

As a Reincarnated Aristocrat,

I'll Use My Appraisal Skill to Rise in the World

4

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A VERTICAL Book

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Contents

Prologue

Chapter 1: Canarre in Crisis

Chapter 2: To War

Chapter 3: Resolution

Epilogue



About thirteen years had passed since my life in Japan ended and my new existence as Ars Louvent, heir to a noble family in another world, began. I was reborn with the ability to judge the strengths and abilities of the people around me, and using that skill, I managed to gather a whole host of outstanding individuals to serve as my retainers.

First and foremost was Rietz Muses, an all but perfect superhuman who could do nearly anything, but had been cast to the wayside before I found him on account of the fact that he was a Malkan: a race discriminated against in the land we lived in. Next was Charlotte, a girl I found in a slave market with truly monstrous magical capabilities. Followed by Rosell, the son of a hunter who was physically unimpressive but staggering in mental acuity. All three of them were more than capable, but all three of them had been born into circumstances that had kept them from living up to their full potential. And so, I took them into my service, where I knew they would shine.

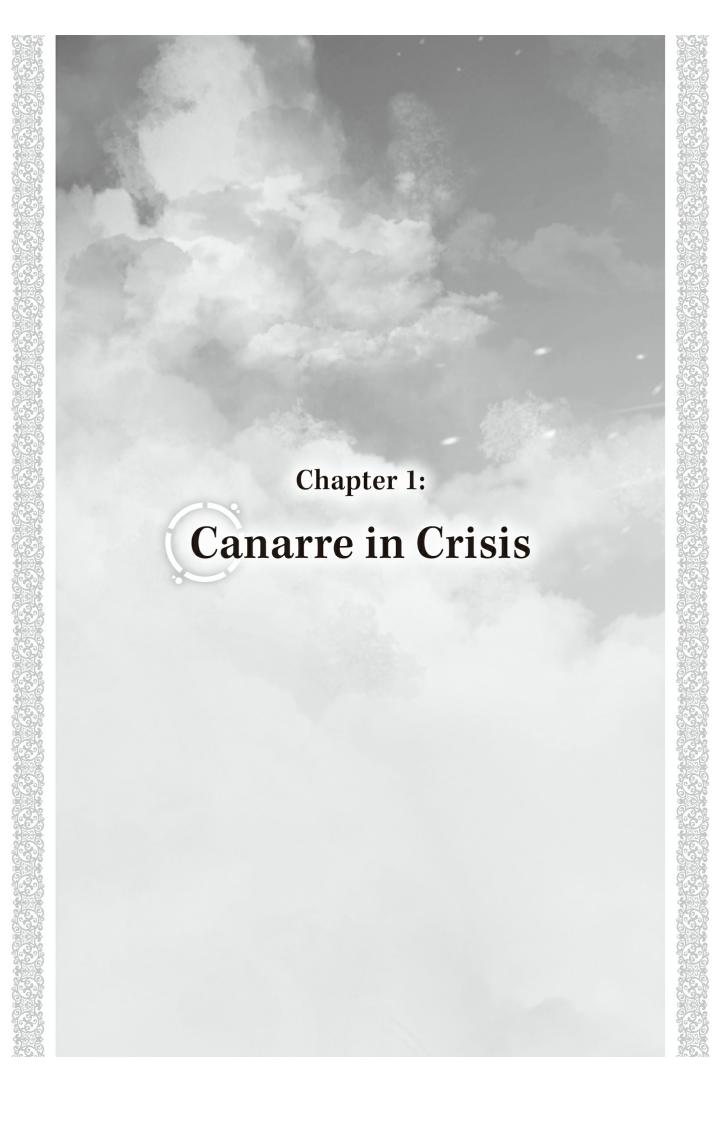
My father passed away long before his time, and I was thrust into a position of rulership over his barony at the age of twelve. I'd lived for thirty-five years in my previous incarnation, but almost nothing I'd learned in that lifetime was of any use when it came to governing a territory. If I'd been on my own, I doubt I would've been able to handle it, but thanks to the help of my retainers, I'd managed to get by. I couldn't exactly call myself self-reliant, but at least I was surviving.

