even if it galls, a gun that shoots is better than one that doesn't.

"…Well, if we're looking for a logical solution, that's certainly one. But, Lieutenant Grantz, do the soldiers have adequate access to boilers and fuel to make that happen?"

"Frankly, we don't have enough." The rest of his report, delivered in an apologetic voice, isn't exactly pleasant. "The mages are helping out here and there even though it's prohibited."

That's something Tanya can't ignore.

Right when we should be conserving the strength of our mages, we're using

them as hot water dispensers instead…?! The reason it's prohibited in the first place is because we can't afford to let our mages become exhausted before we even enter battle.

Sadly, if we need hot water…the law of conservation of energy will be merciless.

We can't make something from nothing.

It's inevitable that if we can't secure enough fuel, some of the troops unable to stand the cold will redesignate the mages as human heaters. Officially, they're being told not to do that, but something's gotta give in these conditions.

"If it's not one thing, it's another. I appreciate the Council for Self-Government's advice, but it's going to be virtually impossible to implement on a regular basis."

"Lieutenant Tospan says we should at least warm up the machine guns…"

Tanya furrows her brow in spite of herself. "Keeping the core of the infantry's firepower operational certainly isn't a bad idea, but…"

Unfortunately, it's become difficult to supply the machine guns with enough bullets. If this were the Rhine front, where we had great access to supplies, we could get by with a boatload of consumables and ammunition. But that's too much to hope for given the supply situation of the imperial forces deployed in the east.

Conserving ammunition and focusing on what's necessary to keep their weapons operational… The idea's not bad, given that it's coming from Tospan.

But as the commander of the Kampfgruppe, Tanya can't approve.

"Raising our overall firepower is our greatest concern at the moment, isn't it? I mean, what could we do if the enemy breached our perimeter? We can't fire into our own lines and mow down our guys along with the intruders."

Machine guns are convenient. In fact, they're too convenient. Soldiers who are overly dependent on them are often fragile.

Infantry fight at the very front. That's an immutable truth. A foot soldier who gets into the habit of hiding and waiting for support loses much of their

willingness to fight and can be called only a former soldier—someone who used to be a warrior.

“If, hypothetically, machine gun support was cut off, what would you do?”

“In the worst case, we’d use our shovels to eliminate the enemy in a close-quarters battle.”

“Lieutenant Grantz, I don’t deny that the shovel is an implement born of civilization, but…” Tanya answers her subordinate’s confident declaration in a tone of voice that sounds like she’s suffering from a headache. It’s not as if this is the Stone Age, so I want us to have the brains to avoid that kind of scenario in the first place. “…As a commander, I can’t send you out with nothing but shovels to fight against Federation soldiers wielding small arms…”

Suddenly, Tanya realizes what’s so weird about what she just said. “Hmm? Hold on. The Federation troops are armed, too.”

“Yes?”

Grantz has a blank look on his face as if he wonders why I’m bringing up something so obvious.

Realizing it was a mistake to ask this slow-witted guy, Tanya changes targets. She turns to her adjutant as if to say it’s better to ask someone who knows the enemy.

“Lieutenant Serebryakov, you can read the official Federation language, correct?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Great…” Tanya nods and continues, “We need weapons we can use. And enemy weapons are clearly viable even in this cold. In that case, the solution is simple.”

The *you’ve-got-to-be-kidding* expression on her adjutant’s face is evidence of how sharp she is. Meanwhile, Grantz seems confused, so for better or worse, his thinking must be too inflexible for this.

Actually, it’s likely that after he gets more experience, he’ll be able to make the leap as well.

“We’re going to use enemy weapons.”

“The ones that we’ve seized? I beg your pardon, but…”

She already knew he would grumble that they didn’t have enough.

“Lieutenant Grantz, luckily I have a few ideas for where we can get more. Now then…” Tanya’s expression is unconcerned as she continues, “Lieutenant Serebryakov!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

“We have some Federation small arms, right? We’re going to test them.”

“Understood.”

With no questions asked, her adjutant retrieves the list of seized items off a shelf. This synchronization is important. Tanya’s happy to reconfirm that she has a capable, rare breed of officer who grasps her intentions immediately.

“Here’s a list of everything the Kampfgruppe has, Colonel.”

“Go with her, Lieutenant Grantz. See if those weapons are usable or not.”

Not long later, some modest comparison trials were done.

What we tested was the full complement of imperial infantry gear. After comparing all the gear the Imperial Army uses (besides computation orbs) with their Federation counterparts, our findings are shocking.

“Basically, all our equipment has been subject to Galápagos syndrome! What year is this?! Are we basically dodo birds?!”

Cooped up in her office, Lieutenant Colonel Tanya von Degurechaff sorely laments the situation alone.

The main reason she’s cursing her fate is because the higher-ups completely misjudged this environment.

Overall, the Empire’s design philosophy is terribly flawed.

The Federation-made weapons are so simple that even if someone was drunk, they could take these guns apart, clean them, then put them back together again. And they’re built to last to boot.

The Imperial Army's standard-issue gear doesn't even compare. Our weapons were designed by forcing everything to their limits, producing high-performance pieces that are overly complex.

It's a gap born of both the Imperial Army's strategic environment, where potential enemies lurk in every direction, and the Federation Army's, which has to take a fearsome winter into account.

"It's only a matter of time before we and our pointlessly sophisticated machines will be overpowered by our enemy and their keen sense of what's good enough… *In this day and age, we should be designing by subtraction not addition, huh…?*"

The Imperial Army Weapons Division had laughed off the Federation's tools of war as crude, but they must have been lacking in imagination. They thought a system with redundancy would be more resilient than a system that was pared down as much as possible.

In pursuit of their one solid chance of victory, the military planners came up with the interior lines strategy and optimized everything for domestic mobile battles to raise the possibility of success even a tiny bit.

This instrument of violence of unparalleled precision, the Imperial Army, ended up like the Japanese flip phone—another product of Galápagos syndrome.

In a different market, it's incredibly uncompetitive.

Every moment counts in capitalist competition, sure, but if you're a minute or even a second late in a war, you might pay for it with your life. Which is why Tanya has to acknowledge the issue head-on.

"Shit, so the Federation is a bunch of penguins? If we're going to adapt to this environment, we've got to become penguins, too."

The Imperial Army had been scoffing at the Federation Army as birds who couldn't fly, but if the enemy can fight in an environment it's specialized in, then we're the ones who are left writhing in agony.

From Tanya's perspective, the Empire's position is based on a huge miscalculation.

“Troops on the front lines need weapons that can be used in the field, not in a lab.” Knowing the problem gets them halfway down the road to a solution. If the issue is that their equipment isn’t adapted to the environment in the Federation…

“We’ll have to make do with whatever’s available,” Tanya murmurs, glaring at the map hanging on the wall and then breaking into a smile.

Recently, there have been multiple reports of contact in an area of the Federation dotted with villages and forests. That has to mean there’s a weapons and ammunition depot nearby.

The partisans are also active, so for better or worse, there’s no lack of prey.

After all, this is the front line—even if the joint Imperial Army and Council for Self-Government battle against the guerrillas has been making rapid progress.

It’s understandable that since personnel is finite, the priority is maintaining stable communications lines. As a result, the guerrillas near the enemy front line have mostly gone unchecked.

Busy with preparing for winter—laboring to build fortifications while also securing supplies and the issue of readying the troops for cold weather—surely none of the Imperial Army units have been able to do anything much more proactive than defending themselves.

Which is why Lieutenant Colonel Tanya von Degurechaff summons her trusted vice commander and adjutant, then immediately hands out orders.

“Major Weiss, pick enough troops to form a company.”

“A company, ma’am?”

“That’s right. I’m putting you in command. Take the best we’ve got.”

“Yes, ma’am…”

Her subordinate with the grim face has probably already made up his mind. She senses his fierce will to bravely carry out whatever mission it might be—what a dependable guy.

“If I’m going to form the unit, may I ask what its mission will be?”

“Plunder.”

“Underst— What? P-plunder?”

“C-C-Colonel?”

She’s surprised at their high-pitched questions and twitching expressions.

Even if it’s not on par with The Scream*, they still managed to capture shock better than any lesser artist.* Tanya can’t help but wince. She didn’t even know these two were the type to have faces this expressive. And her adjutant had been silent until just now. She must have been caught terribly off guard.

“What? It’s a joke. Aren’t you gonna laugh?” This is how Tanya had planned to lighten the mood.

Seeing how hard Weiss is trying to relax after that explanation, it’s clear that the joke failed. Apparently, I have a different sense of humor from these two.

“Please spare us any jokes we can’t laugh at.”

“The lieutenant is right… If you’ll excuse my saying so, that was too much.”

“I’m merely a soldier who follows the law of war and other military regulations. I have no intention of putting our fatherland at odds with modern legality.”

I had assumed that since we’ve spent a significant amount of time together, we would have begun to share the same sense of humor, but the harsh reality is a slap in the face.

It’s tricky to compromise between differing aesthetics.

That said… Tanya recomposes herself. Even if her subordinates are a bunch of warmongers with a deficiency of humor, as long as they do their jobs as pros, she can’t even really call that a fault.

“The tragic reality is that our supply lines are being paralyzed by the Federation winter.”

More than anything, Tanya boasts a talent for looking at herself subjectively.

She’s been aware for a while now that the only notable feature of her personality is how seriously she takes everything. Naturally, I’ve been working

on that. She's struggling to incorporate some humor. But perhaps she isn't making much progress.

"Essentially, it's causing chaos."

Since her jokes are somewhat lacking in humor, she can't rule out the possibility that her subordinates see her as straitlaced.

It's no wonder she ventures to focus on work in a matter-of-fact way. Her voice retains a businesslike tone as she begins to explain their situation with her eyes on Weiss.

"The Council for Self-Government has been established through the good offices of General von Zettour, and our logistics situation is improving. But we can't expect things to instantly turn around."

"Even if security in the rear improves?"

"Unfortunately, yes."

This is another point on which Weiss is a pro.

Whenever the topic changes, he deftly matches the mood. His handling of the conversation is sound as he nods to show he understands. I like the stability of his attitude that makes it clear he grasps the situation.

"Stability of the rear is a major factor. And the joint counterinsurgency battles with the Council for Self-Government have been no small success. But on a most basic level, if we don't have *things*, nothing can happen."

"Meaning the distribution improvements aren't reaching us in the field?"

"Exactly. We have the route, but the critical thing at the moment is the cold-weather gear. Production isn't meeting demand."

Once you're an officer, you're forced to acknowledge the challenges the Imperial Army is facing whether you want to or not, so maybe it's only natural that Serebryakov is nodding—she's always keeping an eye on the logistics situation beside Tanya as her adjutant.

Tanya has no doubt her two subordinates understand the situation.

It probably doesn't need to be said, but she says it anyway.

“Under the circumstances, the Salamander Kampfgruppe is being hounded by our need to complete preparations for winter. That about sums up our current status.”

Loathing waste and minimizing risk aren’t mutually exclusive, you know. It’s not logical to spare a little effort only to drastically increase the chances of an accident occurring. That’s nothing but laziness.

Anyone who does that is trash who should be shot, which is why Tanya is always careful to follow procedures.

“However, I suppose it should be said… In order to put our full power on display, we need to procure optimal gear.”

“…Excuse me, ma’am, but where are we supposed to get it?” Weiss seems to be saying, *You can’t be serious.*

In other words, he’s catching her drift nicely. Tanya nods as if to say that the answer is exactly what he suspects. “The law of war allows the seizure of the enemy’s national assets.”

The Federation may not have ratified the law of war, but the Imperial Army adheres to the rules of engagement on principle. Tanya studied the Rules of War on Land so intensely at the academy that she practically memorized them, so she’s confident in her expertise in this field. *Laws aren’t made to be broken but dodged.*

“I’m fairly certain the law of war allows seizure of cash, funds, and realizable securities, which are strictly the movable property of the state, along with weapon stockpiles, means of transport, stores and supplies, and generally all property of the state, which can be used for military operations.”

“I believe that’s true, ma’am.”

“Then all we need to do is procure them from the Federation Army. The company Weiss organizes will be deployed as an assault unit for that purpose. Let’s capture any weapon stockpiles, stores and supplies, and generally any property of the state that can be used for military operations.”

“Please allow me to point out a somewhat delicate issue. It can be rather difficult to tell which property belongs to the state and which belongs to private

individuals…”

Weiss is an outstanding officer, but it seems his mind-set is different from the rest of the world.

Tanya is happy to debate the finer points of military law. She welcomes it with her intellectual curiosity—but only if it doesn’t disrupt business from getting carried out.

“Major Weiss, you must be exhausted, too. *Exactly what front* do you think you’re standing on?”

“Ma’am?”

Seeing from his reaction that he missed the point, Tanya glances at Serebryakov in spite of herself. Her eyes are enough to convey what she wants to say.

“Front…? Huh?”

Her adjutant nods, seeming to get it as she lets out an “oh.”

“Isn’t our enemy in the east the *Communist* Federation? The wonderful Commies reject the idea of individual ownership of private property—they’re reckless enough to declare everything to belong to the state.”

It’s like how one plus one is two.

The only ones who seek proof of this are mathematicians. Similar to the practical application of mathematics, Tanya will always value the importance of a simple explanation.

Denial of private property rights.

The advance of nationalization.

With these givens, the conclusion is self-evident: Practically everything in the Federation can be considered “movable property of the state.” And the law of war doesn’t prohibit an army from capturing property belonging to an enemy nation.

“Now, here’s the crux of the issue… Are there any laws that prohibit the seizure of property of the state when private property rights don’t exist?”

“Isn’t that forcing it a bit much? Even in the Federation, surely property on an individual level exists…”

Serebryakov’s counterpoint is correct. Setting aside the law for a moment, there’s no practical way for us to separate or discriminate between what property belongs to whom.

But Tanya has to mention something as well.

“Of course, in practice, they may have something like that. But all we’re doing is determining ownership rights according to the civil code the Federation authorities established. We’re not a judicial organization, so what power do we have to reinterpret Federation laws? So what is their definition of ‘private property’?”

“…If you twist the interpretation a certain way, almost all property in the Federation is state owned.”

“Correct, Major Weiss.”

In a sense, this is an exceptional environment scholars of war laws could never even dream of. How wonderful that the law of war was written without taking Communism into account!

In Tanya’s circumstances, it’s the perfect tool for justifying her actions.

“Legally, I imagine we’re permitted to take quite a lot.”

Anyone who digs deep into the world of law will find themselves in the world of legal logic. Not ethics. Individual opinions vary as to whether something being legal makes it morally good or not.

But that’s how laws go.

Just like the rules of a game.

Thus, the individual known as Lieutenant Colonel Tanya von Degurechaff figures she’s fine as long as she adheres to the framework described by the rules.

“There will be legal problems with the classification of public facilities and other immovables, but there’s nothing wrong with us attacking Federation partisans and having them share their weapons and ammunition with us.”

"…Indeed, it's almost as if you're proposing a form of warfare that could be called a 'plunder economy.'"

"You seem to be getting a handle on the economics of war," Tanya responds. "Excellent."

It's like what Sun Tzu says in *The Art of War*.

Anything you can procure in enemy territory will be spectacularly more effective than the same thing brought along from your home country.

First, the transport costs are as good as zero. And there's no time or effort spent ferrying things all the way to the front using the railroad network.

Second, anything that helps you hurts your enemy.

These are all good things. What else can you call it but terrifically delightful?

"I don't imagine we'll be able to fulfill all the Kampfgruppe's needs, but I think it's a better use of a mage company than setting up camps and outposts. I'll lend you Lieutenant Serebryakov as an interpreter. Go ask our neighbors to lend us some weapons, food, and ammo."

"Ha-ha-ha. Communists love sharing, so I'm sure they'll cry tears of joy."

"I'm sure they will. Do as the locals do, right? I'm merely trying out the Commie way of life. Organizational-level seizure. This seems like a great time to try that out. Now, then…"

Tanya smiles.

Seeing that Weiss's humor deficiency won't be a problem at the moment is a major development. It's a good sign that he has the wherewithal to crack jokes.

We can't afford to neglect our work. Military service is a job, after all.

"On that note, I'd like you to form a company and move out. Find a group of armed Commie insurgents to lend us some gear."

"Understood. And is that company supposed to oversee transport as well?"

"No, that won't be necessary. I'm planning on attaching Lieutenant Wüstemann's replacement company as support."

"I see. So basically they'll be conducting a training flight with an added

transport role?” Weiss nods as if satisfied by that explanation.

His response has Tanya grinning immediately. “That’s exactly right.” Then she suddenly adds a word of warning. “Knowing Lieutenant Wüstemann, he’ll want to engage in combat, but don’t let him.”

“Understood.”

“Um…”

Tanya turns to her adjutant, who has spoken up.

“…Are you sure, ma’am? There’s almost no substitute for live combat…”

What Serebryakov says makes sense. Yes, I see now. Wüstemann and the other freshly minted mages lack experience. It’s not the worst idea for them to get to know what it’s like in the field.

But in the end, Tanya shakes her head in a vivid display of refusal.

“Sorry, but the risk of losing recruits who haven’t had enough training is too high.” I’m glad I confirmed this detail with them. Tanya begins to detail her reasoning. “Listen, Major Weiss, Lieutenant Serebryakov. We may not even be conscious of it because it’s so normal to us, but flying long distances in assault formation and then carrying out an attack is actually incredibly exhausting. For these new guys, it will be all they manage just to accompany you.”

The two officers nodding and going “Oh, right” must have forgotten.

“That’s what I thought.”

I had a hunch. Tanya winces.

The service records of the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion are formidable.

Serebryakov, who has been with Tanya since the Rhine front, is a distinguished veteran even among the battalion members. In other words, she has a rare amount of experience for a soldier in the Imperial Army.

And Tanya knows that even sensible Weiss is a proper warmonger on the inside.

It’s only natural that the pair of them would stop being able to tell what is and what isn’t unreasonable.

“I bet you were gauging the difficulty according to your own standards, right?”

“It’s just as you say, Colonel.”

“Ha-ha-ha. How very like you, Major Weiss. You’re an outstanding soldier, but depending on the situation, expecting the same out of everyone around you can become a trap.”

“I’ll be careful,” he replies with an expression that seems to indicate he gets it…but objectively speaking, Tanya worries how much he actually understands.

After all, the old hands are seasoned heroes worthy of the term *elite*.

Not a single person in the whole roster of the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion is either a Named mage or otherwise skilled enough to be worthy of the title. A run-of-the-mill long-distance assault is something they’ve done countless times.

Raiding partisan camps and hidden Federation Army supply bases to collect some souvenirs isn’t so tough.

Sadly, most people in the world find that an incredibly trying feat.

From an objective standpoint, we’re talking about assaulting a base after infiltrating deep into enemy territory. It’s self-evident that anyone who isn’t a veteran will get worn down just by accompanying those flying the mission.

That alone will be plenty of experience for the new kids.

“I beg your pardon, but what is our primary mission, acquiring supplies or training the new soldiers?”

“I don’t deny that it’ll be difficult, but while the overarching goal of the mission is to acquire supplies, I’d like you to focus on minimizing casualties of the recruits as much as possible.”

The answer to Weiss’s question has to be clear. We mustn’t forget the logic of *He who chases two hares catches neither*. With that in mind, Tanya advises her subordinates on their simple plan.

“To cut to the chase, as long as no one is harmed in your or Wüstemann’s companies, I don’t intend to take issue with how well the mission is completed.”

In other words, we'll prioritize the staple of on-the-job training: a field trip.

"You mean we should prioritize turning the deadweight into fighting power?"

"Do your best to make something usable out of the cards we've been dealt. That's why I'm lending you Lieutenant Serebryakov to interpret. Get this done right."

Only the shadiest companies crush newbies under a pile of work right off the bat. That's the Commie way, and it's an extreme tactic that can be considered only when you're flush with human resources.

"Understood. I'll confer with Lieutenant Serebryakov and pick the members of my company. I'll get started on this plundering mission right away."

"Let's call it a 'special procurement mission.'"

"That does have a milder ring to it, doesn't it?"

"Without a doubt," Tanya answers with a straight face.

To avoid any legal misunderstandings, I'd like to present the mission in the most benign, euphemistic terms possible. Something similar to taking preventive medicine.

"I'll make this clear: Avoid firing on civilians. Excessive cruelty against partisans is also prohibited."

Of course, she doesn't intend to be the type of clueless commander who issues orders before sticking the guys in the field with impossible restrictions.

"Frankly, though it'll be a challenge with the state of the battlefield, I'd like you guys to conduct yourselves as befitting an upstanding military unit."

"…We'll do our best. May I ask what prompts such specific instruction?"

"I want to fight the Federation's propaganda with the truth that the enemy army behaves well while the friendly army wreaks havoc. Instead of inspiring nationalism, I want to take a bite out of the enemy's sense of loyalty."

I suppose you could call it a variety of psychological warfare.

"We'll undermine the Federation propaganda war by showing them how disciplined the Imperial Army is. If we can make a good impression on the

Council for Self-Government as well, then we hit two birds with one stone."

"Understood. Allow me to confirm one point." Weiss lowers his voice quite a bit to pose his question. "It's possible that we…may witness friendlies committing illegal acts. Do you have instructions for us in that case?"

"There's no doubt that any behavior violating military law *benefits our enemy*. I find it hard to imagine anyone in our unit would dare, but if you see someone on our side doing such a thing, deal with it strictly and fairly."

"…Are you sure?"

"Since you won't have any military police with you, you can take provisional measures as necessary. If you get in trouble for not following procedure later, I'll go to bat with the General Staff for you. I won't hold back any support that will help my troops accomplish their mission."

"Thank you."

It probably doesn't need to be mentioned aloud that some of the finer points in my decision are based on my principle of self-preservation.

While we may be at war with a hostile nation, that's not everyday life. If I dirty my hands now, once things return to normal, it'll be hard to avoid trouble —that holds true in any era.

I want to minimize the faults that could possibly be found. It's important to have the law on your side. These are considerations Tanya must have.

"I'll prepare written orders that make your authority clear. You'll have them by the time you leave. If for some reason you don't get them, wait before sortieing."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Let's call it a special surveillance and pacification operation built around the pretense of a limited strike. Make sure you recon the enemy the way a unit directly serving the General Staff should."

"Leave it to me, ma'am."

Weiss performs a textbook-perfect salute—how reliable. Tanya returns it and tells him that she's counting on him to carry out the mission.

AT THE SAME TIME, FEDERATION CAPITAL MOSKVA, SPECIAL SUBTERRANEAN MEETING ROOM

Even with the heater running and the lights set on bright, there was still something chilly about this Moskva underground meeting hall.

My comrades probably look bleak because reading reports with dismal expressions has become a chronic condition among our ranks, thought Commissar for Internal Affairs Loria with a wince.

It was inevitable given the power structure within the Communist Party. It was understandable that no one would report a life-threatening error with a cheerful expression.

The warping of reality was an unavoidable result. In that atmosphere, everyone wanted to minimize their failures and exaggerate their successes. What their situation really called for was levelheaded and even coldhearted objectivity—but that was frequently forgotten.

The head of the Committee for Resistance in Occupied Territories, who had been reading a report since a short while ago before Loria, must've been thinking similarly.

…Put another way, this man was probably also intentionally avoiding the whole truth.

"To give an idea of the overall situation, it appears General Winter is presenting a major obstacle for the imperial forces. I'll add that they seem to be running into difficulties with all their precise machinery designed for conditions in their warmer home country."

That was a fine report.

Loria's agent had delivered the same. That meant it probably wasn't a mistake, per se. But even if the factors making up the report weren't fabrications, the most critical part—the analysis—was awful.

"I'd like to ask a few questions as the Commissar for Internal Affairs." Loria casually addressed the committee head comrade trying to finish his report. The question he asked in a supremely calm tone of voice was driven by his curiosity.

“It’s great that the Imperial Army is having a hard time, but I’d like you to tell our comrades here how much power they can actually bring to bear against us.”

“The enemy’s condition is currently being analyzed.”

Loria was skeptical of how seriously the man meant “being analyzed.” He wouldn’t say it was mindless to present intelligence that hadn’t been properly looked over first, but he did sense something contrived about that excuse.

“So you mean the state of the enemy forces is currently unclear?”

Loria stared silently.

Suddenly put on the spot, the other man’s eyes started to become panicked. The sight of him anguishing over what excuse to make next was simply too disgraceful.

While Loria could *understand* the feeling of wanting to present only good news at meetings, there wasn’t any reason he should *respect* it.

“This is…only a rough estimate for reference purposes, but…”

So when the head of the Committee for Resistance in Occupied Territories opened his mouth, seeming to have made up his mind, Loria furrowed his brow slightly.

I asked for analysis, and he’s offering a reference point? What the hell?

“We’ve received word from our comrades in the field that imperial combat strength has dropped to half or possibly even lower.”

“…Is that true, comrade?”

“We’re conducting a careful investigation to look into it.”

Loria was after levelheaded analysis and data, but this man didn’t seem to understand that. His response missed the mark. It didn’t take the others in the meeting long to notice. Yes, it was right about when the entire room was beginning to get disgusted with him. Bathed in the concentrated fire of their gazes, he hurried to speak.

“B-but we do know for sure that their fieldable forces have decreased.”

“You mean they’re having a tough time because of General Winter?”

“Yes, Comrade Commissar! The Imperial Army is freezing solid in this cold weather. I believe we can state that much.”

I see. Loria nodded. When he glanced over again, he saw the idiotic face of a man who seemed to think he had managed somehow.

To Loria, it was utterly disappointing foolishness.

After it was clear that not a single piece of useful information regarding the Council for Self-Government was forthcoming, this man had become garbage. He must not have possessed any understanding of his role and what was expected of him.

…Meanwhile, the Commissariat for Internal Affairs had already acquired quite a lot of intel.

They even managed to embed a truly capable agent at the executive level of the Council for Self-Government the imperials had set up.

His organization had far more intelligence about the issues the Imperial Army was facing than the blockheads in the Committee for Resistance in Occupied Territories.

It was certainly in a tough spot.

But then again…

Loria smiled wryly. There were blockheads forgetting that the enemy wasn’t the only one suffering. And apparently Loria wasn’t the only one who couldn’t stand it.

Several people in uniforms who had been silent until now suddenly spoke up.

“Your claims seem to conflict with the report from the Thirteenth Air Army. Far from maintaining air superiority, it’s uncertain whether we’re even managing to keep a balance.”

“I understand you’re doing what you can, comrades, but please don’t ignore the reality that our planes are outdated compared to the Imperial Air Fleet.”

The rebuttal was a perfect example of smoothing over the truth. From Loria’s perspective, it seemed like the faces of the soldiers listening to such nonsense were like wolves ready to tear into their prey.

“I’m sorry to contradict you, but the Thirteenth Air Army is made up of mostly new models. The problem is the *amount* of matériel available.”

The soldier dispatched from the Federation Army’s General Staff sounded disappointed.

It could be argued whether it was for better or worse…but either way, their repeated defeats in the field may have left their political senses dulled. The military was regaining the courage to report inconvenient truths.

As far as Loria could tell, it was regressive behavior. But even if it was simply their honest opinion, stemming from a realization that their preconceptions were no longer lining up with reality, and offered while at the mercy of aggressive political discussion, these thoughts were still worthy of attention.

“It’s strange. If the imperial fleet is frozen on the runway, then what exactly are we fighting against?”

“This is an official warning for our comrades in the military. You need to watch what you—”

The blockheads, finding themselves at a disadvantage, began to argue, and Loria brought down the iron hammer.

“That’s enough, comrades.”

“““Comrade Loria?”””

He scanned the room and, upon receiving a nod of silent approval from the general secretary, began to speak.

“I’d like to report what the Commissariat for Internal Affairs has learned. Comrades, let us first start by acknowledging two truths. Here,” he said, directing a subordinate to pass out documents. He began giving a straightforward summary of the main points. “First, the reports from our comrades devoting themselves to aid partisan activities probably aren’t false. The Imperial Army is struggling with winter. That’s not wishful thinking but simple reality.”

He guaranteed the truth that the Imperial Army was suffering in the cold.

“I’ve prepared evidence to answer the army’s question, so please take a

look.”

“…Are these repair facilities?”

“That’s right.” Loria nodded as he made sure the papers had gotten to everyone before continuing. “Note all the machinery.”

Though the photo was indistinct, a specialist could easily parse the info contained within. For the military men, it appeared to be more than enough, seeing as how they started to nod.

“It’s plain to see that they’re sending a terrible amount of their assets to the rear, as shown in the attached photo.”

It was no wonder Federation Army General Staff officers gasped at the sight of the photo from inside the repair facility—it was a mass of classified information. The things the Imperial Army was desperately trying to hide had been laid bare; if anything, there was hardly any doubt that this was an achievement worthy of a commotion.

What surprised the soldiers most was how readily this intel had been handed over. Frankly, concealing sources of information even from your allies was a fundamental principle of espionage.

Unless they were incredibly confident, no one would even consider revealing intelligence documents on a scale like this. They could tell the Commissariat for Internal Affairs seemed wholly convinced the imperial forces wouldn’t be able to discern the source.

“There’s a second reality we must also acknowledge… Unfortunate as it may be, the Imperial Army is learning quickly.”

Everyone was hanging on Commissar Loria’s every word to find out exactly how much his organization knew. The only ones uninterested in what Loria had to say were the people from the Committee for Resistance in Occupied Territories, whose thunder he had stolen.

“Especially because of those puppets, the Council for Self-Government— yes, it turns out there are a few former Federation soldiers among the separatists.[1] Sadly, that means our winter battle know-how is undoubtedly leaking.”

“Excuse me, Comrade Loria, is it true that the Imperial Army and the separatists in the so-called Council for Self-Government are cooperating?”

The voice of the staffer from the Committee for Handling Occupied Territories trembled in a way that seemed to indicate he wasn’t quite able to stop it from shaking.

He struggled to find some fault in Loria’s report. Of course he did—it was literally a matter of life or death for him. Hoping to impart the impression that Loria’s data weren’t confirmed, just like his own organization’s, this man recklessly turned his tongue on the commissar.

“It could be imperial propaganda, and failing to spot that would be a grave error. What say you, Comrade Loria?”

“The report is accurate; we have no doubt whatsoever.”

“…So to what extent do the two parties trust each other?”

Ahhh. Loria was assailed with such an intense urge to burst out laughing that he struggled to contain himself. He replied in extremely polite terms to the blockhead’s question.

“Indeed, I must admit that that’s quite a difficult question for me to answer. So I’d like to ask you something instead…”

How incompetent can you possibly be?

“Why in the world would you of all people ask me that?”

The man gaping at him was the overseer of operations in the occupied territories. Loria thrust reality into his face by telling him how things were supposed to be.

“You don’t know? Hmm, that’s strange… Comrade, didn’t the party task you with investigating governance?” Loria censured him slowly with pointed words. “I really don’t understand. How could you overlook the establishment of the Council for Self-Government? There’s still no intelligence on it after all this time?”

From Loria’s perspective, departments whose jurisdictions overlapped were sometimes a nuisance.

Of course, the flip side was that if they were competent, their organization would actually be able to compete and pose a threat to him.

But what was truly awful had yet to come…

“Shall I ask a different question? Traitor, how much did the Empire pay you?”

Useless allies were a nightmare.

Ineptitude might as well be the same as betrayal. It had to be purged.

“Th-th-that’s not what happened!”

“Then it has to be incompetence, negligence, or sabotage. No matter which, you’ve done an awfully poor job.”

All he had to do was murmur, “Get him out of here.”

Security personnel from the Commissariat for Internal Affairs standing by cut in and escorted the man trying to scream something out of the room in an *exceedingly democratic and humane way*. The rest was their job.

Surely he didn’t have to give detailed instructions for every little thing. Anticipating his wishes was the bare minimum he expected of his security officers. And he wasn’t worried about them making a mistake.

With that, the issue of their former comrade was solved.

“Actually, this is the most critical intelligence we need to obtain. We’re pouring our espionage efforts into rooting out traitors as much as we possibly can.” Now that the cleanup was over, Loria turned the conversation back to the Council for Self-Government. “…All right, comrades. This matter is running behind due to the laziness of its former point person. I’d like to make a suggestion about how to progress.”

Loria continued his explanation in a matter-of-fact tone. Though he spoke nonchalantly, as though he hadn’t just made someone vanish into thin air, he had certainly seized enough initiative to dictate what discussion was on the table.

“They say that stormy-weather friends are the true ones. I’d like to test if the Empire and the Council for Self-Government will remain friends in the snow. What do you think?”

If the Imperial Army and the Council for Self-Government were seriously intending to cooperate, that would have long-term implications.

Putting together reports he had received so far from his mole in the Council for Self-Government, it seemed like the separatists were expecting a lot out of the Empire. If the Empire was planning to actively cultivate their fantasies, that would be a nightmare. It could mean that the Imperial Army, which was supposed to be a mere instrument of violence, had transformed into a rival on a more subtly strategic level.

“Comrades from the General Staff.”

So spineless. He wanted to sigh at how cowardly the Federation staffers were, with their jerking shoulders.

No, they had grown a great deal more forthcoming after all their mistakes. Of course, he felt bad that he had to threaten them.

Because he understood how important sympathy was, Loria smiled gently.

“In a purely military sense, it’s very simple. I want you to hit the enemy and see how they react. This is an official request on behalf of the Commissariat for Internal Affairs: Please ready a limited counterattack operation against the Imperial Army this winter.”

“I—I beg your pardon, Comrade Loria, but…a military operation for a political objective?”

The stiffened soldiers’ faces spoke louder than he could have imagined. Apparently, the teaching that officers were to remain calm and composed at all times wasn’t being followed very well.

Loria had heard once that eyes speak louder than mouths, but regardless of where their voices were coming from, this reaction was overly dramatic.

“That’s right.”

“Comrade Commissar, as representative of the General Staff…”

“Well, hold your horses…” Loria raised a hand to quiet the uniforms. “To come right out and put it bluntly, the mission is reconnaissance-in-force for a political objective. But look, I won’t pin any purely military failure on you. It’s

only natural that strategic objectives are given priority."

"R-reconnaissance-in-force? …We have an idea where the enemy line is. From a purely military standpoint, it would be a risk since it could end up an unnecessary attack."

"That's a good point." Loria nodded but refused to yield.

War was the continuation of politics.

The problem they were facing was strategic by nature. Knowing the relationship between the Imperial Army and the Council for Self-Government was absolutely essential for long-term planning.

Especially because…

"…This is a good chance. Let's make this a joint operation by the Federation Army and the international community to add in some cooperation between countries. It's not a bad idea to tack on other elements if we're already going to take military action for political ends."

Does that work for you? Loria asked his boss with his eyes and received an affirmative nod.

In that case… He moved the discussion to the next phase. "All right, shifting into operation planning… What sort of support do we have from the Unified States?"

"Currently a convoy is delivering supplies, but there's a problem. Since exporting directly to us would violate some of the Unified States's domestic laws, the cargo has to take a detour through a third country, so it will take some time."

"Hmm." Loria smiled and continued making preparations.

If there was a problem, it simply needed to be solved. And since Loria knew this was also a solid step forward in bringing his love to fruition, it was important not to rush things.

EARLY DECEMBER, UNIFIED YEAR 1926, FEDERATION TERRITORY, IN THE VICINITY OF THE MULTINATIONAL FORCES HEADQUARTERS

The Federation took the lead in forming a multinational unit to display its international ties.

The stated objective was to present a joint effort between a group of allies from a diverse group of countries. Internally, it was also explained that this was a trial unit that could serve as the basis for gaining joint operations experience fighting against the Empire.

Put plainly, the Commonwealth was reluctant but eventually agreed to the Federation's proposal—though the jury was still out on whether this was a good or bad outcome.

The news that a certain marine mage lieutenant colonel stationed in the Federation had been dispatched to escort the convoy must have been music to the Commonwealth Army authorities' ears.

"Thanks to that, I miss the ocean something fierce and can't even pop into a pub to down a pint. True horror is serving the crown." The Commonwealth Army's Lieutenant Colonel Drake was muttering to himself.

It took only one written order before he was on a joint mission with the Federation Army.

Due to the unique chain of command, his powers of discretion were vast.

He nearly burst out laughing the moment he was handed the paper that read, "Cooperate to the greatest extent possible in support of this request." It had been written in such old-fashioned language that he might as well have been the royally appointed captain of a ship of the line back in the age of sail.

"But, man, I'm supposed to do my very best to meet the Federation's request?"

He was to provide *what support he could* to the allied nation's operations *with good faith and respect*. In other words, he didn't have to do anything impossible.

It wasn't even necessary to employ his skill and experience to come up with a clever interpretation of his orders. No matter who read it, it was clear that he had the right of refusal. The Commonwealth military leadership had given a mere lieutenant colonel the right to turn down the headquarters of the

Federation Army.

“And how did the Federation even…” As a member of the Commonwealth forces, Drake naturally hesitated to say, *…accept those terms?*

He stepped outside to be prudent and winced.

The Federation Army Joint Operation Force had formed under a banner of beautiful ideals to promote international cooperation, and its doors were wide open, but the result was a jumble.

Anyone who examined the origins of all the gathered soldiers could speak positively about the broad global impression this force gave off. Even if they looked only at the military affiliations, there were Commonwealth, Federation, and Free Republican troops. A closer look revealed members of the Entente Alliance’s government in exile’s army as well as volunteers from the Unified States.

Challenging the lone Imperial Army was a diverse resistance.

Multiple ethnicities had come together to fight against the massive Empire. It was a powerful demonstration of humanity’s progress and universality, worthy of applause.

This was an incredibly photogenic moment.

It could be said that the Federation’s Communist Party spared no efforts on the propaganda front. Drake found himself admiring them, too.

Taking a casual stroll outside, Drake was liberal with his praise. “Maybe we should get some of our colonial officials out here. They could use a lesson in PR from the Federation.”

The Commonwealth could claim only a passing grade in administering and ruling over multiple ethnicities. Dividing and conquering was all fine and well. That said, even a generous estimate put his homeland at about a B.

They needed to learn from the Communists how to consolidate latent energy and use it.

Being able to say something without hesitating was an irresistible freedom. Happy he had no one accompanying him, Drake openly spoke his mind.

“Divide and conquer isn’t the only way… Though it’s not that applicable during a civil war, we need to learn the finer points of bringing people together when we’re fighting against a foreign power.”

But this was also a matter of *That said, that said, that said…*

Anyone looking up at the sky trying to sugarcoat their nation’s selfish interests would be disappointed when they inevitably found them lying on the ground.

“…I can’t stand being manipulated by propaganda.”

Just thinking about straining to understand the veritable melting pot of languages all around him threatened to worsen his headache.

Even going by just what Lieutenant Colonel Drake had heard before he left on his solo walk, it was clear that there was a great array of nationalities present and their various languages were jumbling together into a mess.

The disordered hierarchy—a commander’s nightmare—was also somewhat responsible for this state of things. In the end, it was tremendously difficult for anyone to communicate.

Surely the situation wasn’t any different inside the inn that housed their headquarters.

“This has to be what it was like right after the Tower of Babel was destroyed.”

Communications procedures had become absurdly intimidating.

An official notice issued in Federation language would be translated so all the different nationalities could understand it, and then their replies would be translated into Federation language.

Even for the most mundane exchanges, that was how messages were sent. Naturally, the commanders were at their wits’ end. There wasn’t a soldier on the modern battlefield—a place that demanded large amounts of intelligence be processed quickly—who thought this system would hold up in combat.

The point of propaganda was to make them look good, but logic could be twisted only so much.

The only way to fix the situation was exceedingly simple.

Interpreters—and lots of them.

In other words, they would leverage matériel superiority to break through this obstacle. The practical issue was that the students who seemed to have been recruited from the Federation's language schools were, regardless of their proficiency levels, already speaking all sorts of tongues.

Given the present state of things, no matter how many speakers they had, it wouldn't be enough. The shortage was so serious that even mid-ranking officers couldn't have interpreters.

Which is why I got to savor this walk on my own… Drake sighed as he spotted a soldier coming his way.

"Colonel Mikel?"

A Federation commander waved in greeting as he approached. Drake couldn't speak his language, either. But they couldn't very well hold a conversation via gestures.

"Agh, excuse me, I'll get an interpreter…"

"Oh, I doubt we need one, Mr. Drake."

Drake was trying to show with gestures that he was going to go find someone but suddenly froze and stared fixedly at Mikel. "How nice to hear my mother tongue… But I never dreamed you would speak it, Colonel. You'll have to excuse me—it's been a while since I've heard that dialect, and I don't much care for it."

The words coming out of Mikel's mouth were unmistakably Drake's native language.

Moreover, it was the orthodox Queen's dialect. When did this man have the chance to hear Londinium's upper-class accent in a far-flung place like this?

The world is just full of surprises.

"You can say to my face that my Queen's dialect is rusty—that's fine. It's been too long—my tongue is having a hard time getting around the words."

"You usually have an interpreter, though."

"A leash. No one can converse freely while standing under a guillotine."

His comment was a bit too explicit to claim he was hinting at something. He wasn't pulling any punches with those metaphors.

That said, Drake understood how Mikel felt.

"…Things political officers shouldn't hear, huh?"

"You mean things I don't want them to hear?"

"Ha-ha-ha." Drake laughed as he nodded.

A world where a mage corps major had to take such steps to protect himself simply to have a friendly chat with an ally was unthinkable to Drake.

Mikel, smiling wryly, was—for better or worse—the epitome of an honest soldier. Why would a career military man be doubted by the motherland he swore loyalty to?

What a cold, heartless era we live in.

In these wintry modern times, the chilling truth threatened to freeze not only Drake's bones but his very soul.

"It must be hard for you, Colonel. If you'll forgive me for asking, will it be necessary for a stray bullet to tragically strike that political officer?"

"No, no, not at all. You needn't trouble yourself about that."

"Oh? That's a surprise. You think so highly of that Liliya Ivanova Tanechka woman?"

Drake didn't have a very good impression of her. Frankly, she was disagreeable.

More precisely, he personally didn't like her.

Regardless of who she was as an individual, a professional soldier such as Drake couldn't accept a political officer as a friend. Consequently, he didn't think of her as a fellow human being but as a political officer.

Names are things people inherit from their ancestors. The tool known as a political officer should simply be addressed as "political officer," right? I'm not sure a specific name is necessary.

"Honestly, it's hard to treat a dog sniffing around your friends like a person. I

thought I could cull a stray for you."

"I suppose I should show you the proper respect and answer truthfully… That one's better than most. No, I'd go as far as to say that she's much more decent than the rest."

Drake was sure he was gaping like an idiot.

If Mikel didn't speak so fluently in the Queen's dialect, Drake would have wanted to ask whether he might have misunderstood the meanings of *better* and *decent*.

"I do beg your pardon, but do you actually mean what you said? That political officer is one of the better ones? That one's 'better'?! Did the definition of the word change dramatically while I wasn't paying attention?"

Drake thought of Liliya Ivanova Tanechka only as a strange member of the Communist Party.

And really, that was simply because that was the label he gave to political officers. It was hard to associate any of them with *better* or *decent*.

"Colonel Drake, I speak only the truth." Bathed in Drake's *you've-got-to-be-kidding* look, Mikel's tired expression didn't budge. "Considering the possibility that we could have been sent someone awful, I think it would be productive to get along with who we have."

"Terrible. That's the only word for it." Drake spat and looked to the heavens. Was the pale sky a symbol of this merciless world? He longed for the overcast gloom of his homeland.

Could a battlefield really be this absurd? he wondered.

"…This chill really sinks into your bones, huh?" Drake commented, shrugging. If he didn't, he wouldn't have been able to remain sane. "So? May I ask why you invited me to this secret meeting?"

"To thank you. And, well…to apologize."

"Hoh-hoh."

"I heard from Comrade Ivanova that Lieutenant Colonel Drake from the Commonwealth Navy was kind enough to put in a good word for me."

What's that supposed to mean? Drake shrugged again. "Suddenly you seem strangely distant. What's the matter?"

"I doubt Communists and liberals can get along."

"Oh? It may be presumptuous, but I think they can."

"I may not look it, but I'm a soldier who came here to fight in defense of freedom. I'm not sure I can get along with Communists who came to support the Communist Party."

"You've gotta be joking." *So this is what it means to burst out laughing. What a twist.*

It was unavoidable that laughter erupted over the chilly Federation snowfield.

After a good laugh, Drake had to admit defeat. "You got me. I surrender. That said," he continued, "as long as the Communist is a brother-in-arms, it's no problem, is it? *You can't choose your family, but you can choose your friends.* If I've chosen a Communist for a friend, I've got to put up with his eccentricities. Plus…" He chuckled and continued, "We've been underestimated."

"What?"

"We didn't come up on land just to chase after the Federation Army's ass."

Since crossing the ocean as direct support for the RMS *Queen of Anjou*, he had been fighting as a soldier. He wasn't here to be protected.

"We're here to fight a war—shoulder to shoulder with our brothers-in-arms."

Even if friendship between countries wasn't eternal…

Brothers-in-arms were forever.

"The Federation may not like it, but what does that matter? If my allies are fighting, I'll fight alongside them. If my allies die, then I'll die with them. That's what it means to be a soldier."

"Ha-ha-ha, well said, Colonel Drake."

"Oh? You won't call me comrade?"

"I'd like to call you a brother."

I must be smiling ear to ear.

To call it the sympathy between two people who had fought on the same battlefield would be tactless. This was respect paid between friends.

“Time for work, then.”

“Yes, let’s get to it.”

They nodded and bumped fists.

…Most of what he wanted to say didn’t need to be put into words.

““I wish you luck.””

It was the fist of his brother-in-arms.

Drake was speaking with him through it.

Nothing else needed to be said.



[chapter]

II

Paradox

War is the continuation of politics.

From *On War*

[chapter] II Paradox

A FEW DAYS BEFORE CHRISTMAS, UNIFIED YEAR 1926, FEDERATION TERRITORY, IN THE VICINITY OF THE MULTINATIONAL FORCES HEADQUARTERS

Contrary to what most assume, secret discussions are more conspicuous when trying to avoid watchful eyes. People who sneak around intending to do something they feel guilty about naturally attract attention.

“What’s the objective of this operation?”

“I’ve heard it’s to hasten the Empire’s attrition with a limited offensive.”

Upon openly leaving the joint forces headquarters, Lieutenant Colonel Drake and Colonel Mikel had headed to their designated lodgings together while carrying on a sparse exchange regarding the military operation coming up in a few days that had been hastily wedged into the schedule.

“Under this snowy sky?” Drake emitted a sigh and sipped his cold tea.

The Federation’s General Winter didn’t discriminate. He might have done great against the Empire, but the fact that he couldn’t tell friend from foe was problematic.

Scratch that, murmured Drake in his head. It wasn’t as if General Winter was a Federation patriot. Someone who treated everyone equally wasn’t an ally to anyone.

Neutral parties were often an arrogant bunch.

“The best thing to do while General Winter is on a rampage is batten down the hatches. Even social events have their season.”

“There’s no doubt about that. I don’t quite understand it myself. But…” Mikel

smiled tiredly. “…We’ve received military orders—strict orders—from high up in Moskva. We don’t have a say. There’s nothing we can do about it,” he spat.