Soon after, a civil war split the Duchy of Missian in two. We picked a side and took up arms, and thanks once again to my retainers' abilities, we achieved great things on the field of battle. Thus, bringing Couran, the elder son of the

late duke, massive strides closer to his eventual victory. Thanks to that distinguished service, Couran chose to grant me the title of Count of Canarre. I was to manage a far vaster realm than the petty barony I'd ruled over so far, and be responsible for the livelihoods of more people than ever before. My personal dwelling would be different, as well: I'd be moving from the estate I'd lived in all my life to the count's castle.

One thing was for sure: I was moving up in the world, and fast.

I used to be your everyday, run-of-the-mill office worker. Back then, I never could've dreamed I'd come this far. That success brought its fair share of anxiety along with it, to be sure, but with my ever-faithful retainers at my side, I felt a defiant sense of confidence that no matter what happened, we'd be able to work something out.



The day after Lumeire agreed to hand the title of Count of Canarre over to me, Couran called his vassals together to officially announce the appointment.

None of the assembled lords stuck their necks out to object to the decision, this time, but I had a feeling that I'd probably earned the envy of at least a few of them. Some of them were giving me less than friendly looks, at the very least. I took the time to appraise the ones who looked especially hostile, and made sure to write their names down as soon as I could so I didn't forget them. That way if disaster ever struck, I would know who *not* to turn to for help.

With that, our business in Velshdt was fully concluded. While we were preparing for the journey home, though, Couran called me out once more.

"Ars! I'm sure you remember that our agreement was for you to become the Count of Canarre after I emerged victorious in the war with Vasmarque. That said, I simply couldn't leave your achievements here in Velshdt unrewarded. You were magnificent, plain and simple, and I hope you'll understand why I felt the need to move your promotion up," he said.

I still wasn't used to being praised for achievements that my retainers, in truth, had won. It never failed to make me feel uncomfortable. I'd played an active role in talking an enemy general onto our side, so it wasn't like I hadn't contributed *anything* to the war effort, but I'd barely done much at all on the battlefield. I still had to play the part of the feudal lord, though, so I bottled up my discomfort and offered him my thanks.

"I am truly honored by your words, Your Lordship, and my gratitude knows no bounds," I replied. "As Count of Canarre, I swear to serve you to the best of my ability."

"Good. I'm expecting great things from you," said Couran with a nod. "Now then—as I told you previously, we'll need time to prepare before we're ready to mount an invasion of Arcantez. Our provisions have run low, and equally problematic is the fact that Paradille's forces have sustained heavy losses over the course of their assault on the city. My hope is to cooperate with Paradille's army and stage our final attack with theirs, and that means we'll need to give them time to bolster their forces before we can march on the capital."

That meant, I assumed, that it would be even longer before the invasion of Arcantez began than I'd suspected. I was relieved to think that I'd be able to spend the intervening period without having to go out into battle. Becoming the Count of Canarre meant that I had a lot to learn, which would be a struggle in its own right, but nothing compared to risking my life on a battlefield.

"I'm sure your new position will bring plenty of challenges with it, but don't forget to prepare for the battle to come!" said Couran.

"Yes, Your Lordship," I replied.

Couran gave me a satisfied nod, and we said our goodbyes. It was finally time for my retainers and I to return to Lamberg.

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Before we embarked on our journey, a final member joined up with our party: Lumeire's faithful retainer Menas Renard. He would be accompanying me to explain the current state of Canarre, guide me around the castle, and generally help acquaint me with my new role. He was a very capable man—one of

Lumeire's best-and knew all about the Count of Canarre's duties.

I was a little apprehensive about depriving Lumeire of one of his best men. He'd be taking up a new position as the Count of Velshdt, and I was sure he'd need all the help he could get. However, when I asked, he told me that while Menas would surely have been a godsend for his transition, he'd been a count for many years already and would be able to make due. I, on the other hand, was new to the role and was in much greater need of a helping hand. He really seemed to be acting as my benefactor.

Our first destination was Lamberg, where I stopped to explain the circumstances to all of my people who'd stayed behind at the estate during the war. Reactions were mixed. Some of them were shocked, others were ecstatic, and some seemed worried about what would become of Lamberg in my absence. After all, becoming the count meant that I would hold domain over the district of Canarre, and would no longer be personally reigning over Lamberg.

I'd lived in my family's estate my whole life, and I felt a little reluctant to leave it behind. That being said, Castle Canarre and the walled city that surrounded it wasn't a very long trip away from my homeland, so if I ever grew so homesick I couldn't stand it I could always just take a quick trip back when I had a moment to spare.