Drake understood immediately what a difficult position Mikel was in.

To put it plainly, he was stuck balancing a cruel scale. Faced with the duty to produce results no matter what, he would probably have to use his men, who were practically family, as if they were disposable goods.

Anyone who didn’t feel conflicted in that situation had to be lacking something fundamentally human. Sadly, this was a dilemma all commanders were forced to face during wartime.

“If you’ve heard any opinions about this from the Commonwealth side, I hope you’ll tell me, just between us.”

“I’m sorry, Colonel Mikel. I know nothing about it.”

“What?”

“I mean, Colonel. The only orders we’ve received are to ‘cooperate with the Federation Army.’ Even if we’re informed of something new, we never hear the details behind the matter.” He clicked his heels and made a formal report. Maybe he couldn’t handle delivering such ludicrous news without becoming ridiculously serious.

“…I guess we’re both having a hard time.”

Drake shrugged and reached to take a mini bottle of scotch off a shelf anchored to the wall. Jam went well with tea, but the best thing for venting was an old friend.

He poured generously into his teacup and took a gulp.

“Would you like some? To add flavor?”

“My word, an offer of a drink from an allied soldier? Out of consideration for the relations between our two countries, the etiquette of diplomacy makes it difficult to refuse. I accept.”

“…Yes, I insist.”

With a laugh, Mikel sipped from his teacup, which was filled mostly with

scotch plus just enough tea to add flavor. He wasn't about to say anything so insensitive as *It's practically all alcohol!* There was too much absurdity going on in the world to face it sober.

"What are we going to do, Lieutenant Colonel Drake?" Mikel's abrupt murmur was strangely somber.

Well, I don't blame him. Drake figured the polite thing to do was remain silent and take a sip.

This didn't require a lot of talk.

For a little while, they abandoned themselves to their drinks, but then Mikel suddenly broached the main topic of their meeting. "Officially, this limited offensive is supposed to secure a foothold. The idea is to lay the groundwork for the major spring counteroffensive, but it's my personal opinion that we're already doing everything we can." His words, spoken as he gazed out the window far into the distance, were heavy. "I won't call it reckless, but even as a staunch patriot, I can say with confidence that it's risky."

"But you're already in good shape, aren't you?"

"On paper…"

Do you mean that…? Drake asked with his eyes and Mikel shrugged.

"In short, all we have are raw recruits. In the worst cases, there are probably some conscripts who are being registered as we speak."

When Drake got the exceedingly grave hint, his blood ran cold.

"That's shocking enough to drive off even the pleasure of a warm drink. Is it true?"

If this news was true, they were in a terribly precarious situation. And Drake had the feeling that what he heard was all too real. It was a well-known fact among Commonwealth officers stationed here that the official information coming from the Federation side was far removed from reality.

The fact that this didn't surprise anyone was evidence of just how "warm" the alliance between the Commonwealth and the Federation was.

"That's a huge leak…"

“So you didn’t know, right?”

“We were told there were elite units waiting in the eaves.”

Unless Commonwealth Intelligence was purposely misinforming Drake, the conclusion was straightforward: Even if the intelligence being given to the Commonwealth wasn’t a total fabrication, it was far from complete.

“They must be trying to look good for their ally. Or maybe it has something to do with safeguarding operational security, but…the party’s instinct is to conceal its weaknesses.”

“Geez. So what are things really like? Do you think a major spring counteroffensive is possible?”

Mikel furrowed his brow and finally squeezed out, “Honestly, I think it is.”

“You think the Federation will recover enough combat strength for that?”

“We’re rebuilding to some extent, but more importantly…the leadership is going to unreasonable lengths to make it happen. I heard that only babes and the elderly are left on any border regions not facing the Empire.”

“Which means that you should be building strength over the winter…”

But then was there any need or point in launching even a “limited” attack?

The lessons learned in battle had made it clear that unnecessary offensives not only tended to incur excessive casualties but also caused unexpected counterattacks.

“I don’t know. It might be out of political necessity…”

“…Hrrrm, that response is a bit problematic.”

“What?”

Drake felt bad for Mikel, who seemed confused, but he had a duty… This was something he had to say. “We don’t want to incur losses. And we have no obligation to go along with the Federation Army’s recklessness.”

“Oh, I see. I have just gained a much better understanding of your position, Lieutenant Colonel Drake.”

Drake’s homeland had given him wide-ranging authority. Naturally, he was

allowed to refuse the Federation's requests if necessary.

He hesitated to go along with the ridiculous Federation Army and their stubbornness. As a soldier with people reporting to him, he had obligations—the sacred and inviolable duty of a commander.

"…I can't force you to come with us. Certainly, many questions remain, chief among them what the mission's purpose is."

"What about you guys?"

"If the party orders it, we have no way to object." Mikel's face as he laughed at himself for not having the right to refuse was valiant.

"No way to object?"

"Not for us. We never had a choice to begin with."

The words of this man whose family was still in the *lageri* were clear. It was probably due to a resolve so fierce that Drake could only imagine.

…But they chose to fight.

That meant that his brother-in-arms was going to battle.

"I understand that you and your unit won't join proactively. Although if I can ask you to assist in the most minimal way, I could prepare a mission for you to guard in the rear."

Which was why Mikel's remark was exceedingly unexpected.

With a heavy sigh, Drake tipped the mini bottle of his old friend scotch and drained the amber liquid.

What absurd restraint.

"…Colonel Mikel, don't be a stranger. Just a word and it'll be no problem."

Mikel looked hard into his eyes.

He seemed to be lost for words, as if he didn't understand.

"We're soldiers. We should keep our words simple. It's headquarters and the political officers' jobs to quibble."

In short, Lieutenant Colonel Drake was a mage corps officer.

His mage unit consisted of a bunch of navy men who would rather fly into an enemy bullet than live as cowards. Anyone who would abandon their friends in a storm could go sink to the ocean floor.

“I’ve got an umbrella for rainy days. Just say the word.”

“Sorry, but please lend us a hand.”

Drake’s answer was a given.

He didn’t care what the higher-ups would say. Any soldier would understand. He would head to battle for his friends.

There was no need for a complicated discussion.

“Gladly.”

CHRISTMAS EVE, UNIFIED YEAR 1926, IMPERIAL ARMY’S FRONTLINE AREA IN THE EAST, SALAMANDER KAMPFGRUPPE’S GARRISON

“Salamander CP, this is Cherubim 01. Alert!”

“Cherubim 01, this is Salamander 01. What’s the alert? Give me a sitrep.”

“We’ve confirmed a Federation unit pushing into your area. Strength around two or three battalions. Additionally, we’re picking up multiple signals that seem to be mage units. They’re heading for the village in grid zone eighteen.”

Tanya unconsciously furrows her brow at the report from the friendly mage reconnaissance unit as she stands up. If the map she pounded into her brain is correct, they’ve come quite far past the front warning line.

Is some terrible Santa invading? Damn Being X and his ilk!

“Salamander 01, roger. There’s no mistake?”

“Copy. All normal.”

“Shit. They’re too close. What are those bastards in the frontline patrol command doing?”

“Please hold. They’re…ski commandos. That’s been confirmed.”

The Cherubim unit is doing great work keeping watch while reporting.

Are they an exceptionally skilled unit? If I can expect some fight out of them… Harboring a faint wish, she says, “Thanks for the intel. What’s your current mission?”

“We’re on our way back from long-range reconnaissance.”

Tch. Tanya suppresses the urge to suck her teeth.

If they’re returning from recon, then getting their intel back to base is top priority. And if they ventured so far out, it must have been because headquarters specifically requested it. If she got in the way of that, it would do more than make a bad impression.

Unfortunately, we have to handle this on our own.

“Cherubim 01, the Salamander Kampfgruppe will sortie immediately. Relay the details to high command. And if there are any follow-ups, I’d appreciate it if you’d let us know as well.”

“Roger, Salamander 01. Good luck out there.”

When the line goes quiet with a *bzzp*, Tanya thinks for a moment. In any case, the recon unit will probably report to high command. Theoretically, we can wait for the higher-ups to decide what to do…but if it’s our area that’s being hit, Tanya probably needs to attack and repel the enemy.

What a sigh-worthy moment.

“They’re advancing in this weather? These Federation guys sure are an eccentric bunch.”

Now, then… Tanya considers what arrangements need to be made, but…it’s simple.

Luckily, she’s just sent Major Weiss on one of the odd missions they’ve been conducting so often lately. That means there’s already a fully armed company up in the air ready for a combat mission.

Additionally, there’s a company in training on standby to deploy. In other words, the Cherubim’s alert came at the perfect time.

“02, urgent from 01. I’m changing your mission. Change your destination immediately to grid zone eighteen.”

“…What happened?” Weiss skillfully replies with a straightforward question, as expected. Tanya finds his wonderful lack of wasted effort satisfying.

“A friendly magic recon unit spotted a large Federation force crossing our lines. My guess is that they’re on their way to raid the village over there.”

What she has to tell him is very straightforward.

She informs him of his mission in the simplest terms possible.

“What we know is that there are two or three ski commando battalions plus an unknown number of mages. Aid the defense by stopping them ASAP.” On top of that, she offers a clarification. “Support the friendly villagers. Drive the enemy off or buy time for an evacuation.”

Weiss doesn’t gasp or anything, but even he can’t take these orders lightly. After a few moments of silence, he replies, distressed, “With all due respect, could you rethink this? Even if we only engaged in a delaying action, sending the troops into combat with noncombatants present is…”

“I can’t say it’s what I’d prefer, but we can’t ignore them. If we forsake the Council for Self-Government’s village, General von Zettour will murder us for letting the enemy profit.”

Tanya’s serious. Zettour has put a lot of work into this plan to divide the enemy.

If we can’t guarantee safety for the local authority that we’re allied with, we can’t expect victory in the guerrilla war. The essence of security is reliability and trust. If we can’t provide safety, no one will believe in us…

“To think this is happening right before Christmas, too. It’s so… How should I put it…? This news really makes it hard to maintain good morale.”

“Well, this is politics. It’s a present from our dear General Staff, Major.”

“…Thank you very much for the splendid gift.”

When everything is said and done, Weiss’s reaction is appropriate for a soldier in the field. Military action for political ends often means committing foolishness at the request of unreasonable people.

I don’t like the excuse of the holiday, but I understand that Tanya’s

subordinates are eager for a Christmas break. Who knows how things are for Communists, for whom Christmas is officially banned, but I'm sure that even the toughest members of the Salamander Kampfgruppe are looking forward to this time of year.

"I do have one piece of good news, though I don't know whether it'll satisfy you or not. It may be basic, but the area should be fortified—if the Council for Self-Government has been doing their job, that is…"

"Amateur fieldworks? I won't expect much."

Weiss's mind-set was the most prudent in this scenario.

Can a defensive position constructed by amateurs weather a Federation assault? If it had nothing to do with me, I would laugh it off as a sketchy gamble.

Sadly, Tanya is stuck between a rock and a hard place as a part of middle management.

"I'm not saying to stick it out until you've been annihilated. I'm heading your way now with the rest of the battalion."

How much better it would be if I could authorize them to pull back because it's an impossible task! Arghhh. Tanya shakes her head. No complaining. I have to at least get this work over with as quickly as possible.

The conclusion is simple. This needs to be done ASAP. And the enemy can't be ignored. This is what makes me hate everything. Any world where the mere three-word incantation "for political reasons" can thrust mages into heated battles is a place no better than garbage. It's proof that God doesn't exist.

If you have any doubt, just look at how the monster Being X is running amok. *At any rate…* Tanya shifts her priority to military matters and relays the necessary info.

"One other thing: There should be a communications officer out there. Make contact and have him evacuate. After that, you guys get out front and set up a mobile defense."

"Roger. Can I have the spare company?"

"Given their training progress, I'm having them stand by. The main force is

headed your way.”

“Understood. Then we’ll head to the village now. Should we instruct them to burn everything?”

Tanya’s response to the question is short and immediate. “No.”

“At the risk of being insistent, are you sure?”

Everyone is trying to figure out how to get through the deepening winter, and beds are hard to come by, so this fight is also over those warm places to sleep. If we leave buildings for the enemies, they’re likely to use them.

It’s easy to guess that Weiss will hold out, saying he wants to burn them down.

Which is why… Tanya’s answer has been decided from the beginning.

“Yes. 02, this is a *political war*.”

“So you’re posing as a hero saving the residents from the evil Federation?”

Tanya nods. *See, you get it.*

The political necessity of having to provide security won’t allow us to forsake this town.

If we disgrace ourselves with Christmas right around the corner, we’ll definitely have trouble later because of it.

But the only ones who would risk their lives for anyone but a clear ally…must be some kind of weirdos. Real soldiers despise that kind of romanticism.

If these were our own people…the members of the Salamander Kampfgruppe would devote themselves to defense without even asking for details, but Tanya can’t deny that this is a different question.

“I’m warning you, I don’t want to see you defending the village in name only. Give it your all. Reinforcements from the main unit are coming. I’m rushing over with the rest of the battalion.”

“02, roger. We’ll arrive ahead of the main forces and fight a delaying action.”

Even when you’re not feeling motivated, it’s unacceptable to cut corners on your work. After giving Weiss a warning and entrusting him with the vanguard,

Tanya prepares to move out herself.

First Lieutenant Serebryakov must have showed up while Tanya was on the wireless, because she's standing by right where she's needed, like always. Tanya shoots her a glance and says, "Lieutenant Serebryakov, raise the alarm for the Kampfgruppe and have everyone report to their alert positions."

"Yes, ma'am! Right away!"

Tanya has no issues with her adjutant's efficiency. Honestly, between her vice commander and her adjutant, this unit is just wonderful quality. Teamwork where each party does their job properly is exactly what this era requires.

"The rest of the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion should prepare to sortie. We'll leave Lieutenant Wüstemann's replacement company behind as a spare to protect the base. Stay alert. I'll lead the battalion myself."

"Will command go to Captain Ahrens, then?"

Right… Tanya nods and adds further instructions. Maybe it's because she's comparing him to Captain Meybert, who is too cautious, but armored commanders like Ahrens tend to prefer excessively aggressive actions.

I don't want to sound like a broken record, but instructions have to be clear. Confusion caused by unclear directions is foolishness resulting from idiot bosses.

"Tell him to protect the base, and if there are no further instructions after seventy-two hours, he should report the situation to eastern headquarters and ask for further orders."

I'm reluctant to even consider the possibility of such a just-in-case scenario, of course. It's the difference between bad and worse, though; this is better than the captain acting like a fool who abandons everything if Tanya's rendered incommunicado or something.

I'm not a child. I won't run from the responsibility of the job that's been laid down—even if Tanya's pay is not commensurate. There's not much of a choice, since a contract has already been signed.

"Oh, and thank the Cherubim command. Tell them I'll treat them to a round

of drinks as a thanks for the early warning."

Though my workload has just increased, it would be barking up the wrong tree to get angry at the bearers of the bad news. With the exception of whimsical weirdos who dream of becoming naked emperors, what you need when making decisions is accurate information. Those who provide that should receive commensurate praise.

With a comprehending nod, Serebryakov races off in her role as messenger—she gets it. Tanya is sure that she'll handle everything appropriately. At this rate, she'll mature into a fine high-ranking officer.

Now, then…, Tanya thinks after handing out all the necessary instructions. I expected an infiltration attack to come eventually. We're at war, after all. That much is bound to happen.

"Seriously, such hardworking Communists and nationalists alike can rot." Tanya grumbles this to herself but there's something I can't quite understand.

The cold is nature's fury. The Federation and the Empire have to face it equally. Even if the Federation Army is familiar with the winter in these parts, this isn't ideal hiking weather for anyone.

In short, it's not a good time to have troops on the move.

"A winter offensive doesn't seem sane. Is it recon-in-force? But I heard they don't even have enough forces to mount a counterattack…"

What crosses my mind is a guess calculating backward from a strategic objective. Recon-in-force would automatically imply a connection to a forthcoming operation.

Naturally, that implies the Federation has the forces necessary to launch a large-scale attack with what they learn from the recon.

But Tanya can't quite understand.

A major offensive doesn't make sense unless you have a lot of forces to commit to the battle. Is the Federation Army claiming they have that many ready?

"Has the Federation Army recovered more quickly than our intelligence

suggested? Of all the…”

It’s been only a month or two since the front stagnated.

Not even the Federation Army can escape the laws of physics. Despite having such a huge pool of manpower that you could describe it as soldiers growing on trees, they still require a minimum of training and gear.

Thinking logically, it’s not possible for them to have enough strategic reserves to mount a general counterattack. If they did, they would have committed them to battle before their lines initially collapsed; otherwise, the Federation Army General Staff would have been letting a ton of soldiers just sit around twiddling their thumbs.

…That said, it’s pointless to try to prove a hypothesis with mere deduction and shout that it must be XYZ.

Flatly ignoring assumptions for the moment, Tanya sorts out the issues plainly. The critical factor here is the enemy’s intention.

“First, is this intended to be a recon-in-force or not?”

By asking myself that, I can start to make some sense of this mess. If this really was supposed to be the prelude to a major offensive, everything, including the wireless, would be bristling with energy. Tanya has participated in enough major offensives to recognize that special atmosphere the battlefield takes on when a large force is on the move.

She’s confident that she wouldn’t mess up that call.

“Which means a general offensive isn’t happening at this time.” She’s sure of herself as she murmurs the assertion at the ceiling.

Plus, if it actually was a full-scale attack, HQ and frontline control would have been screaming for a while now. The fact that the canaries aren’t singing means there’s no need to second-guess her judgment.

“This is a limited offensive, then. It’s valid to interpret their intention as recon-in-force.”

Hypotheses should be as simple as possible.

Regardless of the underlying purpose, she can’t deny the possibility that the

Federation Army has launched an attack to probe the imperial defensive lines. The key is their timing.

"…What made them think it was worth the risk?"

It's the same as her original question. Does the Federation have enough troops to perform recon-in-force? If not, they're throwing away human lives in vain. Even if it is the Federation, it's hard to imagine such utter wastefulness is permitted.

Of course, if they decide not to attack as a result of the recon, they can keep sacrifices to a minimum. If by the sacrifice of a few the many can be protected, every army would celebrate any kind of tragedies.

But it's still a waste.

Should I consider another possibility? Tanya thinks again.

"Possibility one: a harassment attack."

The most likely alternative is that they're simply screwing with us.

It's a classic tactic, since it'll tire us out. The problem with that idea is that we've already confirmed that they've mobilized a force that's at least brigade strength.

That's too large a troop commitment for mere harassment.

And there's nothing to say that those are the only troops who crossed the border. Considering there could be troops lurking in strategic locations, we can't rule out the possibility of one or more detachments.

This is a half glass of water situation. Whether to be optimistic that we managed to keep half or lament that we have only half is up to Tanya.

The water that's gone isn't coming back.

In this case, the water is time and initiative. She can't afford to lose any more from her cup. *I guess I have no choice…* She hardens her resolve as she makes up her mind on how to respond.

Once she's determined her course, she has to follow through. The remaining units at base have deployed quickly in a swift and extremely orderly manner.

The main forces of the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion are made up of two companies, which Tanya takes command of personally. Her troops get into assault formation and then speed toward the village.

Along the way, word comes in from Eastern Army Group HQ that Federation troops are crossing the border at various locations, but there is no change to the Salamander Kampfgruppe's mission. *Phew.* Tanya is sure now that she's made the right decision. If she put off scrambling till later, they would have been sortieing with their cup mostly empty.

"…So it really is recon-in-force?"

I'm having a hard time believing it.

That said, it's dangerous to be distracted. Having a plentiful water supply is how the good ideas bubble up. For now, Tanya needs to do her duty—no choice but to think this over later.

"Lieutenant, any changes in enemy radio chatter?"

"None. The Federation Army only uses short-range encoded signals for comms between unit members, but they seem to be operating in total radio silence."

"…That's strange. Even though multiple units are crossing the border?"

Normally, when multiple units are trying to coordinate for an operation, long-range communications are essential. And of course, whoever's trying to intercept them naturally exploits the opening presented by those long-range transmissions by trying to pinpoint the location of the attackers.

The Salamander Kampfgruppe and headquarters are a good example. If the enemy can intercept the exchanges between the two, even if they can't understand any of the content, they can use the knowledge that "some unit" and "headquarters" are exchanging messages in their decision-making process.

"Yes, Colonel. Although the weather isn't the best for the radio waves… If we really can't pick up any long-range signals, they must be avoiding their use on purpose."

"They've put more thought into this than I expected." Wincing at her

adjutant's response, Tanya has genuine praise for the enemy's craftiness.

Even a native speaker of the Federation language like Serebryakov can't interpret the enemy's encoded short-range transmissions at a glance.

"If they're not used to cooperating, they'll probably choose to operate individually."

"I imagine so."

What a pain, Tanya grumbles in her head.

If multiple units are communicating, it's fairly easy to pinpoint their locations, but when the enemy isn't on the wireless, the situation could even develop into a series of accidental encounter battles.

Tanya's forces are on the way to meet up with Weiss and the others who are coming from another direction, but…it makes her nervous that they can't get a read on the enemy's movements.

Maybe it would be better to prioritize consolidating our forces, even if we lose a little time. Just as she starts thinking that…

"02 to 01, it's urgent. 02 to 01, it's urgent." Weiss's strained voice with a bit of static mixed in.

Tanya answers the moment she hears. "This is 01. The signal is clear. What is it?"

"02 to 01. We've made enemy contact."

It's the encounter battle she was afraid of.

"We're engaged with a mage commando company that seems to be from the Commonwealth Army."

"01, roger." Unable to hold back, she snaps, "Shit."

A unit from the Commonwealth?

Mistaken identity happens often on the battlefield, but it's highly unlikely that Weiss would make that sort of error. *Is the Commonwealth conducting a joint operation with the Federation?*

"Everything is always too late. We don't have enough information to make

informed decisions.”

There could be Commonwealth reinforcements.

“Have you notified the communications officer?”

“There’s either jamming or his radio is broken. I can’t connect.”

Knowing it was pointless to ask, Tanya gets the answer she expects from her adjutant.

Unable to read the enemy’s movements, she’s forced to think about the unconfirmed enemy forces. It’s suddenly uncertain whether the troops she has heading over are enough anymore.

Either way, the situation isn’t good.

“Report to HQ. Give them an update.”

Tanya gives the order like a conditioned reflex. Her shock is so great, she wants to grind her teeth, and she reviews their situation in her head.

As a commander, she can think only about how tricky their position has become.

Most likely, multiple enemy units are operating individually in this battle. Theoretically, if they’re spread out and not supporting one another, that gives Tanya’s troops a chance to pick them off one by one, but since there isn’t a good way to locate them, that’s only an armchair fantasy at the moment.

She still can’t rule out her units getting pulled into a meeting engagement, and nerve-rackingly, they still don’t have a clear idea of how large the enemy force is. To put it simply, you can just call it the fog of war, but that doesn’t make it any better.

Relieving their allies in this mess will be hard.

“…It’s painful that we can’t tell them this is impossible for us.”

If the Imperial Army leaves the Council for Self-Government high and dry here, it could trigger a negative chain of events. One wrong move and the council might even become treacherous. If they start to have doubts that the Empire is reliable, those guys could wind up running straight back into the arms

of the Federation. The peace in the rear that Lieutenant General von Zettour had miraculously secured would be blown away, and the imperial supply lines would be subject to even greater risk than before.

"But…even if we did tell them we can't do it, with the way things are right now, there's no way we could go straight home."

Considering how pressing the situation is, the path forward is clear.

The current state of the war demands that the Empire make a gesture of not forsaking the Council for Self-Government. The Imperial Army General Staff's typical way of thinking under these sorts of circumstances is completely devoid of emotion.

Succeed or fail, the higher-ups will send in a relief unit.

Succeeding would be great. If we fail, it's the least I can do, but I'll shed some tears for the sacrifices we made in the name of mounting a rescue. That's the sort of creature a General Staff officer is. If she wasn't the lamb in this scenario, Tanya would have had no qualms about sacrificing it.

Withdrawing isn't an option. It's such a twist, she wants to snap, *We've swapped positions with the Federation Army!*

"Hmm…? Twist?" Absentmindedly voicing her thought, she suddenly has an idea.

Something is different from usual.

What is it?

Our positions have reversed.

"Wait, could it be that…?"

It's only a possibility.

But… What comes to Tanya's mind is the mental state of the Federation troops currently on what is probably recon-in-force. They're having fun invading their enemy. They're probably plenty aware of when to quit.

No, they must be.

Considering their position, the principle behind their action is obvious. If they

could run, they certainly would. I have to thank school for teaching me to *make a habit of viewing things from the other people's perspective.*

"…Climb! Up to eight thousand!"

So Tanya does away with any semblance of concealed movement. She immediately abandons the plan to approach the combat zone in NOE flight and climb afterward.

When her adjutant and the others all look at her questioningly, Tanya barks decisive orders.

"Mana signals at max output! We're going up! Climb!"

Are you sure? her adjutant asks with her eyes.

"Do it!" Tanya screams. "Listen," she continues, "we're going to drive the enemy mad with our overwhelming presence! Open the wireless channel, too! Public broadcast. Full power!"

"Wh-what?!"

"Tell the village that we, the Salamander Kampfgruppe of the Imperial Army, are coming and to wait for us. Do it in both the imperial and Federation language."

"I don't think it'll get through to the village, but…"

"For now, it doesn't matter."

The point is to scream.

When posing for appearances, striking the pose itself has meaning.

Actually conveying the full content of the message can be relegated to secondary or tertiary importance.

"Are you sure?"

"The Council for Self-Government and the Federation Army will pick it up, right?"

Tanya is confident.

There's no doubt the General Staff will call it a good decision.

The 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion will pretend to charge into a swarm of enemies.

Even if we don't make it in time, showing that we were on our way is better than nothing.

"The enemy might prepare to intercept us…"

"That's fine. That'll take some pressure off the village. It's not a bad thing to imply that reinforcements are on the way."

Once we make our presence known, the Federation units might voluntarily come over to us. If that happens, we'll get caught up in a meeting engagement and use that as the excuse for not making it in time to stage a rescue.

There's practically no problem with this.

As long as we can avoid casualties…

"I expect the Federation mages are chickens. Let's teach those cravens a lesson! Battalion, blast your assault signals at max power! Follow me!"

THE SAME DAY, THE MULTINATIONAL UNIT

The waves broadcast over a wide range were at an output great enough to shock Lieutenant Colonel Drake.

An assault signal plus a charging advance that completely gave away their position. Picking up the mana signals, he could tell they were Named mages even if he didn't want to.

He still remembered those distinctive waveforms from the Rhine front.

It was impossible to mistake them.

She—they—were coming.

The Devil of the Rhine and her evil band.

"C-Colonel Drake!"

"I know!"

This is bad. The moment he sensed it, Drake turned straight around to race

over toward Lieutenant Colonel Mikel and the main forces.

“Colonel Mikel, that battalion of Named is here!”

“We’ve picked up the signals! What’s the situation?!”

“One company has already looped around to cut off our escape and is currently engaged with our defensive unit stationed there. The strength discrepancy is huge—the most our lone company can manage against them is to buy time with a delaying action.”

“…Shit! This is the worst-case scenario!” It made sense that Mikel would curse with a glare at the sky in the direction the imperials were probably coming from.

According to the Federation General Staff’s predictions, the Imperial Army would be rather late making its first move. They had practically guaranteed there would be plenty of time to secure the village and set up a defensive position.

But reality was less accommodating.

The Imperial Army’s response was far too fast.

“Have we taken the village?”

“…It’s not going too well. We haven’t managed to punch through yet.”

“It’s just a village! Of all the—!” Drake was screaming without realizing. *The infantry and mage units* together *can’t even capture one village?!*

“It’s been turned into a stronghold with a secure perimeter!”

“That can’t be. We’re not attacking some military base!”

It was hard to believe such news that came without warning.

As far as Drake knew, *village* was a term for a residential area, not a strongpoint fortified for combat. He didn’t understand why it would be so heavily defended.

“You can’t get through even with mage firepower?”

“We already tried twice. Even penetration formulas designed to destroy armor aren’t effective. It’s a primitive fortification mostly consisting of

sandbags, but…we should have brought heavy artillery."

This was what it meant to be dumbfounded. *We chose a random village, but it just happens to have defenses so great, we need heavy artillery to capture it?*

"…I never imagined they would be this prepared."

He was a marine mage who knew only counterinsurgency battles and putting down revolts in the colonies.

Astonished, he grumbled almost unconsciously. "I can't believe it… You're telling me the people who live here built up these fieldworks?"

It would be more realistic if he had been told that the enemy had broken their codes and there was a mole in the upper echelons.

But his doubt was swept away by the man standing next to him.

"…I think it's possible."

"Colonel Mikel…"

"To these villagers, we Federation soldiers are none other than the army of the 'beloved' Communist Party. I imagine the guys facing us today have *probably faced a great deal of unreasonable demands time and time again*," Mikel bitterly spat. "That would explain why they're so fiercely antagonistic."

Mikel was a patriot, but you couldn't exactly call him a Communist Party lapdog. Still, he was hounded by the fallout of his owner's deeds nonetheless.

What a contradiction.

They all hated the party from the bottom of their hearts, yet they were stuck fighting on opposite sides. It was awful that they couldn't understand each other.

For now, there's nothing we can do. Drake shook his head.

Talking took time. For armies at war, time was a resource far too precious.

Just because they had to perform reconnaissance-in-force didn't mean they were obligated to become martyrs. As the ones who had secured an escape route and nervously pushed into enemy territory…they couldn't wait to leave.

As far as Drake was concerned, he wanted to turn around the moment they

had achieved something noteworthy. He had made a secret agreement with Mikel—that if need be, they would consider withdrawing by having Drake be "unreasonable…"

"…We need to achieve something."

"That's surely what Moskva wants."

But they couldn't leave without bringing anything back. There was Mikel's position to consider. Sadly, if they failed, Drake's esteemed friend would be left in the ever-merciful party's hands.

"Then shall we put some icing on the cake of this Commonwealth and Federation joint operation? We've got to win, even if only in name."

"We sure do." It happened just as Mikel nodded with a wry grin.

Right as an infantry unit approached a cowshed that had been converted into a pillbox, the pair of officers witnessed them get blown up by a bomb that must have been hidden in the gutter.

On top of that, sniper fire began, and the shooter seemed zeroed in.

"Ah, fuck. This is rubbish!" Drake griped. The scene unfolding before his eyes was horrific.

Before the survivors fell one after the other, Federation mages hurled a hail of smoke grenades while keeping their defensive shells at the ready, but the other side's fire never stopped.

Drake may not have understood Federation language, but the shouts and screams filling the air were common among all nations. Even as someone proud to have made it through some terrible battlefields, this one gave him the urge to fling every curse he could think of at God.

The Federation Army couldn't go down without a fight. The mages hurled formulas at the pillbox, and under that cover fire, the foot soldiers approached and silenced it with explosives.

This was what neutralizing pillboxes one by one was like.

But the casualties were adding up.

They put up a smoke screen to recover the few injured, and while the Federation unit regrouped, the commander raised his voice into a megaphone. “We’re here to purge the armed guerrillas! If you turn them over, we’ll guarantee the village’s safety!”

“Surrender!”

“No!”

The reply was the definition of fierce. The Communist Party must have really wronged these people.

“…So that’s how it goes if it’s the Federation Army?” Drake remarked, grabbing the interpreter standing by next to him.

He didn’t have time, but he converted his point into Federation language, and when he figured his awful pronunciation was good enough to be understood, he shifted into action.

“Colonel Mikel, let us handle this.”

“What?”

As Mikel was readying to mount another attack, Drake returned to his side and stated his business plainly.

He knew that obtaining Mikel’s approval here would probably be bad for his position in the Federation Army. Instead, he would have to frame it in a way that made it seem like he acted mostly at his own discretion. Drake began shouting in clumsy Federation language, “This is the Commonwealth Army! Surrender to us! As His Majesty’s soldiers, we will treat you in accordance with international law!”

What? For a moment, it was silent.

Drake braced himself and went out where the villagers, who had been flatly refusing to surrender, could see his uniform.

Even a mage could die if they were shot through their defensive shell, but a marine mage with no vanity or insanity was like a human with no soul.

“If you refuse, we’ll have the Federation Army charge right into the village!”

Having said that much in Federation language, Drake was sure his words were having an effect. The proof was how the cacophony of shooting had stopped.

Most importantly, Drake himself hadn't been shot despite stepping out of cover.

Step one was cleared.

Drake had figured the next thing would be to drag the frightened interpreter over and begin negotiations, but his expectations were betrayed in a good way.

"A-are you really Commonwealth Army?!"

It was his native language.

"Can't you even tell the difference between our uniforms?!" Drake shouted back but raised his evaluation of the village. He never thought a Federation national out in the sticks would be able to speak official Commonwealth language so fluently.

"Give us proof that you're not from the Federation!"

"I'm proud to declare it! You think I'm such a moron that I'd mistake my own army?!"

"Shaddup!"

To think that I'd be having a shouting match in my native language out here. You never know what life has in store. But he welcomed the fact that this would make things easier.

"Surrender! If you *turn over the combatants*, we guarantee the noncombatants *will stay safe*. I swear on our flag!"

Did they understand the implication? *Please let them get the message, please…*

Drake prayed to God.

Luckily…his prayer was heard.

"…We're coming out now."

"Okay, hand over the *combatants*."

The response that squeezed out was the one he had hoped for.

They could work out a compromise.

…Although it was the weakest possible compromise.

“Hold your fire! Don’t do anything stupid!”

Having Mikel there roaring to prevent an explosion was reassuring. They were in trouble if luck abandoned them now.

It was no wonder it felt like such a long time.

“Throw down your weapons and come out with your hands in the air!”

“Shit.”

A rifle was tossed onto the snow.

One, two, and as they piled up, ten men formed a line, facing Drake with their hands in the air.

He daringly walked right toward them and yelled for effect. “Tie them up! Bundle them for the air travel to the port! We’ll send them to the homeland as prisoners! Do not, under any circumstances, do anything careless like letting them freeze to death!” Everything after what he had initially stated was purely to put the prisoners at ease. It also functioned as a stern warning to the Federation Army, who were no doubt hostile toward them.

It took time and effort, yes, but it was a necessary procedure.

While the Commonwealth Army secured the prisoners, Drake sighed like a weight had been taken off his shoulders.

In reality, they probably hadn’t succeeded in disarming the village. He’d demanded they turn over combatants, so the village had simply offered some adult men. If they tried to take control of the place wholesale, there would no doubt be a counterattack.

“Nice work, Colonel Drake. You managed to take prisoners and, in theory, subdue the village. That’s successful enough. Let’s get out of here.”

“What’ll happen to you? Why don’t we play around a little more?”

“I appreciate your consideration, but there’s no need. Under the

circumstances, all we can do now is withdraw."

Drake put his hand to his ear. *I don't understand what you're saying.*

"What are you—?" Mikel nearly raised his voice, but when Drake pointed at the political officer who had appeared in the distance, he understood and nodded.

Using the excuse of the language barrier, they would involve the political officer in the decision to withdraw. That was the little farce Drake had penned.

"I should have her interpret?"

"Sure…a little slapstick comedy now and then can be enjoyable."

"If this script works, how about becoming a playwright, Colonel Drake? I'll write you a letter of recommendation to Londinium's most venerable theater."

"Ha-ha-ha! Please do."

Having understood what they were up to now, Mikel called the political officer over in Federation language.

Of course, circumstances were such that it was possible to consider their mission accomplished. It went without saying that even a half-baked soldier like the political officer would be able to tell that withdrawing was the most prudent thing to do—which was why some cheap acting could get them results.

Drake couldn't understand the storm of Federation language Mikel was speaking to her, but he could guess what they were talking about.

That was only natural, as it was he who had written the script.

"…You're going to keep fighting, Colonel Mikel?" When he asked a question pretending he had read the vibes, the political officer nodded at him, puzzled.

"Sorry, Colonel Drake. Could you wait a little while?" She apologized and then began discussing something with Mikel. It felt pretty good to have an idea, just for the moment, of what they were saying even though they were speaking in a foreign language.

Most likely, the political officer is kindly persuading or perhaps admonishing stubborn Colonel Mikel into withdrawing.

Contrary to his actual feelings, Mikel would appear reluctant and Drake, who had involved the political officer, would suggest withdrawing.

Considering what a simplified outline Drake had come up with, it was laughable, but when thinking of ways he could appeal to the higher-ups in the Federation Army, it was a necessary step. That said, he couldn't take it easy. It wouldn't do to put on a clumsy show for their guests from the Empire and their refined tastes.

The imperial mage unit rushing this way was probably going to be a handful. The unit securing the escape route was currently engaged with a superior enemy, so they needed to hurry.

"Excuse me, but maybe I should prep the prisoners to be sent to the rear?"

"Yes, I suppose that must be done. I'll explain things to Colonel Mikel. Please make the arrangements."

"I appreciate your consideration."

The moment he got permission from the political officer, Drake made a brisk return to his unit to set about getting the prisoners on their way.

Escorting ten adult men to the rear effectively meant that a mage company would be leaving the battle lines. A mage unit would be able to withdraw fine on its own, but with infantry along, he couldn't give up on support.

Well, let's see… Drake unhesitatingly chose the optimal—the most useless—unit for the job. "Lieutenant Sue. Prepare to take the prisoners to the rear."

"Take the prisoners to the rear, sir?"

"That's right. It's your responsibility to escort the prisoners who surrendered to us. Once the RMS *Queen of Anjou*'s repairs are complete, they can catch a ride to the homeland."

Having entrusted the transport of the prisoners to the least helpful lieutenant's company, Drake was already thinking about how they would withdraw.

The incoming enemy was a relief unit.

In other words, its objective was to defend and relieve this village.

He wanted to believe that meant they wouldn't give chase, but unfortunately, he couldn't cling to such wishful thinking.

Just as he was thinking that he would like to prioritize the infantry's withdrawal, it happened. The Federation infantry picked up the skis they had taken off and began departing from the village.

Finally.

The face of the political officer as she approached him even looked relieved.

"Did Colonel Mikel agree?!"

"Yes, Lieutenant Colonel! Comrade Colonel has given the order to withdraw!"

"Very good!"

Okay! As Drake was about to dash off, he noticed the political officer seemed to want to say something.

"They'll go on trial in your country?"

"They did fire on us, after all. We'll be sure to give them a rough time." He plastered a grin of fake satisfaction on his face and assured her they would be punished. Honestly, what the prisoners deserved most was sympathy, so he planned to show them a truly awful time involving wine, scotch, and cigarettes.

"I hope you'll be considerate…"

"Oh?"

"They're citizens of our country…even under these unfortunate circumstances…"

The surprise was palpable.

Drake was biased. He thought Communist Party dogs were a bunch of sadists. It was a natural assumption for him that they would want the prisoners to be punished.

"I implore you as but one political officer. I wish I had more to offer besides words, but I hope you'll be considerate in your treatment of them."

She had enough self-restraint to not be a nuisance when the bullets were flying, but Drake couldn't get over the habit she had of showing up only once

the fighting was over.

And on top of that, she talks in platitudes without batting an eye! Drake found her sensibilities difficult to fathom.

“The highest penalty in our military courts for a gang of ne’er-do-wells is death by firing squad… I’m afraid I don’t know what will happen to them.”

“C-Colonel Drake?!”

“Lieutenant, do you need anything else?”

If you’re not having issues, then get going already. He gestured with his jaw to shoo away the source of his irritation.

“…It sounds harsh, but if laws aren’t enforced, they become nothing more than hollow words. Isn’t that right?”

With a final “I’m off, then,” Drake rushed away. It barely needed to be stated, but in war, the most difficult operation was fighting withdrawals.

As a commander, he still had a lot to do.

Flying up and looking down at the village, she saw they were still within hailing distance. For a moment, her mind focused only on the thought of defending the withdrawal of their comrades during a retreat, the ambition of every mage.

Mary couldn’t take orders like sending troops to the rear and securing an escape route lightly.

But she still felt sad.

“Enemy forces are on the way! Pull out! Pull out!”

A stern voice shouted the order to withdraw.

“Will we need a blocking unit to slow them down?!”

“The enemy vanguard seems to be mages from a quick response team. With those numbers, they won’t chase us past the defensive line!”

Mary thought it was obnoxious how the commander was reassuring everyone that they didn’t have to worry about intense pursuit.

As the shouts of “We’re heading out!” echoed, Mary knew she had to withdraw, too.

She didn’t want to run away.

If it were possible, she would have rather intercepted the enemy unit and given the Imperial Army—no, the Devil of the Rhine—a good scare.

“…But I can’t yet.”

She was aware how strong her opponent was.

She knew she had to avoid giving in until the time when her attack could make it count.

But someday…

In the near future, she would definitely…

“We’re taking it back… We’ll show them.”

I still can’t reach.

I’m still not up to the task.

I’m still not ready.

It’s a laundry list of things I can’t do yet.

“But I won’t give up.”

The enemy of my father.

The enemy of us all.

…We have to come back.

“For now—and only for now—I’ll leave.”

As she murmured, Mary noticed the shouts to fall back were growing sparser.

I need to hurry.

Everyone was probably almost ready to depart.

Though it pained her, and her heart demanded that she remain and fight to the last man…she had to endure.

Delivering prisoners to the rear was an important mission. If she hesitated any

longer, she would cause trouble for not only herself but everyone else, too.



So she swore an oath.

She looked down, turning around just once, and swore.

“I—we—shall…”

She kept losing.

She hadn’t been ready this time, either.

But someday…

Eventually…

“…I shall return.”

Viewing the fight that day objectively in hindsight, it could be said that the Empire, Federation, and Commonwealth all achieved their objectives. In a rare occurrence, every party could boast that they had been victorious.

The Imperial Army, in plain terms, had won a crushing tactical victory.

Its frontline units pulled off daring counterattacks against the Federation’s limited offensive. They successfully fought off their opponents and even received support from the paramilitary forces of the Council for Self-Government while also barely suffering any losses in the process.

In addition, it should be noted that due to the imperial gesture of offering support to both the council and civilians, the cooperation between the Empire and the Council for Self-Government developed into what could properly be described as an alliance in both name and reality.

As a result, the Imperial Army’s success, which included organizing a powerful unit and pushing back the enemy line in places, allowed the Empire to proudly declare a military victory.

Meanwhile, the Federation Army endured losses that were large but still within the realm of the permissible and had acquired the strategic intelligence it had so desperately wanted.

Military staff confronted the party leadership with the facts that the speculated relationship between the Empire and the Council for Self-Government was stimulating an independence movement and that the

strikingly rampant appearances of separatists were more serious than anyone had imagined.

On this point it was said that a cheer went up in the Federation Army General Staff because they could finally feed the bitter medicine of reality to the politburo.

The reality of the battlefield had shattered the lens of ideology.

It was noteworthy that by managing to confront the party leadership with the military reality without suffering a critical defeat, the Federation Army and Commissariat for Internal Affairs achieved—at least domestically—a major strategic victory.

And in the end, expeditionary mages dispatched from the Commonwealth were able to achieve modest results in the battle. Effectively nothing more than a few prisoners and a smattering of military successes.

That said, the political convenience of the victory couldn't be overstated.

Victory was accompanied by commendation, and the efforts of Lieutenant Colonel Drake and his marine mages were highly praised by all.

But of course, that became clear only after the fact.

CONTEMPORARY MOSKVA

At the time, many in the Federation clamored that the latest battle was "a disaster," and very few would have mocked those critics as *idiots who understand nothing*.

As one of those few exceptions, Commissar Loria of the Commissariat for Internal Affairs could describe the ignorance of the people around him only as perfect nonsense. For that reason, he was in an awful mood.

"From a purely military perspective, the recon-in-force was a major failure. One of the gravest issues facing our army in small-scale combat is our tactical inferiority, and it must be addressed."

This statement was a response to the criticism, *Didn't we lose by agreeing to your plan?*

There was nothing that irritated him more than being snapped at by people who couldn't comprehend simple, clear results, but his voice was terribly calm.

"…Still, the political problem we're facing is more important. The fact that we've grasped its scope now justifies the cost of the last battle."

Loria reemphasized that the entire reason they deployed the soldiers in the first place was to get a handle on the political situation.

He asked for understanding from the secretariat, the politburo, and every other government organ time and again to the point of insistence that the operation was for getting a handle on the political situation. During this struggle, the General Staff eagerly supported his efforts and they carried out a joint plan to convince everyone.

If, after all that, there were still fools trying to score a victory in internal politics, thinking that now was their chance to strike at Loria and the military leadership…Loria felt that perhaps the only option he had left was to ready some holes for them.

Nonetheless, he earnestly delivered his counterclaim without flinching, at least on the outside.

Fishing required patience—because just like love, it was about tactics.

On this point, Loria knew that waiting patiently would bring him the greatest success. He learned that while bargaining for love with a fairy.

"And what is that political matter that we must focus on? It's simple. Comrades, the Empire's promise of independence is becoming a potent poison for the Federation."

Those words were casually left to hang in the meeting room, but they bore an incredibly grave significance.

The wise ones who understood nodded silently, while the clueless who assumed Loria was simply trying to draw attention away from his failure found it difficult to hide their smirks.

It was easy to discern the mocking atmosphere.

Ahhh, your level of intelligence really shows on your face…, thought Loria,

fighting the urge to grimace…

“The dream of ethnic self-determination the imperials are lauding has taken effect… We have no choice but to conclude that the relationship between the separatists and the Imperial Army is stronger than we imagined.”

…But Loria still had to carry on with his report, because that was his job.

The counterattack the Federation Army encountered was more tenacious than expected. The armed groups vaguely referred to as “local people” put up a fierce level of resistance that most assumed would normally be reserved for invaders.

Summing up the reports of their embedded observers made the situation all too clear. Even near the front lines, trust in the Federation Army was depressingly low. Hostility against their soldiers was widespread.

“As you all know already, the Imperial Army seems to have regained their freedom of movement, but we’ve discovered even worse news.”

They had already known that separatist ethnic minority groups were keeping the peace in the occupied territories. But their latest revelation was more shocking.

What shook the core of the Federation’s Communist Party was the fact that the Imperial Army had built such a trusting relationship with the separatists that it trusted them to handle peacekeeping duties.

The defeat the Federation had suffered at the very beginning of the war had been alarming. Allowing the Imperial Army to engage in the mobile warfare they favored so much would be a nightmare. Now that the Empire didn’t have to worry about pacifying a massive swath of territory, wouldn’t that free up their forces to do just that? And they wouldn’t even have to worry about partisans harassing them, either?

If this wasn’t a terrifying prospect, then what was?

“The political officers are being vague, so we don’t have the full picture, but…,” Loria said, laying down words that chilled the entire room, “…we have apparently witnessed cases where the Imperial Army and regional separatists have created a united front.”

A united front—in other words, fighting together side by side.

But the meaning wasn't as simple as the words might imply.

Trust and confidence were weighty things indeed. Anyone living through this tumultuous period would never mistake the significance of them.

It wouldn't be possible for a united front to exist without the soldiers involved having supreme confidence in allowing armed, combat-experienced foreigners to fight by their side on the battlefield. Their actions declared loudly how deeply that trust ran.

"…We should probably be happy we've grasped the true enemy situation. Now we can be sure that we shouldn't expect much cooperation from our comrades in the occupied territories."

"May I ask a question? As far as I can tell, comrade, you seem to be saying that the separatists have defeated the party. To be frank, can't we root them out from the shadows?"

In terms of following party doctrine, that was a fine suggestion, thought Loria with an inward wince.

Unfortunately, that sort of textbook answer has no meaning when held up against the reality of the battlefield. It made him exceedingly miserable to see people forgetting that the real world required compromise.

But the Federation ideology wasn't so vulnerable that it couldn't survive direct confrontation. Which was why Loria nodded dramatically. "To get straight to the point, I don't think it's impossible. Listen," he said in an utterly calm voice. "If we have proper support, have the appropriate personnel committed, and have a solid commander in charge, there should be no problem. In other words, we can say that it shall be humans who blaze the trail to the future." Then Loria suddenly said, "Oh," as if he remembered something, and presented an invitation. "How about it, comrade? It'd be great if you would drive this home for the masses."

"M-me, comrade?"

"The reports from the field are confused. I need someone I can trust reporting in. If you feel strongly about this issue, I'd like to ask you to do it." Using the

threat of possibly sending someone into the field, Loria smiled kindly.

He found a great deal of satisfaction in smacking down this guy who fancied himself enough of a bystander that he could comment about whatever he liked on the fierce guerrilla war.

“Wait a minute, Comrade Loria.”

Sadly, games always ended just as they were getting fun.

“Do you mean to say that the flow of intelligence is unstable? That even the Commissariat for Internal Affairs’s intelligence network is being suppressed?”

There was only one person whom Loria needed to immediately straighten up for.

“Yes, Comrade General Secretary. It’s as you say,” he affirmed instantaneously.

“…I’m well aware that those reactionaries, the separatists, despise us.” The speaker inquired in an unexpectedly intellectual-sounding tone, “But why to this extent?”

He was asking why the Communist Party was hated.

That’s a difficult question to answer head-on, from a political perspective. Loria mentally grimaced.

“Yes, it’s truly as you say. I’m fairly certain we’ve made plenty of concessions on racial policy. Why are they so welcoming to the invaders?”

“Could it be that the capitalist and imperialist propaganda is that effective?”

It was laughable how the blind followers seemed unsure even as they agreed. If they didn’t understand the reason, they were truly useless.

Well, it was worth considering that the General Secretary had probably come down on them too hard for inconvenient reports in the past.

Well, whatever. Loria switched gears.

If they wanted to know, he would just have to tell them.

Holding back a wry grin, he held up a hand and said, “If I may add something…” before solemnly intoning, “nationalism isn’t logical.”

Loria was familiar with the role emotions played as someone who often took advantage of them himself. When emotions were involved, it wasn't logic or realism that mattered but romanticism—romanticism was everything.

They couldn't afford to laugh it off as mere fiction anymore.

The official Communist position that ethnicity was a distraction was nothing but empty words in the face of various ethnic groups' dreams of independence.

"Comrade Loria?"

"Aren't we making use of it all the time?"

A shared cause, protecting the people—in other words, nationalism.

It was due to that sympathy that the Federation Army could use those who were once sent to the *lageri*[2] as soldiers despite their lack of conviction.

"Make the cause ethnicity, wave the banner of ethnicity, sing the songs of ethnicity in the ethnicity's language; it's all utterly commonplace, but the results are tremendous."

To Loria, who had promoted such movements before, the potential was astounding.

The troops who had been sourced from the *lageri*, those who were expected to betray the Federation Army at the first opportunity, actually had a startlingly low defection ratio and fought hard.

To be honest, they were fine patriots.

These soldiers took up arms to protect their motherland as their patriotic hearts demanded! It wasn't rare for former *lageri* residents to swear loyalty to the Federation Communist Party, even if only as a formality.

"Let me share a report from the front lines. 'If the soldiers are fighting for the motherland, no one hesitates to raise their weapons and protect what all soldiers should.'"

There was no need to micromanage their every move.

They loved their motherland, their country, or their hometown—whichever it was, the emotion at the heart of that was powerful. Because it was an emotion,

it didn’t accept logic. It couldn’t be reasoned with; whether they could sympathize or not was everything.

On that point, unfortunately, the Communist Party was incredibly lacking.

What it had managed to do was present an ideal. It was an appealing ideal and wasn’t bad for promotional material. It was especially effective against fools who mistakenly thought themselves clever.

But that served only as surface-level motivation.

“…In other words, the Federation troops freed from the *lageri* are fighting for the country, not the party?”

“That’s exactly right.” Loria gave an instantaneous reply to the party official’s question.

It was undeniable reality.

As far as Loria knew, the number of people who fought out of love for the Communist Party was greater than zero. The party had improved people’s lives in certain ways, without a doubt.

At the same time, there were probably a similar or even greater number of people who wholeheartedly despised the party.

The number of the party’s victims hadn’t been erased from official records, but that was because they couldn’t very well erase all their relatives, too.

“Hmm, so that’s good news.”

“Yes, Comrade General Secretary.”

“This is terribly disrespectful to bring up to you two, but…these are people with no party loyalty! How is that good news?”

“No, no,” Loria interrupted with a smile. “Comrade, think about it in a different way.”

Loyalty was a multilayered concept.

It wasn’t a contradiction for people disloyal to the party to love the Federation, their motherland. Anyone who agreed that the Empire was their common enemy and wouldn’t rebel against party instructions could be viewed

as a reliable human resource.

Even elements that were normally sources of unrest would surely fight to protect their nation from the Empire.

“We’ll have our enemy and our latent enemy crush each other. Don’t you think it’s more effective to have them fight on the battlefield for the sake of glory and mythology than to work them in the *lageri*?”

It was elementary logic.

A cold, hard principle.

But it was also an eternal truth.

“Our role is crystal clear. All we have to do is act as the guardians of nationalism. To that end, we simply need to make the party and the nation one and the same.”

Wasn’t that what it said in a cynic’s dictionary?

Patriots were the prey of conquerors and politicians.

Patriotism was the first resort of villains.

CHRISTMAS DAY, UNIFIED YEAR 1926, FEDERATION TERRITORY, THE MULTINATIONAL FORCES GARRISON

The toast was the same every time.

“Merry Christmas!”

When anyone shouted it, other voices answered.

The rugged soldiers looked so innocent celebrating Christmas by drowning themselves in spiked eggnog and singing carols.

The Commonwealth and Federation mages who had completed their recon-in-force operation were taking a breather.

Of course, everyone had their own way of relaxing.

Some reaffirmed their historic friendship with sugar. Others stuck to the more fundamental pleasure of a good meal. Among them, Lieutenant Colonel Drake,

who fancied himself a man of principle and not one to cheat on his one true love, drank as much eggnog as duty required and then focused on his year-round relationship with his old companion scotch.

Only on a day like this could even the commanders unwind.

Celebrating Christmas far from home on foreign soil made the troops miss their hometowns even more. Sailors and marine mages were no strangers to homesickness.

And that was why to soldiers, Christmas was sacred and inviolable.

When considering the secular celebrations that took place under the umbrella of Christmas, even the Communists who declared that religion was an opiate must have felt it was a day that shouldn't be intruded upon.

"…Colonel, there's a problem."

"What?"

There was nothing worse than getting bad news while buzzed on Christmas. For a moment, Drake thought he would simply furrow his brow, but an instant later, he was dumbfounded by the news.

"The prisoners who surrendered to us were transferred to the Federation Army…?" The moment his brain comprehended what his subordinate was saying, he abandoned his Christmas scotch in irritation and raced off in a ferocious huff.

It was a miracle he hadn't shouted, *You must be joking!* in the middle of the party.

Drake had never even imagined, as a soldier, that something so absurd would happen. He ran straight over to the headquarters where a few duty officers were posted.

He was well aware that the smell of alcohol was still hot on his breath. Normally, he would have had the self-control to hold off on marching into HQ until he had sobered up.

But this time, he didn't have the leisure of waiting. Diving right in to think about how to get the prisoners back, Drake realized he would have to

cooperate in an unspoken partnership with Colonel Mikel.

It would be incredibly difficult to make sure both sides saved face while avoiding any political missteps. *Why do I have to worry about this on Christmas?*

"…This is idiocy. Absolute idiocy. Shit."

But in the name of humanity, it had to be done.

Pushing past the on-duty guards, who seemed surprised to see him like this, Drake strode into the room where the duty officers were and dragged one outside the headquarters inn.

He had never agreed to the prisoners changing custody. There was no way he would ever agree to such a thing. Drake had to get them back. Whether through a farce or a scam, it didn't matter—it just had to be done.

It could be said that the interpreters standing by had bad luck, but he needed one of them to come along. Thus, after collecting a proper audience, Drake laid into Federation forces superior Colonel Mikel as his duty required.

His tongue was sharp as a knife.

"I want them back."

It wasn't phrased as a suggestion.

He loomed over Mikel, close enough to grab his lapels, and raised his voice. His demand was simple and clear. He wanted the prisoners they had captured during the recon-in-force mission.

If they weren't brothers-in-arms, Mikel probably would have Drake about to hurl curses at him. Not that he was planning on holding back if a bit of swearing became necessary.

"Those prisoners were taken by my army."

The distance between the two men was so meager that the boozy white breath accompanying his roar practically blew into Mikel's face. This was the epitome of rudeness.

To anyone watching on, Drake was clearly furious. The only ones who knew it was a cheap act were the star himself and Mikel.

“Return them!”

“I can’t do that.” The moment the interpreter finished conveying Drake’s stubborn shout, Mikel answered in a solemn tone. His attitude was every bit as unyielding as Drake’s. “They’re prisoners who hail from my country.” In that stern tone of voice, he made a declaration for the world to see. “That means they’re under my country’s jurisdiction.”

Putting their different takes on prisoner custody at the forefront, neither Drake nor Mikel seemed like they were going to back down, and the air between them bristled.

That said, it was all an act.

That much was clear from how they chose to go through an interpreter despite the fact that Mikel had an impressive command of the Queen’s dialect. In other words, the stars were Drake and Mikel, the audience was composed of the observing political officers and the interpreter, and this entire interaction was a play that neither was really excited to put on.

Only the partners in crime knew the truth.

“This is no joke! It’s in flagrant violation of the treaty! Those are prisoners who I captured in the name of the Commonwealth!”

The content of the argument was plain—a futile-seeming exchange of *Give them to me!* and *I can’t!*

Setting aside the fact that there were official interpreters for the two armies between them as they repeated themselves, this disagreement basically amounted to a schoolyard quarrel.

“These prisoners surrendered to the Commonwealth’s flag!”

“…Your subordinate agreed to turn them over.”

“That’s just because she’s personal friends with that political officer! I’m in charge here. Her opinion is still clearly an outlier, and she didn’t make an official request to me!”

I’m in supreme command of my army!

Drake was saying this for the benefit of the political officers, who wouldn’t

have listened if he said it straight to them. You couldn't get anywhere without gathering a crowd and deceiving them. He couldn't say it was pleasant, but that was simply how Federation society worked.

Normally this ridiculous sort of formulaic exchange would be pointless, but in the Federation, it was essential.

…What an outrageous era we live in.

"Are you claiming one of your nation's political commissars can back channel a commander of the Commonwealth Army? That's not funny. It's a serious violation of an allied country's sovereignty!"

And there lay the main point. Surely even the political officers who had been silently watching could appreciate this.

Mikel had plastered on an incredibly put-out face and was probably gauging the right moment to act.

"Comrade Lieutenant Tanechka?"

"…As Colonel Drake said, I did ask Lieutenant Sue as a personal favor."

The Federation interpreter remained silent, skipping that part.

But Drake had thought ahead. He had brought a Commonwealth interpreter in case that happened.

God smiles on those who make careful preparations. He chuckled to himself.

"Is that an admission of guilt?!" *This is where we can break through!* Drake thought as he attacked. When it came to determination, making decisions, and proposing offensives, Drake was exceedingly decisive.

Mikel looked at the political officer and walked over, stared her down, and then snapped, "You didn't mention that earlier! I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't muddle up the chain of command!"

"My authority extends as far as any political…"

It was excruciatingly slow to hear the exchange through the interpreter. Incidentally, Drake was aware that Liliya could speak his native tongue just like Mikel did.

Usually, she would butt in where her input wasn't asked for, but now she was escaping with her own native language?

It was basically an expression of guilt.

"You be quiet! I'm a Commonwealth soldier!"

"As a political officer of the party…"

Drake barely restrained himself from shouting, *Shut up, you bitch!*

These Communists didn't seem to understand reason, but he had to hold back the storm of curses he'd like to unleash on them. Anger was only a waste of the energy required for a breakthrough.

To gather himself, Drake took in a deep breath under a frigid sky.

With the cold air filling his lungs, he was able to control his seething emotions.

"Allow me to explain our *honor* as soldiers *devoted to His Majesty* the king who are giving our all to guard our homeland under the banner of the Commonwealth Army."

Drake was well aware that he had chosen words the Communists would find annoying.

And the political officer, Liliya, nearly said something.

If you can understand me, then why not speak in the Queen's dialect from the get-go? he wanted to say, but he couldn't.

That said, if he was going to have such little faith and sincerity for his allies, he would have to quit being a soldier and become a con man or something.

"We are free people, a noble people who won't be ruled by anyone else. In order to defend that dignity, we took to the sea and traveled far across the waves. Therefore"—Drake raised his voice as if this was what an announcement should be like—"I have no intention of saying anything about your authority over the Federation Army, but if you're interfering in my army via unofficial channels, that's a violation of the treaty!"

The political officer giving him a blank look probably didn't understand.

…Which was why Drake sympathized so deeply with Mikel, who had this watchdog constantly around him like a leash. To think these fellows who knew nothing about military affairs could interfere with smug looks on their faces—and even be placed in supervisory positions!

Ah, holy hell.

I never thought the day would come I'd be asked to act like a stooge!

He glanced at the political officer and then spat, "Colonel Mikel, it's a simple demand." He purposely tried to sound tougher and wear a furious grimace. It was a line calculated to mix some condescension for Communists into his gaze to keep his performance from seeming too fake. "My troops captured that game, and I want you to return it this very instant!"

The rules of hunting stated that the game went to the one who caught it.

It was a bit of an aristocratic argument, but it was the simplest metaphor for the matter.

And it was also handy, since it was easy for someone on the Federation side to grasp that the *Commonwealth soldier* with his *highborn hobbies* was obsessed with having *his game*.

"Give me the prisoners this political officer brought over! Now, this instant! Unconditionally!"

"My answer doesn't change. I can't do that."

Drake exploded in response to the expected reply as if he couldn't even wait for the interpreter to finish. "Don't be ridiculous! It's not your catch!"

He and Mikel clashed, hiding their true purpose.

For an impromptu collaboration, they were really nailing it. It was a lot more realistic than some lousy play.

In reality, Mikel knew full well that his position didn't grant him enough authority to turn over the prisoners. Sadly, an officer with a leash on didn't have even that much freedom.

Which was why Drake had to be angry, if only as a formality, and race over so fast to protest that he had practically kicked over his chair… The key was to

keep things going until the commissar came up with a “political solution.”

They couldn’t let things fall apart, nor could they raise suspicion.

“I need you to please understand the authority a political officer has, Lieutenant Colonel Drake. I have no intention of interfering in your army’s chain of command, but this is Federation territory. I have to abide by its laws. How can I turn over citizens of my own country to you?”

This scene, where the commanders of the two armies were supposedly confronting each other head-on, was rough only on the interpreters.

But Drake wanted them to think of it as good experience.

“We don’t even know for sure if they’re citizens of your country or not. Furthermore, I’m fairly certain the Federation and the Commonwealth haven’t even signed a prisoner transfer treaty!” Drake screamed as stubbornly as possible. “Turn those piece-of-shit bastards who shot my men over to us now!”

To cut to the chase, after this extended face-off, the first to relent was the Federation. If it was going to become an issue of delicate legal factors and saving face…then the matter could be settled with a compromise in the field before it came to that.

When Drake and Mikel as coconspirators attempted to make it the political officer’s fault, the issue naturally resolved itself.

“I propose not leaving any official record.”

“…You mean that you don’t want there to be a record that you were interfering with my army, Colonel Mikel?”

“There seems to be a grave misunderstanding between our two armies. This wasn’t a transfer of prisoners. We’re simply helping transport them temporarily. I hope you understand.”

Though they would’ve liked to smile in satisfaction, Drake and Mikel reached an understanding with dead-serious expressions. They had managed to make things happen according to their plan.

“…I just hope this doesn’t cause any ill feelings between our forces.”

“That’s fine, Colonel. Here’s to our trusted ally.”

“To the deepening relationship between our two nations.”

With pleasantries delivered via the interpreters, the pair deliberately shook hands instead of saluting before their audience. With that, the matter was formally settled. The heated exchange that had demolished the Christmas mood was now at an end.

Of course, things were difficult to repair once broken. Regardless of the truth behind what had transpired between Drake and Mikel, for everyone else, it seemed as if they’d been having a shouting match.

After wrapping things up, Drake trudged miserably back to the inn.

If that doesn’t explain it well enough, then maybe this would be clearer: The wasted effort weighed heavy on his shoulders, but of course it did. *This must be just what God’s trials are like.*

Drake was a warrior. He had never had any problems being unrefined. And yet now, he could understand the feelings of the poets who had lamented their fates with tears on their pillows. He understood so well that he felt sick.

He even sympathized with them.

“I need a drink.”

Thinking how much he’d like a bottle of scotch, Drake returned to his room… but God didn’t smile on him.

“Colonel Drake!”

“…Lieutenant Sue. What is it?”

…It was the idiot who nearly handed over the prisoners to the Federation on her own discretion. Or really, the root of the issue was her close relationship with that political officer. In other words, half of the problem was appearing before him now, brimming with enthusiasm. Frankly, Drake sensed God’s malice.

Oh Lord, I’m going to remember this…

“About the prisoners…”

“What about them? I want to take a walk. Is it something you need to discuss

here?” *There’s nothing to discuss. Let’s at least go somewhere else.* Despite an attitude implying those things, Sue persisted.

“It’s urgent. Please, it’ll only take a moment.”

“Surely you can walk and talk at the same time.”

“It’s important. Please, sir.”

“Argh.” Drake sighed. “Something about the prisoners?”

“Yes, that’s right, sir.”

“It’s not as if I wanted to have that argument with Colonel Mikel. In fact, I really didn’t.”

The whole reason he had needed to trouble Mikel and put on that farce in order to regain custody of the prisoners…was this girl.

He really loathed the idea of openly fighting in front of a crowd.

But he had been forced to because he listened to the voice of humanity and conscience inside himself. He had guaranteed those prisoners they were in Commonwealth hands, so it would have been an exceedingly cruel betrayal to give them to the Communist Party.

“…Lieutenant Sue, that was such a thoughtless thing to do! Why did you transfer them?!”

For a time, there was silence.

Sue hesitated and then spoke. “Because, well, the Federation has abolished capital punishment.”

Are you kidding me? Drake thought while implying with his eyes that she should continue.

“Considering that in our country, the highest punishment for irregular combatants when they don’t qualify as belligerents is death by firing squad…”

“Did you really give them away because of that?!” He had to shout despite his headache.

This was approaching the level of being a picky eater.

An officer employing the logic of a child—this absurdity—should have been unimaginable given the education frontline officers went through. *Yet* this *is a first lieutenant?!*

Of the glorious Commonwealth Army?!

"I-it's Christmas. And I'm sure they had their reasons for doing what they did…"

Drake was a seasoned soldier, but this caught him completely off guard. It was so silly, he felt himself sinking into a stupor.

I got told—during the Christmas party—that our prisoners had been given to the Federation!

Santa would never do anything so heartless!

"I don't want to hear it."

The fact that First Lieutenant Mary Sue seemed to have no idea what a cruel thing she had done made Drake's headache rapidly worsen.

"You're a soldier of the Commonwealth!"

Even if only for political convenience.

Or maybe that was why. If she was going to make light of the bare minimum that had to be upheld as a Commonwealth soldier, he wouldn't stand for it.

He didn't want to have this conversation on Christmas.

"But, I mean, there's no reason we have to tie them up and send them all the way back to the Commonwealth… Imprisoning them closer to their homes would be…"

"More humane…?" The reason he didn't let *I can't believe this* slip was probably more out of shock than restraint. "Yes, what a wonderfully *humane idea* that is, Lieutenant." Drake made a pledge to himself: *The next time I talk to this giant moron, I'm taking painkillers first.* "Are you serious?"

"…What about you, Colonel? Why are you so focused on achievements? You're dragging around those poor people as if they were trophies…"

As far as Drake knew, humanity was extinct in the Federation.

Technically speaking, the people themselves still had warmth and emotions. But anyone who was surrendering themselves to the mercy of the profoundly kind Communist Party would be better off flying into the freezing winter sky.

"I just wanted to give them some good news on Christmas. That said, it's possible that they would still be punished. Liliya, er, I mean, the Federation does punish people, so…"

"That's enough! Shut your mouth! Listen," Drake said, choosing his words carefully to emphasize policy in order to break off the conversation while avoiding any diplomatic or confidentiality problems. "What you're saying makes no sense at all! We are a military unit deployed here on a joint mission with the Federation Army, and we must carry out our duty in accordance with military laws and regulations!"

It was precisely because they had a legal argument that they didn't have to transfer the poor souls to the Federation Communist Party's justice system, which people often compared to a meat grinder.

Anyone could scoff at policy, bureaucracy, and what have you as the evils of vertical administration if they wanted, but anything can do good depending on how it's used.

"Naturally, managing prisoners is one of our duties! We don't have the authority to approve their transfer! We can't set a bad precedent!"

"If we could set a good precedent, then those poor people…"

"You're not making sense!"

A good precedent?! Swallowing that shout mentally exhausted Drake to an unimaginable degree.

How infuriating it was to be stuck having a discussion with an officer who was this dense when it came to discerning people's true intentions in a hotel room that was almost certainly bugged.

He suddenly had an idea that even he found excessive. *I wonder if it would be possible to throw her in a Federation prison for a night…*

Instead of a Christmas present, he found himself wanting to give her the

concentration camp experience.

Anyone given the choice between POW facilities in the Commonwealth, where the highest punishment was death by firing squad, and the Federation camps, where the death penalty *had supposedly been abolished*, would choose the former.

It wasn't even a matter of this extreme either-or.

Why did he have to endanger the position of his esteemed brother-in-arms, Colonel Mikel, making him walk such a tightrope on Christmas, because of this little girl who couldn't even grasp that simple fact?

"Why in the world are you so obsessed with prisoners, Commander?!"

"We need a souvenir for Londinium! And more importantly, it's not something we should be poking our noses into! It's high-level politics!"

It wasn't a lie, but it wasn't the whole story, either.

As far as Drake knew, people in government in Londinium hadn't set their eyes on *prisoners* but *refugees*, because they would speak to the harsh rule of the Federation.

Political landscapes were constantly shifting, though, so he couldn't say for sure.

…That said, all he needed to do was what he could.

"I have my position to worry about, too. I can't say any more than this, but I just need you to understand."

But his true feelings didn't get through. In Sue's steady gaze was condensed disappointment.

It was easy for him to guess at her feelings of dissatisfaction and discontentment as he watched her take her leave.

If she wanted to talk about confidential matters, all she had to do was invite him outside—somewhere they weren't at risk of being spied on. The one who truly wanted to lament the state of affairs was Drake.

No one with a normal conscience would be able to tolerate releasing people

under protection in the name of the Commonwealth to the Federation Communist Party's kind hands.

"Shit, this is the worst Christmas ever."

His celebratory mood had gone straight out the window.

"I mean, what a mess."

He had been worrying ever since the collapse of the Rhine front.

Do I actually have kind of lousy luck?

"I'm sure I'll be bragging about my bad luck in the end. Although I never lose at cards, and I'm not bad at gambling, either."

Lady Luck is a rotten dame. Instead of not having any hair in the back, she's wearing a wig that comes right off. He wanted to curse.

Drake didn't know where his question would disappear off to.

Still, he had to ask.

"Oh God, why in the world do things have to be this way?"

| chapter |

III

Lull in the Wind

Reason commands humans to be peaceful.

General Igor Gassman

[chapter] III Lull in the Wind

MID-JANUARY, UNIFIED YEAR 1927, THE KINGDOM OF ILDOA, ARMY GENERAL HQ

The Imperial Army's successful counter to the Federation Army's offensive had modest yet significant effects on all fronts. Though the New Year had only just begun, the concerned parties were all busy running around coping with the results.

Arguably the first of the noteworthy actors was the Council for Self-Government. The group had been viewed as a puppet but turned out to be doing more than anyone had expected. In the context of Federation politics, it meant the separatists had formed strong bonds with the invading Imperial Army.

To Federation authorities, that was a bolt from the blue. Their propaganda broadcasts were conspicuously silent on the topic, which showed the whole world how shocking the news had been. It had been enough to render them speechless.

Meanwhile, the cooperation between the Council for Self-Government and the Imperial Army…had no small impact on other countries, as well. But was the Empire in such a tight spot that it was forced to compromise? Or was it, while focusing less on territorial ambitions and more on dividing and conquering, still in the mood for war? Interpretations varied.

People who could stay positive despite having no basis for it were happy.

Unfortunately, the principal belligerents, guessing it was the latter case, were quite worried.

This war had already been dragging on, and now it was turning into an

unavoidable quagmire. The burden was incalculably enormous. You could try to look forward to the rewards of victory, but in a war that went this far, probably the only things remaining after the violent attrition would be the earth scattered with rubble.

A world war, to the principal belligerent countries, was a zero-sum game played out of pocket. And victory wasn't even guaranteed! Rarely did something worry people so much as an unclear outcome.

When under those circumstances, the Empire was fanning the separatist flames, you didn't have to be a utilitarian to bemoan the costs of the war.

We've hit our limit.

It was stranger to not hear anyone saying that.

Clearly, a limit had to be placed on the mounting losses at some point, and thinking rationally, this was a chance to bargain. Thus, one man came forward as a *good, sincere peace broker*.

His name was General Igor Gassman.

As long as balance was maintained, he was a good friend to the Empire as well as an intermediary for other countries; in other words, he was an ardent lover of peace as well as a philanthropist.

"General, the embassies of both the Commonwealth and the Unified States have accepted our proposal."

"Oh? Even with those terms?"

The moment he got the report from his affably smiling subordinate, Colonel Calandro, Gassman furrowed his brow in disgust and reached for a cigar.

If selling peace to the world went too smoothly, that could also cause issues for the middleman.

"…Sheesh, our *ally* is putting up a more valiant fight than I expected."

Even as a tentative proposal, the terms had been exorbitant. The best anyone could say was that they might become a first step toward negotiations.

Gassman didn't intend to spare any pains in mediation… But his true desire

was to do everything possible to ensure that Ildoa's contributions couldn't be brushed off.

The Imperial Army overturned Gassman's prewar estimates of the power gap by offering a ferocious fight, blowing his careful calculations of interests to bits.

Let's be honest.

Though the Imperial Army was a beloved ally, the Kingdom of Ildoa would have appreciated it more if it would fight only as much as necessary.

"At this rate, we won't be able to gain much from mediating."

His calculations swirled in the air along with his cigar smoke.

By simply being the ones to open up negotiations before the reconciliation summit, the Kingdom of Ildoa had been able to obtain tons of new aircrafts, computation orbs, and even loans with no interest or collateral.

"Well, peace would be best, of course," Gassman murmured and set aside ambitions for further profit. It wouldn't do to be too greedy. The key to negotiations was to stay modest and ensure an appropriate amount of gains.

"I'm glad to know that they're so interested in peace that they'll lend us an ear even if the terms we present are that outrageous. And? We were waiting on a final response from those hyenas in the Federation. What did they have to say?"

"I confirmed through our attaché, who said they have no problem."

Calandro's voice was brimming with the self-confidence of a member of their elite intelligence agency.

Contrary to his nice-guy exterior, he was an absolute realist, so the significance of his guarantee was enormous.

"No problem? Does that mean they have the evidence?"

"…The orders must have been given. The cells who had been reported to be causing trouble have ceased activities."

"Ohhh?" Gassman emitted an interested exclamation unconsciously.

That meant the Federation had worked very quickly to fulfill his simple

request: *The Kingdom of Ildoa will volunteer to mediate, so silence the Ildoan radical left wing.*

"Those whipped dogs."

"Better whipped than rioting."

"That's for sure. Not that we're any better with politicians running the army."

How prudent of Calandro to select a tactful silence. The natural way he shifted his eyes to the clock on the wall was perfectly attuned to his position.

Now, how should I interpret that, since he hasn't agreed or disagreed?

No. Having thought that far, he switched gears.

"…So, Colonel, shall we do what we need to do?"

"It's quite a risk, I think. To be honest, the General Staff is warning that the Empire may react violently."

Calandro's anxiety wasn't unfounded.

What they were about to do was, well, it was likely to provoke a reaction along the lines of *Now you've gone and done it*. It was a dangerous gamble, and if they lost, furious imperials could very well be storming over their border soon.

Gassman couldn't write off that possibility, even if it had only a one-in-a-million chance of happening.

Yet, he spoke with confidence. "There's no problem, right, Colonel?"

"But…"

"I'm sure the Imperial Army General Staff will respond immediately to such a sneak attack. They're talented enough that it should be easy for them. Most importantly, they have plenty of combat experience."

He had no doubt about that.

It was dangerous to assume that ideas proven in battle were superior, but discounting them entirely was equally foolish.

The Imperial Army and its exacting General Staff operated on a fearsomely

exacting standard.

Even Gassman, who prided himself on being more like a politician than a soldier, was in awe of his fellow military men in the Imperial Army—he had to respect them.

“But, Colonel Calandro, our safety is guaranteed by the excellence of the Imperial Army. Did you see how the Council for Self-Government was established on the Federation lines? The Imperial Army General Staff is a perfect mass of raison d’état. They’re not reckless enough to go looking for another front in this war.”

An outstanding military would naturally act to avoid ending up in a crude explosion. With its famous iron discipline, the Imperial Army could be trusted to behave accordingly.

“We should be able to avoid any accidents. That makes this a done deal. The Imperial Army clearly prefers to stay home, as evidenced by its interior lines strategy.” To Gassman, it was inevitable. “They may actually be open to hearing our mediation plan.”

Acting not on emotions but reason.

Even if the Empire came to the table reluctantly, he expected them to come. Then the Kingdom of Ildoa would be able to host their dear friends as an intermediary.

“Rather than shedding blood in war, we should all sweat together in peace talks.”

“…That in itself makes sense, sir, but…” Calandro’s perplexed eyes asked the unstated question, *Will it really work?*

Gassman waved him off with a faint smile. “Don’t worry! These days you can’t reasonably hope to expand your territory relying on political marriage anymore.”

Bloody armed conflict came at a cost.

For the Kingdom of Ildoa, which had been carefully observing the total war from the sidelines, that was out of the question. Neutral countries were in the

unique position of being forced to witness the madness of uncommonly costly battles.

Anyone with normal sensibilities would be on the lookout for an exit. That much was self-evident.

“The best thing a lucky country can do is accept its allotment of peace. What unfortunate reason could there be to go sticking your neck into such a foolish pursuit as war?”

The Imperial Army seemed impossibly huge from the perspective of the Ildoan ground forces.

And haven’t we even started recruiting some women in addition to the men, so we can mobilize more troops?

To someone like Gassman, who had been fighting the government about the budget, it was clear at a glance.

World war meant only outrageous expenditures and madness.

Just a few years of it reduced a nation to tatters. The reconstruction would take an unfathomably long time. Would it even be finished after infants of today grew into adults decades later?

“Excessive pride is unreasonable! If everyone wants something so badly, then we should sell it, even if it is profiteering! Let’s give them some common ground.”

“General, do the warring countries even want peace?”

“Who would want to keep fighting such a wasteful war?! I think it’s only logical that even if it’s a bit of a—no, a fairly hard sell, that peace will indeed sell.”

He gave the natural answer in a natural way.

To Gassman, it was as self-evident as the fact that one plus one is two. He would even call it axiomatic.

“So does that make us the messengers of peace?”

“Quite right! Let’s wedge the imperials’ mouths open with some piping hot

pizza and pasta and hear what they have to say!”

“Don’t they say it’s important to have manners between friends?” Calandro made a sour expression as he offered this frank advice. It was stereotypical of him, as an intelligence officer, to so prudently envision the worst case, but how far would his caution extend?

“Oh, we can just call it the manners of warriors.” Gassman broke into a liberal-minded smile and shrugged at the worrywart colonel. “Colonel Calandro, your anxiety is all for nothing. Those guys in the Empire, politics runs so deep in their veins that they’d keep smiling even if they’re furious on the inside.”

“Either way, I’m the one who’ll have to deal with them once they’re angry…”

“I’ll expect great things from your heroic struggle, then. Will that be all?” Gassman moved to end their conversation, but he noticed Calandro’s gaze still fixed on him, looking worried. “You’re really against it, huh?”

“…May I ask you something, as an intelligence officer?”

“Of course.” Gassman nodded generously.

Looking at him questioningly, Calandro must have hesitated for just a brief time. His eyes glanced away momentarily before he spoke. “To tell the truth… yes, to tell you the truth… I have to wonder if you’re provoking the Empire on purpose.” His anxiety seeped into his hard voice. “I’m holding the lives of the troops in my hands, so please answer this properly for me.” His tone was earnest.

Though Calandro was an intelligence officer with a desk job in the rear, he was a man who knew combat.

Gassman’s only response was to smile wryly as he answered, “Sheesh, what little trust you have in me. I don’t deny that this project of mine will stir things up…but regardless, it won’t come to war.”

It was true that his plan of carrying out unscheduled field maneuvers on a large scale with the troops urgently mobilized at the Ildoa Empire border was an extreme move.

“Shall I tell you why before you ask?”

Calandro wasn't the only one shooting him skeptical looks.

Mobilizing when the Empire needed every man it could get while its entire army was swamped in a battle of attrition on the eastern front would be "provocative" even with the most generous estimation—to the point that General Calderoni and other commanders long stationed on the border with the Empire were making noise about it.

"Neither we nor the Empire wants to fight. So why would there be war…? To cut to the chase, this will only be a demonstration. Even if we were planning on starting a war, that would probably happen the next time, not this time."

"I beg your pardon, General, but you're a military politician."

And? Gassman asked with his eyes, and Calandro looked straight back at him as he answered.

"Aren't you perhaps discounting the fact that the human mind often deviates from reason in combat?"

It must have been a question stemming from experience in battle. And in reality, Calandro was one of the rare Ildoan soldiers who had served in small-scale conflicts in the colonies. Even Gassman, who had a long career on paper, wasn't averse to admitting there was much to learn from him.

Still, Gassman had experience himself, as well. He saw himself as an old warrior who had taken up arms and fought in the colonies during his younger days. Though he had gone on to pursue a career in administration, he clearly styled himself as a soldier whose heart would always be on the battlefield.

"I'm used to getting called a politician in military uniform. But I do wear the same uniform as you."

"…I said too much." The anger radiating from Gassman's every word wasn't something an armchair general could emit. Faced with that steely glare, Calandro swiftly elected to make a tactical withdrawal. "I hope you'll forgive me for my rudeness, General. My deepest apologies." His attitude as he bowed was pitch-perfect, and the angle his head lowered, magnificent.

The moment Gassman found himself thinking, *This doesn't really suit such a cheerful guy*, he shrugged with a chuckle. "You got me. That made me laugh."

No matter how accomplished an enemy general might've been, a friendly general who surrounded himself with yes-men would always be far more frightening. Gassman was glad to be the kind of person who allowed counterarguments.

"Your analysis is sound. I'll accept your apology and let this be water under the bridge."

"I appreciate it, sir."

"No worries. Besides…I have insurance. Even if the Empire does come out swinging, we should be able to pick up the telltale signs of movement and changes in their position."

Calandro must have apologized because he realized he had crossed a line…but that kind of consideration was unnecessary. Conspirators preferred someone rude who knew how to handle themselves over a polite idiot—because anyone plotting a conspiracy had to be a realist.

"Understood… It may not be much, but I'll do what I can, General."

And that's why I count on intelligence officers like you. His unstated feelings must have gotten through. The eyes looking at him now contained a dependable force of will.

"It's in your hands now." Gassman encouraged him.

AROUND THE SAME TIME, IMPERIAL ARMY GENERAL STAFF OFFICE WAR ROOM

No General Staff Office meeting room looked any better than the rest.

They were places where high-ranking officers wearing the staffer braid stood scowling, clustered around a large map covered in scribbles of data.

And that held true for the Imperial Army's offices as well.

Good staff officers all ended up resembling one another in some way. They were stubborn, competitive, and hard workers who spared no pains.

It was precisely for that honor and spirit that they were praised, *This is the heart of the great and fearsome Imperial Army, which belongs to the Reich,*

crown of the world. Here are enshrined wisdom and forethought, and so on.

Setting aside their elegant exterior created for show, staff officers were quite an uncouth bunch.

The reality was a pile of geniuses basically wringing their brains out, writhing around in the fog of war as they faced a mountain of documents while they desperately groped for a solution.

That said, *usually* a standard—meaning the minimum—of decorum was just barely maintained. Shouting back and forth could only be a sign of danger.

"Ildoa is mobilizing?!"

Restraint went out the window as voices barked. Shrieks that went up like shots from signal guns invited a storm into the General Staff Office, immediately turning the place into a typhoon.

"There wasn't any advance notice?!"

"This isn't part of their regular exercise schedule!"

"Which units are on the move?!"

"You're saying it's an unannounced mobilization exercise?!"

The notice from the Kingdom of Ildoa, that it was commencing a large-scale mobilization exercise with the goal of assembling their forces by February 1, threw the Imperial Army General Staff into hellish agony.

It was officially a mobilization exercise, so after the troops were gathered, they would supposedly do field exercises for a few weeks before being released, but all of this was news to the staff officers.

The shouts of *This is absurd!* crisscrossing the room were a reflection of their disgraceful, panicked state.

In a nutshell: They were traumatized.

"Are we going to get hit in the flank again?!"

"Of all the—! What has Intelligence been doing?!"

The Imperial Army General Staff previously misinterpreted the François Republic's intentions. Everyone remembered what it was like to get their flank

shredded by an opponent they didn't expect to enter the fight.

Even when they won, no one understood better than the staff officers what thin ice they had been on. With their previous failure lighting a fire beneath them, it was impossible to stay calm when examining the situation to the south.

Did they trick us?

The staffers did have a sense that they were focusing too much on the east… leading them to get the worst sort of premonitions in the backs of their minds, like conspiracy theories, and that scared them even more, so it turned into a vicious cycle.

It was shameful behavior, unbecoming of Imperial Army staff officers.

"I can't bear to watch this," uttered one officer's esteemed friend as he took the cigar out of his mouth and ground it into the ashtray.

"Shut up! Do the lot of you want to be sent back to war college?!"

It was a single shout. Facing the gaggle of dumbfounded officers, Lieutenant General von Zettour pounded the map and barked again.

"What are you staff officers here for?! Is that braid a decoration?!"

His eyes shone a palpably sharp glare on the staffers. The moment the normally fearless officers came to their senses, a burst of laughter echoed throughout the tense room.

"…Boy, Zettour, you beat me at my own game. You know I look forward to chewing out useless youngsters!" Lieutenant General von Rudersdorf laughed as if to say how ridiculous it was. But though his tone was gentle, his words were harsh. "Now then, it's time for work. Let's include the Ildoan Army's movements in our assessments of their situation and see what's what." Having said that much, he suddenly seemed to notice something. "So? Why don't we have any intel on the situation?"

With that one comment, the Operations staffers finally began to move.

Once they had been told what to do, the training hammered into their brains kicked in, enabling them to fulfill their duties.

"We're extracting our officer ASAP. The leader of the Ildoan army is General

Igor Gassman.”

“General Gassman?”

“Not General Calderoni from the northern area?”

The personnel choice caused both Zettour and Rudersdorf to question the reasoning. The name was unfamiliar enough that a few people chimed in with questions, confused.

Those in the field of operations probably hadn’t ever heard of the man. Rudersdorf cocked his head with a *Huh?* and he was only the first in a line of confused expressions.

But of course they had never heard of him.

Even Zettour couldn’t recall the name immediately. After rummaging in his memories, the guy he finally came up with seemed less like a soldier and more like a politician who had merely donned a uniform.



“If I remember correctly, General Igor Gassman is part of the administration… He’s served mostly at Ildoan central command and has barely been out in the field at all, right?”

“Correct, sir.”

This general was such an inconspicuous figure that until the officer riffling through documents confirmed his existence, Zettour wasn’t even sure he was real. Some soldiers were like that. The sort that were adept at running a tight ship internally, more suited to administrative work than battle.

The fact that they lacked information about him even though he was a general from the army of an allied country was headache inducing. And if not even the specialists in the rear like Zettour could recall him immediately, that was even worse.

“Let’s make sure to get some material on General Gassman later. Speaking for Operations, I’d like to know the chain of command of the mobilized Ildoan forces.”

Zettour had been sinking into thought, but he snapped back to the present at the sound of Rudersdorf’s voice.

That was the decisiveness befitting a member of Operations, Zettour supposed. That approach of doing whatever possible with what they knew at the moment was the continuation of a fine tradition emphasizing flexible handling of any situation.

“…Will this General Gassman be leading the troops himself? Or will General Calderoni on the ground there direct the exercises?”

“According to the detailed report, General Calderoni has been tapped as chief aide-de-camp and appointed a senator, so he’s been summoned to the Senate.”

“Go on.” Rudersdorf nodded, and the officers from Operations gave briefly summarized reports.

“It seems that this time General Gassman, who was appointed as the general director of the exercises, will be conducting an inspection himself. Apparently, they would also like to invite allied officers to attend via our attaché in Ildoa.”

“…Let’s forget, for the moment, that the general’s come from the more administrative side of things. We need to find out what’s happening with the mobilization. Do we know how many units are involved?”

“Yes, here you go.”

Finally, the printout came around.

It was a report that the attaché at the embassy must have sent in a huge hurry. Whoever typed it probably started the moment the first call came in. Zettour was impressed by how concise it was.

Ildoa has issued mobilization orders

Scale, four hundred, battalions, notification received

Commander, General Igor Gassman

Details as soon as the connection can be maintained

Envisioning the worst-case scenario of the communication lines being cut, the attaché had typed out the most important info, even if it had to be in drips and drabs. They had done an admirable job.

The first report of the mobilization exercise of approximately four hundred battalions for urgent deployment to Ildoa’s northern area was plenty. And they would probably be able to expect further details. If there was a problem, it was that interpreting the information was difficult.

“How many divisions is that?”

“About twenty-five divisions of our size, I think.”

“In other words, Ildoa is mobilizing almost the maximum number of troops they can muster during peacetime?” Rudersdorf’s question was emblematic of a certain issue.

Imperial Army officers weren’t terribly familiar with the units of the Royal Ildoan Army, so they had no choice but to take a little time to grasp the numbers.

“If it’s that many, well, we can think of something. We can’t conclude that Ildoa will actually invade, but let’s consider defensive measures.”

“Understood.”

As an operations specialist, you would probably consider how to react based on that judgment. That was fine and well, but there was no need to limit themselves to crisis management. Zettour chimed in out of a sense of duty.

“Try making a request to Ildoa asking that they cancel it. I doubt they actually will, but…we need to object, if only as a formality. Make sure the text is impeccably calm and courteous. Actually”—he paused to twist his mouth into a *bit* of a sneer—“feigned politeness is fine. Emphasize the friendship and camaraderie between the two countries.”

“Yes, sir.” The staffers nodded, and he knew there wouldn’t be any issues if he left it to them.

It was important to protest up front. Even if the objection didn’t change anything, they would go on record as having made it. At least one simple problem had been solved.

The real issue was what to do in a worst-case scenario.

“I think we should alert the Southern Army Group and the Southern Continent Expeditionary Army Corps at once.”

An Operations officer was making a defensive proposal.

It wasn’t a bad idea, but there was one thing Zettour didn’t like about it. *For some reason*, he started to think, but then his mind was occupied by the Kingdom of Ildoa’s principle geopolitical feature.

Their military was an equal balance of army and navy. To put it another way, this wasn’t a country that could fight with its army alone. If it really meant to go to war, it would be gathering its main forces, including the naval fleet.

If they were truly intending to fight, that would be a matter of course.

“What’s Ildoa’s navy doing? I want to know where their capital ships are.” He tried to ask with as much composure as possible, but the significance of the question was enormous.

“No sign of them massing.”

“Also no changes to the regularly scheduled exercises. Our naval forces are

also hurrying to confirm this, but we haven't seen any transfers that would indicate any imminent combat maneuvers."

The moment the officers in charge of naval intelligence gave their reports in even tones, Zettour was able to release the tension in his shoulders. The relief was practically indescribable.

At the very least, from what he could tell, it didn't seem like Ildoa intended to start a fight. As far as the fleet movements had been confirmed, they seemed to be scattered in territorial waters or on convoy duty in a peacetime or neutral stance.

The chances that the Kingdom of Ildoa would come out swinging with the soldiers it had mobilized were next to none.

Even so, Zettour asked another question to make extra sure. "How are pharmaceutical company stocks?"

"No major fluctuations have been detected in Ildoa."

That's strange, thought Zettour with a doubtful look on his face. A large-scale mobilization was usually accompanied by a spike in medicine consumption.

Modern warfare entailed a huge waste of human life.

In order to minimize that waste as much as possible, it was necessary to prepare a stock of all sorts of medical products. Much like ammunition, if medical supplies didn't make it to the battlefield in time, they were useless.

"Check in the Unified States and other third-party countries right away. They could be importing."

"Right away, sir."

Even if it wasn't a real invasion but merely a bluff—or perhaps precisely because it was a bluff—it was common to buy a large amount of medical products to stockpile as part of the ruse.

*I just don't know what to think…*was Zettour's honest take on the matter.

If the major pharmaceutical companies in the Kingdom of Ildoa weren't experiencing high demand, then was the country procuring supplies in secret?

If they were cooperating with another party so deeply that it made such a deal possible…then Ildoa could grow into a threat in the long run.

“Report back as soon as you find out. I don’t care what time it is,” Zettour told his subordinate and then fell silent.

Even if he was interested in the stock prices as supplementary information, he knew that the intel they had was enough to interpret the most pressing matters.

Military affairs could never be free of logistics. Any army that didn’t take logistical issues into consideration was an army that its supply team would give up on. If Zettour ever had to be a general of an organization like that, the unbearable shame would surely drive him to bite a gun barrel.

“…But I guess the conclusion doesn’t change.”

As a hard-boiled realist…upon considering several different possible motives for Ildoa’s abrupt exercises, Zettour decided they were intended to be a demonstration. Though he didn’t realize it at the time, he had interpreted the kingdom’s actions almost exactly as Gassman hoped the Empire would.

“It’s most likely exercises as we’ve been told,” he said with purpose, “but we can’t simply stand by and watch.”

“It’s a tricky situation.”