The one remaining question was who would take over the position of baron in my stead. That decision was mine to make, and the person I'd most trust to fill that role would be Rietz...but I preferred for him to stay as close to me as possible so he could keep acting as my right-hand man. Eventually, I decided to consult my retainers and get their input before making the decision.

When I set out for the city of Canarre, I did so with my retainers and a few of

my family's servants. I couldn't take *everyone*—that would leave Lamberg without any management to speak of—so I started out by bringing the bare minimum of staff with me. We packed our bags, then hit the road once more.

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I made the journey to Castle Canarre by carriage. Lamberg wasn't very far from the capital at all, so it only took a few hours for us to arrive.

Castle Canarre was relatively old compared to the castle in Semplar or the Imperial Capital, and it hadn't been the most stunningly lavish or fortified structure to begin with. Still, the thought that I'd become the sort of lord who had his own personal castle was pretty hard to swallow. All the more so considering the mundane, white-collar life I'd led before my reincarnation.

It struck me how long it had been since I'd found myself here as we made our way into the castle. If I recalled correctly, the first time I ended up inside the castle was when I came here in my father's place after he died, and as that thought crossed my mind, I was struck with a question: what would my father have said if he learned I'd become the count? Would he have been shocked? Or thrilled? Possibly both, I imagined, and as I pictured the face he might've made when he got the news, I felt a sense of desolation swell up within me. I had to carry on House Louvent's legacy, both for my sake, and to help my father's spirit rest easily.

Menas guided me through the castle. I hadn't gotten the full tour on any of my prior visits, so I wasn't well acquainted with its layout yet. The castle was three stories tall, with the first floor containing the dining hall, the great hall, a parlor, a treasure vault, an armory, the kitchens, the pantry, and the bathing chambers. The second floor was home to the library, a common room, a meeting room, and personal quarters for retainers and staff. Finally, the personal chambers for the count and their family were located on the third floor, along with a study and the count's office.

Compared to the Louvent estate, the castle was massive. Just taking the full tour ate up a fair chunk of time. I would've liked to take a little more time touring the place, but I had a lot more on my plate than just seeing the sights, so I kept it to a quick walk-through for the moment. The servants I'd brought with me and those who'd remained in the castle after Lumeire's people cleared out set about organizing my chamber, and in the meantime, I retired to the count's office to receive a detailed explanation of my duties from Menas.

A massive desk was set up in the middle of the office. A few shelves lined the walls as well, stuffed with documents that I assumed had some relation to Canarre's management.

"To begin with, I'd like you to read through this," said Menas as he passed me a rather thick bundle of papers.

What are these? I wondered as I leafed through the first few pages. I soon came to realize that they were a set of documents describing the current state of Canarre County. They detailed the current status of our standing army, the yields of the latest harvests, the income from the latest round of tax collection, the county's population, problems they faced, the local state of law and order, and even included an up-to-date map and an analysis of the local natural resources. The bundle was packed with information.

I'd gotten similar reports when I ruled over Lamberg, but the territory I governed back then was so much smaller in scale that there had not been much

information to report to me in the first place. I'd never had to peruse more than a few sparing pages. This time, though, it took me two hours just to read through the whole packet, and by the time I finished my eyes were dry and weary.



It occurred to me as I put the bundle down that if I'd tried sitting still and reading for two hours straight in my previous life, it would've left me with back pain and stiff shoulders to go along with the eyestrain. My current body was still young enough that I didn't have to deal with any of those aches, mercifully. My next impression was that, as expected, I would be working on a much larger scale than I had back in Lamberg from now on. I mean, all the latest info about Lamberg was *still* present in this new report!

I'd almost forgotten that I used to have to send those off to the count.

"This concludes your orientation," said Menas. "I encourage you to discuss how you'll manage your territory from here on out with your people, and take their advice into consideration. Oh, and I would also advise you to invite all of Canarre's barons to meet with you at your convenience. They have already been informed of the change in rulership, but nevertheless, it would only be proper."

"Understood, and thank you for all your help and guidance," I replied.

Menas's orientation had been far shorter than I'd expected, overall, and I had to wonder if he'd received orders to return to Velshdt sooner than anticipated. I quickly penned letters to each of Canarre's barons, then called my retainers together to discuss the matter of Lamberg's new ruler.