It sure is. The pair exchanged tired smiles. Rudersdorf, who had chimed in, seemed to grasp the nature of the problem.

Ultimately, it wasn’t an issue of whether the Kingdom of Ildoa meant to invade or not. They had demonstrated quite clearly that their forces were capable of it. That was enough for Zettour’s brain, trained to act with the worst scenario in mind, to sound the alarm.

Ildoa is a potential threat.

And *potential threats* had to be prepared for.

This simple conclusion just seemed so ridiculous. While hoping that the defense units they stationed in the south would end up doing nothing, it would probably still be necessary to draw troops off from the shattered remains of the

Great Army deployed in the east.

The outlook on the war with the Federation would require substantial revisions. When he glanced at the Operations man, Rudersdorf's red face was practically exploding. He seemed to be struggling to suppress his anger.

"…If we can stick it to those macaroni bastards, I don't care what it costs." If they had been at dinner, Rudersdorf probably would have been stabbing his fork into his pasta, even if it was poor manners. His angry, hostile outburst was a straightforward expression of the general mood in the office.

"I agree completely. Allow me to point out something wonderful," Zettour replied in spite of himself.

"What's that?"

"Those dear macaroni bastards are our precious allies. And if I may add one more thing, they're our friends who control the supply lines to the Southern Continent Expeditionary Army Corps." He continued, "Do you understand?" knowing how obvious it was. He still had to say it. "At least formally, they're a wonderful allied army."

It wasn't hard to memorize things he didn't believe. Zettour modestly offered his opinion. "For now, that is… And I think it would be logical, militarily, to hope that they continue to be."

"Nrgh…"

"Considering the strategic environment, we have no choice."

The Empire's situation was, in a word, a deadlock.

It wasn't supposed to be this way, everyone groaned. Everything that happened leading up to the war had been a series of unexpected events.

Theoretically, there should have been a way out of the encirclement. It was possible that the Empire could break out by smashing the Entente Alliance to the north and Dacia to the south. But did their victories on either of those fronts accomplish anything? The answer to this rhetorical question was clear.

They had plunged into all-out war, but what was the result? It hadn't contributed one bit to the improvement of their national security like they had

anticipated with their existing theories. The best thing to do at this point was to not make any more enemies.

“Putting our personal tastes aside, I really have to wonder whether squashing those flies down south might not just be all pain and no gain.”

“Wouldn’t it be worth the effort to protect our tender nether regions?”

“It’s true that we’d have to do something if they were aiming for that, but…” Zettour made an honest admission of his feelings before the other staff officers. “If they’re not going to start a fight of their own accord, then it’s less costly for us to simply leave them alone. I don’t want to get buried in more occupation admin work. And I’d like to avoid tying troops down defending even more captured territory.”

It was precisely because he was the head of the Service Corps, which was treated like a bunch of gofers, that he had to bring up this reality despite knowing his counterpart in Operations wouldn’t like it. The burden of occupied territory put a strain on the Imperial Army’s administrative arm.

Occupying land meant stationing soldiers on it. Taking troops who could be used on campaigns and instead scattering them across former enemy territory was as good as taking them out of the action.

“The bottom line is that this will inevitably turn into a quagmire if we gain more territory with no peace.”

The Imperial Army didn’t have infinite soldiers. Only by using them with extreme efficiency was it possible to maintain national security. The essence of interior lines strategy was mobility.

They had to recognize that the two-step process of annihilating the enemy army and convincing their leader to surrender didn’t work in a total war scenario.

Before, when the enemy suffered so many casualties that they were no longer able to defend their capital, they would have been forced to consider peace; national security strategies were created under the assumption that if once the enemy military faltered, all that was left was to march on their capital.

Even Zettour had to admit that the idea of threatening the capitals of their

enemies was practically a dream.

A case in point was the mistake they made against the Republic.

The Empire had planned a thorough destruction of the enemy field army in order to end the war. It whispered, *Open sesame*; spun the revolving door; and achieved the utter annihilation of their opponents.

Yes, they had pulled it off perfectly.

The instrument of violence that was the Imperial Army achieved the utter obliteration of the instrument of violence known as the Republican Army and boasted, *We are the Reich, crown of the world.*

Given the context, it could be argued that the army had fulfilled its duty.

Yet there was a truth that everyone had to accept.

Victory on the western front hadn't ended the war. And so they then dispatched troops to the southern continent, clashed with the Commonwealth, and as if to top it off, got sucked into a quagmire in the east with the Communist Federation.

"…War is hard," Zettour murmured in a dried-up voice, clenching the butt of his cigar in his teeth. That was his impression as one of the people in charge of coming up with war plans, who had been involved in drafting numerous operations.

They were continually faced with circumstances they never anticipated. Of course, they weren't foolish enough to cling so hard to theories that they lost sight of the fog of war.

But Zettour, a veteran general of the Imperial Army, was confused. The reports from the field were strange. He couldn't quite get a feel for what was happening.

"That's an awfully trite conclusion to reach after piling up so many corpses and blowing through our nation's budget."

It was only natural that his old friend would make such a biting comment. Zettour couldn't deny the accusation. He straightened up a bit and remarked solemnly, "The truth is often unremarkable."

“For example?”

“Rudersdorf, you make too little of thought and contemplation. Even a commonplace phrase can hold deeper meaning.”

Human beings aren’t perfect. Having participated in war, at times observing, at times leading, Zettour had reached that commonplace conclusion.

“This isn’t a circular argument—that’s just how people are. We can’t fall into the trap of idealism, wishing for how we think things should be, but rather we must look at reality, see them for what they are.”

Someone like a devout preacher might crow that God had great intentions for every premise given to humans…but Zettour thought that was laughably absurd.

This is pitiful even for me, he thought as he spoke in an aggravated tone. “It’s impossible to put too much faith in intellect and reason. We have to think with that premise in mind.”

It irritated him that the people around him were nodding—“Ohhh.” *It’s contradictory if I do say so myself*, he felt like scoffing. *Luckily*, it should probably be said, his time for dwelling on that went out the window when his esteemed friend asked a question.

“General von Zettour, it’s a bit much, but I’d like to ask a favor of you.”

“Which is?”

“Could you reserve a case of cigars for me? There are so many leeches lately. They pester me on the front lines when I’m observing, too—I can’t stand it.”

“You mean you want to burn the bloodsuckers to death? Well, I get the feeling, but…” *I understand that you’re stressed*. Zettour winced.

There may have been a lull in the east, but there was no telling what would happen with the mobilization at the border with Ildoa… It was like the Kingdom of Ildoa had stabbed them in the back.

It was only natural that Operations had been thrown into confusion. Zettour understood so well, it made him sick.

“Unfortunately, I’m turning down your request. Make do with this.” Zettour

tossed him a cigar, then lit his own and puffed a couple of times. “We need to look at things from multiple angles.”

“What?”

“Even your leeches. For example, in the field of medicine, there are ways to make good use of leeches. Didn’t you know that?”

“You can use those things?”

Zettour responded to his skepticism firmly. “There is such a thing as medicinal leeches. So even bloodsucking has its uses.”

“You’re saying to let them suck my lifeblood?”

“I heard that sometimes that’s *the way to get healthy*.” He spoke a little forcefully and the other man understood.

“Well, the more you know! You have my thanks. If it’s not too much trouble, I’d like to ask you one more thing.”

“Anything at all.”

“Are people actually happy to be treated with leeches?”

“Hmm, that’s one thing I can’t say for sure. I’m a career soldier, as you see. I know nothing about medicine.”

It was a roundabout way to refuse to comment.

Zettour didn’t need Rudersdorf to point that out to him—he’d been mulling it over himself for some time now. Honestly, there were probably no living things who would be happy to have their blood sucked.

He didn’t even need to ask himself whether public opinion in the Empire would welcome this move from Ildoa.

“…Then I really would like you to have a cigar ready…”

“Let’s make plans to consider it later.”

Having just barely made it through the conversation, they both sighed. Strategic plotting against Ildoa was a political taboo for the Imperial Army.

Of course, in terms of a plan itself, they did have one.

Steps for opening hostilities, victory, and peace via border defense reinforced by the Great Army.

In other words, an interior lines strategy. With its head stuck in the vexing swamp of the east, the Empire had no hope of carrying out such a thing.

It was terribly likely that it was necessary to consider a just-in-case scenario.

“So which units should we recall?”

“I’ve already identified which of the units scattered in every direction can be moved.”

“…This is it?” Rudersdorf complained with a glance at the estimate, and Zettour shrugged.

“You know most of our combat units were sent to the east. The tactical forces are your jurisdiction, so you must already understand.”

“It’s not enough—it’s not anywhere near enough. Please do something.”

“Do you flee the scene of a fire just because there aren’t enough firefighters? Things are finite; it’s a fact of life.”

It’s not possible to get something from nothing, but they also wouldn’t get anywhere unless they had something to work with. Zettour and Rudersdorf’s testy conversation made their task terribly clear.

“I can’t take responsibility for the defense of the southern border like this. It might be better to just pull troops from the southern continent.”

“And let the Free Republic have its way? Do you have any idea how many weapons will find their way into the partisans’ hands if we do that?”

“Then it’s simple. Give me troops, Zettour.”

They were going in circles.

They were both quite aware that their respective positions were unreasonable.

For top officers inhabiting the General Staff Office, this conversation was incredibly basic. You could even say it was lacking in intelligence.

But Zettour had to respond. He had to.

“We already drafted any young people we could mobilize early. Or are you saying we should call up another year ahead of time? Seventeen-year-old draftees! What splendid youthfulness they’ll bring!”

“You’d have me send in troops that green? That would be plenty if you want to show the world the extent of our ineptitude.”

Zettour spat self-deprecating remarks, and Rudersdorf had to sigh in disgust—their resource situation was getting that desperate.

The Imperial Army had no reserves to rely on.

What little population of working age available to call upon had already been sent into industry or onto the battlefield. They were wringing out any manpower they could. They couldn’t meet ends even when they mobilized the young people ahead of schedule.

The Imperial Army couldn’t avoid its shortage of soldiers, a physical limit.

“Griping is pointless. Let’s turn our attention back to work.”

“How irritating this is.” Rudersdorf grumbled and then said, “General von Zettour, treat this as an official inquiry: If you were going to draw troops off, where would you take them from?”

“I’d like to deny it, but there’s probably no choice but the east.”

“What makes you say that?”

“We just fought off their limited offensive. That’s more than enough for a while. Optimistically speaking, we should be able to expect a lull in the fighting.”

“So the risk to the east is within acceptable bounds?”

When the Operations man began to grumble, Zettour cut him off and offered his opinion, well aware it was only a tentative idea.

“I can’t give you what I don’t have, but if Operations can accept the risk in the east, I think we could make it work. And…I could take a handful from the Dacia and Norden fronts. There’s also the eastern units resting after rotating off the front line. How about sending them down to the south?”

If they bent over backward a little bit, this plan to station troops defensively

was doable. Having grasped the Operations man's paradigm, Zettour planned to push through a plan that entailed minimal overexertion.

The staff officer Zettour's judgment was sound, on the whole. But apparently, Rudersdorf still felt something was missing.

"A delaying defense would be possible like that, but it'd be great to have some mobile reserves."

"I've already offered you all I can. The best I could do for mobile reserves is a newly formed brigade or *maybe* a division."

"That won't cut it. This is for fighting fires! The existence of backup fighting power makes a huge difference."

Rudersdorf was stubborn as he demanded troops with his eyes: *Cough them up.* Perhaps it would be proper to praise his strong will.

Or perhaps his lack of cooperation should be lamented. But anyone who could confidently declare exactly what they needed would be able to avoid the folly of holding back and then heading off on a mission they had no hope of accomplishing.

"Let's quit beating around the bush. What do you want?"

In all truth, when a request was believable in its necessity, Zettour had no choice but to compromise.

"Give me your Salamander Kampfgruppe."

"*Non, nein,* no*, iie, nicht.* That about does it, I think?"

"I'm sure you could give it to me."

Zettour wasn't one to put up with such brusque requests. That said, it was only because he and Rudersdorf were old friends that restraint could be cast off so completely.

"I can't."

"…Do you have a reason why? I heard they were being treated like guests in the east since they're directly under our jurisdiction."

"Just the other day, they had to rush to defend the village where the Council

for Self-Government is located. Did you not read the report? I don't understand why the decision to keep a fighting unit who so accurately grasps Central's will at ground zero gets so little respect. And besides," continued Zettour. "That's a test unit. It's a Kampfgruppe experiment. I'm fairly certain employing it in the east is best."

If you threw a research model or prototype into an actual battle before properly testing it just because it was performing well and busted it up, what were you left with?

"I don't deny that, but Operations would like to hear from some people with experience on the front lines out there. It would be a good opportunity to learn what it's really like in the field as a Kampfgruppe."

That's a great excuse, but… Zettour sighed. Lately, his rate of sighs and complaints had gone up again—to the point that he couldn't help but notice it with irritation.

"You just don't want to have to apologize to the guys in the east as much."

"You're not wrong."

You Operations bastards! How much easier it would be if he could just say that. These guys were always taking the initiative to think from someone else's point of view and then doing exactly what they wouldn't like.

It was exceedingly frustrating for Zettour to not know whether to praise Rudersdorf as the manifestation of the ideal staff officer or honestly lament what a pain in the ass he was.

"I'm warning you in advance that depending on the situation, I'll transfer them as needed. And if they are returned under that condition, they'll serve as strategic reserves again."

"All right, it's a deal," Rudersdorf responded instantaneously. "That means eighteen divisions and an armored division. Plus two units of mobile reserves. Add that to the Southern Army Group's border patrol and we have the minimum of what we need." Rudersdorf must have been truly worried. His relief was genuine as he uttered a "sheesh" and let his shoulders drop. "It's roughly the same number as Ildoa is mobilizing. That said, if they get serious,

they could shift to a general mobilization and outnumber us.”

“They won’t go that far. Ildoa wouldn’t bother playing both sides like this if that was their plan.”

“You never know! People from the southern countries are full of passion, but it’s not so uncommon for these fiery people to be crafty strategists in their own right.”

“True.” Zettour winced. You could call Rudersdorf himself a prime example, maybe. Though he was a man of formidable vitality and stubbornness to match his stony exterior, it was through his cleverness that he made his mark on the battlefield as an Operations expert.

“So your brain does work in a pinch.”

“What was that, Zettour?”

“Nothing. So who shall we send to observe?”

“Do you want to go?”

Though it was for only a moment, saying he wasn’t tempted would have been a lie.

Zettour had a lot of experience in the field of operations, too, so there was no way the thought of marching into a potential enemy’s territory and checking things out didn’t make him curious.

He was also confident that he could get an understanding of the situation. Even an objective appraisal would say he could do a great job if he went.

But Zettour unhesitatingly dismissed the temptation from his mind. “I can’t abandon my duties regarding the reassignment of troops from the east and domestic negotiations. We’re still making adjustments in the manufacturing plan.”

Being an unsung hero meant dull, unending work that no one would really notice. Slacking off at the top wouldn’t be a good example for their subordinates.

The spirit of a commander leading from the front was a constant. It held true both in the field and in the rear. The last thing he wanted to do was be counted

among those fools who thought being a commander meant kicking back.

“What about you, Rudersdorf?”

“I’ll have to leave my pasta-eating, sightseeing trip for another time. Though I’m curious about what sorts of exercises the Ildoan Army will get up to.”

“Me too.” Zettour nodded and suggested an alternative. “Then we’ll just have to choose some elites. My people will send a team.”

“Oh?”

“Northern Ildoa is a mountainous region. I just figure they could *learn* a lot about operating deep in the mountains *from our ally*.”

It would be instructive in not only a purely tactical sense but also in terms of military geography.

Their ally was kindly inviting them to the exercises. Dispatching a *studious* group of officers would surely be handy later.

“I agree. From Operations, I’ll send Colonel von Lergen. I’m sure he’ll see what there is to see.”

“What about his work in Operations?”

“That’s no problem. It’s about time for him to become a regimental commander anyhow.”

“…I feel like I have to say, ‘Under these circumstances?’”

“You’re right, but, well, this is a good chance for him.”

“Hmm…,” Zettour murmured and shook his head. *Does Operations intend to leave operations in the south up to Colonel von Lergen?*

The kind of guy who was a balanced bureaucrat but could also hold his own under fire was certainly valuable.

“All right, gentlemen. Make it happen.”

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LATE JANUARY, UNIFIED YEAR 1927, IMPERIAL ARMY’S FRONTLINE AREA IN THE EAST, SALAMANDER KAMPFGRUPPE’S GARRISON

“W-we’re being reassigned to the capital?”

Aware of how foolish she sounds, Lieutenant Colonel Tanya von Degurechaff rereads the General Staff’s orders.

Since her unit serves directly under the General Staff, it’s not that surprising to get a sudden notification like this. She’s well aware that they can circumvent the regional army group’s headquarters to redeploy the unit.

The issue is the destination.

They’re going from the front line to a staging area built around a railroad station near the capital. It’s actually so close to the capital, you can say they’re being transferred to a garrison near Berun.

Was this message decoded correctly? It’s no surprise they wonder if there was some mistake. Even the guys who weren’t normally skeptical had to be suspicious.

Tanya gets the signaler to make sure there aren’t any decoding errors, but it’s a waste of effort. There are no mistakes on their end.

The duty officer wondered the same thing as Tanya. They say the message was double-checked before they even brought it to her.

So Tanya acts as though the orders she has are real.

She summons the chief officers of the Kampfgruppe. It doesn’t take long for them to assemble, and she relays the orders.

The looks on the older hands’ faces say it’s hard for them to believe, but she thrusts the truth at them with instructions to pull back. Before long, word arrives that the Eastern Army Group has a train for them, and things are busy.

This is the second time they’ve managed to escape the quagmire of the east.

Tanya had braced herself for a bunch of unpleasantness, but the contact they receive is kept so businesslike, she’s caught off guard.

Not that businesslike is a bad thing. In fact, she prefers it that way.

“Colonel, is something wrong?”

“No, I’m glad we aren’t having any issues.” Though she harbors absurd

doubts, she feigns composure as she dismisses her subordinate's question. As long as it doesn't sound like she's trying to convince herself. "Thanks to the Council for Self-Government, we have heated train cars. Maybe our new friends are more trustworthy than we thought."

If the Imperial Army can use the Federation standard rail network, that's great news for its strategic mobility.

It's pretty obvious, but the cars are fit for the climate here, too. We can expect better insulation and cold-proofing than in imperial trains.

Best of all, our risk of being attacked by partisans will drop. Improved safety and security on the road will do a lot to decrease the strategic burden. As a commander in the field, it's a relief to hear.

Praise be to Zettour and his great idea to wash his hands of administration in the occupied territories and allow the separatists to establish their own puppetlike government.

Tanya shakes her head, and having quickly reviewed what needs to be done, she gives orders.

"Where's my runner?"

"Here, ma'am!"

"Tell Lieutenant Tospan to start moving the infantry."

"Yes, ma'am!" He races off, the very definition of nimble.

Watching the young orderly go, Tanya murmurs to herself, "I don't get it. What are the higher-ups thinking?"

Despite the bitter cold, the Salamander Kampfgruppe is surviving the winter. The infantry have gotten used to the freezing east and the snowdrifts.

If need be, they can play tag with Federation ski commandos. They've adapted, and you could even say they now have perfect control over the battlefield environment.

The road to get here was long indeed.

Making arrangements for cold-weather gear, paying attention to our

nutrition, just barely getting the supplies we need—it was a difficult period.

At the end of a great deal of toil and strife, we finally had the necessary equipment. We no longer have to worry about socks.

And it's not only the gear that improved—what's inside did, too.

Even Lieutenant Tospan, whom I considered emblematic of utter uselessness, is no exception. Even with that thick skull of his, he's managed to improve when it comes to routine work.

All the officers have been infused anew with camaraderie.

Which is why Lieutenant Colonel Tanya von Degurechaff has to wonder…

"…Considering the current situation in the east, there is leeway to call us back for reassignment. I understand that it's possible. But what's the reason? What would cause them to pull us out?"

The Salamander Kampfgruppe is the strategic reserve that has kept its energy up the best.

We're first-string fighters—you could even call us a precious asset.

I could understand if we were being deployed urgently *to* the east, but why would we be rushed *away*?

"We only just repelled the Federation's limited offensive. Honestly, I never imagined we would be pulled out now."

The battle lines are still unstable.

Though things are calming down in the rear regions, the Federation Army's infiltration raids never end. The Salamander Kampfgruppe can even be sent out in the snow, making it quite handy to have around.

Tanya can't think of any reason to pull them out now. Of course, the difference in intel held by HQ versus those in the field is undeniable.

"I don't get it. You're telling me the higher-ups have some good reason for this?"

The words *I don't get it* are repeated.

That's how crucial this is to Tanya.

Pulling staff out of a busy shop is a bad move unless there are awfully pressing circumstances.

“I’m sure they’re not even giving us a break…”

We ended up going straight from the southern continent to the Federation, after all.

“That was awful.”

Is the same thing going to happen again?

Either way, we should be prepared to not get a proper rest. Going in expecting the worst is probably slightly better for your mental health.

“Supposedly, they want to talk to us. Is it really okay to believe that we’ll only be ordered to serve as the opposing force in military exercises?”

[chapter]

IV

Diplomatic Deal

"An ambassador is an honest gentleman
sent to lie abroad for the good of his country."

Sir Henry Wotton

[chapter] IV Diplomatic Deal

EARLY FEBRUARY, UNIFIED YEAR 1927, NORTHERN ILDOA

Upon heading to visit the Kingdom of Ildoa, Colonel von Lergen was given three missions by the General Staff.

The first was to see how well the Ildoan Army was trained.

Whether they were enemies or allies, the more information the General Staff could acquire about them, the better. For a staff officer, the task of reporting their observations was a natural duty that didn't even need to be discussed. Even with the situation as tense as it was, that was a relatively simple task.

The second was an order to get a feel for the military geography with mountain battles in mind. Lieutenant General von Rudersdorf, who was leading Operations, gave this task to him personally. As far as Lergen could guess…the idea was to be prepared for potential combat with Ildoa.

Of course, merely studying the lay of the land didn't automatically put them on the road to war. That said, it was significant that they were considering it, even as a potential plan. Adding in the commander's determination and resolve, it seemed like it could be an important indication.

The final task, it has to be said, was an incredibly unusual order compared to the other two.

His third mission was extremely simple. Lieutenant General von Zettour, in charge of the Service Corps in the General Staff, wanted him to find out as much as possible about General Gassman.

Lergen remembered staring—in spite of himself—at the orders, rereading. That wasn't the sort of mission a colonel would usually be asked to do.

It was a routine job for a lower-ranking officer.

And Lergen didn't have espionage experience in the first place. As a colonel in the Imperial Army General Staff, he had been cultivated to be an operations man who could manage logistics and organization in the rear.

Even he wasn't confident he would be successful aping the duties of an Intelligence agent.

When Zettour had told him he would be great precisely because his background was in Personnel, his only reaction was bewilderment. Though he was the eager type to put forth every effort to fulfill orders, he couldn't deny that this was out of his wheelhouse. How did he expect him to compare Personnel domestically in the Empire and the personnel affairs of senior officers in a foreign country?

That said, if Lergen let every emotion he had show on his face, he would be disqualified as a high-ranking soldier.

Having entered the Kingdom of Ildoa, he interacted cheerfully with his reception, exchanging polite remarks like the model of a perfectly serious officer.

"I'm Colonel Virginio Calandro. I'll be guiding you all on behalf of General Igor Gassman."

The man who met Lergen and the others from the Empire was a similarly courteous officer of the Royal Ildoan Army, a man with an amiable smile. Just as Lergen was about to salute, he was surprised to find the man holding out a hand to shake.

He was the type to try and cozy up to people.

"Now then, you're Colonel von Lergen, correct?"

"It's an honor, Colonel Calandro."

Still, the hand as he shook it had the extremely firm grip of a soldier.

His hands were awfully hard for a soldier-politician. He was the sort who made others realize right away that he knew when to be hard and when to be soft—the most formidable type to have monitoring you.

For Lergen, who had been asked by the home country to dig into this and that during his trip, this guy would be a pain.

All he could do was accept the same truth all soldiers had to live with: You can't choose your enemies. Lergen took up the challenge Calandro's smile presented and nodded with a warm smile of his own.

"Right this way. *It isn't much*, but we've prepared some refreshments."

The remark was enough to make him think, *This is what getting a jab in to score the first point means.* The spread was all luxury items that had disappeared from the Empire due to the Commonwealth's naval blockade.

"Allow us to treat you to some *real coffee*."

"Oh, the *kindness* of a *neutral nation*, hmm?"

At the facility for receiving guests near the location where the exercises would take place, they served all variety of goods from the southern seas that hadn't been seen on the imperial mainland in some time due to the embargo—including, above all, fragrant coffee.

To rub it in, they even had piles of brown sugar.

"Yes, I'm so happy we're able to show our *allies* some hospitality."

An exaggerated remark, an earnest tone, and, to top it off, a suspicious smile.

Lergen didn't feel like he could do a very good impression of a diplomat, but he found himself in the position of having to fight snark with snark as a representative of his country.

"We're so lucky to be counted as friends." On paper the words would have been impossibly mortifying, but even Lergen himself was aware how hollow his tone was. "We were just *so busy with our duties on the battlefield*…I'm afraid we've been out of touch. Ah, but it's *so embarrassing to make excuses*."

"I don't think it's an excuse at all. *I certainly don't want to be such a small-minded person as to blame you when you must have valid reasons*."

The conversation was stereotypical: patronizing Ildoa, evasively cynical Empire. Nevertheless, they exchanged their snide comments with the proper feigned politesse.

Perhaps it could be called a verbal preliminary skirmish as reconnaissance-in-force?

Nearly satisfied at having gotten one in, Lergen was forced to show his hand.

Setting down the teacup after savoring his coffee, Calandro smiled and casually dropped a bomb.

“I’ll be frank. I’m General Gassman’s special envoy.”

It was so unexpected that for a moment, Lergen was speechless.

“There’s something that I simply must speak candidly about with our friends from the Empire.”

“…A special envoy? What is it you want to discuss?”

Lergen’s intention had been recon-in-force, but he had encountered the enemies’ main forces. Since it wasn’t entirely unexpected, he had the slight benefit of preparedness…but he was undeniably taken by surprise.

A sneak attack was more powerful than he understood in theory. Lergen was forced to learn what could be termed a lesson of battle in the field. He was practically holding his breath when Calandro spoke quick and rough, almost as if to steal the Empire’s thunder.

“The Kingdom of Ildoa is terribly anxious about the present situation.”

“…Which means?”

“This prolonging of the war *isn’t good for anyone*.”

He took the bait without hesitating. Those words were too significant. “For *any*one?”

Colonel Lergen of the Imperial Army General Staff knew it was rude to answer a question with a question. But he had to know the answer.

It was one thing if the side making sacrifices in the war said such a thing, but it wasn’t the type of thing a party that flitted like a bat to wherever the profits were found could comment on so smugly. *All we have to do is fire back when fired upon. It’s not so extreme, is it?* In any case, it didn’t feel right for this guy from the opportunist Ildoan Army to bring up the topic.

“I apologize if I’ve offended.”

“Excuse me, Colonel Calandro, but the situation is—”

“Don’t misunderstand me,” Calandro interrupted with a smile. “We’re also quite concerned about the way things are going. We’re prepared to act in good faith as a mediator for peace.”

This was what it meant to fail to secure the initiative. All Lergen could do was let each of Calandro’s words pound into his brain as he stared into his counterpart’s eyes, dumbfounded.

“Do you understand? In other words, peace talks. We, the Kingdom of Ildoa, are willing to be the middleman for our friends.”

Though Lergen knew it wouldn’t do to be thrown off by this, he was nonetheless hard-pressed to find any immediate comment, and his silence betrayed his confusion. He was at the mercy of Calandro’s choice of conversation topic.

That he hadn’t shouted, *Of all the ridiculous—!* was surely due to his last reserves of restraint. He was positive the other man had been observing his expression with periodic glances this whole time.

If he didn’t reflect on the meaning of Calandro’s words and understand them, he wouldn’t be able to respond effectively. Lergen lacked the decisiveness that field battles required.

At that moment, he had to recognize, whether he wanted to or not, that he was inexperienced.

“…I beg your pardon, but you’re saying Ildoa wants to mediate peace talks?”

The reason he replied in a question was simply that he couldn’t think of anything nice to say.

The principal figures of the Imperial Army General Staff, with only a handful of exceptions, hadn’t dreamed such an offer would be suggested. As far as sneak attacks went, the Kingdom of Ildoa’s proposal was a bolt from the blue.

In Lergen’s shock…what crossed his mind was a magic officer he knew well. As a commander in the field, Lieutenant Colonel Tanya von Degurechaff often

made strange calls. In the rear, he had been astonished by her unusual decisiveness, but *if she were here…what would she do?*

"Speaking as *an allied nation*, I caution that any more war will be a strain too great on the Empire's economy. Allow us to propose peace talks." Ever-smiling Calandro politely ignored Lergen's bewilderment and added, "I realize it's presumptuous, but don't you think it's time to find a way to settle things? If we call it a stalemate and volunteer to arbitrate, would you consider accepting?"

It was precisely because Lergen was a key member of the Imperial Army that he had to swallow hard.

The burden of continuing the fight was enormous—unbelievably so. The costs to the Empire had ballooned into a massive sum.

The lines in the east were turning into a quagmire. The futile war of attrition with the Commonwealth and the Free Republic was an everlasting draw. The flip side of the General Staff's thirst for a decisive victory was the hemorrhaging of the Imperial Army, which was already growing anemic.

…But why should he have to reveal his anxiety externally?

"Forgive me for saying this after hearing your thoughts, but…that's a matter for Supreme Command to decide. A mere colonel has no idea what Supreme Command would think."

"Not even a genius from Operations such as yourself? Your reputation precedes you. I understand you have the confidence of both Lieutenant General von Zettour and Lieutenant General von Rudersdorf."

Calandro's remark delivered so nonchalantly was significant. It went far beyond lip service or a joke.

…When they said the Ildoans were passionate, they really knew what they were talking about!

"Excessive modesty can be offensive, don't you think?"

Calandro's words implied that he was very well-informed.

When Lergen finally regained some composure, he took another good look at Calandro. A glance at the colonel's uniform made it seem like he belonged to an

alpine regiment, but… *Well, well.* As Lergen's brain got up to speed, he began to get an idea of the man's true identity.

As far as he could recall, the alpine regiments all reported directly to the Royal Ildoan Army General Staff.

If an Intelligence officer was going to disguise himself as someone serving in the field, an alpine unit with a good reputation for combat would be fine cover.

But Lergen felt Calandro had far more field experience than him, given his dexterity. So perhaps the correct way to view him was as a veteran elite who had served in cross-border and other legally gray operations? Either way, he was surely a tough soldier who had come through quite a few fierce battles.

"Either way, I'm very fortunate to meet you here."

"It would have been great to celebrate our countries' friendship unconditionally…"

"As you know, a slight misunderstanding can cause complications. That's why I'm so glad we have a chance to discuss things frankly."

Calandro proceeded on his own with a face like he knew everything— *he must really have been a special envoy. And it's obvious why he's chosen me to contact.*

Lergen must have been selected as someone who would be sure to deliver the message to Operations and the Service Corps.

"Allow me to first clarify our position. We—that is, the Kingdom of Ildoa—are not actively hoping for the collapse of the Empire."

"So why are you passively hoping for it?"

"How biting. I was sure you knew: the issue of Unredeemed Ildoa."

Ahhh. Lergen understood immediately. Whether expressed as *territory*, *homeland*, *sovereignty*, or any number of other words, the emotions involved were always genuine. Meanwhile, *vexingly enough*, it should probably be said… an active officer in the imperial military was absolutely not permitted to publicly acknowledge such an issue.

This territorial conflict had absurdly deep roots. The problem of Unredeemed

Ildoa was a dispute over the ownership of an Ildoan-speaking region taken by the Reich when the Empire was formed.

The Reich wasn't about to extend its understanding to someone arguing that just because some residents of an area spoke Ildoan, the land should belong to Ildoa.

The Empire's official stance was that the issue was not even worthy of debate. It had always flatly refused to "consider" abandoning territory inherent to its makeup.

On the other hand, Ildoa couldn't accept the logic of not unifying Ildoan-speaking lands.

This was a territorial dispute that had always been smoldering between the Empire and Ildoa.

"Hmm? The issue of Unredeemed Ildoa? I'm not sure I recall an issue like that."

"In other words?"

"Officially, this is my first time hearing of such a problem. Perhaps I've heard of it in private before?"

Lergen's response was a repetition of the official Empire line. The imperial government refused to even acknowledge the territory was in dispute at all, so there wasn't much else he could do. Everyone would answer unanimously if asked, *It's Heimat.*

Preservation of Heimat—the homeland—was imperative and there was no room for argument.

That was how things stood inside the Empire.

And Calandro understood very well that Lergen was forced to stubbornly deny the question regardless of how he felt about it, so he didn't get upset about his response.

Likewise, perhaps it should be said…

…Lergen could easily guess the reason Ildoa couldn't give up.

It took only a little calm thought. *Why should someone else think a certain way just because we do?*

Many staff officers including Lergen were worried about just that.

“If I must explain… But it’s rather ridiculous…”

Lergen gazed at him with eyes that said, *Let’s hear it*, and Calandro didn’t mince words.

“If we can have Unredeemed Ildoa, we’re not averse to fighting alongside the Empire.”

The man’s persistence was tremendous.

The longing for territory a people or nation believed to be rightly theirs was a latent torrent of fury.

“Can that be taken in the sense of boots on the ground as well?”

“We’re prepared to put up a united front in that sense, conceptually.”

Ahhh. It occurred to Lergen, who was used to bureaucratic thought and grammar, that Calandro’s comments seemed meaningful but actually guaranteed nothing.

It was all talk—a model empty promise.

…No matter how nice they sounded, words that weren’t backed by action were powerless and devoid of meaning. In the world of politics, military matters, and diplomacy, good intentions weren’t security enough.

They say a drowning man grasps at straws, but it’s unreasonable to think a straw would save a man. He should grasp at a sure thing, like a boat, and if that isn’t possible, the only option is to swim under his own power. A country that can’t make it on its own has no future—because a state has no eternal allies and no perpetual enemies.

“From a practical standpoint, we are prepared to mediate between the Empire and the countries it is at war with. Between you and me, though, we’re also prepared, jointly with the Unified States, to invite all the warring countries to a cease-fire conference.”

I see. Lergen nodded, but he couldn't miss the subtle difference there.

Calandro had been talking this whole time as a representative of Ildoa, but now Lergen wondered what country he was really representing.

"Will these peace talks be led by the Ildoan military or the Ildoan government?"

"It's basically a plan that was pushed by the army and approved by the government."

"That doesn't add up." Lergen expressed his doubt candidly.

The basic relationship between government and military was that of the government presiding over the military. Whether the administration was imperial, republican, or feudal, military power was an extension of political power.

Ultimately, war itself was a continuation of politics.

In that sense, the Ildoan military advocating for a specific foreign policy was a strange twist to the natural order. And the fact that they were sounding out Lergen of all people, an imperial soldier, couldn't be overlooked.

"I'm a soldier. In other words, I'm merely a member of the armed forces."

Lergen knew his place.

He was only a protector of his country, someone who had sworn loyalty to its flag and emperor. How could he withdraw with the people of his Heimat there, even if the enemies threatening his fatherland were going to cut him down?

If need be, he would hold his ground. That was a soldier's duty.

A wholehearted career soldier who followed regulations, whose training had become a part of their flesh and bone, and who was dedicated to their occupational morality honed by logic and ethics, was quite a troublesome creature.

Lergen believed that, most critically, a soldier was a person sensible enough to not jump to the words *on my own authority* in the face of empty promises and wishful thinking. If he was going to end up the kind of fool who wouldn't hesitate to interfere with his nation's governing power, then he would at least

end himself honorably as an officer.

By both his nature and talent, Lergen was able to rein in his urge to leap at Ildoa's offer.

"The authority to perform diplomatic negotiations and whatnot doesn't rest with the army. The correct channel for this would be the Empire's embassy in Ildoa." When the logic wasn't following, nothing, no matter how small, could be overlooked. As that classic of the Orient said, *The tunnel of a tiny bug can cause a long embankment to collapse.*

There certainly was a lesson to be learned there.

"I beg your pardon. I just thought it would be faster to settle it between us military men."

What Calandro was saying was true, in a way. Lergen couldn't deny that omitting convoluted procedure and handling things on the ground was beneficial at times.

But he could deny this instance flat out.

"I don't mean to contradict you, but I don't think it's possible."

"…I'm sure we could make a decision right here. So what do you think, Colonel von Lergen?"

"If it were in the realm of tactics, a quick judgment would be fine. But as long as it's a matter of national strategy, isn't it out of the question for the hands and feet to mistake themselves for the brains? And besides," Lergen continued, "even if we decided among military authorities, this setup would still be strange. Don't you have an attaché at the Ildoan Embassy in the Empire? Or you could talk to the attaché we have here in Ildoa." He pressed on before Calandro could gloss things over. "I don't mean to be disrespectful, but sneaking around with unofficial special envoys and whatnot makes me question General Gassman's judgment."

"That's just how seriously we take confidentiality. We want to keep the number of people involved to a minimum. It's only natural that we would keep secrecy at the forefront of our minds."

“So you want us to do this verbally? Even on the front line, orders come on paper.”

Lergen could understand probing an enemy’s feelings. Even envoys had their purpose. But getting asked to accept only the “words” from a half-politician emissary was shocking. This man was supposed to communicate, to leave a message, but he didn’t even bring it in writing?

If he treated this shady dialogue as a meeting with a secret emissary and took it home, he could very well be stripped of his staff braid and kicked out of the General Staff Office.

“…I see. I understand your position. Still, I beg you not to turn me into some child on an errand.”

Somehow, Calandro’s courteous attitude rubbed Lergen the wrong way.

…Perhaps rather than liking or disliking him personally, he was anxious about the man’s methods?

“Colonel Calandro, I understand your position. I don’t mean to throw your words right back at you, but I’m not a child on an errand, either.”

“In other words?”

“Could I get something in writing?”

“…Words aren’t enough?”

No, they aren’t. Lergen stared silently at him.

How long were their eyes fixed on each other? He didn’t think it could be terribly long, but on the other hand, it felt like quite a while—a strange interval.

It probably wasn’t right to say that Calandro resigned himself. It seemed like he somehow got over it as he looked up to the sky and then nodded before saying, “I’ll prepare a sealed document. I can trust you’ll deliver it to your country’s General Staff Office?”

“I’m happy to fulfill the request of an allied nation.” Lergen nodded. Calandro’s expression stiffened for a moment, but he immediately plastered a gentle look on his face.

What a magnificent switch.

“Well, is that all you wanted to talk about? If you have no objections, I’d like to see the exercises.”

“…Sure. Since I’m here, why don’t I describe what we’re doing? This way.” Calandro offered to guide him. Nothing about his carriage or explanations struck Lergen as distant. He had been worried there would be lingering bad feelings but was relieved to find it wasn’t the case. He could describe Colonel Calandro only as a sincere soldier rich in experience. The man showed him whatever he wanted to see and explained any details he asked about.

It goes without saying that two experts will notice different things even if they walk down the same road.

When it comes to military exercises, whether it’s a demonstration meant for outsiders or not, there is always something to take away. For instance, when Lergen glanced at the gear the Royal Ildoan Army officers were carrying, he saw items that looked exactly like the seized gear he had seen in documentation.

The main difference was that these were probably official imports. Considering how nice they were and how they had enough to go around, it would be difficult to think that they picked them up off a battlefield.

At a glance, you could say it indicated a significant fact—that the Kingdom of Ildoa was building close relationships with the countries the Empire was at war with.

On the other hand, from the point of view of someone well versed in logistics and operations, it could also be interpreted that the Royal Ildoan Army’s equipment situation was a mess.

“…I seem to have *seen a lot of this equipment somewhere before*.”

“It’s all imported. Lately it seems like there are new innovations in military tech every day. It wouldn’t do to fall behind, so we’re working hard to modernize.”

“I’m so happy to see *an allied army keeping up with the times. A hearty congratulations to you.*”

“Well, that’s an honor.” Calandro bowed. He must have grasped the issue, too. Rather than diversifying, it was better to standardize your gear—otherwise logistics would be too complicated in practice.

An army was a massive organization.

If they didn’t streamline even a little bit wherever they could, they risked weapon maintenance becoming nonexistent on the front lines. That was just what modern war was like.

The next part was what truly confused him.

Lergen couldn’t figure out why the Kingdom of Ildoa was so proud to be using foreign-made gear.

“By the way, your aerial mage battalion combat doctrine resembles the Commonwealth’s…”

“That’s because of the instructors. They happened to learn it on an exchange program between Ildoa and the Commonwealth.”

“…I guess we should be proud that the Imperial Army obliterated the conflict between Ildoa and the other countries on the southern continent.”

“Of course we’re grateful to our ally.”

“That’s an honor, indeed. Apparently, we’re coming in handy.”

Was Ildoa employing props to boast about its diplomatic position? Or was the army forced into using foreign-made gear despite their awareness of how disorderly it was?

If the latter, then the Royal Ildoan Army was no better than a paper tiger. If the former, then they were tough. He would have to think about what might happen in a counterattack.

Sheesh. Lergen was about to shake his head when he saw a familiar color scheme out of the corner of his eye, and his brain immediately began sounding the alarm.

The uniforms of the belligerents were that emblematic.

“…Who are they?”

“Hmm, I don’t have a very good memory…,” Calandro joked, but he couldn’t hide the fact that his smile, which had been so natural up until now, had transformed into one that was awfully artificial.

There was something creepy about the way he was talking that made him sound more like a politician than a soldier. The man from just a moment ago would have spared no effort to introduce him, but now, no.

It seemed an imperial soldier couldn’t request a friendly introduction complete with handshakes to people in Commonwealth and Federation uniforms.

“Oh, it’s almost time for the air force to go up. Mages tend to get all the attention, but we’re shoring up our fighter manufacturing, so we have some fairly nice aircraft.”

He probably felt awkward. Calandro hurried in a way that seemed to say, *Can you just pretend you didn’t see that?* Lergen followed Calandro as he led him in the opposite direction—“Over there”—and Lergen wondered how he should interpret what had just happened.

Was this part of the act or a slipup?

Hmm. After thinking for a bit, he looked at the sky and his eyes rested on the Ildoan military planes flying in dreamy formations.

They seemed awfully well trained—which meant a lot of flight hours. Lergen smiled inwardly at the thought that their apparent abundance of fuel for training flights could be used as a test of loyalty.

“You seem to have no shortage of aviation fuel.”

“As you know, Ildoa is currently one of the major oil importers.”

Apologies to Colonel Calandro, who wasn’t even going to hide the fact that they’re importing, but I was indeed fully aware of that.

“…To tell the truth, it’d be great if we could trouble you for some high-octane aircraft fuel on the basis of the agreement between our two countries.”

“Yes, it’s just as you say. We would love to be able to assist you; however… there are some treaty issues. As you know, as a neutral country, duties and

privileges come as a set.”

“But you would like to help us out as a friend?”

“Of course.” Calandro nodded dramatically. “It pains my heart. Not a day goes by I don’t wish to help my friends. But I’m surrounded by evil war laws and lawyers. Vexingly, these legal people claim that exporting high-octane fuel to even allied armies would violate our status as a neutral country.”

If someone’s expression said that they sympathized from the bottom of their heart, Lergen could certainly accept it as sympathy. Of course it would become difficult to push an impossible problem onto such an individual.

That said, Lergen wasn’t asking as an individual but as a member of an evil organization.

“…If you’ll excuse another inquiry, then, do you also have reservations about us using motorcycles instead of our feet?”

“Hmm?”

“Will our officers visiting to observe not be permitted to use fuel inside our ally country?”

Lergen had been forced to become an expert in the law of war, so he boasted quite a bit of knowledge in the field.

You could also say he had no choice but to learn it all because of Lieutenant Colonel Tanya von Degurechaff.

“Hrm, that call’s a bit hard for me to make. I doubt there’s any problem with it, but…”

“So if that’s the extent of it, then there’s no issue, correct?”

“There probably isn’t a law that prohibits using fuel in this country.”

“…Then could our army participate in these exercises?”

“That would be…” Calandro was lost for words, but then he must have understood what Lergen really meant. His face tensed slightly.

“As long as you’re paid, it won’t be a problem, right? I realize there are technological hurdles, but if you could help us out with flight training, that

would be wonderful."

"Colonel von Lergen, as a neutral country, I'm sure that's…"

"Ohhh, so it's military use that's the problem?" He nodded exaggeratedly as if to say, *I get it now.*

I can't get myself to like imitating Degurechaff, but when you give it a shot, it's actually pretty fun to sarcastically pounce on someone's imprecision like this.

"So then, would we be able to get some for civilian use?"

"C-civilian use?"

"As you know, there are many uses for high-octane fuel."

"Isn't it against the law of war?"

"Well, that's unexpected. Is there a law prohibiting civilian use of high-octane fuel? I'd just like to request fuel for civilian pilot training and the civilian aviation industry."

Technically he was talking about soldiers flying civilian planes, but…in theory, that wasn't against the law of war. It was certainly a gray area, and what's more, it wasn't even out of the question going by the "spirit of the law." There was no reason to punish someone for doing something no rule prohibited.

The law of war was full of holes, and Lergen had studied it to death in his time at the General Staff.

The world of statutory interpretation was a profoundly mysterious one where potatoes counted as "war supplies" and small arms turned into "tools for civilian self-defense."

"Is that a request based on the premise that I'm a special envoy?"

"That's right. I hope you'll consider it."

"…I'll be sure to bring it up with General Gassman."

AROUND THE SAME TIME, SOMEWHERE ON THE COMMONWEALTH MAINLAND, INTELLIGENCE AGENCY HEADQUARTERS

"This is a report from the officers we sent to Ildoa. It's awfully intriguing,

gentlemen.”

The pragmatists trying to reach their own conclusions let Major General Habergram’s prefacing remarks go in one ear and out the other, but even they perked up upon reading the latest typewritten report.

“…Lergen? Is this Colonel von Lergen from the Empire’s General Staff?”

“That’s quite a big name for the two ravens to be using as a messenger pigeon.”

Habergram waited for the right moment to pointedly ask the specialists on the Ildoa situation, “What faction is Colonel Calandro? That’s his contact there.”

“He’s in General Gassman’s center faction. They don’t stand out much, but they’re top figures in the Royal Ildoan Army administration.”

“Hmm.” Habergram pondered a moment before bringing up another question. “Give me your opinion, gentlemen. Should we interpret this as working-level discussions?”

It wasn’t particularly strange for people in charge of practical matters in the Imperial Army and Royal Ildoan Army to meet. Though the countries’ relationship had chilled somewhat, they were still officially allies.

“I don’t mean to disagree, but wouldn’t that mean the leak on the Ildoan side is gigantic?”

“Isn’t it too obvious?”

Their analysis offered much to agree with. He didn’t think his subordinates would be wrong. Still, Habergram wanted to know not what it seemed like but what it was. A hundred percent and 99 percent meant different things.