"To start, I'd like to talk about who we'll be appointing to watch over Lamberg in my stead," I said. "I'll be spending most of my time here in the castle from now on, so I'd like to leave Lamberg in the hands of someone I can trust to keep it safe."

Rosell spoke up first. "I think that Rietz would be the best man for the job."

For just a moment, Rietz looked startled. All of us knew very well how much

he'd contributed to our cause. There wasn't anyone left among my people who looked down on him for being a Malkan, and in fact, everyone seemed to accept Rosell's suggestion.

Personally, I would've liked to keep Rietz at my side, but I was starting to see that it wasn't for the best. There was no mistaking the fact that he was the most reliable candidate for the job. When I glanced over to see how he was reacting to the nomination, though, I found that he didn't look pleased by the idea at all. In fact, it almost looked like he wanted to speak his mind, but was holding himself back.

Does he not want the job? I'd rather figure out how he feels before I make any decisions.

"Do you have any objections to that suggestion, Rietz?" I asked.

Rietz hesitated for a moment, but then replied, "If that is what you wish of me, then I would not dream to object, Lord Ars."

But even as he claimed to be all right with the suggestion he gave me a look like a sad little puppy dog that had been abandoned by its owner. It was abundantly clear that he didn't want to leave my side, and after everything he'd done for me and my household, I wasn't about to force him to take on a job that he didn't want to do.

"Be honest with me, Rietz. What do you really want?" I asked.

Rietz hesitated once more, his gaze dropping to the floor, but then he stood up straight, looked me in the eye, and spoke with conviction. "If possible, I would sooner remain in your immediate service, Lord Ars," he said, his voice laden with intense emotion.

I wasn't about to disagree. I wanted Rietz by my side as much as he wanted to

be there, so if he was opposed to the idea of being Lamberg's baron, I didn't see any reason not to keep him with me in Castle Canarre.

"Very well," I replied. "I will respect Rietz's wishes, and refrain from asking him to fill the vacancy."

"Well, okay," Rosell muttered. "Who else could do the job, though...?"

Everyone present sank into thought. Eventually, Rietz himself broke the silence.

"I believe it would only be fair for the most successful member of our council to be given rulership over Lamberg," he said. "Does that sound reasonable to you?"

I paused to consider his words.

The most successful among us...?

My gaze—and everyone else's—drifted briefly to Charlotte, and a moment later, all of us grimaced in unison. She was, undeniably, the most successful of all my retainers in terms of pure contributions to the war effort. Even in the context of Couran's whole army, she was the soldier who'd contributed the most to the cause on a personal level.

Managing a barony, though...?

No matter how hard I tried, I just couldn't picture her doing a good job in that sort of position.

Charlotte was watching my expression, and judging by the scowl on her face, I'd been doing a poor job of concealing my thought process.

"Hmph! Do you have some sort of problem with me?" she asked.

"N-No, of course not! But, well...I just think there may be someone else more

suited for the role," I said, frantically attempting to appease her.

"Not exactly nice to hear you don't think I could do a job like that. Barons spend all day sitting around at their desks, right?" Charlotte sulkily grumbled.

"You can't think it's that easy?" I sighed. As expected, I couldn't leave Lamberg in her hands. I needed someone more responsible for the job.

"I believe that Rosell may be well-suited for the position," Rietz chimed in once more. "He may be young, yes, but his youth belies his intelligence, and I believe his contributions to the war have proven his strength of will beyond a doubt."

"N-No way! I can't!" Rosell shouted with all his might. "Ruling over a territory's way out of my comfort zone! I'm not cut out for it, no way, no how! And just think about how little time I'd have to study if I became a baron!"

That was about as unenthusiastic of a response as I could've expected. Rosell had been very helpful to me, and I didn't want to impose a job that he didn't want on him either.

But that just leaves one candidate...

"Guess that means it's up to me, huh?" Mireille said as she crossed her arms. "Wouldn't be my first time around the baron block. I can take care of Lamberg, no issue."

"That's a great idea, come to think of it! I'm sure Master would do an excellent job!" insisted Rosell, who'd badgered his way into Mireille's apprenticeship. Mireille had one dedicated supporter already.