“…Gentlemen, I don’t want guesses. I want evidence on which we can make a call.”

“Even if it’s not unnatural for colonels of the two allied countries to be chatting during exercises that we were also invited to observe, we can’t rule out that they’re trying to send a message.”

“I know that.”

This sort of thing happened all the time. And when both parties were in the same business, there was a sort of formal beauty about the way they could guess each other's hands. The other side was well aware they were being read.

Which is why… Habergram was so frustrated, he didn't have a confident answer.

"Makes me think it's time for a craniotomy."

Just seeing what Ildoa wanted them to see wasn't going to get them anywhere. Ultimately, they would have to slice right into their scheming brains to see what was inside. If they didn't poke around in there, they would never be sure of the truth.

"In any case, keep sounding Ildoa out. We can leave being tricked by posing and signaling to the morons. I would hope you gentlemen are not morons."

"Yes, sir." And it wasn't as if they were incapable. If they were fools who would betray his trust when he told them to finish the job, he would simply dismiss them.

It might be hard to find replacements, but having talentless idiots in seats where they didn't belong was more harmful.

Oh. Habergram switched gears at that point. "So? What else do we know about the situation in Ildoa?"

"We've confirmed that it has violated its neutrality. Ultra said they were supplying the Empire with high-octane fuel. There's a good chance that a new route between the two countries has been opened."

"It's intel from Ultra…?"

That meant it was from a reputable source, then. Habergram stifled a groan. He had to accept that the situation had evolved.

"The Royal Ildoan Army is tougher than we thought… They must be having it both ways."

"It's as you say, sir. Shall we…crush their supply route?"

Habergram swallowed his doubts—*That would be pretty difficult*—for the moment and began considering it with a sigh.

Personally, he wanted to conduct a strike. It would probably feel great to teach those opportunists a lesson. But the cost of getting swept up in a momentary emotion and attacking would be sizable.

After all, Imperial Army Intelligence were no slouches.

If they were smuggling high-octane fuel, they had no doubt kept the people involved to the bare minimum. It was probably best to assume they were taking all possible measures against leaks.

He couldn't let Ultra's presence be discovered, either. They could paint the intel as a leak from the Ildoan side, but there were too many variables to be able to predict the outcome. It wasn't clear if it was worth forcing it.

If we're going to do it…, Habergram was thinking when he realized that carelessly enough, he was getting ahead of himself. He had assumed that they *could* do it.

"How many units do we have available?"

"There are two commando units available immediately. If need be, we can send more over, but that will take a little time."

"…Never mind, we won't do it."

It would take too much time and effort, and on top of that, it was an awkward time to add people. Not that he didn't wish they could do it, but as the specialist he was, he had to choose the safest option.

"General, are you sure? It's a chance to catch Ildoa breaking their neutrality."

"Retaining Ultra is more important."

"You think something would happen to Ultra? With all due respect, I think it would be awfully difficult for the Imperial Army to pinpoint who was involved in a strike like this even if they did conduct an internal investigation."

Even Ultra's contact officer didn't know the details about the agent. Their identity was top secret, and even those in the intelligence agency were told only that they were a general-rank officer in the Imperial Army General Staff.

In reality, Ultra was the code of the Imperial Army, which had been cracked… The only ones besides Habergram and the code-breaking team who knew was a

limited group of departments in the government and military.

Well, it made sense. Ultra was that big of a secret. They needed to avoid the Empire even suspecting that they might have Ultra intel.

“Wouldn’t they assume it was a leak on the Ildoan side? I don’t really think we have anything to worry about where espionage is concerned.”

“Is that about it for your opinions?”

This wasn’t in the same dimension as someone’s identity being revealed.

If the Empire started to doubt its code, it would get much harder to decipher. Even a change to the code would be a pain, but the worst possibility would be if there was simply less signaling altogether. If the Empire questioned the strength of its code, Ultra’s supernatural powers would be hamstrung.

If it meant losing strategic benefits, then it was better to let a tactical opportunity go by.

“Then my conclusion remains the same: No.”

When he asked if there were any other matters to discuss…

“Given the strong ties between Ildoa and the Empire, from an intelligence security perspective, I think we should put the brakes on weapons exports.” It was the duty of the officer concerned about intelligence security to say that. “If their alliance runs that deep, Ildoa could take weapons we exported to them and hand them to the Empire.”

“We already took that into account. We were only ever exporting old models. Furthermore,” Habergram added, “we’re already only exporting weapons seized from the Imperial Army. So even if Ildoa takes them to the Empire, the chance of an intelligence leak should be quite low.”

By the power of Ultra, the Imperial Army’s wireless communications were laid bare. Though the Empire was trying to hide their scheming brains, it was an all-you-can-poke buffet.

The contributions of the code-breaking team to their nation could only be described as enormous and unparalleled.

Of course, that meant that if people were pulled from that team, the

Intelligence Agency would effectively cease to function.

What can I do? Habergram was forced to lament.

Manpower, manpower, manpower.

There simply weren't enough accomplished people. *Can't some of these* noblesse oblige *fellows volunteering for frontline service take an interest in working in the rear?*

"Ah, sorry. Back to what we were talking about. If it's only a few lots, I think we can keep exporting to Ildoa. We can be happy about profiting from their foreign cash reserves."

"About the source of that foreign capital…you're all right with it?"

"Did you find out some fascinating new detail?"

"Yes." The officer nodded, full of confidence and conviction. "We strongly suspect it's sourced from the Empire."

"…The Kingdom of Ildoa claims its capital from various companies was all gained in prewar trade. So can you…back up that allegation of yours?"

"The navy's done it. Upon capturing and inspecting cargo-passenger ships of both nationalities, we have physical evidence."

"Ohhh?" Habergram unconsciously leaned in. Having evidence besides Ultra could come in handy.

Especially in the propaganda war. Something eminently tangible they could employ without worrying about protecting the source was a precious asset.

"Give me the details."

"An employee of the former Republican Central Bank taking refuge in the Free Republic confirmed the serial numbers on the ingots. Numbers that should have been in the Republican Central Bank's vaults are flowing into Ildoa."

"Very good." Habergram nodded and clenched a fist. It didn't feel half bad to have acquired some solid intel.

"Then it's certain."

Anyone who understood the significance of that information could also grasp

the situation occurring behind the scenes.

“The Empire’s finances are finally falling apart.”

“If they’re settling accounts in gold bullion instead of credit…it must be bad. I’m sure Ildoa is prepared to take advantage of it as well.”

“Definitely.”

It could probably be termed *good news*. Hearing proof that the Empire’s economy was in its death throes made him want to cheer.

Even if he had known that it was happening to some extent, having physical evidence made it official.

“It seems like the Kingdom of Ildoa still intends to weigh its options… We can’t rule out the possibility that they’re only in it for the money.”

“True.” Habergram smiled and urged him to continue.

“The compensation Ildoa’s receiving from the Empire seems to be coming from the gold reserves of occupied states. Basically, the Empire is a parasite.”

“You’re sure about that?”

“Ildoa is definitely settling foreign accounts with lumps of gold the Empire seized from occupied territory. We also found ingots that seemed to be the same type on ships that broke through the naval blockade.”

The Empire and Ildoa are awfully impatient if money they stole is burning a hole in their pockets like that. Apparently, being out of resources can lead to these sorts of indignities.

Ahhh… There, Habergram discovered something pleasant. In other words, this was a sign that Ildoa’s economy was also in bad shape.

…It was unexpected, but perhaps Ildoa was not *choosing* to double deal but rather *had no choice*.

“Oh, right. One thing about that. The Free Republic and the Entente Alliance are requesting the return of the ingots the navy seized…”

“That’s a thorny issue given the naval prize law.”

The debate among his subordinates over what to do was very interesting. But

Habergram, who was very well-informed, had to smile wryly and tell them to forget about it.

“Even in a secret operation, there are some complex subtleties, but…”

“If we try to lay a hand on that gold, shells will roll.”

“Sh-shells will roll, sir?”

“Listen…” Habergram gave the younger officers some classics education. Every sailor knew this old story. “It’s a navy legend. What it means for shells to roll is… Oh, it’s terrible. It’s what happens right before a mutiny.” Discontent people were the ones who rolled shells. “The treasury could be blown up in a tragic ‘accident.’”

“Oh…” The younger officers with somewhat confused faces didn’t understand navy tradition. But it wasn’t as if it applied only to the navy: The power of people who valued tradition was nothing to be sniffed at.

Just then, Habergram realized it was nearly the hour for tea.

“Oh, it’s time.”

“General?”

“For my report to our dear prime minister.”

Paying a visit to the prime minister for tea had become a part of Habergram’s daily schedule. Apparently, people from the intelligence agency weren’t allowed to take their tea where they pleased.

Standing up with a sigh, Habergram confirmed there were no other serious issues and ended the meeting.

Thus, one report was thrown into the briefcase Habergram took to visit Prime Minister Churbull.

He hurried as fast as he could without jogging. Leaving the heavily guarded intelligence agency, he got into the designated car and was taken down the now familiar road to the prime minister’s residence.

He organized an outline on the way and by the time he was shown into the PM’s office, he had the main points all noted down.

“Prime Minister, I’ve come as ordered. Is now all right with you?”

“Oh, Habergram. Well, take a seat. How about a cigar?”

“Thank you, sir. Oh? Are these imported?”

It was a type he didn’t recognize. Habergram was sharp enough to notice it was different from the wartime ersatz products.

“Yes, our pals in Ildoa sent them. As a token of friendship, apparently. They’re *a bit smelly* for my liking, though.”

“It’s probably not a problem of quality. I’m happy to partake.”

Even if it was tainted with ulterior motives, a cigar was a cigar. Since imperial subs were wreaking havoc on the Commonwealth’s prided merchant navy, it was even more precious.

Habergram wanted to express his genuine gratitude—as an individual, that is.

“So? What are our pals in Ildoa up to?”

“Our friends in the south are quite amorous.”

“They’re two-timing us?”

“Yes.” Habergram nodded and elaborated a bit. “But rather than being unsure what to do, it seems as though…they have no other choice.”

“Go on…”

“This is just my personal speculation, but it’s possible that the Kingdom of Ildoa is much weaker than we imagined. It might be better to understand their utilitarian double-dealing as stemming from environmental limitations rather than a voluntary plot.”

Habergram understood the feelings of the prime minister, who frowned in frustration and lowered his eyes for a moment to his teacup, quite well. To someone suffering through the war in present tense, Ildoa’s position was utterly selfish.

But while he was speculating as a strategist, he knew that Ildoa’s position could be something he theoretically sympathized with.

“They may not have the national strength to enter the war. They may even

admit among themselves that the Royal Ildoan Army has a number of critical flaws and that they can't go charging into battle immediately."

"But that's speculation, right? What's it based on?"

In response to that natural question, Habergram produced some of the intelligence he had just gotten and explained the reports and his interpretations in turn.

What sort of picture got painted with the materials on hand was up to the painter. He may not have been as good an artist as the prime minister, but he felt like he could probably come close in the realm of analysis.

"…So it's a paper tiger?"

"The difference from Dacia is that the Ildoan military brass is well aware of their army's capabilities."

Driving off the Imperial Army's Southern Continent Expeditionary Army Corps and occupying the imperial mainland from the south with that momentum and creating a second front…would probably remain an unfulfilled dream.

"At least," Habergram continued. "Objectively, there's a good chance that if we suggest they clash with the Imperial Army, they won't do it."

"So they know how to calculate their interests. But, General, even you seem to be forgetting something."

"Huh?"

"You'll understand once we get to the next topic at hand, but sometimes calculating interests compels one into unpleasant cooperative relationships. Sorry we have to do this sober, but would you come with me?"

Thus, Habergram ended up following the prime minister to the meeting room in his residence and was given the opportunity to observe something very interesting.

"Those irritating Communists have made a proposal. Surprisingly enough, it looks terribly sensible at a glance. Apparently, they want to carry out a joint operation."

The bleak looks on the eminent gentlemen's faces told Habergram their

expressions were about to scrunch up.

Well, it was no wonder.

Anyone who heard the prime minister's next words—*So*, he began in a calm tone—would be sure to think the same.

"Gentlemen, I think we should take them up on it… How about you?"

A huge anti-Communist was saying they should do a joint operation with Communists?

Churbull's remark gave the common sense of all those in attendance a thorough beating. It was as if he had dropped a bomb in the middle of the room.

The first one to regain some composure and counter was the Chancellor of the Exchequer. He shook his head that there was no way and stood to make his argument. "If you'll excuse me, Prime Minister. Don't you think this calls for some caution?"

What followed that politely snarky euphemism was the frank protest of the foreign secretary, who was formally Habergram's boss. "…I'm sure international cooperation is important and all, but you're saying the Communists came up with something sensible? That sounds to me like you're saying you believe in miracles. Maybe we should limit our faith to God."

Though his background was that of a courteous diplomat, he couldn't quite keep the acid from his tongue when it came to the Communists. Or perhaps things were so bad that he felt it was futile to feign politeness. And Habergram knew that given his job, he had reason to think so.

"Why don't we try thinking about whether we can trust them?"

"It's not worth the effort!" someone shouted.

"A waste of time!" shouted someone else.

"Animals aren't loyal."

The comment someone spat was the opinion of all present. Or at least, it was the true feeling of a definite majority.

Communists employ pretty words and dirty tricks. It was precisely because they had something in common with them that the members of the Communist Party became the targets of their loathing.

Was any method justified as long as it led to a bright future?

Sane people called that madness.

Even Habergram, who was sitting there quietly listening, would have rather smiled for a photograph with a con man than shake hands with a Communist.

The prime minister who stood against the counterarguments must have known.

“I won’t deny that. Go ahead and call them beasts, wild animals, barbarians.”

These fellows impairing their judgment in the moonlight seeking the dawn of Communism… In the end, they wouldn’t even acknowledge how monstrous the frantic madness of revolution was.

As far as Habergram could hear, the prime minister’s policy of hating Communists hadn’t changed one bit.

“You could even say it’s like shaking hands with the devil. But,” he continued, “*their fighting power is invaluable.*”

Was he this reverent when he read a verse from the Bible?

This solemnly delivered line conveyed a fact these realists dedicated to the logic of the balance of power were forced to acknowledge.

To the Commonwealth, to these men who were proud to represent the Commonwealth, the truth was not to be twisted.

“For that reason, their suggestion is welcome. Gentlemen, in order to assist our ally fighting on the lines in the east, I think we should at least pretend to put our all into a seaborne feint.”

As far as Habergram could tell, it was a de facto order. The prime minister’s words that clearly stated, *Send out the fleet!* were brimming with a tenacious will.

But the navy was no less obstinate and thoroughly demonstrated that they

were a crew who adhered to the traditions that produced Lord Churbull.

"I object to committing the navy fleet."

"…The air force's Strategic Bomber Command has run so many missions probing the imperial mainland's air defenses, they're sick of it. I should think that's distraction enough."

There's no way, said all the navy admirals, and they seemed serious about it.

"Even if the navy were to merely strike a position that seemed good for an amphibious landing and implied that we were going to send in commandos, that would already have an impact. Don't you think it would be shocking on a whole different level if we sent in a carrier strike group and faked a raid plus a landing?"

Even when the prime minister glared at them, the navy's resistance continued, unwavering.

It was impossible to tell whether they were being arrogant or competent, but that said, the Commonwealth—a naval power—had admirals known for their skill in coolheaded calculations of profits and losses.

"It will lead to the Empire strengthening its defenses in the long term." The comments spat by the admirals as if to say, *You know it's true*, were full of significance.

"As a result, we'll have one more problem to deal with when it comes time for our real counteroffensive. If the coast is fortified, His Majesty's troops will have to pay for each yard with their young blood. How dreadful." The navy representatives spoke in a trivial tone as they puffed their cigars, intensely sarcastic.

"I believe you know this already, but the navy isn't planning on approving any such folly. We're not a bunch of sadists."

Even after getting these remarks dripping with snark hurled at him by seasoned seamen…Churbull's will to fight blazed brightly—and not only against the Empire.

"The Federation's objective to draw imperial units away from the lines in the

east is a sound strategic way of thinking about it." Not to be beaten at arrogance by anyone, Churbull puffed his cigar and blew violet smoke before continuing, as if he was speaking the obvious truth. "War is pointless if you lose. Helping out the Federation Army is a necessary expense to make sure we don't get any tactless visitors calling on our coastline in the future… It's fine to consider the needs of the coming counteroffensive, but in order to make that a reality, there are steps that need to be taken first. Am I wrong?"

When the prime minister glared at them…several of the naval officers looked away with a frown that said, *I see the logic, but…*

As far as Habergram could tell, it made sense for the admirals to be reluctant.

The Commonwealth Navy's main fleet had already committed some of its fleet destroyers to protect the trade route. They probably didn't want to be ordered to conduct harassment attacks that had nothing to do with the type of decisive naval battles they were interested in.

Ultimately, it would risk their ability to make use of the power of the full fleet. They were probably serious when they said they couldn't agree with such a plan.

"…But if we could at least strike the port where the enemy fleet is anchored."

The grudgingly offered alternative must have been one the navy had already carefully considered. And given how unwillingly he suggested it, it wasn't what they really wanted anyhow.

"Wouldn't a coastal strike be the optimal way to rouse the enemy's ground forces?"

"It's hard to evacuate troops after even a small-scale landing. Even a short operation would entail a large number of casualties. It's not easy to train commandos, you know."

"Considering the aerial strength of the imperial coastal forces, a sneak attack would be tricky. If we're going to choose such a high-risk, low-return option, wouldn't something high-risk, high-return make more sense?" One of the admirals pointed out that fact, apparently omitting the set phrase, *With all due respect, Prime Minister*, without thinking, but Churbull laughed it off from the

get-go.

The navy faction remained, nevertheless, politely silent, and its attitude could be summed up in one word: *unyielding*. Whether it was due to an inclination toward risk avoidance or whatever it was, there had to be some reason they couldn't passively accept the proposal.

Hmm… Habergram was lost in thought when he noticed the navy representatives staring at him.

Shite. When he realized, it was already too late.

"It would be tricky without the cooperation of the intelligence agency. What do you think about it?"

You're dropping this in my lap now? he thought as he looked, as a formality, to the prime minister seated at the head of the table for permission to speak.

"Habergram."

"Yes, sir."

"It's as he said. I'd like Intelligence to support the navy. You can make full use of Ultra intel."

Dizzied by this development that didn't even permit him to complain about confidentiality, Habergram just barely managed to get some actual words to come out of his mouth. "…We'll do our best, sir. May we have a few days?"

"As long as the navy doesn't mind, that's fine with me."

To cut to the chase, the political request was prioritized in the end.

Based on an agreement made in Londinium, the Federation and Commonwealth decided to further their "international cooperation."

After worrying so much about protecting secrets versus what actions could be taken during operations, Habergram was stuck putting together a plan with the navy while making use of Ultra and all their other sources of intelligence.

Though there were slight complications, an operation using a carrier strike group in the west took shape. The core of the plan was assaults on military ports by the carrier planes, but it would also feature a capital ship

bombardment. The objective was to threaten the Empire's western coast, thereby implying the opening of a second front and hopefully taking some imperial pressure off the east.

The name of the distraction was Operation Tea Party.

It was rumored that someone called it that in a bid to liven things up.

Meanwhile, the Federation and Commonwealth agreed to plan a future joint operation in former Entente Alliance territory based on a firm request from the army and navy.

In other words, the Commonwealth said, *On the principle of reciprocity, you should sweat and bleed into the sea, too!* and the Communists accepted without flinching.

Thus, the die was cast.

AROUND THE SAME TIME, ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF IMPERIAL CAPITAL BERUN

Even a military city not so far from the outskirts of the imperial capital couldn't really be called a city of the Reich unless it had at least one café.

Fortunately, this café has enough space for Lieutenant Colonel Tanya von Degurechaff and her officers to chat after placing their dinner orders, newspapers held under their arms to read while they wait.

Lieutenant Colonel Uger introduced her to the spot, and she feels safe in calling it a good one. She's really starting to like the atmosphere.

A café that is comfortable but devoid of civilians who tend to have annoying misunderstandings is the perfect place for an officer back from the battlefield to reach for a newspaper. It's an officer's instinct to get a general handle on public opinion, the state of the world, and anything they may have missed.

I'm glad he introduced me to his place, thinks Tanya as she looks over multiple newspapers as if that's simply what one does.

They're filled with nothing but exaggerated articles written in an energetic tone. It's all good news and puff pieces.

As Tanya works her way through the papers, her expression grows ever gloomier.

She's smart enough to get it. She doesn't even try to hide her bitter expression when she looks up from the pages.

"It's all coverage about how we repelled the Commonwealth Navy's sneak attack. 'Repelled'? Sheesh, I can't believe we're getting sneak attacked by carrier-based planes and feeling proud of ourselves for driving them off," she gripes. She's disenchanted.

Air forces, of which carrier-based aircraft are representative, swarm and then pull out—that's what they do. It's only a matter of course that they pull out! I can't believe they're not ashamed to be like, *Ya, we repelled them*. It's about on the wordplay level of saying *changing direction* when you mean *retreating*.

If you read between the lines, it's easy to see what the imperial authorities are trying to hide.

"Apparently, we really didn't achieve much in that fight," Tanya grumbles and reflects on the weakening of the Empire's position in the west.

It would be different if cannons on land had exchanged fire with the naval cannons and repelled the ships themselves, but if we just intercepted the planes and drove them off…that's the same as saying they got away safely.

Yet, the military's really not going to admit that they got one over on us?

"I heard from a friend in the west that it was utter chaos."

"I bet it was," Tanya responds to First Lieutenant Serebryakov with a nod. They probably weren't prepared at all—it was a sneak attack.

In wartime, it's important to have other sources of information besides the sensationalized official news.

"We can't trust the newspapers. So what really happened?"

"The training mage company my classmate is with got scrambled… It seems the aerial fights in the west are less about attacking and more about defending these days."

"Wait a sec. A training company went up for an actual mission?" Tanya asks

on a reflex.

Even if she could guess that the west is short on fighting power, it's pretty horrible if they are sending troops who are still learning how to fly into combat missions.

"Yes," answers Serebryakov, looking pale. "They don't get deployed elsewhere, but apparently, it's normal for them to go up to intercept."

"Talk about short on manpower."

Once you're at war, you can't expect to have enough of anything. Even so, this is pretty extreme.

It's enough to make me worry.

"…I've heard similar stories."

"Really, Lieutenant Wüstemann? I get that we're short on people, but…what would you say the average flight hours is for newbies before they get stationed somewhere?"

In the next moment, Tanya regrets asking him so casually.

"It seems like they're cutting it at thirty hours of combat-style flight. Including navigation and basic training, it's probably still only about a hundred hours."

He said it like it was no big deal, but the number can be described only as *shocking*.

Perhaps Wüstemann is so used to this that it doesn't seem strange to him.

But for the veteran magic officers, it's a different story. They all stare at him in bewilderment.

"…Are you sure that's right?"

"Yes, I'm pretty sure that's accurate. Is something wrong, Major Weiss?"

"That's horrible."

"Oh…"

The contrast between Wüstemann's uncomprehending look and Weiss's face like he'd sucked a dozen lemons is emblematic of, I suppose you could say, the

gap between pre- and mid-war?

…I've heard that the manpower shortage is so serious that most of magic officer training has been cut out, but this makes it sound like barely any time is being allocated to training mages at all.

"This gives me a headache. It might be only a matter of time before all the aerial mage battalions are called dodo battalions."

"Things are rough for birds that can't fly. Let's at least aim to be penguins."

Weiss and Grantz try to lighten up the depressed mood with jokes, but it's not very funny.

That said, Tanya is encouraged to know that her subordinates have the wherewithal to be so considerate… The Salamander Kampfgruppe, with the 203rd as its nucleus, is blessed in that respect.

Sadly, the army on the whole isn't.

"Yeah, it probably is better if you can swim when you get shot down."

"Spoken as one who's used to being downed."

"I wish you'd say 'used to being shot.'"

Weiss, who has been shot through the shoulder once; Grantz, who's teasing him about it; and the other older hands definitely have war-nut tendencies, but that's not such a big problem for Tanya.

She thinks of it as what most people would call *individuality*.

Individuality must be respected. As long as they're all competent officers, their individual personalities aren't something she needs to be concerned with.

"Lieutenant Wüstemann, asking you this is a bit awkward, but…do you think the new recruits will actually provide us with some fighting power?"

Wüstemann responds with a sober expression. "Honestly, I think it will be tough. They have their hands full simply flying, and they're dropping at a rate that would previously have been unimaginable."

Everyone had to heave a sigh at that news.

"And the number of mages who can stay in the air after being hit has been

decreasing… We're seeing more newbies with wounds that would have been treatable die in crashes."

We invest in their education and then squander them due to a lack of polish. What a waste.

Tanya's opinion would probably strike Weiss, who spoke so emotionally, as a bit off, but that's also individuality.

Either way, they can agree it's not a good policy. *This is so tricky*, thinks Tanya for the umpteenth time.

"So the western air fleet that made its name on the Rhine front is a thing of the past now?" First Lieutenant Serebryakov sighs in spite of herself. She used to serve in the west, so it's only natural that she would feel mournful about the decline of the once powerful western armada.

"The way they're drawing off troops to send to the east, it can't be helped."

It's a sad conclusion. But Tanya has to defend the west. She glances at Weiss and he gets it.

"Still, it's pretty bold of them to come out swinging with a naval fleet. I guess it was large-scale recon-in-force?"

"Must have been." Tanya nods. Then she adds, "The Commonwealth chaps are raring to fight, so they came to make a move. Their expensive seagoing hotels had been no better than toys, but when they remembered they existed, they must have felt like making them do some work."

There are innumerable similar examples of military actions that were taken based purely on the strategic impact they would have. This latest attack must have been something similar.

It's quite easy to understand the Commonwealth Navy's aim of throwing imperial-occupied territories into confusion. It's basically an expanded application of the Raid on Scarborough.[3]

Or more plainly, it's like Doolittle's Tokyo Raid.

Harassment and propaganda.

Less like a conventional battle and more just persistence in striking a weak

point, but it's extremely effective, so I recognize the threat it poses.

"We have to acknowledge the outcome. It's going to be hard to pull any more troops from the west. We may even have to send reinforcements their way." Tanya is forced to make a disheartening conclusion. "…The east is going to get the short end of the stick for a while, I suppose. It's unclear how that will affect us, but it probably won't be fun."

In response to Tanya's *negative*, you could say, outlook, Weiss asks, "The fact that the timing lined up with Ildoa's posturing made me feel like we were being attacked from all sides. It sent a chill up my spine. Do you think they planned it that way?"

"We can't easily assume it wasn't their intention."

Weiss is right to be anxious.

Considering how the enemy might think, it's clear. They reminded the Empire of the latent threat the sea and Ildoa posed.

Now that we know what the problem is, we probably need to do something about it. Which means strengthening defenses. We have to do something, even if the means to are scarce.

"Simply scaring us is already a win for the enemy."

Sadly, the Empire doesn't have an infinite fountain of manpower.

It has to split up its limited resources. This was a very cost-effective move for the enemy considering that the Imperial Army has to allocate troops to somewhere that isn't the main front.

It was a good investment for the states warring against the Empire.

"The biggest pain is that they've proven that it's possible."

It's not about intention but ability.

That's probably what Weiss is worried about, too.

"Yes, even if it's merely a possibility…it's clear that we can't ignore the threat at our back."

"Things will get really hairy if they start making landings."

That was what happened after Normandy. Anyone who knows Operation Overlord[4] can tell that the strategic dilemma facing the Empire, with its similar geography, is obvious.

The burden on the eastern front is too great.

One thing's clear, and that's that we can't go on like this.

"Luckily"—Tanya relaxes her expression in a bit of a smile—"the Kingdom of Ildoa is playing it smart. We can probably hold out some hope there."

"…Excuse me, ma'am, but do you really think Ildoa is smart?" Weiss asks with his eyes if she's being sarcastic, but she shakes her head. A player who deserves respect doesn't necessarily have to have a wonderful personality.

Look at Talleyrand, Palmerston, or Bismarck.

You could call them all a fine pack of monster kin…and you would be quite right. It would have been a nightmare to negotiate as a diplomat with any of those guys.

But if you view them as players, they're all renowned experts.

"For an allied country, we sure can't trust them at all."

Both eternal allies and perpetual enemies are impossible for a state. The eternal in diplomacy means valuing the method itself as the purpose.

But that's an unforgivable cessation of thought. What's really admirable is a healthy raison d'état.

Even a dirty move, if made with a minimum of intelligence and a sense of national purpose…is incredibly smart.

"Ildoa as a neutral country isn't an actor we need to be rid of just yet." *On the contrary…* Tanya thinks quite highly of Ildoa. "As long as our interests align, we can trust their dirtiness."

"You mean you can trust a competent enemy more than an incompetent ally?"

"Excuse you, Major Weiss. The Kingdom of Ildoa is *our wonderful ally*. I'm sure having such a competent player on our team will end with good results for the

Empire as well. Either way," she continues, "it's great to be able to negotiate."

"Colonel, you think this development is good?"

"Isn't it obvious?" She turns to First Lieutenant Grantz, who has chimed in. "The essence of civilization is language."

"Language is awfully leisurely. War is more direct."

If only this could be ended just by lamenting.

It makes sense for a mid-ranking officer like Grantz to suggest attacking the enemy…but even if individuality is to be respected, there has to be a limit somewhere. *The members of the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion like war too much.* The thought puts Tanya at a loss. Yet she can't reprove them for being full of fighting spirit—the awkwardness.

"We can hardly burn down every country besides our own and send the world back to the Stone Age. So we should be open to talking. Listen," she continues. "Discussion, troops, discussion. Talking is the first step to making up."

"With all due respect…do you think Ildoa will really end up mediating?"

"No, it's impossible."

"Huh? Then isn't this a waste of time?"

"I agree with Lieutenant Grantz. There's no reason we need to go along with the enemy's delaying tactics…"

Grantz isn't the only one looking stunned. I'm appalled to find even Weiss sympathizing!

Hence me always wanting to cry, *This is the problem with warmongers!*

"Officially, the wonderful ladies and gentlemen of the Kingdom of Ildoa are our allies. Kindly refrain from referring to them as enemies so casually. Look." She lowers her voice and adds, "Regardless of what Ildoa's motive is, they didn't think things through enough here. The Empire has beaten the Republic, the Entente Alliance, and Dacia besides. A peace treaty with those countries might be possible. But"—she pauses to sigh—"if the Kingdom of Ildoa is engaging with the Empire on behalf of the Federation, the Commonwealth, and the Free Republic…its motive is clear."

The other officers don't seem to see it, so she tells them.

"Ildoa can only be aiming for none other than peace on all fronts."

This isn't the sort of situation where peace with each country separately could come about. In order to close the curtain on this war, Ildoa needs to talk with everyone.

Yes, with everyone involved.

That's not the kind of meeting that can come together very quickly.

"And everyone's too stubborn to agree to overall peace. Neither the Federation nor the Commonwealth will accept an Empire victory. Not unless we make some big concessions…"

"Colonel, do you think the Empire should make concessions?"

"That's a good question, Lieutenant Serebryakov." Employing some care in choosing her words, Tanya delivers her conclusion. "Honestly, it's probably not something a soldier on active duty should think about. We're soldiers—soldiers engaged in the service of our emperor and our fatherland."

Peace is a milestone on the path to a world without war. How could anyone be against it?

"Unless you're a savage or an idiot, we have no choice but to follow the military's rules and regulations."

When the food arrives, Tanya puts a stop to that conversation.

"…All right. That's enough of the super-serious talk. Let's enjoy this dinner, troops."

A meal is always a joy.

Even with the worsening lack of supplies, distribution in the Empire is still functioning well enough that dining out is possible.

Honestly, if asked whether she'd like to eat at the General Staff Office, she would promptly refuse—that's how good the food is. Probably any soldier would choose a café recommended by a friend over that stuffy dining room.

Palatable food and a decent atmosphere make for a dinner that's not too

shabby. In other words, it's a great place to discuss vacation.

"And while we're at it, let's talk about what's up next. For the time being, we're on standby. We're not in a war zone. As long as you don't do anything that requires the MPs to get involved, I don't mind if you cut loose."

"Understood," says Weiss. Tanya figures he's fine. She's a bit more anxious about Serebryakov, Grantz, Wüstemann, and the other lieutenants.

"Got it, you guys? Take care—yes, extra care—not to get in a fight with the MPs." As she presses her point, she continues as if she has remembered something. "I imagine it'll be a short break before we return to the east, but… you can go home for a visit if you want. As long as you're not on duty, you can do as you please once we get back."

"Um, who's on?"

The one who asks is Weiss. In other words, he seems dependable.

"I trust you, Major Weiss! We'll—you'll go halves with me."

"…Understood."

It's not that she doesn't feel bad for not being able to give him a full vacation, but work is work. She needs him to simply resign himself to the fact that this is the misfortune that accompanies military service.

The one responsible exists to take responsibility.

Granted, another way of doing things is to push responsibility off onto your subordinates…but Tanya doesn't want to associate with the fools who boast, *I'm a waste of space who doesn't even take care of the stuff I'm responsible for!*

Hmm. Tanya calms her thoughts a bit.

"But, man, ersatz food sure is awful. As per usual, there's nothing that whets my appetite less."

"Given the situation in the homeland, the front lines must be getting favorable treatment when it comes to food."

"That's probably how it should be, but once your tongue gets a taste of luxury, it takes time to reacclimate."

“I’m not sure if you can call frontline life luxurious…”

Before Tanya realizes it, she’s…stupefied.

Even once I reboot, it’s so surreal, I’m shocked. I—a person who values a civilized, cultured lifestyle and respects intelligence—have been charmed by the battlefield?

What an awful thing war is. I must acknowledge this unexpected truth: In a world at war, the harshness of everyday life can warp even human customs and values.

“…It’s an incorrigible problem.” It’s all Tanya can do to gasp out that one remark.

When she reaches for the coffee cup that was finally brought over, thinking to calm herself down, she notices something strange. “Sheesh, so the coffee is all ersatz?”

She doesn’t even have to put it in her mouth—the weak scent is enough to make her sick of it. It’s hard to call drinking odorless muddy water civilized.

But she knows she has no choice, so she takes a sip, but her expression still makes her look ill.

“Well, it does taste a little better…”

Coffee is a luxury item.

Personally, Tanya would like to object, but coffee isn’t considered a necessity. Yet a nearly fanatical love for coffee is pathological throughout the Empire.

The Imperial Army without coffee is like Limeys without their rum. It’s nowhere near possible to call that a healthy existence.

The awful taste of the coffee you can recognize even half-asleep is a barometer that tells you the Empire’s status. If things go on like this, they really will be substituting muddy water for coffee soon. Something has to be done. Of course, we don’t have many choices.

It has to be peace.

“We should. We should, right? But…”

With outside ears around, she swallows the words *make peace*.

When she scans the café, she doesn't spot anyone who seems to be overtly listening, but she has to be careful. Even if the MPs aren't listening, she doesn't have any desire to get into a wrangle with good-intentioned patriots, either.

Tanya knows that civilians in the rear tend to espouse more radical opinions than the soldiers.

No knowledge, no shame—something like that maybe.

People who've never been on the battlefield tell us to "win" the war like it's so simple. Apparently, people who don't know the battlefield also don't know that nothing is more irritating than their cheerleading. Being able to shoot clueless newbies who are like, *I came to help you guys!* is my only joy on the front line.

Most people don't learn something unless they experience it.

Tanya doesn't disagree that the tuition for experience is too high, but neither can she deny how effective the education is.

"Sheesh. In that sense, this flavor is reality."

The bitter flavor of this coffee is the Empire's truth. How many people, upon experiencing this taste, would think of the nation's fighting forces?

Not most of them, and just as she's ready to be done with that line of thought, she notices a waiter heading her way, and her body stiffens.

Has running her mouth off caused some kind of trouble?

"…Excuse me, are you Lieutenant Colonel Tanya von Degurechaff?"

"That's right… But wait, sorry, you are…?"

She doesn't know why he knows her name.

Maybe the reason she braces herself—*Has he caught me in his web?*—is all the time she spent playing with the Federation commandos on the front.

"Oh, do excuse me. Lieutenant Colonel Uger comes here quite often…"

"Oh, Colonel Uger? Sure is a small world."

It happens just as experience is really making the alarm bells in Tanya's brain clang. When she finds out he's someone Uger knows, she lets her hovering hips fall back down to her seat and answers him with an exaggerated smile.

"…He told me that if a young girl came in today and complained about the coffee, I should give her some of 'the reserve.'"

"'The reserve'?"

What's this? She notices something pungent wafting toward her and cocks her head.

"…Hmm? This smell…"

"It's nothing special, but please have a cup."

"Ooh!" She inadvertently expresses her delight at the smell of coffee. The cup of liquid being poured describes itself by its transparent blackness and, more than anything, its rich fragrance.

The smell leaping into her nostrils is indeed the genuine article she has been longing for.

"It's the real thing, imported via Ildoa, although we haven't been getting much lately."

"Wonderful." Her tense expression relaxes and she ends up smiling.

It's good news that imports can make it in through a third-party country. It means Ildoa is being useful as a neutral country, at least insofar as letting luxury goods through.

"It's the Railroad Department's vice, right?"

"To the extent the law permits."

"Of course. This is Colonel Uger we're talking about. He's so precise— I can just see him making sure he doesn't bring in more than regulations allow."

"Ha-ha-ha. You know him well."

What a pleasant conversation with this smiling waiter.

"Well, I'll leave you to enjoy it."

The scent of intelligence, civilization, and culture.

This is it—a civilized individual's break time…is how wholeheartedly delighted she was about to be when the nasty voice of one of her self-centered subordinates dampens her mood.

"I'm honored to partake of my share."

"Tch, right, you guys are here."

"Colonel, it's not fair!"

In response to Tanya's snarl, her subordinates come back as though their feelings have been hurt; their mental game is tough.

Is it their thirst for coffee, perhaps? The Imperial Army's attachment to caffeine is a bad habit. I may not be allowed to voice such thoughts, but thinking so in disgust is my prerogative.



“I seem to remember you guys drinking up my gift from Colonel Uger, though…”

“We did it in the war-buddy spirit.”

That not only the three lieutenants but even Weiss is looking over at her expectantly is a pain. Their insistence is formidable, and she is nothing but irritated by their smooth talking.

Agh… Tanya gives up on monopolizing the coffee with a sigh.

Thus, she’s coerced into calling after the waiter who is on his way back to the kitchen. “Sorry, but you can see the predicament I’m in. Do you think I could get some for my officers, as well?”

Seeing the unwilling look on her face, he must have sympathized with her from the bottom of his heart. “Understood,” he said, and I should add that the look in his eyes as he nodded was terribly courteous.

Perceiving the deepest essence of hospitality in the way he so tactfully prepared enough for everyone without saying a word, Tanya lifts her cup.

“All right, troops. Let’s savor this little moment with our coffee.”

Ready? She looks around at the group, and it hits her.

Once everyone had received their cup, she had begun giving a toast even though it wasn’t alcohol, and it doesn’t even feel that weird.

It’s a bizarre experience, this feeling that it’s strange and yet not strange at all…but coffee has been in short supply for some time now. It would be a waste to just gulp it down in one go.

“To the ally who may or may not submit to us! Cheers!”

Everyone cracks a smile and enjoys their coffee. She didn’t intend it to be a sort of group ritual, but it’s fun nonetheless.

She takes a leisurely sip, closes her eyes, and savors the flavor.

Ahhh, the taste of civilization.

Her cheeks relax in spite of herself, and she exhales deeply, entranced.

The food was so-so, and the coffee was the real thing. Tonight she's also impressed, thinking, *Colonel Uger really knows how to choose them*.

A half-assed neutral country is often a bat flitting around. But as long as the bat is useful, it will be welcomed by all sides.

Surely Ildoa is trying to walk the line as closely as it can. Toward the Empire, it's being as troublesome as allowed while trying to do favors as major as possible for the Commonwealth and the Federation.

If you called it being faithful to its raison d'état, that would be the end of it.

In a word, it's *robust*.

If it wasn't being faithful to its contract, that would be another story. But when something isn't written, it's the same as if it doesn't exist. Types of ingratitude that don't appear in the contract should be allowed.

To Tanya, that's obvious, since they're signing a contract, not exchanging ideas. The party that brazenly hurls abuse is merely a numbskull who can't admit it was their own mistake to not read the contract thoroughly.

For better or worse, it's great to know that Ildoa is a player with good sense.

Formally, it's an ally, but in practice, it's neutral.

But if it then sends us luxury goods…well, one instance of trouble isn't a bad way to make us understand what sort of player Ildoa is.

"That said, what will it do, I wonder?"

The murmured question is everything.

What will the Kingdom of Ildoa do now?

It announced itself as a player of the game. So what role do they want in it?

"Will it be a good-natured mediator? Will it negotiate hard? Or does it simply want to join the war?"

No matter which route the Kingdom of Ildoa takes, its abilities and determination will be tested. But these guys have expressed their intention to play in a healthy way.

If there's a problem, it's that the game Ildoa is trying to play isn't single

player.

The key will be how the Empire handles this.

Sadly, you'd be hard-pressed to call the Empire good at this game.

"It's kind of a test to see how well we can follow that elementary tenet of state management, *Know the enemy, know yourself*. No, this isn't what someone on the commander level should be thinking about." She grumbles quietly into her coffee cup. "…There are too many things I have no control over. This really drives it home that people in the field can't fix strategic-level mistakes."

If she were serving in the core of the General Staff, it would be different.

But although she's given considerable authority, Lieutenant Colonel Tanya von Degurechaff is still just one officer. Her realm is commanding in the field.

Due to the special organizational structure, she has a lot of freedom. But she's not in a position to participate when the key members are drawing up the strategy. That makes Tanya incredibly frustrated.

If she doesn't accept it, then she'll just have to do something on her own.

"We should sow some seeds while it's still early," she murmurs, and her mouth relaxes into a smile.

She's encouraged to no end that she has someone she can talk to about these subtleties.

"Change of plans."

It pains her to obliterate her subordinates' vacation.

She's fully aware that everyone was looking forward to spending the night in the capital, but given the pressing nature of her business, she needs to make use of her officers.

If they were privates, it might be different, but these are officers.

Authority and rank are proportional to responsibility.

"Major Weiss, you stay back. Lieutenant Serebryakov, sorry, but go back and tell Captain Ahrens or Captain Meybert that I need him on duty tonight."

“Understood. Should I report in when I’m done?”

“No, a chance like this doesn’t come often. Go have a chat with your friend in the west.”

When it comes to talking about subtleties, Weiss is easier. Furthermore, if we have a connection we can tap for info about the situation in the west, that takes priority.

After telling her adjutant to pay her friend a visit, Tanya politely calls the waiter to ask him a favor. “Can I borrow the phone?”

THE SAME DAY, EVENING

You’d be hard-pressed to say that an officer of the Service Corps in the General Staff is blessed with much spare time.

And when it comes to those Lieutenant General von Zettour has working on railroad matters, they’re glued to the timetables where every second counts.

It’s the busiest department in the General Staff. And rail management specialist Lieutenant Colonel Uger doesn’t take his work lightly…

“It’s been a while, Colonel Uger. I hope your wife and daughter are well?”

“Yes, quite well. I’m a little worried my daughter is forgetting my face, but…”

“Sorry to hold you up in the evening when you should be home for family service.”

“It must be something you don’t want outsiders to hear, right? Are you in a hurry?”

…Which is why Tanya feels that having the social capital to be able to ask someone inside the General Staff to meet is a bigger advantage than she could have hoped for.

Who you know, who you can talk to, who you’re connected to… Those elements are often undervalued, but trust is like air.

When you have it, it’s easier to breathe.

“…Oh, I just wanted to shoot the breeze about the state of things.”

“I…see.” He smiles weakly. Perhaps he thinks her excuse insensitive. Tanya finds herself wondering if she should have instead said, *talk about old times*, but what’s done is done.

“I believe you’ve met, but I’ll reintroduce you. This is one of my men, Major Weiss.”

Weiss salutes in silence. After glancing at him, Uger turns to Tanya in confusion and asks, “You want to shoot the breeze? That’s fine, but are you having him come along?”

“Well, I look so tiny, you know. If I’m out walking at night alone, I get caught by the MPs or public security police and scolded. Wouldn’t you worry about your daughter if she was out alone at this hour, Colonel?”

“I’m not sure if you’re being serious or using it as a convenient means to your end, but I’ll go with it.”

At least he’s not objecting to sharing secrets.

Real coffee fills their cups to the brim. Uger takes a sip and smiles, crinkling his eyes.

“So?” The first thing he asks is what she’s here for. “Colonel von Degurechaff, cut straight to the chase for me.”

“The chase?”

“I haven’t forgotten our time in war college. I was so surprised by the novel points you brought to our debates. It makes me nostalgic thinking about it.” His eyes smile and she can’t sense any tension from him. She begins to worry he’s turned into an old man reminiscing over the past.

Exhausted eyes, the sharp increase in gray hairs, that tone of voice that makes it sound like he’s in pain—it all makes his actual age difficult to guess.

Hard work and stress are the main causes, but lack of sleep probably doesn’t help.

“…It feels like so long ago.”

“So much has happened.”

“So true. There really have been so many things going on.”

Whatever the reason, the officers of the General Staff are aging dramatically. If you didn’t know Uger’s real age, you would probably talk about him as *the old lieutenant colonel* like he was a character in a story.

It has to be the poor working conditions.

As far as Tanya knows, military law requires that staffers take proper vacations and keep their physical strength up, but…*in times of war, the law falls silent* is apparently a saying.

“Which is why I want to know what you want to chat for.”

“…Even I’m a bit hesitant to cut to the chase this time.”

Both Weiss and Uger flinch, bracing themselves, and Tanya winces inwardly. They don’t need to react so theatrically.

Well, setting aside overly stressed Uger, at least…

“I just figured, since it’s you and me.”

“I’m honored, Colonel… So now what should I say?”

Tanya emits a sigh—“haah”—and begins to speak. “The Imperial Army is in no position to pursue victory. We at least need to admit that we’re deadlocked.”

When she inquires with her eyes what he thinks, she sees that he understands.

“There’s no doubt about that.” Uger nods with a bitter expression on his face. He’s a logistics and railroad specialist.

The organization that is the Imperial Army is facing various problems. Chief among them, and the one that he is in charge of, is that due to excessive expansion of the lines, the logistics network supporting them has been stretched to its limits. You could say he’s the one in all the General Staff who understands this problem the best.

Because he is that sort of person, even Tanya, concerned with self-preservation, can say the following: “Allow me to reason from our premise.” She explains the main premise. “The Reich cannot take any further expansion of

the lines. We have no reason to expect that our enemies will surrender. We're deadlocked."

At the moment, they're definitely dealing with the situation—coping. The fact that the Imperial Army, which never envisioned a long war, has hung in here so long is due to miraculously hard work.

The current state is a quagmire—or a lull, you could say.