My one concern about the suggestion was her Ambition score. It was high-scarily high, even. To be honest, I couldn't bring myself to trust her. She was more than capable of ruling Lamberg, to be sure, but that didn't do away

with my concerns.

"I believe Mireille would be the best candidate for the task as well," Rietz said, catching me off guard. I'd been under the impression that he hadn't accepted her as one of my advisors, and certainly didn't trust her, so I never imagined he'd advocate for her to be given this sort of power.

With Rosell and Rietz both offering Mireille their endorsements, part of me felt that it would be for the best to entrust the job to her.

But still, that Ambition of hers...

As I mulled over the choice, Rietz leaned in to whisper into my ear. "No need to worry, Lord Ars. The people of Lamberg hold House Louvent in the highest of esteem, and even if you give her control over the barony, turning its populace against you would be no simple task. Moreover, with the Shadows in your formal service, you have ample means to keep an eye on her."

That explained a lot. It seemed that Rietz really *didn't* have faith in Mireille after all. He just believed we had the means to ensure she wouldn't or couldn't betray us. And he had a point—it was true that assigning a member of the Shadows to work for her while reporting to me on her every move would make it very hard for her to betray me. Rietz's reassurance made me feel a lot less nervous about this whole prospect.

"I'm convinced. Mireille, I'll leave Lamberg in your care. I trust that no one objects to this decision?" I said, and as expected, nobody was opposed. Mireille would be the new Baroness of Lamberg.

With our most pressing decision having been made, we called the day's meeting to a close. There were plenty of small policy matters that we'd have to choose our course on, but I'd decided that we could space those out over a number of meetings in the future.

"Seeing as all of Canarre's barons have been invited to the castle, I believe our first order of business should be to prepare a banquet to receive them. I believe it likely that all of them will accept the invitation," suggested Rietz after everyone else had gone on their way.

"Good thinking," I agreed. "Let's start preparing at once."

I'd only just sent out the letters, so needless to say, I hadn't received any replies yet. Still, I had a hard time imagining that any of Canarre's barons would snub my invitation. There was a chance they might resent the fact that a kid like me had been made the count, but since the order had come from Couran himself, a mere baron didn't have the sort of influence it would take to mount a proper objection. At the absolute least, I was positive that Hammond Pleide, the Baron of Torbequista, would make an appearance—I was engaged to his daughter Licia, after all—and even in the worst-case scenario where nobody showed up, I wouldn't lose anything by having been prepared.

Come to think of it, I wonder how Licia's doing?

I'd promised her that I would marry her once the war was over. I wasn't opposed to the idea of marrying her, in and of itself, but the war technically hadn't come to a close yet, which left us in an awkward situation. Couran held an overwhelming advantage, but the enemy's main citadel, Arcantez, still stood strong for now, and the fighting could break out again before long.

Personally, I was in favor of waiting until the war came to a complete, conclusive finish before we tied the knot. I was not, however, convinced that

Licia felt the same way. The odds were very good that she'd come along with her father to visit, and I decided I would take a moment to discuss the matter with her when that time came.

A few days of banquet preparations later, messages arrived from the Baron of Torbequista, Hammond Pleide, and the Baron of Coumeire, Krall Orslow. Both of them stated that they would make their way to Canarre at once. Later that same day, while I was helping with the banquet preparations, Rietz approached me.

"If I may, Lord Ars?" he said. "Shin Seimallo has arrived at the castle, and requests an audience with you. Are you inclined to meet with him?"

Shin Seimallo...

The name didn't ring any bells for a second, but then it hit me: he was the man I'd met in the capital who had a remarkably high Aerial Aptitude. I'd promised him that when I moved up in the noble world and gained access to greater resources, I'd support and finance his quest to build an airship.

"Do you intend to invest in his airship development effort, Lord Ars?" Rietz asked.

"Well, I did give him my word," I answered with a shrug.

"Yes, indeed, and one must not break one's word without due cause. Nevertheless, the state of Canarre's finances is, if I may speak frankly, rather poor. The recent string of conflicts has done us no favors on that front, either... If you can convince Shin to accept a delay on his promised funding, I believe that would be for the best."

It was true that Canarre as a county had less money to throw around than I'd expected, and it made sense that the recent conflict was to blame. Still, I had

more funding at my disposal now than I'd had back in Lamberg, and I was a little concerned about what Shin would say if I told him his airship would have to go on the back burner. He hadn't struck me as the patient type. Besides, I was anxious for the airship to be built as soon as possible myself. If we managed to build the very first airship in the world, it would earn House Louvent no small amount of prestige.