"And the General Staff is concerned about it. I'm not in a position to know General von Zettour's inner feelings, but I'm sure he's aware of the problem."

"I agree. So having considered the Imperial Army's situation, located the problem in the strategic realm, and defined that problem—"

"That's enough."

"Huh?" Tanya cocks her head when Uger stops her, and he speaks frankly.

"Colonel von Degurechaff, let's not spin our wheels here. I'm sure neither of us has time to spare."

"Then if you insist…" She straightens up and continues, "Colonel Uger, an immediate peace is our only option."

"Peace? …Colonel von Degurechaff, I'm surprised you aren't aware. The Foreign Office and other organizations are actively searching for a way to negotiate. Peace is—"

No. She stops him with a look and interrupts. "The current situation is a stalemate."

She uses a chess metaphor because it describes their circumstances in a straightforward way.

The Empire can't find its next move. *And how could it?* is how Tanya sees things. What can this be called if not a deadlock?

"We don't have a move to make. You may find this repetitive, but allow me to say this with that in mind."

She takes a deep breath and…can't quite spit out what comes next. She's aware that even with an old friend from war college like Uger, in the Empire's

paradigm, it's a view that she should think twice about expressing.

Still, she's not interested in being the type of trash who stays silent when things need to be said.

"I believe there is no path but to immediately propose a peace with *restitutio in integrum*."

But her determined words don't seem to make much of an impression.

Weiss, gaping at her, doesn't seem to understand. But it's no wonder.

Tanya, like all imperial soldiers, is fighting for victory.

Ever since the Empire's founding, that has been its unending tale of glory.

Victory means magnificent expansion. Even if someone understood the need for peace, until it was pointed out to them, they wouldn't understand the essence of the matter.

"Thus, we shouldn't reject restoring the borders back to their prewar locations with no annexations, dropping all demands, and requiring no reparations, and if need be, signing an arms limitation treaty." Tanya finishes what she has to say. From her perspective, they need to give up.

Incurring further losses out of regret for the enormous sunken costs is putting the cart before the horse.

This is one of the mistakes people make constantly.

It's a classic pattern of collapse repeated time and again by great corporations, firms obsessed with successful experiences.

But that's just her opinion.

Hence, moderate, sensible Uger's pained expression.

"Colonel von Degurechaff, that's not peace."

"Then what is it?"

"It's no different from surrender. It certainly can't be called peace." The color of his face as he snapped at her, though he's just barely controlling himself… well, he should probably be praised for the attempt given the intense emotions he's suppressing.

“…Do you know how much this war has cost? How many young corpses we’ve piled up?”

“With all due respect, that’s why I think we should be against any further sacrifices.”

He’s probably been shocked speechless.

After a few moments of silence, he addresses Weiss. “Major Weiss, how do you see it?”

“Huh?”

“I want to know the opinion of an officer in the field. How do you see it?”

He’s implying he wants a view that isn’t Lieutenant Colonel Tanya von Degurechaff’s.

Her subordinate asks with his eyes if it’s all right for him to speak, and Tanya nods.

“Go ahead, Major. Say whatever’s on your mind.”

She anticipated this type of question from the start.

Serebryakov has been her adjutant for too long. Hence she brought Weiss. She’s sure that even if his opinion can’t be called objective, it’ll be useful as a reference.

“To jump right to the point…if given a choice between sacrifices proportional to our gains or not making any more sacrifices, I’d hope for the latter. But I also think it would be very difficult to give up at this point.”

“I see. So that’s the feeling on the front lines.”

“It’s how I feel personally, at least.”

In the face of Weiss and Uger’s interaction, Tanya stiffens. I have to admit, I thought I had his answer figured out.

“…Hold up, Major Weiss.”

…So she has to interrupt.

“You can’t give up, either?”

“Actually, I wonder why you can, Colonel.”

“Because it’s our only choice. Being a frontline commander is about making decisions and focusing.”

Weiss may be accustomed to war, but he also understands common sense. That’s her honest view of him.

He can be practical if need be, she thought, and even, *He couldn’t not be.* And yet… *Why?!*

Why is he expressing open confusion?!

“I beg your pardon, ma’am, but that’s just a theory… It’s an opinion.”

A soldier who knows the cutthroat world of fighting on the front line should be on board with peace. Tanya believed that unwaveringly. This is the first instant she felt it wobble.

“All right, Colonel, I hope you’ll leave it at that. Let’s get back to the main topic.”

“Okay.” She turns back to Uger.

“…I understand your logic; I do.”

“Thank you, Colonel Uger.”

“But Colonel von Degurechaff, it’s like he said.”

Tanya is forced to reluctantly agree. Nodding in silence is her tiny act of rebellion.

Her attitude is less due to childishness than being dazed.

“We can’t give up. Even this one you’ve been training for ages comes back from the front lines and agrees!”

“I think she’s agreed…”

“Even though, intellectually, I hate it to death, I nodded, but I feel like I’m stuck resisting to the bitter end in a pillbox. I can’t agree to this gladly.”

Uger’s face is extremely hard. In the same way, Tanya’s disapproval is probably showing in her voice.

“You’re fine with more losses?”

“You’re fine with the losses so far meaning nothing?”

Ohhh. That’s when Tanya understands.

It’s the Concorde Effect.[5]

The Concorde Effect, of all things!

Without a doubt, this war has become an investment that is no longer worth it for the Empire. It has spent massive amounts of money on the war, as well as dumping every last young person—its working population—all over the ground.

What has it gotten? Large swathes of territory crawling with partisans and guerrillas.

To say it’s not worth it is a gross understatement.

If you think about it sensibly and squeeze everywhere you can, you could probably aim to improve revenue, but at the most basic level, it’s still an unprofitable enterprise. The best, if it were possible, would be to wrap up this venture immediately.

There’s just one problem.

…After going through so much hardship, there’s that feeling that you *must* get returns.

“So even you’ll argue against me?”

“If it weren’t you, I’d be screaming and kicking my chair over… Colonel von Degurechaff…immediate peace is just too absurd.”

“The only way to resolve this I can see is the peace you just called absurd.”

Uger starts arguing back “But that’s nothing but surrender!” sharp and fierce, but Tanya can see where he’s going and gets ahead of him.

“At least it’s way better than an unconditional surrender once we’re invaded.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“But I’m pretty sure the General Staff hasn’t figured out how to end the war

in the near to midterm via victory. So logically, you can't rule out the enemy forcing peace upon us."

For a time, Uger falls quiet before her, and she glares silently back at him. What Tanya is describing is an entirely plausible vision of the future.

She's confident that a soldier—precisely because they're a soldier—should be able to grasp this possibility. And she and Uger were vying for class position in war college. He's far from foolish; there's no way he can't understand it.

Yet he's being so insensible.

And yet…, she repeats in her head and then finally realizes what the root of the problem is. "So you're saying that even a soldier who is against sacrifices is still stubbornly against peace."

She doesn't even have to look at Uger's expression as he nods tiredly. "That's how it is. In the rear, we've got the irritating-as-hell, delusional monster known as 'public opinion' causing trouble. How much do you know?"

"I keep getting transferred from battlefield to battlefield, so I don't hear much about public opinion in the homeland."

"Colonel von Degurechaff, take a look at this."

What made a slight noise as he laid it gently on the table was a precision pocket watch. From the looks of it, an old model. It isn't as small as a wristwatch. Still, it's an exquisite piece; she can gather that the craftsman put a lot of careful work into it.

"A pocket watch?"

"This."

"The chain? What about it?"

"Originally, they were silver. But then the order to collect all silver went out."

"I see… So your point is…?"

"In restaurants at home, people are seriously saying that this is the 'greatest sacrifice.' That the reason they're enduring such inconvenience is for victory."

If it weren't her friend Uger saying it, she probably would have dismissed the

comments outright as preposterous.

“Even for something like that, they’re demanding high returns… And the radio shows and newspapers are on board with it.”

“Isn’t there censorship?”

“You think this surge of desire to fight can be stopped? The censorship plan is just trial and error. Since there wasn’t a plan in advance, they’re only now finally trying it out.”

“We’ve got amateurs in control of the media? No wonder our propaganda sucks.”

Usually foreign news is more objective when you’re the losing country, but the Imperial Army is winning, so it’s pretty bad if our news is experiencing that phenomenon. It’s to the point that embedded foreign reporters’ stories are published in their home countries before the imperial reporters’ stories are even through the censors.

Tanya had despised the Imperial Army control of the media as an incarnation of ineptitude, but hearing there isn’t even a plan is just frightening.

“Y-you mean, there’s no way to calm down this war frenzy?”

When she says it, the realization finally hits me.

I don’t even need to recall the Hibiya incendiary incident. Even the winning side becomes intoxicated by success. Bismarck just *had* to take Alsace-Lorraine. Once Napoleon was too victorious, Talleyrand could advise him only so much.

…Apart from a major defeat, there’s nothing worse than a major victory. That irritating-as-hell saying hits on an eternal truth.

It’s just like the bubble.

Until the reigning fanaticism bursts, it will keep growing without end. If you tried to stop it, the reaction would probably be unimaginably fierce.

“…This is the worst. If we try to dampen their desire to fight, we could end up with bigger problems than the war.”

“We don’t know if that would happen.”

“Colonel Uger, you’ll have to excuse me, but I think rather than being optimistic, we need to be prepared as pessimists.”

Even if it’s annoying, it’s a truth she has to convey.

The only ones who can avert their eyes from the truth are the fools who say they don’t want to see a failure but then go racing to the bottom. Fools can only be scoffed at. It would be more fun to blow my brain stem out than be friends with them.

“The situation is unfavorable. The Empire is intoxicated by the delusion of victory, and meanwhile being swallowed whole by the mud on the front lines. The Empire’s precision instrument of violence is decaying.” So she declares, “Military matters are only a continuation of politics. They require a political solution… Could I have you suggest that to the higher-ups via General von Zettour for me?”

“All right. I’ll talk to him.”

“Great,” says Tanya eagerly, but Uger continues in a subdued voice.

“But I’ll say this: Don’t expect much.”

“May I ask why not?”

“It’ll be impossible to make a move right away. Or rather, I guess I should say I can’t get them to move.”

Even without naming names, she catches his drift. Even if Zettour acknowledges the suggestion, it doesn’t mean she’ll get the dramatic change of course that she wants.

“Colonel Uger, I’m going to ask you straight up. Why are so many things being put off until later? Is it sabotage? Are there rebels inside the organization?”

“C-Colonel von Degurechaff!”

“It’s fine… Actually, I finally just realized…”

Weiss tries to tell Tanya she’s said too much, but Uger stops him with a sad smile.

“I’ll say this as a member of the General Staff: The General Staff never

envisioned embarking on foreign campaigns. The Imperial Army itself was designed only with mobile defense near the borders in mind." He scoffed. "The Empire didn't even have a plan ready for invading enemy territory. As a result, the army has been playing it all by ear on the battlefield. You could say that, since we can't fix it, we've simply been coping haphazardly."

"You mean we've only avoided total collapse due to the strenuous efforts of individuals in the field?"

"That's a harsh way to put it but accurate. I mean, the army's overall direction was so vague to begin with… I see. Once you put it into words, it really hits you how serious the situation is. This is awful…" He gazes up at the ceiling, a far-off look in his eyes. His shoulders appear dusty. Nothing more could make you understand how grave the situation facing the General Staff is.

As far as Tanya can tell, the Imperial Army and its organizational culture are all about playing it by ear. Or to come at the issue from another direction, they've gotten into the bad habit of handling things as they happen.

Even if it's a system that allows for incredible tactical flexibility, forgetting about strategy entirely is putting the cart before the horse. There's no way to win by being so reactionary.

If even the strategy specialists Lieutenant General von Zettour and Lieutenant General von Rudersdorf are limiting their roles to purely military matters, then the Empire essentially has no national strategy.

If the General Staff can't make proper use of its military victories, it'll end up like Hannibal.

They'll continue winning on the battlefield—with the caveat, *until that one final battle that can't be undone.*

Tanya's about to groan when Uger slings a follow-up attack. "This is a state secret, but I'm sure it's fine to tell you. It's about distribution in the east using the rail network. Since the General Staff doesn't have much experience making attack plans, it took a page from a certain book. Do you know whose?"

"Come to think of it, if we were doing the fundamental research on that, it's weird that I didn't hear about it. It's not from some cadet's homework or

something, is it?”

“Close but no cigar. Well, actually you’re right, in a way.”

“Huh?”

The answer he gives her as she gapes at him is one she didn’t expect.

“The fundamentals are from a joint research paper by the *Republican* Army General Staff and the War History Compilation Division called *An Inquiry into the Logistics of Invading the Empire.*”

This fact he explains self-deprecatingly renders Tanya speechless.

It’s not even from their own country. If the source weren’t Uger, she wouldn’t have believed it.

“I-is that true?”

The Imperial Army is so good at playing things by ear because it has done its homework. After all, in staff education at war college, everyone gets how to cope when the bottom falls out of your assumptions drilled into their brains.

Surely someone, somewhere is researching foreign campaigns.

…At some point, I’d acquired a bias that overestimated them.

“We couldn’t use railroad operation theory optimized for interior lines strategy abroad.” The words Uger spoke with a dry smile were shocking.

Even under suppressive fire by the Republican heavy artillery on the Rhine front, I wasn’t this horrified.

“It feels like cheating. Of course, when you don’t have the know-how logically, your only option is to use what you can.”

“Seizing enemy equipment is one thing, but copying their plans is…”

“It had to be done. That’s all.”

They were forced to appropriate enemy research… Nothing proves the Imperial Army’s assumption that they wouldn’t need to conduct foreign campaigns more than that. It’s utterly ridiculous, but basically they were an army that forgot about the concept of invading the enemy.

Horrifically, Tanya can now explain so many of her earlier feelings that something was off.

The handling of wintering in the Federation as if it had never been considered, the very belated formation of the Council for Self-Government, the reason it took so long for the military police to interpret and interview the prisoners—everything.

"…Well, I get it, then. So that's why everything is getting done at the last minute."

She never guessed that would be the reason.

When you think about it, this is like the stupidity of cramming for one night to take a test. It's a wonder they've done it so many times and not failed yet.

Given the results of their divide-and-conquer efforts in the east, no one would be surprised to hear it was the result of long years of preparation. Who would think a rush job could be so effective?

"So that means…General von Zettour's divide-and-conquer plan in the east is ultimately working due to extraordinary individual efforts?"

She asks because she can't believe it's possible. She expects Uger to laugh it off.

"That's right."

"Huh?"

His immediate answer sends a chill up her spine.

"So…so that means there's no clear plan? He's just doing it himself?"

"I understand your concerns… At present, Operations and Supreme Command both approve, but it's not based on solid strategic research."

It's a plan stemming from a single man's discretion.

It's an individual's policy, not the organization's?

"Depending on how the situation changes, it's liable to be overturned fairly easily. The policy isn't very popular in Central."

She doesn't even wait for him to finish.

Tanya opens her mouth right away to respond. “Speaking from frontline experience, I can say that we absolutely have no other choice.”

“It may be presumptuous of me to say so, but I think Colonel von Degurechaff is right.” Weiss agrees with her immediately. There is no other solution possible for the east.

Though it may not be a popular policy, it’s unlikely to change when it keeps the rear areas stable.

“Please convince the General Staff—by any means necessary.”

“We’re both just lieutenant colonels. That’s a pretty tall order. If we at least had Colonel von Lergen… If he were here, it would be easier to talk to Operations.”

“I heard he was sent to Ildoa.”

“It must just be a coincidence this time, but…I suppose he’ll be busy for a while. Although if I get the chance, I’d like to ask him.”

“Thank you,” says Tanya with a salute and nods at Weiss that he should leave it to Uger.

“…Also, I’d like to know what it’s like in the field.” As Tanya and Weiss straighten up, he bows his head to ask the favor. “Candid sentiments that can’t be included with the official reports are extremely valuable. I can’t lose sight of how things feel on the front lines. So please help me out.”

His tone is sincere.

This is how a pro should be, not a naked emperor kicking back and relying on his subordinates to handpick intelligence for him.

His respect for the voices and experience coming from those who work in the field is a vivid expression of the health of the organization.

“Leave it to me. It’ll be a thank-you for the real coffee. I’ll provide you with the freshest lessons coming hot off the front lines.”

“Please don’t.” Uger’s supplication, I suppose you could call it, seems to Tanya like a murmur from the bottom of his heart. “What we get in the rear is so awful. The freshest stuff from the front line might be so disorienting, I get food

poisoning.”

“Better to have indigestion than go hungry.”

“So I guess getting any deliveries is better than getting nothing? I can’t deny that.”

Uger’s groaned conclusion is a sad truth. Just because someone is in a position to need to know what is happening on the front lines doesn’t mean they have to weep with joy to hear the bad news. But neither can they close their eyes to reality.

“Whatever happens, let’s do what we need to do.”

“That’s a crystal clear principle. All right, see you again.”

In the end, Tanya has to conclude…no matter how much you sugarcoat it, the reality you don’t want to see is still there.

In the case of the Empire, it’s right before its eyes.

If fate is inescapable, then don’t we have to embrace it?

[chapter]

V

Portent

It was a strange war. Our arrival must have been a big nuisance to the partisans.

Colonel Drake reminiscing about the commando battle up north

[chapter] V Portent

THE END OF MARCH, UNIFIED YEAR 1927, FEDERATION TERRITORY

An old wise man once said that as long as you're prepared, your chance will come. But also that there's no reason for heaven to help those who don't help themselves.

In other words, assertive action is how you seize a chance, and it must be performed boldly.

Principles were always easier said than followed.

What Drake the marine magic officer knew was how to come to terms with a reality that determination alone couldn't fix and wage war—even if the amphibious exercises connected to the plan up north, conducted with the assistance of the Federation Army General Staff, were a mess.

Though they were kind enough to allow them to observe exercises that should have been a military secret, it took only a moment to become disillusioned.

Drake had learned all too well how reckless war in a sky without air superiority was. Ever since the Imperial Air Fleet had advanced into former Entente Alliance territory, enemy air forces dominated the sky there. The bigger problem, it should probably be said, was their skill.

The Imperial Air Fleet was scheming to sever the route between the Commonwealth and the Federation, and Drake had thought of them as a superbly talented crew. *Had thought* because he now had the latest information.

Having participated in the mission to guard the route, Drake could say with

confidence that Intelligence's work wasn't perfect, either. If he were to give his impression after actually fighting them, he would say that "superbly talented" didn't even come close to describing the enemy. That was their first mistake.

The reality was far beyond anything they had imagined. *Assume the worst—ha.* They had to accept that the enemy was "extremely dangerous."

Even a ship like the RMS *Queen of Anjou*, which was fast enough to outrun enemy submarines and had a pile of marine mages like him and his troops as direct support, still got hammered.

The second mistake was underestimating the imperial submarine fleet. Submarines didn't stand out much, but they were a serious threat. The Federation Navy seemed to think there would be only a few, but that was analysis given by guys who didn't seem to completely understand how to patrol for subs.

It was no wonder he was worried one would make it through.

All those things together made the problem clear.

Apparently, when planning on landing ground forces in former Entente Alliance territory, they took into account the potential for a fierce counterattack from the Imperial Army, but that was already too optimistic. Sadly, that was nonsense spoken out of ignorance about what an opposed landing entailed.

It was awfully amateurish to not even consider the possibility that they wouldn't have a chance to land. Perhaps the Federation Army's attitude of not wanting to think about it was tied to their domestic situation.

I want *things to be fine.*

So they're probably fine*.*

In other words, things are fine*.*

The mood ruled by this baseless argument was vaguely terrifying. An optimistic outlook meant relief, which was their worst enemy. Why didn't anyone question the madness of this plan?

The real cowards were the ones not saying what needed to be said and refusing to think about what needed to be considered. Drake cursed the

heavens in spite of himself. Looking back on his military career, he was scared that the whole thing could be summed up as cleaning up after amateurs and optimists.

At least he didn't need to tiptoe with his brother-in-arms. He felt he should tell him.

"I can't understand those tortoises who thought this would work," Drake admitted to Colonel Mikel in a low voice. "…I mean, there aren't even any landing crafts! This is a bit too novel for my liking. Is it fair to call this a leisurely wartime yacht cruise paid by taxpayer money?"

"Gimme a break," Mikel responded in a suppressed voice and spoke of the Federation Army's internal situation. "Apparently, that was us doing the best amphibious operation we can."

His whisper was an almost robotic voice devoid of emotion. Drake couldn't help but feel that he was suppressing exhaustion and resignation.

Still, even if it made him obnoxious, he had to say it. "I realize this is impertinent and tactless, but please tell me: Wouldn't your prerevolution navy have been able to present something better given even a single day?"

"That's not the sort of thing to ask a mage. It's not my jurisdiction, and I don't know anything about the ocean… I heard the guys who would have known are gone now…"

"All right." Drake broke off the conversation before it veered into more dangerous territory. He didn't want to get into it, and he didn't want Mikel to think he was trying to interfere in Federation administration.

The Federation Navy's circumstances were old hardware and brand-new software.

New might sound pure at first, but it basically meant empty. The shell of the old navy was all that remained, and the predreadnought battleships stuck in the past just barely displayed what you couldn't quite describe as majesty.

With aerial mages, planes, and even submarines having come into their own as fighting forces, the Federation Navy was fairly underpowered for contemporary maritime battles.

“Having witnessed your exercise, I’ll give you my conclusion out of duty as an officer from an allied country… Charging into an area where the enemy has control of the sky like that would be suicide.”

“Yeah, we don’t have air superiority… The premises of the exercise were too different,” Mikel answered in a lifeless voice—he must have known. Any soldier who had to weigh the outcome of Operation Tea Party would reach the same conclusion.

“Raid with a carrier strike group and both sides will be hurting. Can you hope for the same amount of air cover without a carrier?”

“Our navy doesn’t have aircraft carriers…”

“…All I can say is that it’s reckless.”

On their minds were the results of the “stress test” operations the Commonwealth Navy had carried out some time before.

Commonwealth carrier task forces had conducted strikes that also functioned as recon-in-force against various objectives in former Entente Alliance and former Republic territory, but the results were terrible.

In every area, imperial forces had magnificently repelled them. It was even exposed that their capital ships were weak in anti–air combat.

“We can’t expect imperial defenders to be second-rate. This is a pain.”

They were taken completely by surprise and were in such a sorry state that they had to send up training units to intercept…is what was officially announced in praise of their heroics, but to anyone who could read between the lines, the Commonwealth Navy’s shock was clear.

Imperial fledglings got caught up in an encounter battle, and Commonwealth marine mages had to withdraw because “time had run out”? The fact that trainees the marines expected to be unstable could maintain what counted as combat-ready quality in the Commonwealth exemplified the base quality of the Imperial Army’s soldiers.

Naturally, they had anticipated facing tough resistance in the west.

Given that in the west the Empire was facing the Commonwealth mainland,

they weren't surprised that the western air fleet and the reserves assigned there would be strong.

But even so, things had apparently gone worse than expected.

If Drake was hearing this much about it despite the gag order and the secrecy classification, things must have been bad.

It would have been some consolation if they had cleaned up in places besides the west, but the stress test results showed that the imperial units in the former Entente Alliance were also tough.

"We have to admit that they were sturdier than we anticipated. The Imperial Army must be prioritizing severing the support route to the Federation. Their air power was surprisingly robust." As Drake continued, he lowered his eyes to the reports in irritation.

In his hands was the report about what they assumed would be a relatively weak counterattack in the former Entente Alliance territory. Despite a warning from Drake and others, they had apparently underestimated the Empire's forces.

One glance was enough to tell things had gone horribly. Powerful imperial units, including an air fleet they had never seen before, came out to meet them, and the carrier task force got pummeled.

Apparently, they had heard that imperial ground troops stationed in defense were second-rate reservists and then failed to take the entire defense force seriously enough.

Partisan reports specified that there were "no powerful ground units," but someone must have misread it as "no powerful units." That sort of error was infrequent but did happen.

It was bad news if their air forces were top tier. It proved that the imperial armada in former Entente Alliance territory had been reinforced far more than estimated.

If people were only now paying attention to the report from Drake and his troops, who had escorted the RMS *Queen of Anjou* one way, it was too late.

“It’s a nightmare trying to move a convoy through waters under enemy air superiority. What are they thinking over on the mainland?” Drake sounded the alarm quietly but with a sense of crisis.

Ignorance is bliss? Is that it? Though they weren’t unhappy to have pulled strong units from places that weren’t the main lines, there was a strong air fleet moving into position to occupy the Federation support route.

Considering how important that route was, it wasn’t just the navy who would be losing sleep over this.

We knew this would happen, though. Instead of grumbling, Drake just sighed in a white puff. Mikel looked unwell as he gave his reply.

“As far as I can tell, the higher-ups were just interpreting things as they saw fit. Apparently, they thought the imperial air forces would be concentrated on the front line.”

“That’s awfully optimistic. And who do they think is going to get bit by it in the end? Certainly, the Empire is known for stationing troops thickly along the front lines, as opposed to how the Federation prioritizes strategic reserves…but I hardly think that would mean they let defense in the rear slip.”

The Federation Army had a tendency to see the Imperial Army as specialized in attacking…but in Drake’s experience, it was more defensive. The imperial doctrine focusing on mobility was often understood as an embodiment of maneuver warfare, but in fact, its foundation was interior lines strategy.

In other words, they had a reputation for using the cards in their hands to protect and survive.

“…Not sure what to do about that, I guess. So? It’s not nice to keep your brother-in-arms in suspense… Do you have some secret plan or script for us this time?”

“It’s not quite a secret plan, but…” Drake smiled. “Basically, we’ll be a distraction.”

“Right. We’ll get the Imperial Army focused on a location that isn’t the east. Ultimately, your idea must be to divide their forces.”

“Exactly,” Drake continued with an evil grin. “Do you get it? We’ll be going through the back door, so we don’t even need air superiority or a landing with enemy resistance. It’s fine to be flashy like a proper distraction, but…we don’t need to get too serious.” Drake grumbled, flicking away his cigarette. It wasn’t only the Federation Army who had that problem; soldiers who valued procedure were often overly obsessed with textbook stipulations. “We’re going on a sneak attack! If we can’t visit our beloved Juliet through the front gate, we’ll just have to be Romeo and go through the back.”

“Are we lovesick?”

“Yes, it’s similar. For a submarine assault, that’s the ideal form. The Imperial Army has ripped my heart out.”

“Whoa there, that’s an indecent affair.”

“Let’s just say I’ve fallen for its modus operandi.”

Sneak attacks, feints, decapitation tactics…

The Imperial Army’s shrewd use of aerial mages was terribly effective. They were doing things in naval strategy that he had never considered before. The elegant generals talking around a table might not approve of that sort of assertiveness, but it would certainly rouse the adventurous spirits of the officers in the gun room. Drake felt they could learn something from that resolve.

“…They really got you. I take my hat off—is that the right phrase?”

“I guess I’m an Orientalist.”

“Ah, let’s leave it at that.” Mikel ducked his head slightly and scanned the area in silence. From his body language, it was clear what his comment meant.

Something like, *If a political officer hears this conversation, it’ll be a pain.*

Even joking around like this could cause trouble?

“Then it seems like I should be the one to draw up the operation plans?”

“…Sorry to make you do all the work, but I appreciate it.”

“Oh, it’s just a Commonwealth soldier forcing a plan on a Federation soldier.

Get ready for some arrogance.”

Let’s cut to the chase.

Lieutenant Colonel Drake and Colonel Mikel’s invasion to take pressure off the east was planned through the proper channels, and although there were some complications, the main framework ended up getting the approval of both the Commonwealth and Federation Armies.

Maybe it was more correct to say they were extremely welcoming rather than simply approving. That’s how enthusiastic the upper echelons were.

The operation the pair jointly submitted was a plan to use a number of large submarines to invade former Entente Alliance territory via the sea. If their landing operation was interpreted as a commando mission in essence, that made it the largest one to date.

The idea of a major counterattack probably sounded good to some of the higher-ups who were anxious to mount one.

The ultimate goal was to aid the flank of the eastern front.

The method was to make a show of the coordination between local partisans and the Federation-Commonwealth allied army to lure imperial troops to Norden and pin them there.

It was a relatively straightforward plan, but the difficulty stemmed from its simplicity.

The issues anticipated due to siloing between branches were handled easily. The Federation subs had been reluctant to have Commonwealth soldiers aboard despite the fact that they were allies, but they finally accepted the plan with an order from Moskva.

Since they were emphasizing political achievement over military gains, it wasn’t too hard to get support from the continuing resistance.

You could say a cooperative spirit coursed through every stage of the operation.

The time to get an affirmative response for each step was astoundingly short. For anyone who knew even a little about how slow bureaucracy could go, it was

unbelievable.

The history books would probably praise it as a smooth, well-organized endeavor.

A solid cooperative structure.

A concrete strategic objective.

Thorough understanding from the upper echelons.

A determined commander.

Appropriate intelligence analysis and integration with related organizations.

All the factors that distinguished success from a failure were present.

But even after lining up all the comments about how smoothly things were going in the field for Drake and his crew, it was difficult to say it was as nice as the comments made it out to be.

After all, things were always a shit show in the field.

And that went for Drake and his troops in a Federation sub as well.

Their passage had been remarkably uneventful, but the prep had been incredibly rushed.

All that meant was that amid mechanical trouble, the sound of a screw propeller of what must have been a patrol boat that they encountered along the way and general disorder caused by the cramped space, he would write, *No trouble worth noting*, in the official report.

Considering all those factors, as they drew near to their destination in former Entente Alliance waters…respect for their transporters began to well up inside Drake.

“It’s so handy to have submarines facilitate like this. No one thought to use them like this before the war started?” Having been at loose ends, Drake struck up a chat with the duty officer next to him to express some of his respect.

The navy man not only understood Drake’s Queen’s dialect but responded as well. Not that he really should have found it terribly surprising.

It was standard on the seas.

“‘Handy’ sounds nice, but you could also say it’s making things harder for us… Once you go above and beyond, what used to be above and beyond becomes the default next time.”

The way he could say something so dangerous in the conning station where other people could hear proved that submariners were similar the world over. Hearty seamen.

Being on a submarine together meant sharing fates; the crew was basically a family that lived and died together. Apparently, that meant they could gossip without hesitation.

“I understand. That’s rough. As an apology, I offer this. It’s a bottle of gin I brought over, probably not too shabby.”

“Are you paying us off? I may even start believing the party’s propaganda about how horrible capitalists are.” Though his expression said he was joking, his attitude as he didn’t even attempt to refuse was rare for a Federation officer.

“Ha-ha-ha. Yes, it’s an evil capitalist conspiracy. We want to win you over by warming you up with toasty alcohol in this cold ship.” As Drake laughed in response, it sunk in for him once again how submarines had their own culture. If he had to find fault with it, he would complain like a dandy that there was a limit to the airs he could put on. It was a bit too cramped for him to laugh nihilistically with the Federation soldiers. But the freedom to breathe seemed a fair trade.

Instead of naval mines, they had loaded up on people…but honestly, it was still too cramped. If they forced the issue, it was certainly possible to cram everyone in, but it wasn’t something he wanted to do over and over.

Three vessels, three mage battalions.

Marine mages, including Drake, often had to embark on small military ships once formed up. That meant he was relatively used to it. *The mages with lots of missions on land probably have more to worry about than we do. Poor sods.*

Ahhh. Drake smiled wryly at that point. It wasn’t like him to think so much. They had arrived at their go point safely, and apparently, the long wait time

after a modest tea toast made one thoughtful.

If there wasn't anyone supervising them, he could have busted out the rum and gotten a little rowdier with the friendly crew…but it was more crowded than the Londinium subway.

"Phew." He sighed and was staring silently at the clock to stay out of the crew's way when he noticed something strange. *What the—? This was made in the Empire!*

To think the day would come that I'd be inside a Federation submarine watching a clock of imperial make and waiting to commence a landing operation! The Imperial Army guys must have been looking at this same sort of clock just before they landed in the Osfjord. Is this what people mean when they say "curious fate"?

Having thought that far, he realized what a weird combination it was.

I'm in a submarine with a liberal atmosphere watching an imperial clock and speaking freely with Federation soldiers!

Was this the three steps of observation, discovery, and interpretation? The world was a strange place indeed.

But after a little while, Drake's moment of rumination was at its end.

"Operation Romeo—it's go time."

The call echoed out in the Federation language.

He didn't wait for it to be translated. Everyone perked up, understanding it was time; of course they turned toward the captain.

"Maintain periscope depth! Checking the area… All right!"

"Cease submarine cruising! Surface!"

"Blow the main tank!"

The crew's crisp, staccato exchange echoed throughout the iron casket.

Even in a language they didn't understand, any navy personnel could grasp what was happening. The words may have been different, but operating a ship was the same.

The pressurized air was forced into the water, and the buoyant force had the ship up on the wide-open ocean in no time.

“Gear, check!”

“Open the hatch!”

“Lookouts, to your posts!”

The sailors jumped briskly out of the hatch. With a vulnerable submarine on the surface, they couldn’t afford to have their guard down for a second.

But that was the crew’s job.

As someone just hitching a lift, Drake had his heart stolen by the influx of fresh air. It was rich in oxygen, and he could breathe without worrying about the carbon dioxide concentration.

“…Sheesh, I didn’t realize how delicious the sea air is.”

“Ha-ha-ha. I bet not. You don’t understand how sweet a smell it is unless you become a submariner.” The Federation naval officer who appeared next to him spoke the truth.

His tone was filled with camaraderie due to the respect between the fellow navy officers for each other’s seamanship. Drake ducked his head slightly and said, “You’re right about that.”

Marine mages, like the older marine units, most often served on capital ships. Drake’s military career was by no means short, but this was his first time serving on a submarine.

Right. He recalled at that point that there were good and bad things about new experiences, like anything else.

When he realized what the glances he was getting from the Federation personnel in the area were for, he couldn’t say it felt good.

There could be only one reason he had to recompose himself and plaster on a hollow expression like he didn’t know these guys and conceal the relaxed atmosphere.

It was the approach through the narrow corridor of a woman officer. He

didn’t think it very tactful to curse in this sweet, pure sea air, but neither did he enjoy holding in his frustration.

It was hard to live authentically in the world.

“Colonel Drake, on behalf of the people, I wish you luck.”

The political officer bobbed her head politely.

It was sad that he was used to seeing the exhausted face of the officer ordered to interpret, but…Drake had plenty of experience suppressing his dislike of political officers.

Then again, being used to dealing with them didn’t make it any less of a pain.

“Thanks, Lieutenant Tanechka. You really helped us out in a lot of ways.”

“No, I’m glad I was able to accompany you all, since we share the same aim.”

“It’s an honor to hear you say that… We may be allies, but I’m sure we’ve put you through some stress.”

Did the fact that he could smile and have a hollow conversation with her indicate growth? Or a fall from grace? Considering the higher-ups described this relationship as shaking hands with the devil, probably the latter.

Honestly, he railed beneath his smile, *how the Federation soldiers put up with such an incomprehensible system is human history’s greatest mystery.*

“Well, I’m sorry you had to come along even though you’re not with the navy.”

“Oh, I’m just glad if I can be of some service.”

She wasn’t navy personnel, and she wasn’t participating in the operation.

She was just idly taking up limited space and oxygen. But perhaps he was biased.

There was no guarantee that he wasn’t reacting in an overly negative way to the appearance of the foreign element—this political officer—because he was familiar with the coordination and family-like bonds in the navy. He didn’t feel it to the same extent Mikel did, but still, although she was a pain in the neck as a political officer, it wasn’t as if she was unreasonable as an individual.

But he had to sympathize with the Federation Navy for their troubles nevertheless.

Even a submarine had its own political officer. Then this one had to cram aboard with them—it probably couldn't get more crowded than this.

"We're always causing trouble for everyone in the Federation. I just hope getting a ride like this isn't too much. My apologies." Drake bowed his head to the Federation naval officer.

They were two men of the sea. They didn't require an excess of words. He simply wanted to deliver a good-mannered apology. *Which is why*, perhaps it should be said, he ended up dumbfounded in the next moment.

"Cultural differences occur between any countries. As long as we're fighting for the same cause, they're nothing more than obstacles to be overcome."

This political officer, Liliya Ivanova Tanechka, is a terror. She just shamelessly barged into a conversation between two officers like it was her own!

To be honest, Drake didn't foresee this at all. It was implied his comments were for the naval officer, not the political officer. And yet she so kindly took the liberty of responding!

"It's as Comrade Tanechka says. Don't worry about it, Colonel Drake."

"…Sorry…er, I guess I should say thank you."

"Either or neither." The naval officer shrugged. He must have been used to this. To Drake, it was shocking and surreal.

They say that too many captains will send a ship up a mountain, but here we have someone who isn't even in the navy chain of command acting like she's in charge when the minimal requirement for success on a submarine is unity of the crew!

"Sheesh, I'm no match for you. Let's compete in military achievements. That said, if you give me a huge quota, I won't be able to do it anyhow, so don't expect too much."

He must have had a little self-restraint left if he could go without snapping, *I can't take this.*

Sorry, he apologized internally, and when he jumped out of the open hatch, he was met by the sweet, rich sea air.

Yesss, the sea.

That his unusually irritated internal state was soothed on deck as he was headed to the battlefield made him feel like he was past saving, and he smiled wryly.

He had missed the salty sea air dearly. Even if he had gotten used to being run around on dismal Intelligence errands, at heart he was a soldier who valued honor.

His conscience complained that duty was calling.

In that case. Drake stood on the narrow deck of the sub and looked up at the sky with a confident nod.

Time for work.

Rather than wavering, rather than getting annoyed, it was better to do his job step by step.

“Marine mages, I need you up on deck!”

The moment of shouting, *Move out!* came with a brisk feeling he wouldn’t trade for anything. Wearing his computation orb, rifle in hand, he faced the water hoping he, too, could be brave.

What did he have to worry about regarding his duties as a soldier, warrior, and individual?

“Commander Mikel gave the signal for all units to move out.”

His subordinate’s clear reporting voice sounded so full of energy.

“Very good.” He responded to the mage’s fierceness in kind. “Once we get up there, get into assault formation! Our destination is the Osfjord! Lieutenant Sue, take point! Guide us to your fatherland!”

“Yes, sir! Leave the vanguard to me!”

Her reply was decisive.

When he glanced over at the lieutenant, her face was lit up with joy. She was

on her way home. It wasn't a bad thing for her to be excited, and it wasn't surprising.

But he couldn't help but be slightly worried.

"Don't get cocky, Lieutenant."

"Understood! You can leave the forward watch to me!"

"All right."

Though he nodded, she seemed impatient enough that he wasn't sure if she really understood. He couldn't help but think this was risky.

The location they had chosen to charge as their entryway into the former Entente Alliance was the Osfjord. He had heard Sue's father had fought there. And it was the battlefield where the imperial fleet had landed and made rubble out of the Entente Alliance lines.

Can she stay composed? He couldn't shake his doubt.

But vexingly, no matter how worried he was, he couldn't take her off point.

The mainland's requests always prioritized politics. The nobles in Whitehall wanted to see someone from one of the occupied countries pitted in a flashy fight against the Empire.

She and her Unified States unit of volunteers from the former Entente Alliance would make great propaganda material.

Drake had strict orders to get them into the thick of the fight.

It was an operation for political ends directed by politicians.

War may be a continuation of politics, but as a commander in the field, he felt this relationship was a bit too cozy. Given it was a joint operation between the Federation and the Commonwealth for the purposes of propaganda, it was a natural request, but Drake couldn't help but find it annoying.

"I love the sea… Ah, but I can't mess around."

They were up and on their way to the Osfjord. Though he had done exercises on paper a number of times and learned the military geography, this was his first time performing a sneak attack from a submarine.

He had just thought, *So this is another first*, when he realized something.

"…An invasion via submarine, a sneak attack after sending in an aerial mage battalion. To think the day would come when us pros would be imitating everything those amateurs started."

The navy of a maritime state was playing catch-up to a continental state. This was how it felt for their precious Goddess of the Sea to sleep with someone else.

"That's a pretty sad thing for us champions of the sea."

They thought they were pioneers, but they had been lapped. For a country who had boasted being number one in the field, it was a disgrace. Honestly, it didn't feel very good.

The sailors found both ships and the sea to be quite jealous. But it went both ways. Men of the sea and ship were both full of passionate emotion. *This newcomer the Empire is coming into our wide ocean and acting tough?* There was no reason something so ridiculous should be happening.

Drake clenched his fists, sucked in the sea breeze, and roared with laughter.

"We're late to the trend? No matter! We'll just nail it!"

As someone from his country with a reputation for taking only love and war seriously, he would have to represent. And in the first place, he was the commander of a marine mage unit. It wasn't as if he were a newbie on his first amphibious operation.

He just hadn't factored in the submarine before.

If you had the basics down, application wasn't difficult. If there was any issue, it was that this was a joint mission.

"Boss, Colonel Mikel is…"

"On my way."

Drake responded to his subordinate's voice concisely.

"I guess things can't just go smoothly when it's your first time. Man, the Goddess of Fate sure is a bitch. Seems like everything depends on her mood."

Perfect coordination almost never happened outside of armchair fantasies.

It was hard enough to coordinate among your own units, much less troops from an allied army. It took an awful lot of time, bloody vomit, and sweat to turn complete strangers into those organic beings who share your fate on the battlefield known as brothers-in-arms.

"…Well, oftentimes your first time is one you'd rather forget."

Being in sync had nothing to do with logic.

The Federation Army's Colonel Mikel was a soldier worthy of trust and respect.

Personally, Drake wouldn't be averse to having him cover his back. But even with someone you could trust to some extent, being able to coordinate was a whole different issue.

They'd been on two or three joint missions, but…they just happened to be fighting alongside each other on the same battlefield in those cases.

And he had no idea what to expect from the partisan units.

On your first joint operation, even the best of pals have to be ready to fail. And when it came to cooperation between not only mage units but local partisan ground troops, the risk variables started to accumulate rapidly.

"Whoever said to do what you can and let God do the rest was on to something. If this were poker, I'd be folding about now!"

He didn't want to fall to the earth having mistaken the smile of the Goddess of Luck as being adored by Fate. Flying toward the sun with wax wings would be a ridiculous plan, wouldn't it?

Mikel glanced up at the sky and scowled. Whoever said that the eyes could be just as eloquent as the mouth was right.

"I got some bad news."

"What is it?"

"The sub that was supposed to be at sortie point three got detected by the enemy warning line and didn't make it. They're reporting their location, but…

it’s really far away.”

Drake looked down and clicked his tongue in spite of himself.

This was the sort of trouble you could expect in the field, but…to think they would get tripped up on their first step.

“…So one battalion is down for the count? We won’t have enough people.”

“A third of our troops are out before we even start the fight. If we’re going to declare we’ve been wiped out, it’s now or never.”

Their situation was extremely grave.

“So you and I are fools who let a third of our troops drop out before the battle even started?” Mikel’s voice sounded dry, and Drake’s must have seemed just as defeated. He didn’t have the fight to put up a strong front. “Do we just call it one of the challenges of submarine operations? I had resigned myself to the fact that we couldn’t expect close communications in the fleet… Well, I *thought* I understood how hard it was…”

Any understanding had to be in past tense now.

Submarines underwater couldn’t use wireless communications. If they couldn’t use the wireless, they couldn’t report their statuses.

Learning precisely how significant that was through experience really stung.

“I would think you’ve got enough of the salt about you to know.”

“My job is to go over the sea. I might as well be a newbie when it comes to its depths.”

Learning something new was a precious experience—as long as the tuition fees weren’t profiteering.

“I hate that even though out in the world we have nothing to fear, the sound of a screw propeller makes us jump. And I’m sick of feeling like I’ve got the watchful eye of a dorm monitor on my back, even when we’ve had no major incidents along the way.”

“Yeah, even just the memory of that is unpleasant.”

So you were a bad kid? They eyed each other and Drake laughed it off. If there

wasn’t anything he could do about his situation, he had to accept it.

“I’m sick of hearing the engines of unidentified ships.”

Approaching by submarine, surfacing, and sending out the mage units—they were all maneuvers performed on the assumption of a sneak attack. If there was even one ship in the vicinity when they surfaced, they could no longer expect secrecy to be maintained. The worries about secrecy were constant.

How ironic, then, that they couldn’t even keep tabs on their own subs and found out at the last second that they were short on troops.

“By the way, what are we going to do about the missing battalion?”

“Well…it’s impossible to carry out a large-scale feint, so what about switching to a hit-and-run? If we attack enemy torpedo storage, we should be able to secure the Northern Sea route’s safety to some extent.”

From Mikel’s tone of voice, he didn’t seem that serious about it. Still, it wasn’t a bad idea.

Two battalions were more than enough to get one strike in.

And though people tended to forget, the fact was that torpedoes were a lot to deal with. They fell under the umbrella of extremely good targets.

The average submarine torpedo weighed well over 1.5 metric tons and was between six and seven meters long. They were huge both in terms of size and weight, but what really made them a handful was how sensitive they were. One careless move and the fuse would refuse to work properly. Unlike shells, they couldn’t be easily mass-produced; they were essentially large collections of precise machinery. If they struck the imperial torpedo stockpile, there was a good chance the Empire’s submarines and torpedo boats wouldn’t be able to operate properly for the near future.

“You’re saying we should attack the imperial munitions facility on the Osfjord? An eye for an eye, then, huh?” To Drake, as he smiled back at Mikel, it sounded like a thoroughly enjoyable plan. Hitting torpedoes was the kind of idea someone well versed in maritime affairs could get behind. And more than anything, he wasn’t against that spirit of revenge.

Yes, it made him crack a smile.

“Sounds like fun.” *Sadly*, it should probably be said, he had to continue, “Please consider our situation, though. Speaking as a member of your allied forces, it’s our first joint operation in this mage regiment, and it’s expected that we get proper political results.”

In other words? Mikel asked with his eyes and Drake continued bitterly.

“Striking the torpedo or whatnot stock and withdrawing isn’t a very good way to demonstrate our strong coordination with the partisans on the ground there. We need to *take this farce seriously*.”

While it had military logic to it, this operation was limited by political circumstances.

An air raid on torpedo stores would be quite flashy, but…it wouldn’t help them achieve their political goal of coordinating with the partisans.

“Honestly, it’s great to have you along for this farce, Colonel Drake. It’s hard to be free with a collar on.”

“Well, it’s a mix of the political situation and what works for the military.”

Mikel nodded with an expression that said, *That’s for sure.* It had to be hard for him. As someone in the same field, Drake sympathized from the bottom of his heart.

Fighting such a tough bunch as the Imperial Army was hard enough on its own. But this colonel had to fight them while keeping an eye out for the secret police and conspiracies behind his back.

“A two-front operation is always hard.”

“Ain’t that the eternal truth. And on that point, my apologies, but I’m glad I come from an island nation.”

If his self of a few years ago heard him, he would have questioned his sanity, but he meant it—he had even found a new appreciation for the greatness of his beloved Commonwealth’s politicians.

At least I don’t have to worry about watching my back, and there’s no way any of our politicians would say they want to attach political officers to our

units. I do have it better.

A political officer boarding a submarine is more impudent than a rat.

“All right, that’s enough politics talk.”

Drake nodded at Mikel and mentioned something he had been worried about for a while. “I hope we can actually contact the partisans.”

“Supposedly, they’ve been on standby for a week now… Although we won’t know until we go see.”

Drake could only answer, “Right.” But it was incredibly frustrating to him. The Entente Alliance’s territory had been under imperial military rule since its defeat.

He had heard that since the Federation was adjacent, its army’s General Staff and central political administration had been giving quite a bit of support to partisan activities since before the fighting had started.

But… Drake could remember more than a few reports in the Commonwealth’s domestic records that gave unpleasant hints of what was to come.

Public opinion in a nutshell was, *Better the Empire than Communism.*

“If the partisans don’t have enough manpower, we can always just go wild and pull out.”

“In terms of propaganda purposes, it would be better if they had enough…”

“Well, let’s not expect—”

It happened right as he was about to finish with *too much*.

“Attention, all units. We have contact with a Wanderer. I’ll patch them through.”

At the sound of Lieutenant Sue’s proud voice, Drake exchanged surprised looks with Mikel.

“Wanderer 03 to all of you. Welcome home.”

It must have been Federation language that followed the fluent Commonwealth address.

“We’ve been waiting for you. I’ll be your guide. Please begin your descent promptly.”

EARLY APRIL, UNIFIED YEAR 1927

The harassment attacks on the fjord were carried out as a distraction by a volunteer company of mages from the Entente Alliance, Commonwealth marine mages, and a battalion of Federation mages. As a commando operation to support the main lines in the east through coordination with the partisans, it was typical.

That’s all it would be known as, looking back in history.

The people of this generation would be laughed at in hindsight by those of later ones. *You didn’t even realize something so basic?*

But that had nothing to do with the people at the time.

“What?! An air raid?!”

“Don’t be ridiculous! We’re not picking up any mana signals! Even for an incursion behind the lines, there has to be a limit to the distance they can strike from!”

“It’s true that the local garrisons are experiencing sporadic combat!”

As the officers racked their brains over scattered reports of engagements and sightings in the din of the local Imperial Army garrison headquarters, more and more info came pouring in.

Some half-shrieked reports even said they were taking fire from naval cannons.

At the local garrison headquarters, they had to urgently inform their superiors of the situation while also alerting all units under them. All both the senders and receivers could do was despise the fog of war.

Thus it was that the upper-level organizations who received the vague, confused information mixed with speculation passed unclear summaries down to the units beneath them.

Even the Empire’s precision instrument of violence couldn’t run perfectly

forever.

And so, is how it should probably be said…

The shameful affair of these chaotic reports arriving at the core of the army caused some discerning officers to be wholeheartedly anxious.

Among the officers who received the urgent report and were forced to sigh were Lieutenant Colonel Tanya von Degurechaff and the other officers of the Salamander Kampfgruppe, a force currently stationed on the outskirts of the imperial capital and prepped for quick response.

For better or worse, a crew used to the battlefield knows that intelligence always comes in tangles. Tanya has thoughts about the guys at high command who can't see through the complications.

But setting her frustrations aside, it takes only a moment for her to get her brain in gear to comprehend the situation.

"…There's a chance they're mimicking us."

"You mean they infiltrated via submarine?"

"Yeah," she responds to her adjutant who immediately grasps what she means. "I suppose we can consider it retaliation from the Federation. Even the inactive Federation Navy could probably manage to transport some mages."

Sadly, the Imperial Navy has essentially no antisub capabilities. The main forces of the High Seas Fleet have a unit of destroyers as escorts, and they do about as good a job as can be expected, but…there was no reason the navy would surrender its precious babies.

They had their hands full securing the waters between the mainland and Norden.

The air fleet and submarines deployed in the northern waters were on a mission to destroy the enemy's sea lane, so patrolling against subs was too much to hope for from them.

"So, Colonel von Degurechaff…you're saying this isn't a mistake but the truth?"

"There's a good chance. Well, if the reports are this confused, there's a really

good chance. What are the local units doing?”

Tanya is more surprised that the local HQ failed at selecting intel. Was it because they had sent all the brains to the front lines in the east? It’s the moment her fear that officer quality is dropping takes on some reality.

But she soon learns that was only the beginning. Faced with the stream of incoming reports, the officers of the Salamander Kampfgruppe all furrow their brows.

Enemy mages have infiltrated a rear area where there are active partisans.

It’s a gold-standard tactic we’ve experienced enough times on the eastern front to be fed up with it.

Though the Council for Self-Government got the Federation partisans under control, everyone can still remember how much trouble they were. Just then, Federation mages cross the border, and we aren’t sure how to deal with them.

If we leave them be, our fragile transport net will get attacked. But sending excellently mobile mages after them will cause its own problems. Playing tag along the vast eastern front often simply exhausts the it side.

“…Sparks flying from the east?”

“We can’t rule it out. This is how the Federation does things. It would make military logical sense for them to expand their reach to the northern front to take advantage of our fatigue.”

Things had seemed quiet in the former Entente Alliance territory. If sparks are flying, they may not stay calm any longer.

“What are the Feldgendarmerie and local garrison even doing?”

Tanya resists the desire to nod at Major Weiss’s complaint and urges him to grasp the severity of the situation before denigrating others. “If they’re aiming to hit us where we’re exhausted, they’ve made quite the cunning choice.”

Once you find yourself on the side getting it handed to, you understand the nature of things.

Tanya was secretly concerned that First Lieutenants Grantz and Tospan didn’t have an appropriate sense of the crisis, but even they have begun to frown.

Experience truly is a great teacher.

"…Communists sure know what people hate," Tospan grumbles in a low voice, and the comment is surprisingly on point for him. Tanya feels like celebrating her subordinate's growth.

Sadly, before she can praise him, she ends up warning him.

"They probably deserve our respect."

"Huh?"

"Everyone has their strong points. A talent for harassment should probably be appreciated."

Tanya's experiences in the east have taught her that Communists are not to be underestimated.

Between their efficiency in snatching away our cause and their scheming to draw the Imperial Army into a war of attrition, in the area of malice, the Federation's Communist Party is by no means stupid. I have to admit that they're employing the principle of competition well.

Tanya can't very well lose to the Commies on competition, the very foundation of the ideal market. Even if the commodity is ill will, competition is competition. I need to step up like I would to any other.

"…Put together some records of partisan activities."

"Their general status isn't enough?"

Asymmetrical data are a problem, but that's why you work hard to erase the asymmetry. Putting in the effort to uncover the truth is always crucial.

Responding to her adjutant's perplexed question, Tanya gives an order imbued with her powerful will. "They seem to be operating differently from the partisans in the east. I want to compare them. Oh, and once you've collected the materials, check with the General Staff to see what's going on."

"Understood," First Lieutenant Serebryakov says, leaving the papers she'd collected and racing off to contact the General Staff. Tanya watches her go and then looks over the documents.

It happens just after she hands copies around to all the officers present and urges them to read closely. “May I say something?” It’s the person she least expected. “This is bad. We don’t have the partisans by the roots.”

She does a double take in spite of herself, is I guess what you’d say. “Oh?” She’s more than a little impressed by Tospan’s comment. Apparently, even a first lieutenant who doesn’t seem to have any idea how to apply knowledge can come up with a decent idea once he has some experience. She feels like she’s seeing another side of her subordinates, whether it be First Lieutenant Tospan or Captain Meybert.

It’s not half bad if they can compare the counterinsurgency battles in the east and the north and recognize the differences. Progress should be acknowledged.

“Could it be signs of a general uprising?”

Correction, Tanya whispers internally. She’s not opposed to acknowledging Tospan’s remarkable progress, but he still seems to lack the ability to think about a situation for himself.

“Lieutenant Tospan, I find that hard to imagine.”

“Why is that, ma’am?”

That gape-mouthed numbskull face.

But questions should be answered.

After all, the ability to admit you don’t know something is a virtue. Idiots aware of their uselessness are a zillion times better than numbskulls convinced of their wisdom.

Tanya isn’t averse to appreciating Tospan’s honest-to-a-fault nature; it’s certainly better than if he pretended to know what he didn’t.

“They may be spread out, but we have quite a few troops over there guarding that territory. There’s no way at present that the partisans could expect to rapidly capture the urban area.”

It’s generous of her to explain things to him in an if not careful way, then at least in detail.

“We’d be awfully lucky if the partisans started shit with no prospect of

success. Our problem at present is that, sadly, the chances of that happening are slim."

When everyone asks with their eyes, *How come?* she declares, "Frankly, the enemy mage units that dropped in there are commandos who have come to cause a disturbance. As long as they don't get reinforcements, holding the city center should be no problem for our forces."

As far as Tanya can see, commandos are guerrillas. In other words, they're the guys who are the best at the things people hate. Considering that the Northern Army Group division is prepared to protect against a landing on the coast, it goes without saying that the enemy would target the city.

"The issue is whether the garrison can chase down units so highly mobile as mage units."

Let's be straight. Garrisons are slow, so the best they can do is defend a point. It's questionable whether a slow, second-rate division will even be able to hold the line.

"…It's less about holding a position than searching and destroying."

"Exactly. Which is why—" Tanya is in the middle of saying what everyone figures she will say, *this is where we come in*, when a knock on the door interrupts her.

"Lieutenant Serebryakov, coming in."

"Welcome back, Lieutenant. What did the General Staff have to say?"

"We've been ordered to help mop up. They assessed the situation as a raid by a regiment-strength number of Federation commandos and are giving the order for multiple strategic reserve units including our Kampfgruppe to deploy."

"Hmm…roger that."

One glance at the written orders is enough to make what the higher-ups are saying clear. They probably figured this would be too much for the local garrison, with their lack of mobility, to handle.

It's an order to go beat them out of the bushes.

This job is always the same when it comes to being sent off somewhere by a

single sheet of paper.

“Sheesh, they sure got on top of that faster than I expected.”

“So?”

“Yes, Major Weiss. You probably already know.”

Naturally, the orders in her hand are to sortie. As usual, the General Staff’s judgment was quick and decisive.

But the implications of this particular judgment being *so* quick are terribly grave.

The Northern Army Group has become such a bunch of lazy hermits if they need to rely on the home country to hunt a few commandos for them. The fact that the General Staff made such a fast decision means that the situation is worse than anticipated… It’s proof that units with the energy to tolerate maneuver battles are scarce. Or perhaps that the only troops up north are newbies with no experience?

We may not be busy at the moment, but if the strategic reserves under direct command of the General Staff are being mobilized, that’s proof that things are bad enough that they’re forced to send us.

Anyhow, if we’re going to go, we had better get going.

“We have our orders. Troops, how do you feel about winter sports? Let’s go north of Norden for a nice game of tag.”

Ahhh, fuck.

So much for standing by in the home country.

“Let’s do it in grand style with public funding from our beloved fatherland—what do you say?”

“”””Understood!”””

“Good.” Tanya nods and starts firing off orders in rapid succession. “The situation being what it is, I’ll lead the main forces of the Kampfgruppe. Major Weiss, take the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion and go ahead of us.”

It’s imperative to travel both the sea and air routes to imperial Norden.

“Given the scope of the incursion, they’re probably not operating in divisions. If you want to conduct some recon-in-force–level attacks, that’s up to you.”

“Understood. We’ll be the vanguard.”

If she leaves things up to her nodding vice commander, she can trust there won’t be any mistakes in the details.

“Can we borrow Lieutenant Serebryakov?”

“Sorry, not this time. There won’t be enough people at HQ.”

“…That’s true.”

Regardless of how it would go in enemy territory, this is territory under our control, even if it is a military government. Considering the condition of the unit…Tanya concisely delivers her decision that they need to prioritize the functioning of their headquarters element.

If there’s any issue, it’s which route the main forces should take.

“What should the artillery do?”

Meybert had been silent up until now, but his question struck at that very point.

“I can’t make any promises.”

Just as Tanya is regretting having to say that, Serebryakov jumps to answer a phone call from the barracks guard that there’s a visitor. The moment she hears who it is, she calls out, “Colonel von Degurechaff, Colonel Uger is here to see you.”

“Oh?” Tanya’s voice is bright. “Colonel Uger? That’s great. We’ll have this settled in no time.”

She doesn’t even have to tell her to show him in. Or rather, he shows up so fast, it’s more like he barged in.

If the guy from the General Staff in charge of moving the troops comes at the same time as the order to deploy, that’s some blazingly fast work.

Delightfully, the moment he arrives, he gets right down to business.

“I’ll arrange land transport to the port. We can send the necessary equipment

directly to the north. I just need you to not count on having much heavy gear."

"You mean because we're hunting partisans?"

"The Norden sea route is the bottleneck, and we don't have the capacity to take a ton of heavy gear through there."

I have to say, this omission of even the time-appropriate greeting is exactly what I expect from a member of the General Staff elite. It's so easy to discuss work with someone who gets it.

Straightforward business gets replied to in kind.

"I'd at least like to send the most critical armored forces and artillery…"

The moment he looks at her, he sighs. "The supply system is set up for an alpine battle in Norden."

He implies that it's basically impossible, which prompts Tanya to ask, "…What are the rails like north of Norden?"

"In short, all we have are some prewar lines that we've partially reopened. There's hardly any capacity for military rolling stock."

"I remember there being heavy equipment in Norden at the beginning of the war…"

"Yeah, we did send some. And we learned our lesson, Colonel. It's too hard to supply armored troops up there."

"Sorry, but are guns an issue?"

"They have spare equipment up there, so you'll be fine. Really." He winced. "The biggest problem is once we send everyone in, it's not so easy to get them out."

When we poured troops into the Entente Alliance after getting embroiled in Norden issues, the Republic blasted us in the flank.

For the Empire and the Imperial Army General Staff, going through that trauma once was plenty. That's why the Kampfgruppe was formed as a compact unit for strategic deployment.

It was all out of a desire for strategic flexibility.

But those in the field have their own ideas. As a commander, Tanya has to state her concerns.

“I understand the situation; *however…*even if we have artillery, taking away our armored forces is out of the question. Are you saying to take all our tank crews and turn them into infantry?”

The whole point of having a combined arms unit is to have a combination of arms.

If you take tank crews out of their tanks and make them fight, that’s what you call “infantry.” And tankmen without tanks are little better than amateurs.

“…Hmm. That’s a good point…” But after thinking on it, the response Uger comes up with is unexpected. “Oh, what if we made them motorcycle troops?”

“M-motorcycle troops?”

“If you’re mainly worried about mobility, they’ll definitely come in handy. And against partisans like this, they’re not a bad idea. Well, I heard your enemy is actually invading Federation mages, but how about it?” He’s awfully perceptive. Still, even if it’s a good plan, an officer needs to know where their supplies are coming from.

“Tell me more about the bikes.”

“They were seized from the Republican Army, but the Railroad Department has gotten ahold of some in good condition.”

If they were seized, that means they’re outside the official count. So yes, it would be possible to be flexible with them. But then again, since they aren’t official issue, they may not match.

It doesn’t really matter if a group of individuals has different vehicles. But what Tanya needs are vehicles for a unit.

“You’ll have to excuse me for asking, but can you get enough of the same model to outfit a whole unit?”

Uger’s reply is a silent nod. He continues his confident affirmative verbally, “If a company’s worth will do, I’ll have them prepped for you right away on my authority.”

“They won’t break down on us? I just hope they don’t turn into decorations while we wait for replacement parts that never come.”

Uger laughs off her concern. “That’s a great question, Colonel von Degurechaff. It’s important to maintain a questioning attitude toward that kind of operational assumption. But I hope you’ll remember who you’re asking.”

The man proudly puffing out his chest is a logistics expert.

This is what it means to have a home front you can be thankful for, one that understands the field of operations and can offer appropriate support. How reassuring it is to have a friend tell you it’s no problem. Everybody needs connections they can trust. Long live social capital!

“…What a rude thing for me to ask a logistics expert. I do hope you’ll forgive me.”

Whether taxis, company cars, or yes, even military vehicles, it’s assumed for operation that they will be standardized and uniform. If we discount the detail that they’re seized machines, the fact that there are enough to go around is good.

Tanya bobs her head in apology.

If repairs and a supply of spare parts can be guaranteed, then Tanya personally has no complaints.

If there is anything… Tanya throws the ball to her subordinate in attendance who had been sitting quietly.

“Captain Ahrens, what do you think?”

“We’d be happy to have them.”

“It’s all right with you?”

She asked because she wants to honor the opinion of the people who will actually be using them, but the reply that instantly comes back is somewhat unexpected. She didn’t think he would agree so readily to being converted from armored troops in tanks into much more vulnerable motorcycle troops.

“It’s definitely better than being stuck holding down the barracks in the home country. Our tanks can get a total overhaul, and we can be kids again racing

around the fields and mountains."

"I see." Tanya gets it. She doesn't want to leave her troops behind if she doesn't have to, either.

It's not specifically to do with Ahrens. The bonds of all troops to their unit are tremendously strong—even more so when you're an armored unit commander in charge of tight-knit tank crews.

"Oh, there is one thing, though." Ahrens speaks up earnestly in an anxious tone. "This is all just until we get our tanks back after they get spruced up, right?"

"That's an extremely reasonable worry." I'm sure they would hate to have to trade their tanks for motorcycles. His thought makes a great deal of sense, so Tanya chimes in, "Colonel Uger, I hate to force this on a great logistics expert such as yourself, but…can we get that in writing?"

When she glances at him, he seems half-understanding, half-disappointed? *You really have to keep your wits about you with this one.*

If we hadn't said anything, who knows where he would have sent our equipment! Saying an elite in the General Staff has a nasty personality is a compliment, but surely there has to be some limit.

"I can't get anything past you—all right. I'll make it not just something from me but proper orders negotiated through the Service Corps."

"I appreciate it."

"Well, I get it. You were the guys who would have been losing gear."

For a moment, Tanya's about to rail back at him reproachfully, but she immediately closes her mouth.

She understands how he feels.

When they were short on supplies, she demanded one thing after another. Naturally, the receivers of the requests were the guys in the rear. Given that Uger bore the brunt of that, she probably needs to view his "tricks" with a little more tolerance.

Despising the thrifty one is the very incarnation of foolish sectionalism that

disregards the organization as a whole.

Boasting that you can plan absolutely everything the way the Communists do is idiotic, but without a genie on your side, no one can avoid selection and concentration.

“It’s an awful lot to juggle, huh?”

For the one making sure the limited resources get where they need to go? Of course it is.

“That’s for sure. Well, I’d best be taking my leave.”

As he stands with his cap under his arm, he smiles awkwardly. I should probably be grateful for the sort of friendship that gets someone to come out at this time when called.

We’re both pros.

So let’s do what we need to do.

“Well, I wish you luck.”

“You can count on me.”

EARLY APRIL, UNIFIED YEAR 1927, FORMER ENTENTE ALLIANCE TERRITORY, NEAR THE OSFJORD

Looking up at the sky, *I’m back…* The wind blew through her hair and the air she breathed in smelled like home.

I’ve been gone from these shores for so long, yet it feels like only a short time has passed.

Father, I’m home.

I’ve returned to the country we all tried to protect.

Even the ground beneath my feet feels different. This is where I, we, my people, were born and raised, and it’s where they died.

…This is home.

It’s what I, what we all, need to protect.

It's what we swore to our friends who fell along the way, what I swore to my father, that we'll regain.

Okay then. Mary enthusiastically joined her partisan friends who breezily came to meet her, and they walked back to joint headquarters step in step.

Since it was a fight to liberate her fatherland, she was especially enthusiastic.

The partisans, who had basically been fighting alone all this time, traded cigarettes with the Commonwealth and Federation mages who had come running from far across the sea, and they began chatting in a relaxed mood.

When the partisan leaders met Lieutenant Colonel Drake and Colonel Mikel, they passionately embraced as if they were at a party, while the propaganda corps showed up with cameras, and their shutters got busy snapping away.

The sight of the brothers-in-arms exchanging firm handshakes was a moving testament to their solidarity.

At least that's how it looked to someone with pure eyes.

But there was something the girl who was ready to fight with her friends to take back their country didn't know. Before getting down to business, the partisans and the soldiers were only conscious of how they looked in the photo because they knew they needed these shots.



And so her pure, noble spirit came crashing into reality.

The moment they started talking about the issue at hand, the partisans began expressing disapproval of the large-scale guerrilla attack that Drake and Mikel proposed.

“…You want to aim for the imperial torpedoes? Don’t be stupid!”

The response the Entente Alliance partisan practically spat was one Mary never imagined.

“Wh-what’s that supposed to mean?”

“You guys are leaving right away. But we have to stay here and fight. If we draw their attention like that…”

It *was* pretty unfair.

Mary wanted to strike with tenacity, but the partisan leaders tried to talk her down, their expressions sour.

This is our battlefield, they said. But Mary couldn’t believe it when she heard that. She had come all the way here to fight.

“We’re all in the same boat, aren’t we? Fighting for the same objectives?”

“Being a partisan means knowing that fighting head-on isn’t the only way to fight a war. Isn’t that right, little lady?”

“But we have that ability—to fight the Imperial Army head-on!”

She had trained and she had lost friends along the way. The whole point was to liberate their home country. They all wanted to be a strength to their fatherland.

So why?!

“We’ll do what we can, bit by bit, to drive the Empire off! What’s wrong with that?!”

Why won’t they understand?

“…You’re so young. Cool your jets. The problem isn’t weapons and power.”

“Then what *is* the problem?”

She was shocked that they were sighing at her. *Why can't I get through to them?*

"Someone like you who ran away wouldn't understand."

"I came back!"

"Must have taken some nerve." The older man snickering didn't even try to hide the disgust in his twisted expression.

The partisans should be our allies in the fight against the Empire, so why are they looking at us like that? Like we're outsiders?

It makes no sense that they won't accept us.

Are we wrong to consider them friends? Why would people from home say such a horrible thing?

The tensed corners of her mouth were nearly driven to loose that question. If things had gone on like that, she definitely would have spat some harsh words.

The only reason she managed to avoid it was the flash in Drake's eyes. "Lieutenant Sue! That's enough."

When he grabbed her shoulders and pulled her back, she returned to herself.

The partisans scowled at her while her superiors had vaguely hollow smiles plastered on.

She wasn't a girl who couldn't read the room.

Mary knew exactly how her criticism would have been taken. Though it didn't feel good, she was still capable of stepping on the brakes.

Having been pulled to the back, she looked on as they negotiated with exaggerated politeness. *Why?*

"I'm sorry my subordinate caused trouble."

"…To think that a Commonwealth officer would understand so well. What a sad era we live in."

"To hell with this era where we have no choice but to hand guns to children. Now then, I would be happy to hear the opinion of the experts on the ground here. What do you recommend as our target?"

Drake and the partisans were all buddy-buddy as if they knew something…

Mary held her tongue, but inside her, questions were swirling. *Why do they listen to Drake, but what I say doesn't seem to resonate?*

No. She shook her head. *If I'm wrong, I need to ask where I'm wrong.*

I should listen now.

Then I can say what I think, she tried to convince herself, doing her best to regain her composure.

For the liberation of my country…

For the land of my father…

She could control herself and listen to what these proud resistance fighters had to say.

Her focused gaze was stern, but it was because she was in earnest.

"We want you to hit the coastal radar site and the torpedo boat supply bases they've built around the fjords on the outskirts."

It was weird how Mikel nodded as if he was on the same page as them after thinking silently for a moment, but even so, Mary was excited to attack Imperial Army bases.

That must be what they need. So I'll put my all into it, too. If I do that, I know we'll be able to overcome our differences.

…Because we're allies.

Even if they had different opinions, the objectives they believed in were the same. Having decided to quietly observe, she watched; she waited, sure that Mikel would start talking about how they could defeat the Empire.

"I understand what you're trying to say. In order to cooperate well, fighting as you suggest is probably our only choice."

"Thanks. We don't want to cause a disturbance in the city."

They bumped fists and appeared to be getting along in a way that was quite reassuring. But something about it didn't sit right with Mary.

“We won’t cause you trouble.”

Mikel’s simple comment felt too strange to her.

“The pests will fight on the sidelines like pests should.”

“Is it all right to say I’m surprised? Honestly, I didn’t expect people from the Federation to…”

“Didn’t an agent from the Commissariat for Internal Affairs get in touch with you?”

“Yes, we heard from them, but honestly we didn’t quite believe it.”

“…Well, action forms the foundation of trust, so it makes sense.”

Mikel continued talking cheerfully, but Mary couldn’t understand it. *Why is he being so passive?*

“We won’t get in the way of your *phony war*. But let us know if there’s anything we can help with.”

What does that mean?

She’d been listening all this time, but nothing he was saying made sense to her. As far as she could tell from the flow of conversation, it was like they were…having a meeting about *not* fighting.

It can’t be. She tried to shake the idea out of her head, but the meeting to coordinate the operation seemed more like a gathering of conspirators.

“May I ask something? What’s going on?” Mary interrupted in spite of herself.

The sound of her eager deep breath was bizarrely loud in his ears.

“Lieutenant Sue, contain yourself.”

He couldn’t really say it went against his expectations. As Lieutenant Colonel Drake reproved the young first lieutenant on the verge of going off the rails, he mentally sighed.

In order to avoid an incident, they probably needed to step away for a little while. It didn’t make him happy to say it, but though the brass was probably expecting Sue to be a bridge to the Entente Alliance people…she was immature.

Not only was she not useful, she was actually a nuisance.

Still, he couldn't very well shoo her away, nor could he tell her to pipe down and live as a civilian in the Entente Alliance.

When his only option was to lecture her, of course he was going to sigh.

"Excuse me, Colonel Mikel. I'll explain things to her. Can I leave you to continue the resistance meeting?"

"…That's fine, but…"

Drake bowed his head apologetically as Mikel nodded to show he understood. He could just barely hold back his gripes at the higher-ups. It was better for him and the subordinate he couldn't control to withdraw rather than get laughed at for poor discipline.

What an amateur Lieutenant Sue is if she still doesn't get it!

Where did she do her officer training? All he could do was lament how dangerous it was when mages were pushed through their training too quickly.

There may be a shortage of officers due to the war, but to think we'd have to be giving the rank of first lieutenant to someone who isn't even qualified! Drake faced the subordinate he'd had to drag out of the meeting like he would face a headache.

I thought I understood how reckless she could be. But I never imagined she wouldn't be able to understand partisans from her own country!

She had vented and complained so many times, it was absurd, but apparently her worries were still going to keep bubbling up.

"I'm surprised you don't understand. I didn't think you would be against measures to protect the Entente Alliance's people."

If the one coming to him with a pouty face and an objection was a little girl, Drake might have found her charming.

Sadly for both of them…

Mary Sue didn't seem conscious of the fact that she was here as a first lieutenant, not a girl.

“…Where did you learn to act like that?”

“Colonel Drake? I wasn’t trying to do anything!”

The look in her eyes said she just wanted to get back at the Empire, and it wasn’t as if he couldn’t comprehend that.

Even Drake was human. A flesh-and-blood human. If the enemy was occupying his homeland, he would want to put up a tough resistance. As an individual, he understood.

He understood, but as a soldier, it disgusted him.

“Are you planning on rampaging through the city?”

He was honestly surprised that he had to keep going with this stern look on his face, but… *Does she really not get it?*

It was in the major city that the imperial guards were stationed.

“If you go on a huge rampage, you know you’ll catch civilians in the cross fire, don’t you?!”

“I have no intention of carrying out that sort of attack!”

“It’s not an issue of intention!”

How many times had he heard someone say, *I didn’t mean to do that*? Was that supposed to make up for a mountain of corpses?

“…‘Stay out of the city. We especially don’t want any regular army members in the city.’ That’s what the partisans are saying—can’t you see that?”

Anyone examining the partisans’ suggestions for where to attack should clearly understand. All the targets were remote or at least on the outskirts in barely populated areas. They were keeping the number of people who would get caught up in an attack to a minimum.

Frankly, they were environments where the Imperial Army and the regular army could have repeated scuffles.

“I don’t understand a thing you’re saying. If we help them, we should be able to resist more effectively.”

“I’m pretty sure we’re a nuisance.”

“Huh?”

Perhaps she hadn’t considered that possibility? First Lieutenant Mary Sue’s mouth made a strange sound like a broken machine.

…It won’t be easy to make her understand.

I’ll have to spell it out, Drake realized and spoke carefully as he looked her straight in the eyes.

“We’re a bother to them. We’re second only to the Imperial Army in terms of headaches. Lieutenant, I know you don’t want to hear what I’m saying, but please just understand.” He pitted his words against her glistening eyes. “Listen, the partisans are only reluctantly lending us a hand. We can’t cause too much trouble for them.”

If we go into the city, there’ll be problems.

That went for the partisan camp as well as the Commonwealth and Federation Armies.

Even the Imperial Army probably didn’t want to fight in an urban area. It was almost strange how due to this unspoken desire for peace, the former Entente Alliance cities were maintaining relative tranquility.

And from the point of view of the law of war, too, any delicate conflicts in urban areas were to be avoided if possible.

“What?! W-we’re—!”

Before Drake could stop her, Mary had run back to the meeting and was asking the partisans directly.

If he suppressed his thought, *After I said all that…*, he could see how she might want to run off like that. His personal opinion wasn’t that she didn’t understand but that she didn’t want to accept reality.

She sounded frantic as she asked if they were really in the way.

As far as Drake could see as he watched, the partisans’ answer to her was sincere.

“Please don’t think badly of us. But your presence here will cause trouble.”

That statement murmured with a bitter expression spoke to the situation the partisans were in.

They were rebels. But they weren't an army.

Every single one of them was also a person who lived here. Their battlefield was a place to fight but also a space where people were leading their lives.

…Which was why, while they wanted to cause losses to the enemy, they had to maintain the delicate balance that protected their day-to-day existance.

"You could say the partisan movement is built on a strange equilibrium."

Saying it was a symbiotic existence with the enemy was going too far.

But the fact that the Imperial Army was garrisoned on this former Entente Alliance land couldn't be ignored. Under the current circumstances, the slight peace just barely being maintained in the urban area would crumble.

"But that, that's collusion…"

"Stop right there, Lieutenant Sue… Let's just be happy that if we tear things up on the outskirts, the garrison presence in the city will weaken."

It was less that she didn't understand and more that, emotionally, she couldn't agree. Drake sighed as he pulled her away.

War is complicated. These things happen in the field. Getting her to understand that was a monumental task. War wasn't just about shooting guns.

When, where, and how to fight were the sort of troublesome things an officer entrusted with subordinates had to consider…but apparently that hadn't made it into her training.

"I'm sorry my subordinate was so rude."

"Well, it's an issue to do with our own request. Thanks for being so considerate, though."

As the partisans bowed their heads in appreciation, they were probably frustrated, too. But they knew that realistically this was the way things had to be done.

Why couldn't that girl understand these subtleties instead of throwing her fit?

“You’re going to be fine with that?!”

“Are you saying they’re being too servile?”

“Ngh!”

Given the way she went silent, that must have been what she wanted to say. Even considering she was the daughter of the resistance fighter Colonel Anson Sue, she was being too narrow-minded.

Disdain, contempt, and pity were the furthest things from comprehension.

“Lieutenant Sue, we’re troublemakers.”

“But…,” she started to argue, but Drake admonished her over and over. If she blew up here, there was no way things would end well.

The partisans weren’t emotional; they could be termed strategists who kept up a clever resistance. Their movement was the best resistance that could be maintained under the circumstances. Only an insane person would criticize them.

“You were able to escape your fatherland. Or maybe I should say you were lucky enough to.”

Honestly, he wanted to yell at her, *So why did you come back?*

If you think so fondly of your home country, then why can’t you show a little understanding to the people who were forced to stay?

“Many people had no choice but to remain. About the only ones who can criticize them are the children who got caught up in their circumstances.”

“So you can just say this is fine, then?!” she argued back, practically in tears.

But it was just a child’s moaning. This was a battlefield, it was reality, and it was the world of adults. It wasn’t a gentle place where your guardian would comfort you if you threw a fit.

“We probably should,” Drake said.

“But,” she gasped. Did she not expect him to say that? At least, she must not have agreed. Here she was raising her voice in stubborn determination. “This is the Entente Alliance homeland! Please consider the fact that it’s being occupied

by the Imperial Army!”

“Right. We should consider the fact that it’s being occupied by the Imperial Army.” *Are emotional arguments a problem of the heart, in the end?* “This is a battleground, but at the same time, it’s a place where people live. Think a bit about the troubles of people besides yourself!”

There was no reason the people of the Entente Alliance should wish that their country become a war zone. How ironic that the fight for liberation must always be fought at home.

“I can’t help it that you hate the enemy, and that’s fine—but Lieutenant Sue, we’re soldiers. I’m even one of the more lax ones, but orders are orders and duty is duty. I’ve got to have you keep that in mind.”

“…Understood.”

She reluctantly swallowed her argument. After giving her a stare that instructed her to return to her unit, Drake put the cigarette he’d taken out into his mouth.

If he didn’t have a smoke, he would never calm down.

Tobacco wasn’t recommended for aerial mages, but when you were this tired, you started to want one.

“Agh, this job is just awful,” he murmured and looked up at the sky.

Coordinating with the partisans was easier said than done—that was the realm they were in. Fighting the Imperial Army while keeping in mind the feelings of the people who didn’t want to have their home wrecked was going to be stressful.

Gazing at the former Entente Alliance sky alone, it was a heartless northern sky. The overcast sky of his country wasn’t known for its charm, either, but this wasn’t a very pleasant thing to look at far from home.

Things just don’t go how you want, he lamented.

He knew moaning wasn’t allowed, but his angst was real.

“…Mind if I join you, Colonel Drake?”

At the sound of Mikel's voice as the colonel approached, Drake's blue mind instantaneously switched back into a soldier's. "Not at all. Any change in our situation?"

"Shockingly enough, a party liaison among the partisans authorized us to act according to the situation."

"Oh? That's a surprise." It was so unexpected, his opinion spilled right out. "If you'll forgive me for asking, Colonel Mikel, it's not someone trying to scam us, is it?"

"They're real. I have no doubt about that."

I knew the partisans and the Federation intelligence agency were maintaining contact, but I didn't realize there was a liaison from the Commissariat for Internal Affairs here!

"You may not be able to tell the difference, but to us, it's clear at a glance. You can't mistake the kind of eyes you used to always see in the concentration camp."

Drake's look said he was having a hard time believing this news, but Mikel's level reply drove the doubt from his mind.

"…That's some reach they have. To think they'd send a supervisor all the way out here. The Commissariat for Internal Affairs is a ruthless bunch. Ah…" Drake caught himself and backpedaled. "Sorry, I went too far there."

"Don't worry about that. It's the truth, and right now we're enveloped in a spirit of almost limitless tolerance."

To Drake, it was unexpected that Mikel would be all smiles. *I thought for sure this was a pain, but…is it actually good news?*

"Orders from the Commissariat for Internal Affairs… They're leaving this entirely up to us. The mission is to harass the Imperial Army and 'build trust with the people.'"

This was what it meant to smile with an "Ohhh?"

It had come utterly out of the blue.

"Sounds like we'll be able to have an all right time on this job."

“For all that, you sound awfully stressed.”

“You can tell?” Drake winced and grumbled. “I think Lieutenant Sue and others from the Entente Alliance find this situation frustrating. This is the kind of time someone is apt to go off the rails.”

“Sorry for the trouble.”

Drake was thankful for the no-frills sincerity. At least he was proud to be blessed with such a brother-in-arms. A man didn’t need a greater reason than that to fight.

“I’m proud to have been given a mission alongside a soldier with values like that.”

He really meant it.

He knew this shitty battlefield inside and out, but if he could have a man like this with him in the trenches, he would fly anywhere.

Overcast sky, formidable cold.

And on top of that, the icy stares of the partisans. If he could take all that, then what was there to be afraid of? He was with his people.

He had his rowdy marine mage unit and a fellow commander he could trust.

I’ll be fine… Drake bumped fists with Mikel and flashed an invincible smile.

Let’s fulfill our duty.

Let’s make things make sense.

Let’s do what we have to do.

It’s always a simple matter.

“”To my rainy-day friend.””

[chapter]

VI

Structural Problems

Imperial Army Current Status: Fundamental issues
Solution: Cost performance
Problem: External environment

Lieutenant Colonel Tanya von Degurechaff's scribbles

[chapter] VI Structural Problems

APRIL, UNIFIED YEAR 1927, FORMER ENTENTE ALLIANCE TERRITORY, SALAMANDER KAMPFGRUPPE GARRISON

The Empire's handling of the combined Federation-Commonwealth forces' invasion of former Entente Alliance territory got off to a completely late start. In Norden and even farther north, the snow seemed like it would finally start melting.

Having deployed multiple units, including a highly mobile first-rate Kampfgruppe, Imperial Army authorities were running up against the difficulties inherent in their hard-core military framework. In short, the military org's bureaucracy wasn't flexible enough in a pinch. Thus, the large-scale imperial cleanup operation had other major burdens on top of the partisans doing as they pleased.

Of course, it's always the ones in the field who notice the contradictions. Lieutenant Colonel Tanya von Degurechaff is no exception as she is forced to confront the various issues in the north whether she wants to or not.

"…Our orders are way too removed from what's actually going on here."

The Imperial Army's current status has fundamental issues; that is, the regular army is playing tag with partisans who don't fight.

It's so futile. It's like trying to use a steam hammer to crack walnuts.

The solution would prioritize cost performance and give a role to people like civilian police. But in the external environment of this occupied territory, the likelihood of that coming to fruition is low.

"This isn't something the people in the field can fix on their own."

She's complaining in spite of herself. If you ignore the discontent bug, it multiplies when you aren't looking. *This is no good*, and once she collects herself again, it's the standards of her job that occupy her mind.

She has her position as an officer to consider. Though she's managed to keep herself from cradling her head in despair at her situation, when she steps back to take a look at things, she can't help but deplore the absurdity of the setup.

She locks her sigh up inside.

If she can't run away, then she has to face reality. She might as well embrace it.

"This just in from the 1079th Aerial Mage Company. Engaged with an enemy partisan unit in sector B-15. Managed to acquire two pistols and some explosives."

"Report from the Sixteenth Division's checkpoint. Have restrained a woman trying to break through and seized weapons and bombs. They're requesting our Kampfgruppe's motorcycles as transport for military police."

The reports themselves are far from stressful.

It's a different world compared to encounter battles with brigade- or regiment-size units in the harsh war zone of the east.

At first, she feels on top of things. She even has time to muse about her off-kilter impressions—*It's so peaceful*—as she sips pseudo-coffee. There are a lot of garrison- and coastal-defense units, and somehow there is plenty of intel about the area. Even the seasoned officers of the Salamander Kampfgruppe are almost relaxed, thinking the mission is shaping up to be a breeze—until they realize the comparisons they were making are wildly unsuitable.

By the time they realize, they're in a type of quagmire. It's not normal to have the military organization running around out here to catch a handful of people.

It might be cruel to say I expected this, but the reaction is anguish.

Let's be frank.

"This is like using a meat cleaver to bone a chicken."

"Colonel?"

Tanya pays attention to appearances, replying to her considerate adjutant that it's nothing. "Just talking to myself, Lieutenant. More importantly, what do you think it means that the partisans haven't emerged from the urban area?"

"Huh?"

"…Peace in the city. War in the country. It's strange—they're acting as if they want to avoid urban war."

Usually, these people's resistance movements are all about revolting in the streets. That's how it was with the French Revolution, that's how it was with modern rebellions, that's how it was with the violent proletariat revolution, and even contemporary uprisings and riots can be said to be like that.

Her adjutant with the vacant look on her face doesn't get it? First Lieutenant Serebryakov isn't stupid, but…

"Here's a little lesson for you, Lieutenant. Listen up."

"Yes, ma'am."

"We were deployed here to counter the partisans. But you can't really call what we're doing cleaning up militia. We're basically chasing local gangs or mafia."

"O…kay," her subordinate answers carelessly. She doesn't seem to be grasping the severity of the situation. How well does she understand the fact that we're not facing a military organization?

"Visha, use your head a little."

"…I have no idea what the issue is."

Honesty is a virtue. I should praise her. But I'm not too keen on the fact that she doesn't know, Tanya thinks as she reluctantly reveals the answer and continues the conversation. "The enemy's main objective isn't even to get rid of us. The partisan resistance in this area is essentially a demonstration to show off the fact that they exist."

Mafia and gangs simply continue surviving. It's not like they ever aim to kill all the police.

The partisans in this region are the same.

They're lurking in a back alley while the Imperial Army "police" maintain order on the surface. They'll continue getting in our way and hope for our eventual defeat.

"So maybe…Entente Alliance partisans are a group that chooses steadiness over flashiness."

It would actually be easy to deal with them if they actually pursued major military gains.

Or more like… Tanya works her mind through her headache. It's impossible to eradicate partisans who can bide their time.

"They're surprisingly careful and persistent."

Amateurs who haven't been through training are easily excitable. A mob that has been given weapons but nothing else makes for one impulsive group of people.

The classic example of this are irregular soldiers. Even trained professionals risk cracking under the pressures of the battlefield. To lure, wait, and endure is far more rigorous a task than it seems on paper.

"Usually militias are low on perseverance."

These are rebels who aren't in a hurry but instead are forging on step by step, never growing discouraged or giving up. Even just the fact that they're so calm speaks to their unusual levels of discipline and determination.

An enemy who can wait is a nightmare for public order.

The special solidarity and control in the mafias and gangs of history and tradition come about through training by the core members, who were fit for that role to begin with. Considering the relatively peaceful conditions in the former Entente Alliance, it would be strange to assume it had built up over years.

"This is an organization who knows how to bide their time, and they were built up from nothing. Our enemy is fucking skilled, Lieutenant."

In history, there are more cases where organizations were unable to wait and exploded. And if you're using a strict definition, then it's definitely the vast

majority of them. It's like the idea of fleet in being. If your passive resistance isn't supported by a strong will, you generally end up getting worn down in psychological warfare.

Prudence stems not from cowardice but from bravery.

The fact that idiots who equate bravery with loudly proclaiming their aggressive stances aren't the main faction of our enemy speaks to their intelligence and tenacity. People who can really persevere toward their objective are the true danger.

Anyone can die—that's simple. Even a dummy or a fool can get killed. It's a type of foolishness Tanya has a hard time understanding, but she has no intention of bothering to attempt to understand fools.

But a good rival like this, who knows how to wait for their chance, I'll respect.

And having done that, I say:

Go to hell.

I hate you from the bottom of my heart. Anyone making extra work for me can rot. Why do good-for-nothings think it's so fun to get in the way of hardworking people like earnest Tanya?

"It's a big difference from the former Entente Alliance government."

"From a perseverance perspective, that's true…or really, I suppose that's the reason."

Serebryakov's comment really hits the nail on the head. Tanya sighs when she realizes.

"I can only say, 'I see.'"

"Colonel?"

"Most of the people of the Entente Alliance know."

Her subordinate's eyes ask, *Know what?* so she reveals the answer.

"These are people from the same generation who learned through experience what rushing ahead leads to. They understand how the Entente Alliance army disintegrated after exploding and crossing the border into Norden." They've

most certainly paid experience hefty tuition fees. “So they acquired knowledge.” When you think about it, the matter is rather simple. People saw what happened on Entente Alliance soil and heard about it, so they learned. “Solidarity, patience, a clear strategic philosophy… The Entente Alliance government was a teacher who gave them an excellent education through examples of what not to do,” Tanya grumbles, fed up with it all.

The seeds of resistance had been sown through the enlightening act of folly. The depressing past that haunts them with every recollection of how much they were made to suffer is having lasting effects.

“Thanks to that, now we have to suffer.” Grateful to her adjutant for politely remaining silent, Tanya heaves a sigh.

These guys in the Entente Alliance are resisting us passively.

If it were military opposition, we could obliterate them with ease. I have no doubt that if there was a centralized uprising, the Imperial Army could annihilate it. But that’s only if we can find and pummel them.

Your arms will get tired if you keep swinging them, though.

Even pro boxers can’t throw infinite jabs. And though it might not seem that way, armies actually have glass fists. They might as well be carrying bombs on their shoulders.

A giant army erodes just by moving.

When a corporation moves, it can create profits, or at least it’s trying to. But each time an army moves, it liquefies another huge chunk of taxpayer money.

…At that rate, it’s practically socialism. Ugh. Tanya shudders at the similarities.

“…We don’t have a moment to lose. If we don’t find a way out of this soon, the military is going to self-destruct. Any organization that forgets the word *sustainability* is bound to collapse.”

The quiet remark is terrifying. By nature, Tanya von Degurechaff has sense both common and good.

And if you’re facing a threat that could cause your organization to collapse,

and you haven't made arrangements to transfer ships, it would be impossible not to shudder.

Mentally, is she shedding tears or sweat?

In these uncertain times, all a mere good citizen can do is face reality with sincerity and humility.

It's just as Tanya is about to get sentimental and utter, *Reality, huh?* that the telephone begins furiously ringing.

Serebryakov excuses herself to pick up, and during the conversation, Tanya switches mental gears.

"It's a joint report from the maintenance and armored companies."

"Go on."

"The number of motorcycles breaking down is on the increase, and if things continue, in a few days they won't have enough working to use. Captain Ahrens is complaining."

"Colonel Uger guaranteed them. So what, can we not even trust logistics authorities in the General Staff anymore?"

Sheesh, thinks Tanya, and she's about to hurl her bitter sentiments in the direction of the imperial capital when Serebryakov awkwardly counters.

"No, the parts are arriving on time…"

"Then what's the problem?"

Under Tanya's gaze, Serebryakov timidly explains. "It's…less a problem of parts than of personnel and structure. In the east, our maintenance company was getting support from the Eastern Army Group's maintenance unit as well as the tank repair base."

Of course we were. Tanya looks at her adjutant in confusion.

Though each force is self-sufficient, it's natural to divide labor in an organization. The armored unit can't very well overhaul all its own tanks.

Motorcycles may be a different type of vehicle, but they should work the same way.

“We should be able to get support here, too, though.”

“The units are engaged in search or pursuit missions, so they’re operating in all different areas.”

“They should be able to access the nearest depot, though.”

“Yes, in the east, that was true. And they’re authorized here, but critically there aren’t repair bases nearby. Even the closest one is quite a distance, so the procedure for sending the parts gets complicated. And since we only have a limited number of mechanics…”

Tanya waves a hand at Serebryakov to indicate she doesn’t have to say any more and replies, “So we have parts, but circumstances aren’t conducive to making the repairs.”

It’s pretty grave if we have workshops but not enough ways to get the parts to the workshops. Distribution is an industry that gets ridiculed for profiting off moving items from left to right, but only Communists are stupid enough to make plans without taking it into account.

“No, wait a second, Lieutenant. Where are the Northern Army Group’s maintenance companies? I don’t recall any issues with repairing equipment when we did the operation over the Northern Sea.”

“Most of them are stationed at air force or navy bases.”

The reply causes Tanya to click her tongue, which is rare.

Most of the garrisoned troops in the north are supposed to simply dig in and hold their position. There’s no expectation of maneuver warfare, so focusing their limited repair capabilities on the air and navy fleets is probably the efficient thing to do.