"I see what you mean, but I also believe that Shin's airship will be of great importance to us," I said, countering Rietz's point.

"Is that so...?" said Rietz. "I don't know how much funding Shin intends to ask for, but regardless, why not offer to start with a partial payment? You can give him a third of what he requests, and deliver the rest of the funding later on. Even without a full budget, he should be able to make progress so long as he has some funding available to him."

"That makes sense. I'm convinced—we'll go with your plan. Bring him here, please."

"Yes, Your Lordship."

Rietz left the room, only to return momentarily with Shin in tow. He looked like he was in an excellent mood, and struck up a conversation before I had the chance.

"Gotta say, I'm *real* impressed! If I'm bein' honest, I didn't *actually* think you'd make yourself a count! Looks like I picked a damn fine horse to hook my carriage up to!" Shin said, openly admitting that he hadn't believed in me up until now. "So, you'll be footing my development costs, right? I've gone over all my plans 'n theories again, and I'm more sure than ever that it'll fly! All I need's the money to make it happen!" he asserted, brimming with confidence.

"Yes, about that," I said. "Becoming the count has been a step in the right direction, but I'm afraid to say that Canarre's finances are already rather strained."

"Wh-What?! Does that mean ya can't spare the coin?!" Shin shouted, aghast.

"I didn't say that. My intent was to provide you with one third of the money you need, to start. You'll have the rest of your funding once we've brought our books into balance."

"H-Hmm. And you're sure that's gonna happen?"



"I'll make it happen, one way or another."

Shin looked a little dissatisfied, but nodded anyway.

"All right, then. You won yourself the count's seat, as promised, so I'll trust you to keep yer word again," he said, looking me squarely in the eye.

At that point, I finally asked how much money Shin wanted. It turned out to be quite the sum, but while giving him the full payment would've strained my budget, a third of it was more or less manageable. Before I handed the money over, though, I had Shin sign a written contract that I'd had Rietz prepare in advance. It specified that the completed airship would be the property of House Louvent, and included clauses intended to prevent the details of the ship's construction from falling into the wrong hands and gave us exclusive rights to profit off its design.

Shin, for his part, was only interested in building and flying the thing. So long as he was allowed to pilot the ship he didn't care a whit who owned it on paper, and he signed the contract—in blood—without hesitation. With that, his grand endeavor had finally begun.

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A few days later, the barons arrived at Castle Canarre. House Pleide and House Orslow would both be in attendance, representing Torbequista and Coumeire respectively. I picked out Licia among House Pleide's party, and the moment she noticed me, she beamed, dashed over, and threw her arms around me.

"Thank goodness, Lord Ars! I've been so worried," she said, her shoulders

quivering with emotion.

I almost panicked the moment she hugged me, but when I realized she was shivering, I regained my composure. I'd been away for a long time, thanks to the war, and it seemed she'd spent that whole period worried that I'd never come back. That was just how things went when there was a war to fight, but I still couldn't help but feel guilty when confronted with clear proof of how anxious she'd been.

"I'm sorry to have worried you. I'm back now safe and sound," I said as I returned her embrace, doing my best to reassure her. It seemed to work, or at the very least, her shivering quickly abated.

After we released each other, Licia leaned in and whispered quietly enough that only I could hear her.

"I never imagined you'd become the Count of Canarre so soon! I was right to expect great things from you," she said, dropping the cloyingly sweet voice she usually spoke in to address me in a more calm and composed tone.

I remembered that Licia wasn't *just* an innocent little girl who feared for my safety from afar. She was also a cunning and calculating girl who boasted high Intelligence, Politics, *and* Ambition scores.

"Hee hee!" Licia giggled. "Why, at this rate I wouldn't be surprised to hear you'd claimed the whole duchy, one of these days!"

"Th-The duchy? I wouldn't get your hopes up," I replied awkwardly. If I wanted to inherit the title of duke from Couran, I'd need to take his heir, Rengue, out of the picture first. That was a move I had no intention of attempting. My goal was to grow Canarre into a stronger, more prosperous domain, and aspiring for more felt like it'd be asking for trouble.