…*Problematically enough*, I suppose it should be said, we got called here because those guards holding down the fort can’t give chase, but then we don’t have maintenance support. Apparently, someone decided it was unnecessary.

There was no need for a system of stationing maintenance companies along the road to fix dropout vehicles, in part due to the fact that we had captured enemy railroads in this occupied territory—we could just use the rails.

For long distances, instead of moving things ourselves, we could use trains.

“If they didn’t expect to be branching out over long distances, concentrating the maintenance companies in the capital makes sense.”

“That’s right, ma’am. And as a result, they don’t have much experience doing maintenance on broken-down vehicles, which slows things down. At present, they really can’t handle everything in a timely manner…”

“Yeah.” Tanya nods again. Whatever the reason, all she can do is accept it. “Well, it’s a reasonable excuse. I guess we have no choice but to rethink the motorcycle company’s rotation.”

It doesn’t feel good to have limits placed on the use of an arm that should be mobile. A quick response unit that can’t respond quickly is about as useless as it gets.

Still, since it’s not a problem of the soldiers but of gear, the one to blame is the commander.

In other words, if someone is looking for the fool who couldn’t get the proper support for their troops, you’ll have to kick the ass of Lieutenant Colonel Tanya von Degurechaff.

“I suppose all I can do is shamefully acknowledge it as my error and improve, but…well, saying it was unexpected is an excuse, huh?”

Tanya quietly accepts that she stupidly misread the situation.

Turning into the kind of dreadnought-class fool who can’t accept their mistakes is intolerable to a human being’s sense, both common and good. The world already has Being X—it doesn’t need any more of that kind of idiot. Ultimately, if you’re a rational, intelligent life-form, you’re familiar with the concept of unbearable shame.

“Alert from the Norden military district! Detecting what appears to be enemy mages! Sector B-39, position indefinite. The on-duty company needs to scramble—now!”

At the sound of the voice of the apparently on-duty person who came flying into the room, Tanya returns to herself. *Again?* She clicks her tongue and stands

with Serebryakov to rush over to headquarters.

When they race into the room, Tanya eyes the huge map on the wall and thinks a bit. *B-39 is pretty far away.*

“Grantz is the commander on duty to respond?”

“Yes, Lieutenant Grantz’s unit is on standby.”

On her feet before the map about to give the order for them to move out, Tanya, somewhat belatedly in her tired brain, feels something sticking. When she considers it, she suddenly realizes.

Caution—preventable accidents should be prevented. Committing an error out of negligence in order to save a little work is proof of incompetence. As long as there’s a line of foolishness that mustn’t be crossed, it’s only natural to take precautions.

They seem to be hiding out in the area at the limit of our advance.

“…They sure picked an annoying spot. How far away can you get?”

There must be mages hiding out there, too. The Federation and Commonwealth combined unit is annoyingly cunning. Originally, we figured we could obliterate the enemy mage units primarily with the iron fist of the Salamander Kampfgruppe, but they continue to elude us.

I’m getting sick of chasing around these guys who pop up to assert their existence now and then by rampaging in a remote area.

“We don’t have enough cards in our hand, and plus, isn’t this just more wasted effort?”

If she sends out First Lieutenant Grantz’s unit, they won’t be back for a while. We’ll be out our scramble reserve.

“Lieutenant…after the scramble group leaves, are there personnel on deck to take their place?”

“No, there haven’t been any orders from Control. I imagine that means we’re supposed to handle it ourselves, but…”

“Nrrrgh.” Tanya growls in spite of herself. “What the heck?”

“Huh?”

“…They only let us rest a few hours.”

It takes a lot to not click her tongue in frustration. *I guess I have to admit it*, she thinks, keenly aware of her carelessness.

The lack of sleep is starting to impinge, to a startling degree, on her ability to think rationally.

Lowered ability to focus, more and more scattered thoughts, and an increase in minor mistakes—the result of which is a large accident that should have been possible to avoid.

There’s no magic cure for exhaustion. Or maybe there is something, but only if she can put up with severe side effects, like with the Elinium Type 95.

The Type 95…? Tanya turns to her orb and sighs. The dual-core orbs, like the Type 97 the 203rd Aerial Mage Battalion uses, perform well, but they tire you out that much more. The Type 95 is far worse, but it’s still a matter of degree.

“Regulation rest time is the bare minimum. You’re saying to put sleep-deprived mages on standby for scramble orders?” she snaps and silently begins fingering her cap.

The urge: *I want to throw it.*

The struggle: *I have to control myself.*

Ultimately, the conclusion is obvious. It goes without saying that reason must be upheld. But even if logic conquers emotions, it’s natural for obnoxious feelings to come up.

“What should I have them do?” Her adjutant’s attitude reflects that she has a proper grasp of Tanya’s intentions.

“Tell Lieutenant Grantz to hold off.”

“Ma’am?”

“Have him get one platoon ready to go scouting.” Upon giving that message, she speaks into the receiver quickly but calmly. “Norden Control, this is Salamander 01. I object to scrambling an entire company. I’d like to keep it to a

platoon for scouting purposes.”

“Salamander 01, explain your reasoning.”

She holds herself back from spitting, *It’s simple.*

If the controller she’s talking to is only adhering to the manual, it would be incredibly rude to dump her bad mood on him.

“If we send a whole mage company over a few partisans and mages, we’ll be the first to give out.” Does her controlled voice sound like one a pro wouldn’t have to be ashamed of? “I understand that piecemeal commitment is foolish, but my elite troops can do a hit-and-run. I’m confident in that as their commander.”

Given the principle of selection and concentration, preserving our spare energy seems like the wisest move.

The bold, aggressive combat mind-set is for the battlefield. If we foolishly dodge like an enraged bull, we risk getting a sharp jab.

“I find the current situation of accumulating exhaustion undesirable, so what do you think?”

“Norden Control, roger. Send up a platoon.”

“Thank you, Norden Control.”

Maybe it’s appropriate to celebrate that achievement with a sigh. Given the circumstances, that’s a step in the right direction. Identify your problem and improve things—that is always a human’s task.

“All right,” Tanya says. “Tell Lieutenant Grantz to send out that platoon. He himself should stay on standby.”

It’s great that Serebryakov acknowledges immediately. Tanya is about to think how it’s all due to good discipline when her cheery mood is abruptly dampened.

“He has a suggestion.”

Tanya looks up at her adjutant, who seems to be in an awkward spot.

She doesn’t even send the *What is it?* look. Serebryakov is a far better messenger than most. If she wasn’t able to reprove him, then it must mean he’s

on the phone ready to tell me he can't accept this.

I must be cursed. Are Being X and his ilk at it again? When will they learn? Tanya asks for the phone and preemptively shoots down what Grantz is about to say. "Lieutenant, there's no need for that *commander-leads-the-charge* mind-set. Is there anything else?"

"No, ma'am."

"So then you have nothing to say to me."

"Colonel, I'm sorry, but I have no intention of turning into an easy-chair commander! Please let me go!"

It's fine and good that he's not shrinking back before the enemy.

But the diverse array of enemies we face requires different fighting styles. Brave and bold are great, but calm and collected are also essential qualities for an officer to have. When combating an intelligent enemy, thinking is paramount.

Even a commander in the rear isn't just taking it easy. "Haaah," Tanya sighs and continues. "You're saying the commander of the company should leave the main forces behind? In the army, we call that reckless bravery. Even if waiting is hard, flying on ahead to make things easier on yourself won't be tolerated."

"Sending a platoon is no different from officer recon! Please!"

He must really mean it.

And Tanya doesn't want to stifle her subordinate's motivation. Even if she can't shake the concern over his impatience, he has piled up some experience.

It's not like he can't do it, thinks Tanya, weighing her options. If she has him sortie, she's down one company commander and he'll get more tired. Honestly, she would rather save him.

But she also has to think twice about quashing his volunteer spirit.

"It's a search-and-destroy mission, but there's no need to go chasing them too far. Can you prioritize gaining an understanding of the situation?"

"Of course! It's okay, then?"

“Unless those partisans are total numbskulls, they won’t hang around. If they do, you can have the rest of the company sortie.”

“Understood!”

It would probably be tactless to ask if he really understood.

“It’d be great if a chance like that really did come up.”

Grantz probably understands what she’s trying to say. Playing tag with the partisans is tough, even with the Salamander Kampfgruppe.

If we can fight, we can win.

That’s *if* we get the chance to fight.

“…You’re not to go chasing them, Lieutenant.”

“Of course not. You can count on me.”

“Good. I expect no headlong rushes.”

“Yes, ma’am! I’m heading out to respond now, so please excuse me!”

“Good luck.” Tanya hangs up and addresses her adjutant. “Lieutenant Serebryakov, coffee. Strong, please.”

To switch gears, she’ll treat the symptom. If you ingest too much caffeine, it affects you less. Then, since it’s less effective, you ingest a whole ton more and get caught in a vicious cycle.

Even if I’m not sure how many gallons of coffee I’ve flooded my stomach with, I can sense the undeniable fact that my thoughts are constrained by chronic lack of sleep.

I know all that. At the point Tanya is about to think, *Well, it’s better than too much alcohol…*, she gets confused.

It’s not pleasant to catch yourself stacking up excuses. In short…it’s a bad sign.

“This is a hotbed of human error.”

Knowing that and lamenting that nothing can be done is simply more whining. It’s an excuse I make to myself. Justifications should be for other people. Under no circumstances should you be using them on yourself. If you start lying to

yourself, then you're the same as a fool who has no choice but to fake it.

If I'm going to grow that weak-minded, I'd rather blow my brains out and get it over with. It would be a necessary act in accordance with intelligence and reason—and a lot more pleasant than continuing to disgrace myself.

Thus, Lieutenant Colonel Tanya von Degurechaff fires up her overly tired brain to show that though she may be a squishy human, she's sentient.

"…I'm too busy."

A summary of the situation reveals the issue.

"The root of all our problems is that we don't have enough people."

In other words, the burden on personnel is too heavy, and whenever someone drops out, the weight that falls on each person who remains increases proportionally in a vicious cycle.

The solution is incredibly simple.

"Either a reduction of labor or an increase in hands is unavoidable…"

Doesn't have to be anything fancy.

If there aren't enough people, we either need to add some or make the work go more efficiently.

That said, Tanya is plenty aware that carelessly taking the route of maximizing individual productivity in a personnel affairs way is dangerous in a military setting.

"Yeah, armies ultimately have to be formed with the assumption of attrition in mind… It's a challenge to tailor them to their environment, too…"

Human capital will be lost sooner or later. That's a given, since humans are creatures fated to die whether in times of war or peace. Unlike economic agents, which are guaranteed the eternal life of legal personhood, organic organisms must eventually cease functioning.

If gods do exist, they should recycle investments made in human capital a bit more effectively to improve productivity.

Unfortunately, it's self-evident that gods do *not* exist.

Ahhh, there Tanya reins in her scattered thoughts.

“I guess assigning solo shifts is out of the question. The issue around here wouldn’t even be robbers coming for the till but partisans. Getting burst in on by those fully armed, humorless guys would be terrible.”

People die even during peace, but they start to go at a horrific pace during a war. Even laborers who have a relatively good chance of working until retirement end up falling while they are still reliably part of the labor pool in their twenties and thirties during wartime. Not a shred of respect for social capital anywhere to be found.

“Then we just have to increase the number of hands by any means possible.”

The Imperial Army has already tapped all the population pools that can be mobilized, but it still has two options.

One is to begin the general conscription of women. That said, they’ve already been mobilized in the industrial sector. Considering current circumstances, we’re not at the point that we need combat personnel at the expense of manufacturing capacity.

Thankfully, the Empire’s situation isn’t that catastrophic. Even if arriving there is a battle against time, we’re holding out for now.

The more hopeful option is to employ the as-of-yet-untapped human resource pools of foreigners. Things like putting prisoners to work or recruiting voluntary troops are permitted under the law of war. There’s a lot we could do in the realm of the legal.

“So getting caught up in personnel-intensive counterinsurgency battles is putting the cart before the horse. Rather than charging in here to clean up the remaining enemies, it would be better to do an operation of gentle persuasion in the east… Well, it’s too late to say that now, but…”

Going in with no plan invites utter disaster. The Empire’s lost time and opportunity costs are both tremendous. It’s not even clear if we’ll be able to recover from this.

The way it handled the former Entente Alliance territory and the Principality of Dacia are model failures. The Imperial Army took a textbook approach of

making use of the local government organizations as a rule while attempting to maintain peace and order.

As a result, there were no lethal failures, but neither has there been success. To put it another way, the Imperial Army is dabbling in governance without a clear strategic objective. It's pretty arrogant to expect anything good to come of that.

"I can't believe we're going about setting up government agencies and ruling so haphazardly… I'm so torn whether to celebrate our excellent coping skills or lament our lack of principles."

After stacking up the three nos of no policy, no plan, and no strategy, the people in the thick of it in the Empire continue to exhibit their brilliance at engineering appearances.

"I guess I should be happy that we're managing to cover for the strategic-level errors on the tactical level?"

Nnngh… At that point, Tanya has to swallow the bitter feelings that come up.

It's all just treating the symptoms.

It's as stupid as using painkillers to ignore the cause of the pain.

What is required as soon as possible in the swiftest manner is a measure that addresses the cause, even if it's invasive.

"Surgery that kills the patient is a problem, but so is leaving them to their own devices."

Like Machiavelli said, half-assing it is the worst thing you can do. Ain't that the truth? As Tanya, I'm feeling that keenly in the present progressive.

Whatever the form it takes, the Empire is an occupier.

No matter how the Imperial Army struggles, it's an instrument of violence that has no hope of being loved.

Even if it does a really good job, the best it can pray for is to be showered in countless politely bitter sentiments.

In that case, it's probably better to double down and be feared.

“…So there’s really no plan…”

The current state of affairs is simply letting things run their course and us dealing with problems as they appear.

When the Imperial Army occupied the former Entente Alliance territory, it didn’t have a plan for how to govern. Our specialty is the interior lines strategy!

This is a humiliating description, but…it has a hermit’s temperament.

The Imperial Army never imagined rushing outside and occupying land just as soon as it could cut it off. In other words, there was almost no research done beforehand. If you ransacked the General Staff’s classified document storage, you probably wouldn’t find a single page on foreign expeditions or plans for governing occupied territory.

“We’re winning, so no one is thinking. But what’ll happen if things go on like this?”

Things will continue to be dealt with in a haphazard way.

Even a capable organization will get worn down without a clear strategy. When the Imperial Army finds itself unable to gloss over things any longer, it will literally collapse.

“In the end, it’s a question of organizational theory.”

The Imperial Army presides over military affairs. As the country’s instrument of violence, that’s a perfectly accurate thing for it to do.

Sadly, that’s the issue.

Imperial authorities haven’t reached a consensus on whether war is a military affair or a political one.

Even more vexingly, you can probably say that they haven’t even had the debate about how to link the military and the political.

The Imperial Army is in a totally Hannibal state.

On the battlefield, it can win.

But it knows how to take advantage of victory only after it’s reached its limits.

Having thought that far in silence, Tanya sighs. “…Strategic victory is a long

ways off. It's not even within my grasp anymore. There's nothing I can do about this deadlock."

Hannibal kept on winning.

Everyone has to admit his victory at Cannae goes down as the root of the fine art of war. But he couldn't win all the way. I feel a strange affinity with the part of history where though he was winning, he was ground up, like Pyrrhus, under the weight of Rome. If I could, I'd like to hear what Maharbal thought of it.

Look at the matchup of Xiang Yu and Liu Bang. There hasn't ever been an army that could win a hundred of a hundred battles. There's absolutely nothing to say that the Imperial Army can keep going.

Problematically, public opinion in the Empire doesn't want to acknowledge that truth.

You don't even have to wonder why. This is the Empire, which hasn't once been defeated since its founding. We're the ones who force people to surrender, so they've never dreamed that we would be forced.

What happy brains they have. Utterly irritating is what it is. Meanwhile, various countries, the Empire among them, are shedding too much blood on the battlefield.

It's literally no use crying over the blood spilled across the earth. How do we process rampant triumphant nonsense like *How can we justify these sacrifices besides the sweet nectar of victory?*

"Not coming up with the aim of cutting our losses will probably be fatal."

The blowback against trying to avoid losses and steer clear of defeat by insisting on not taking on risk is massive. Just look at the Japanese economy. It's clear that what we call the Lost Twenty Years or whatnot will soon be called the Lost Thirty Years.

Or another good example is the various countries who shrank from reform in their late stages.

"How many people actually understand that we're sacrificing all these troops' lives and the nation's budget just so we can cover the opportunity cost of

maintaining the status quo?”

Reform is essentially something you’re driven to when system fatigue reaches its limit. It’s the same as surgery.

When a noninvasive procedure won’t make it in time, you’re forced to make the surgical choice known as reform. It’s valid to use anesthesia to dull the pain, but if the patient is frightened of the surgery itself, they will eventually die.

AROUND THE SAME TIME, IMPERIAL CAPITAL BERUN, GENERAL STAFF OFFICE WAR ROOM

The Federation Army appeared to be planning a major counteroffensive all along the main lines.

By the time he was getting reports from all sorts of places in the east that the Federation troops were showing signs of preparing for an all-out counterattack, even Lieutenant General von Rudersdorf, who usually boasted unwavering determination, was fed up.

“…We literally just fought off their limited winter offensive.”

The doubt he expressed in a somewhat suspicious voice was reasonable. From what the General Staff could judge, the first-string units of the Federation Army had been committed incredibly recently.

“Where are they getting that kind of manpower?”

“Don’t they grow on trees?”

“Even with no fertilizer?”

“Apparently, they’re using this cheap, effective stuff called nationalism—although we would have preferred they use the inferior Communism.”

It was a fact that made him want to click his tongue: The Federation Army was transforming from an organization driven by Communism to one driven by nationalism.

As far as Lieutenant General von Zettour could see, the change was already irreversible. The Federation Army was growing rapidly more useful as an instrument of violence… It was a different animal from the one appraised in

prewar intelligence. You could even say they had solidarity.

“So the Communists are even overcoming their failures in agriculture?”

“I’m sure imports are a significant contributor.” Rudersdorf furrowed his brow in disgust and spoke again only after falling silent for a few seconds. “In which case…perhaps we should lift the restrictions on submarine warfare.”

Even the man who made the proposal didn’t really want to consider that option.

Zettour’s old friend continued in a slightly tired voice. “If we can’t count on the Unified States and other neutral countries to stick to the definition of neutrality strictly and fairly, then we may not have a choice. What do you think?” When he asked, his expression was as bitter as if he had been forced to drink vinegar.

They had considered this difficult problem a number of times. Supporting belligerents’ logistics while proclaiming one’s neutrality was practically joining the way. It did seem possible under the law to consider them enemies and make them the target of commercial raiding.

But Zettour couldn’t approve of an aggressive plan like the one Rudersdorf was suggesting.

“…That would be much like flipping the switch on a time bomb.”

The difficult problem on everyone’s minds in the General Staff Office was simple enough to define.

Would isolationists abandon their principles of nonintervention?

If so, the answer was simple. All the isolationists would come together to intervene in continental affairs.

If they weren’t going to abandon their principle, things were a little more complicated. They would choose to continue the impressive feat of maintaining their isolationism while also intervening, but then it was a matter of how long.

“Unified States ships are supporting the Federation and Commonwealth supply lines. From an operations planning standpoint as well, we can’t just leave them to do as they please.”

Rudersdorf didn't even need to start with *Listen* to cut in. It was only natural to feel ashamed at being helplessly unable to strike the enemy's supply lines.

And it was natural given his position as the lieutenant general charged with directing operations that he would emphasize it… But Zettour had to argue back, "If all they're doing is assuming a logistics role, let's just consider it an endearing gesture of support and leave it at that."

As the one fighting the intense supply line battle, his opinion could only be to stay practical, albeit in a resigned way. Numbers that send both feelings and principles out the window didn't make it acceptable to directly antagonize the Commonwealth's supporter, the Unified States.

Zettour raised his cigar to his mouth in irritation and grumbled, "It's better than the worst case, anyhow."

"Zettour, you think they might actually participate directly?"

"I have no choice but to say yes. My esteemed friend General von Rudersdorf, have you forgotten? They've already invested too much in this war."

Unrestricted submarine warfare could end up being an unexpected boon for the Unified States. They would manipulate the enraged monster of public opinion and use it as an excuse to happily intervene. Zettour even suspected that there was a chance they might orchestrate an incident themselves.

"If it's just a risk, then…"

"If there was a risk, they've already taken it into account and invested too much." Zettour was promptly dismissing Rudersdorf's wishful thinking. "Rudersdorf, think of it from a logistics perspective instead of operations."

Cutting your losses was an option you could take only when it was possible to minimize your losses. He was sure of that as a logistics man.

The Unified States had already bet too much to fold now.

"Once you've built the production line and finished the product, you can't pretend it doesn't exist. If they've poured this much into military supplies and the product doesn't sell, it'd be a tragedy."

The military supply industry was an extreme case. Frankly, it was hard to get

the supplies necessary for wartime stockpiled during peacetime. Makers were generally nervous about overproducing, so to get them to expand their lines, it was necessary to guarantee them contracts.

…If you don't intend to use the supplies, it's difficult to increase production.

"They're building aircraft carriers as a fix for the economy, you know!"

"…You mean fear of unemployment could trigger them to join the war?"

"I doubt it's that simple. It's probably more likely a dense tangle of their economic situation and their unwillingness to accept the Empire's supremacy."

Zettour may not have been an economist, but the scale—building aircraft carriers as an economic policy measure—shocked him.

The Unified States Navy fleet was already blessed, but to undertake the intensive labor of building carriers as a public works project in an attempt to stimulate the economy was… Anyone from the Imperial Navy, where they were having a hard time simply covering the High Seas Fleet's maintenance costs, would probably collapse in shock.

But they were discussing reality.

"I suppose it makes sense." Rudersdorf quietly nodded.

Zettour wasn't very happy even if he was able to obtain understanding, but… the secret to healthy coordination in the General Staff had to be making sure they were on the same page.

"Yes," he said in a tired voice. "Money speaks the truth. And it's flowing not toward us but toward the Commonwealth."

"…So ultimately, our victory would go against all their interests."

"Sadly, that is correct." As he affirmed Rudersdorf's complaint, Zettour thought, *No lender wants to handle loans that can't be collected, and cutting losses has its limits. Those are both eternal truths.*

"There aren't any lizards who want to kill themselves." Lizards cut their tails off precisely because it's the tail. They wouldn't ever try to abandon their bodies. "Therefore, while unrestricted submarine warfare may seem effective at a glance, with a bird's-eye view, you can see that it would make things worse.

“What a bizarre tightrope to walk.”

One hand is shaking theirs to stave off participation in the war, while the other is persistently slapping their hand trying to supply interested parties with war goods.

In other words, there was a contradiction.

“Zettour, do you really understand what you’re saying? It’s one hell of a tightrope. Even circus veterans make mistakes, you know.”

“I’m well aware of that. But it’s our only choice. We at least have to try to keep them from joining immediately.”

After all, war meant advancing toward the future into obscuring fog.

His personal answer when lost was to wait in place believing that help would come.

Sadly, there was no rescue team for saving countries. If he wouldn’t have believed that, he could see them boarding a leaky ship and getting swallowed by giant waves.

A nation that couldn’t stand on its own feet had no future.

“If it’s to find a way out of this, shouldn’t we try every means possible?”

If you tried everything, then whoever only readied “everything” was at fault. Once you’d been entrusted with a nation, it was no longer a question of having options.

Look at Rudersdorf as he grins.

This unpleasant operations man knows what I’m trying to say. This is our only choice, Zettour thought with a wry smile and changed the subject. “As luck would have it, we’ve received an offer.”

“I want to hear your opinion. Do you think we can make use of those scammers in Ildoa?”

“Hmm.” Zettour hesitated for a moment, thinking.

The Ildoan intelligence officer Colonel Virginio Calandro had passed along a proposal from General Igor Gassman.

We want to mediate peace. It was a tricky offer.

“I read Colonel von Lergen’s report… To cut to the chase, I don’t know.”

“You don’t know? There you go being vague again,” Rudersdorf spat in irritation. Well, it was understandable.

Considering Ildoa’s geopolitical circumstances, their ability—demonstrated via an exercise (which was actually a mobilization order) that it could occupy the southern part of the Empire—had to be acknowledged.

As they spoke, Ildoa was already working out a plan to sell them to the highest bidder.

The chance that Ildoa joined the war on the side of the Empire wasn’t zero, but as long as the chance of it joining as an enemy couldn’t be dismissed, the Imperial Army was *forced to keep some of its troops chained to the border*.

Compared to the total number of troops, of course, it wasn’t that many. But it was still enough to take on an entire country. Giant garrisons twiddling their thumbs. *If I had that big of a force…*, someone from Operations couldn’t help but dream.

“Let’s get our facts straight.”

When his esteemed friend nodded with a grunt, Zettour enumerated their circumstances and began to think.

“As long as an opportunist exists, they can be approached by both sides. The chances are fairly good that they’ll stay on their parasitic, bloodsucking path as a neutral power.”

The premise Zettour presented was the simple truth. He was saying that Ildoa’s policy of neutrality was purely for the pursuit of profits.

“Whenever they mobilize, we’re forced to draw troops off the eastern front. From that perspective, Ildoa’s attempts to gain the upper hand are painful but also quite crafty.”

“There’s no doubt about that.” The way Rudersdorf snapped was an indication of how severe the situation was.

It would never happen, but just think about how many reinforcements could

be sent to the east if they could confirm that Ildoa wasn't going to join the war. It could have been a turning point for the whole continent.

It's really a shame was everyone's frustrated thought.

"Under the circumstances, there is something we should think about." Zettour prefaced his remark then dove in. "As far as I can tell, it's not the country but the Royal Ildoan Army that is making logical judgment calls, at least relatively speaking."

"Oh? You're planning to consider Gassman's suggestion? But those guys… even though we're allies…! I doubt they can be trusted."

Rudersdorf's furious argument was probably representative of public opinion. Problematically, he was right. Anyone aware that diplomacy wasn't a world that turned based on correctness alone would be at wits' end.

Zettour swallowed a sigh and made his point. "I can't deny that, but their proposal makes sense. At least, it's balanced enough that all the principal warring countries would have to pay attention."

"…It's true that we can't reject it flat out."

Rudersdorf's face said he wasn't happy about it, but Zettour figured he should feel lucky to have his agreement. Ildoa's proposal *was* infuriating, but there were some parts that couldn't be completely denied. Just the fact that he had managed to get through to him gave him hope.

"So Gassman's proposal from the Royal Ildoan Army…at a glance, it might not fail to be a first step toward peace."

"That's an awfully roundabout way of putting it. Spit it out, Zettour. What's the issue?"

"Problematically, the Ildoans are so good at calculating risks and rewards that they might cause an accident."

Rudersdorf gaped at him in confusion. "W— You're still beating around the bush. Explain what you mean!"

Under his stare, Zettour reluctantly replied. "They're probably just as scheming as they were before the war. In other words," he had to snarl.

What he was about to say was animal logic. Going further, it meant the defeat of the glory of intelligence and reason.

But as a General Staff officer, he had to say it anyway.

“Calm rationality is no longer functioning properly in any of the warring countries. We’ve all woken up the monster called public opinion.”

In total war, a country’s citizens participated far more than in any other type of war to date. Whipped into a frenzy and then whipped up some more, the heated emotions rushed on as a torrent to wage war with tremendous energy.

Fighting this far had already taken a huge amount of energy, but it was *so* much energy that it threatened to sweep away even raison d’état.

After all, not only politicians but even the military had cast themselves into the maelstrom of passions and hysteria.

The greatest error was confusing a beautiful, brave fighting spirit for levelheaded tactical judgment. Once that happened and the violent emotions grew frantic, it was no easy feat to calm people down.

He could convince the General Staff officers. That was encouraging news. The question was whether that explanation would work on public opinion.

“I really wonder how much the Ildoans understand.”

The Kingdom of Ildoa had been watching this total war from the sidelines.

They probably saw the follies the Empire was committing and had been waiting for their chance to mediate.

“No matter how correct the logic, it means nothing if people don’t accept it…”

“I know that.” Rudersdorf nodded, though he formed a fist and brought it slowly down onto the table. He stared at his fist for a while but then uncurled it, though he didn’t seem satisfied. “…It’s hard to know whether to hit them or shake hands, huh, Zettour?”

Zettour was about to agree with him—*yeah*—when he suddenly realized something. From the tone of his voice, the place he was going back and forth about hitting was…

“Did you draw up a plan for that?”

“We have an emergency response plan… The main idea entails mobile defense along the border and then mounting a major invasion to push back their lines. It wouldn’t be impossible.” He smiled and the confidence filling him was real… Zettour had known Rudersdorf for a long time. He wasn’t one for bravado.

If he said it was doable, it was probably doable.

That meant it was probably all right to assume it might be possible to teach those self-styled heroes pretending to be shrewd observers a harsh lesson.

But the remark also made Zettour furrow his brow. “You want to go further than border defense?”

“Affirmative. Recall that the topography there makes it difficult land to protect. We advance out of tactical necessity. I don’t want to continue exposing our tender nether regions to an enemy state.”

Rudersdorf’s stubborn comment made military sense. The only problem was that it made *only* military sense.

This type of reasoning seemed liable to forget about politics, which was dangerous. Zettour felt like he needed to say something even if it wasn’t strictly called for. He had a good understanding of his esteemed friend’s personality, but he couldn’t shake the feeling that sometimes he was a bit too bold.

“Escaping forward, huh? I suppose it’s fine if we can break through. But if we end up an impulsive salient, we might end up driving ourselves to an early death with fear.”

“I understand your concern.”

It was best to always keep hold of the initiative. In the fight against the Republic, escaping forward worked because it was unexpected.

The Kingdom of Ildoa was probably already prepared for a preemptive attack or whatnot. You would have to be awfully full of yourself to even call a sneak attack missing the “sneak” a gamble.

“Still,” Rudersdorf said in an irritated manner, “if we leave Ildoa be, it could

turn into a bridgehead.”

After a moment of silent thought, Zettour found himself nodding.

Following the bloody lessons learned in the trenches, the world powers realized that unless you’ve grasped your enemy’s weakness, the cost of frontal attacks will be too high.

The Imperial Army’s southern area could count here as its weak point.

The traditionally delicate relationship between the Empire and Ildoa had resulted in peace for the border area. Frankly, there weren’t any encroaching threats.

The defensive line facing Ildoa was fragile.

It was built only with the prewar interior lines strategy in mind—all they had to do down there was hold out until the Great Army could arrive.

It was never expected that they would repel the enemy on their own.

“…Operations thinks foreign reinforcements will surge via sea routes.”

I know that.

Zettour didn’t need that forecast smugly pointed out to him by someone from Operations—he’d already worried about it enough to be sick.

He stared Rudersdorf in the eye as if to ask, *Don’t you guys have any better ideas?* but was then forced to realize something.

Rudersdorf was looking back at him with the same wishful thinking. This was what it meant to be unable to go on without suppressing your curses by sticking a cigar in your mouth.

“If we do nothing, the Empire will grow weaker as if it had cancer, huh?”

Zettour confronted this cold, hard reality. If he imagined the worst-case scenario, the Empire’s south was incredibly frail. The Imperial Army was already stretched to its limits with foreign campaigns it never planned for on multiple fronts.

They had to accept that they wouldn’t be able to hold the line very long and that there was a real chance of collapse.

It was no wonder that when faced with such spine-chilling possibilities, he was drawn to preventive measures. The logic of an operations specialist was screaming at him that they should strike without delay.

Zettour couldn't deny that his indecision was lame.

"This is the hard thing about war. When the options you have are limited, as a soldier, you're forced to choose the least awful one even though you know it isn't optimal."

"In other words?"

"I can't refuse an aggressive plan with the purpose of defense."

He saw that Rudersdorf was smiling wryly when he came into his peripheral vision.

"But you don't agree with it. This is you we're talking about, after all. There's probably also the caveat, *as long as you know where the reinforcements are coming from*, right?"

"That's right." Zettour nodded.

You can do a limited offensive as defense only when it will connect to what happens next. Offensives take a lot of willpower.

"…Withdrawing wholesale from the east or setting up the Council for Self-Government as a buffering state could be options."

"No, they couldn't."

All Zettour could do, getting rejected so bluntly, was wince. "Oh, don't shoot me down like that. Though I do admit that possibilities are scarce. But in all things, until we check whether the cat is dead, the future is uncertain… We can only think as flexibly as the number of alternatives we don't eliminate."

"Then are you saying you have a plan to convince the Communists to allow the separatists their independence?"

"See, you understand the idea of a buffer state."

With a "hmm," Rudersdorf nodded. "…Would the Federation's nationalism allow it?"

It was a sharp point to make.

“It’s probably impossible.” Zettour could state with confidence that, “*The Federation’s people* probably won’t allow it.”

When asked about the latest developments with the monster of nationalism, he could answer immediately. Even the people who rebelled against the Communist Party were giving themselves up to the Federation Army and fighting to the death against the invading Empire.

The fusion of propaganda and nationalism boasted enough power to unite even the antiestablishment faction beneath the party.

Love for one’s fatherland wasn’t logical.

Their own feelings toward their Heimat were fierce. No matter how much blood spilled over their mother earth, they would surely cling to the land.

Rudersdorf was about to counter—“So then”—when Zettour made a further remark.

“But *the Communist Party might*.”

“Huh? Are you insane, Zettour?”

“Oh, I’m quite sane.”

“We’re talking about the Communist Party that has forsaken ideology in favor of nationalism! You really think they’ll be that flexible?”

Rudersdorf’s question seemed to come from the bottom of his heart, and it was commonsense doubt. Any sensible person would surely agree.

Although as an idea from a General Staff officer, it was no good. Even if this cessation of thought didn’t get you an F in war college, it would definitely get you chewed out by your instructor.

“But have you forgotten the problem of possibilities?”

“Ngh.”

Zettour could understand his frowning old friend’s displeasure, but he had stated the premise without affectation. Logic was a strange product that could even arise in ordinary, ugly cases.

“As long as a possibility can’t be rejected, we should consider it. Things aren’t going so well for us that we can afford to be choosy.”

Up against an enemy who was capable of weighing their advantages, he wouldn’t have been surprised even if some unusual deal materialized—even if it was hard to call them a rational player they could do deals with.

It was dangerous to expect them to be reasonable. But rejecting them as unreasonable was equally dangerous. Clinging to wishful thinking and considering your options were two very different things.

That was why they needed alternative plans and considerations. Having some kind of idea down on paper was much better than a blank page.

“Either way,” Zettour continued quietly, sounding tired, “we shouldn’t try to grasp politics or war via common sense. The damn Federation Army took all those losses without yielding and is putting together a spring offensive!”

No joke or anything else, as a logistics expert, Zettour was dizzy. Judging from the scale of the personnel they were moving and the amount of matériel, the true power of the Federation was enough to cause real trouble.

The fact that it wouldn’t do for him to grumble *This is unbearable* made it even worse. All he could do was brace himself.

If you know you can’t escape the turmoil, at least you know. There shouldn’t be any reason you can’t move on to the next thing.

“What we need now is determination and resignation. Nothing will surprise us anymore.”

APRIL 18, UNIFIED YEAR 1927, IMPERIAL ARMY NORTHERN MILITARY DISTRICT, SALAMANDER KAMPFGRUPPE GARRISON

How much easier would it be if she could laugh off the nonsense coming out of the receiver?

She’s wholeheartedly fed up and stifles a sigh; the griping and shrieking of her lungs must be psychogenic due to the stress as she thinks, *Again?!*

A spring offensive?

Now?

…Honestly, it makes no sense.

No, I understand that the Federation Army is going on the offensive. States take military action in pursuit of some tactical objective or strategic goal. So it's not as if it's impossible to grasp that the Federation must have some sort of purpose in mind.

But even so, a general offensive all along the imperial lines is impossible to understand.

If the Unified States were joining the war, it could be a huge distraction to keep the Imperial Army pinned to the eastern front…but as it stands, all they'll accomplish is probably creating new salients.

"…Does the Federation Army think they can win? I can't figure out what their goal is."

As far as Lieutenant Colonel Tanya von Degurechaff can tell, there's no military rationale or political necessity for it.

"A complete mystery is definitely the right description for it."

If you order soldiers to charge defensive positions that are holding strong, it's hard to avoid ending up with heaps of corpses. The road will be paved with bleached bones.

That said, nothing is impossible.

Even my beloved market principle doesn't always operate unfailingly.

Conflicts fought by irrational actors—humans—tend to go racing off in unreasonable directions amid the mistakes and misunderstandings born of the fog of war.

Thinking you can predict the future is too arrogant.

…The only thing that is certain is uncertainty.

"Have we reached the realm of wordplay? More like theological debate."

A world so annoying that ordinary people can't even fathom it. The only solution is to prioritize what's happening in the field rather than quibbling

about logic.

There are plenty of things that Logos would tell you couldn’t be but exist nonetheless. In that case, logic is a mistake.

This is how natural science defines the world.

Observe, measure, and classify. If you can’t do that, then your only option is to try again until you find a category that fits.



A picture is worth a thousand words is a saying that's true to life—but only if you can accurately observe the phenomena. Humans are creatures who can't even remember what they've seen with their own eyes.

To suffer from surprise, confusion, and fatigue—that is our fate.

Which is why psychological warfare, behavioral economics, and psychology are researched in such earnest.

There's only one thing that is clear.

Only a numbskull who can't comprehend the things happening right before them would make a judgment call in a flustered state of mind.

In that case…

Tanya turns a tired gaze on the sky and grumbles.

If the world is in constant turmoil, then all I can do is know and accept that and be ready.

"Nothing will surprise me anymore."

(The Saga of Tanya the Evil, Volume 6: Nil Admirari, fin)

Appendixes: Mapped Outline of History

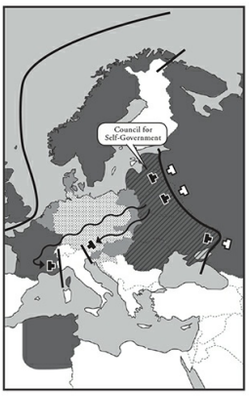
Appendixes

Mapped Outline of History



Mapped Outline of History

❶



General status on the eastern front: deadlock.

Skirmishes along the front lines are frequent.

The Imperial Army doesn't have enough cold-weather gear.

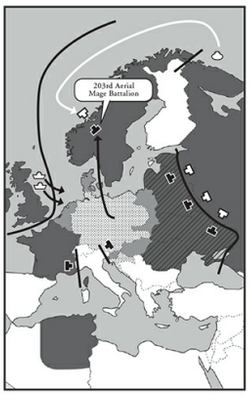
The Federation Army carries out a recon-in-force operation with the additional goal of probing the political situation of their enemies.

The Imperial Army and the Council for Self-Government repel the Federation push.

Conditions gradually improve thanks to the stabilization of the communications lines.

The situation on the Ildoan front abruptly changes. Some units begin to be transferred over.

❷



The Royal Ildoan Army suddenly begins to mobilize.

The Commonwealth Navy creates a distraction in the west.

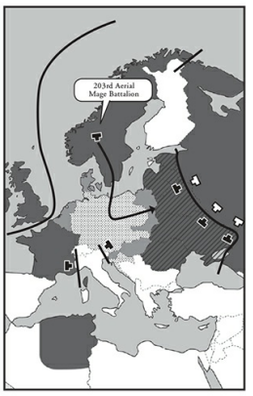
In response, forces including the Salamander Kampfgruppe are reassigned to the vicinity of the imperial capital.

Ildoa and the Empire initiate negotiations.

A multinational unit invades former Entente Alliance territory as a distraction.

The Salamander Kampfgruppe is sent north to do a cleanup operation.

❸



The cleanup operation hasn't gone well.

There are signs that a major Federation offensive is imminent.

The Salamander Kampfgruppe is abruptly given another strategic reassignment.

General Commentary

Though the eastern front is stable, the situation in the north has become more fraught, while concerns about security in the west continue to arise, and the fragility of the southern border is becoming clear. Even if the Imperial Army can secure equilibrium or superiority on all fronts as before, the situation is sure to stagnate sooner or later.

Against this stalemate backdrop, political maneuvering and the search for an overarching solution intensify.

In any case, the seeds are being sown.

Afterword

Sorry to have kept you waiting for Volume 6. This is Carlo Zen.

To you heroes who didn't wait but bought all the volumes through 6 at once, and to the heroes among heroes at Kadokawa Enterbrain, my eternal gratitude.

The anime project is probably a mass hallucination we're all having!

Here is a story from long ago when I, someone who loves caffeine above all; my editor Fujita, who loves meat above all; and illustrator Shinotsuki, who loves gyoza above all, met at a tasty gyoza joint for a meeting.

"Do you think an anime could be a possibility?" Shinotsuki asked incisively, and Fujita declared, "Unfortunately, no!"

And yet now, an anime project seems like a fait accompli. Before I knew it, Tojo was serializing a wonderful manga.

Perhaps the hero Enterbrain has grown even stronger?

When I dove into this industry, I never imagined this future would be waiting. (Maybe it's a butterfly's dream.)

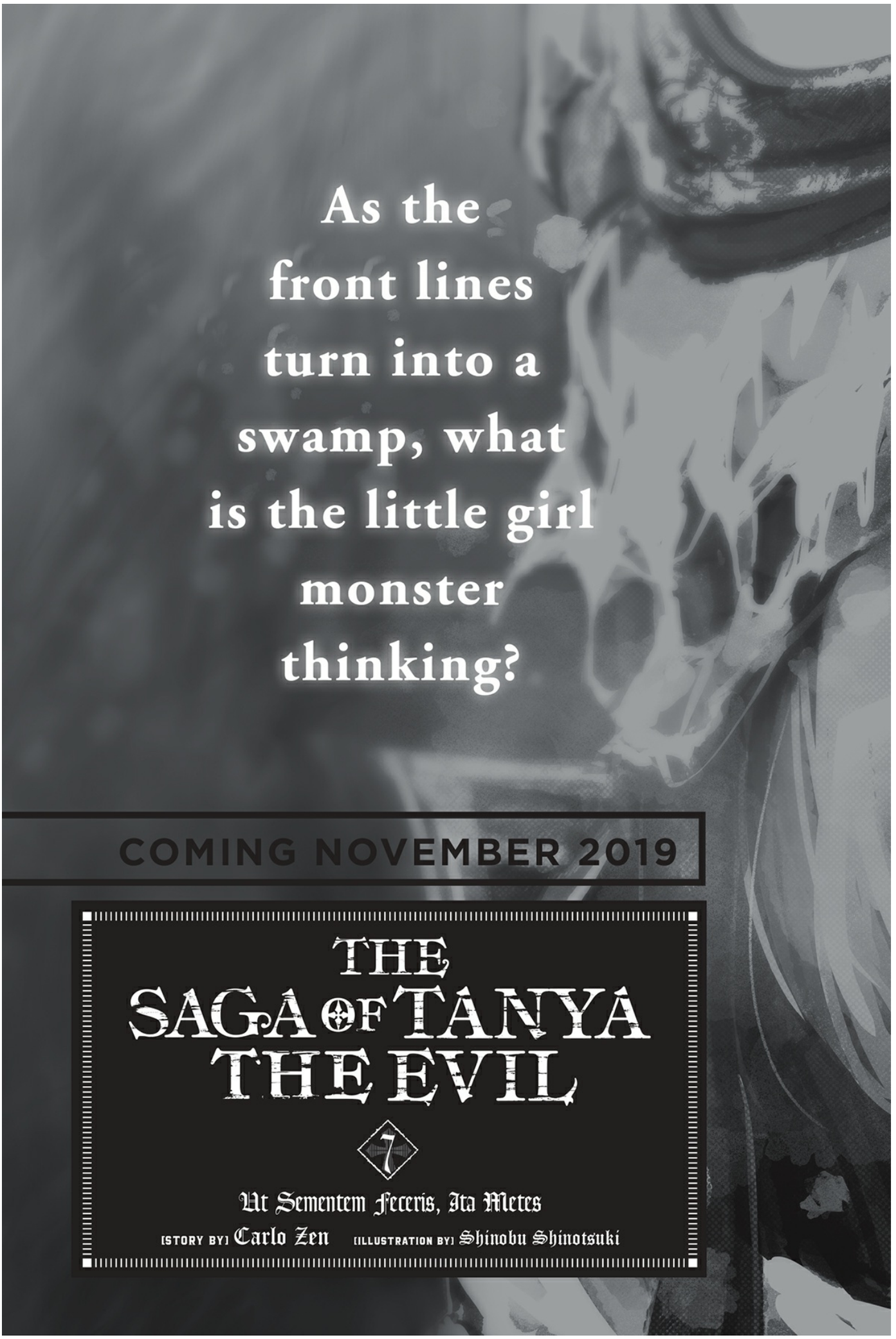
Well, reality is fiction's greatest rival, and the spirit of not being surprised by anything anymore might be one we need these days.

Anyhow, this is all possible through the combined efforts of a great many people. Allow me to thank them again here. To the designers at Tsubakiya Design, the proofreaders at Tokyo Publishing Service Center, my editor Fujita, and illustrator Shinotsuki, thank you as always.

And above all, my sincere gratitude goes out to everyone who has supported us to the point that we can get an anime!

I hope to see you again next time.


THE MANGA IS FUN!!
The venerable Tojo's depiction of Degu with such precise expressions and her smiling pals in their workplace is being serialized now!
The glassy look in Dr. von Schugel's eyes makes it really seem like he's going to do something bad. I love it!
And whoo, the sixth volume is out!! I'm looking forward to seeing what becomes of Mary. I want to draw her!
(This is student Visha as she would have been if there were no war.)


As the front lines turn into a swamp, what is the little girl monster thinking?
COMING NOVEMBER 2019
THE SAGA OF TANYA THE EVIL
7
Ut Sementem Feceris, Ita Metes
[STORY BY] Carlo Zen
[ILLUSTRATION BY] Shinobu Shinotsuki



[1] **separatists** One term for a minority in a nation that opposes mainstream policies and aims to secede.

[2] **the *lageri*** Places that corrected bad habits and taught the value of hard work. Through the joy of plentiful labor, they allow one to achieve substantial growth. Gossipmongers tend to call them concentration camps, though.

[3] **Raid on Scarborough** Also known as the Raid on Scarborough, Hartlepool, and Whitby. During World War I, the German Navy fired on the British mainland. This was a feint designed to lure out part of the British fleet, achieve local superiority, and beat them up. (They ended up going home partway through beating them up.)

[4] **Operation Overlord** Not the novels by Kugane Maruyama but the major operation to liberate France, with the landing at Normandy and the liberation of Paris. Well, the enemy was about as powerful as Lord Ainz, so in a way it's kind of the same, but anyhow.

[5] **the Concorde Effect** What do you do when after putting a fortune into a major project, you realize, *Crap, this is no good*? If you quit now, all the money you invested goes *poof!* Your only option is to put in all the rest of your money! If you just keep throwing more and more money at it, it's sure to work out… So yeah, this is the process by which, due to that sort of psychology, a project bound to fail eats through an entire budget and—naturally—fails. The name comes from the fact that that's exactly how the Concorde project turned out.

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