"Oh, I was only teasing," said Licia with a grin, though it hadn't sounded like a joke to me.

Hammond, the Baron of Torbequista, and Krall, the Baron of Coumeire, stepped up to greet me next. Both of them took a knee, bowed deeply, and spoke in unison.

"I hereby pledge fealty to His Lordship Ars Louvent, Count of Canarre," they said.

"Stand, please," I said. "I may be the count, but I'm still far from experienced. I can't even begin to guess how much I have left to learn, so I'll be counting on both of your support as I strive to turn Canarre into an even better place than it already is."

At my command, the barons stood once more. Glancing at their expressions I could tell that Hammond had no misgivings about my sudden promotion, but that Krall was...well, not necessarily apprehensive, but not enthusiastic, either. The way he looked at me made me feel like he was sizing me up. I had a feeling that he had yet to decide whether or not I was worthy of my new title, and I had serious doubts about whether he'd meant the oath he'd sworn just moments before. He wasn't outright hostile, at least, so I figured that as long as I did a good job and proved my worth to him, he'd come to accept me in due time.

The banquet began, and the atmosphere in the castle took a cheerful turn. As the festivities went on, Hammond eventually broached the subject of my engagement to Licia.

"I seem to recall that you and my daughter agreed to be wed when the war was over," he began.

"Yes, that's true," I said. "However, in my eyes the war has yet to come to a close. The battle for Arcantez will begin before we know it, and I'm inclined to put off our marriage until after it's concluded."

"Y-Yes, of course," said Licia. "Our agreement was that we'd marry after the war was over, so naturally, having our wedding now would be premature," she agreed. She seemed a little reluctant, but a little relieved as well.

The banquet eventually drew to a close, and the next day, the barons returned to their territories.

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After the barons went on their way, I managed to secure a brief period of time for myself. I hadn't had so much as a moment to rest since I'd returned from the war, and the exhaustion had been piling up. The castle's bathhouse was the perfect place for me to relieve a bit of that fatigue, so I started my time off with a good, long soak.

No sooner had I gotten out of the bath and returned to my chamber than the high-pitched voice of a child rang out.

"Come practice sword fighting with me, Ars!"

I looked over to find that my little brother, Kreiz, had stepped into my room with a wooden sword in hand. Kreiz was six years old, and had grown up into quite the rambunctious little troublemaker as of late. His youthful face carried distinct traces of our father's features, and his blond hair emphasized the resemblance. Of course, a little kid like him had no hope of emulating the intimidating aura our father had exuded.

"Of course he can't train with you, Kreiz! That would be much too tiring. You should study with me instead, Ars!" said my little sister, Wren, from behind him. Wren's hair was black, and she looked more like me than our father. She struck me as a little more mature than her brother, as well. They were twins, but they'd never resembled each other, physically or mentally. Fraternal twins were just like that, I had to assume.

"He's gonna sword fight with me!" shouted Kreiz.

"No, he's going to study with me!" insisted Wren.

The two of them were seconds away from a nasty fight, so I hastily intervened before things got out of hand.

"I'll do both! Just don't fight, please!"

"Really?!" Kreiz and Wren gleefully exclaimed together.

So much for my break. Nothing I can do about that, though.

"I'll train with Kreiz first," I said.

"Hurray!" Kreiz yelped as he threw his hands into the air.

"Aww," pouted Wren.

My brother had remarkably high Valor, while my sister's Intelligence was something special. Both of them had shown a clear interest in the fields they were talented in, as well. They were only six years old, and were still far from fully grown, but they'd been picking up skills as time went on.

The three of us made for the training grounds. I found a wooden sword for myself, and got ready to spar with Kreiz while Wren sat off to the side to watch us.

"Okay, here I come!" said Kreiz.

"Whenever you're ready," I replied.

I was far from talented when it came to swordsmanship, but Rietz had taught me the basics, and while Kreiz was brimming with talent, it wasn't enough to let him win against a boy seven years his senior...or so I thought, but as our duel commenced, I was surprised to find it a much closer contest than I'd been expecting. He was fast, for one thing, and so strong you'd almost think we were the same age. I managed to eke out a win, but only just, and I had a horrible feeling that a year from now I wouldn't even be able to do that much.

"Ahh, I lost! You really are tough, Ars!" Kreiz groaned.

"You're plenty tough as well, Kreiz. It won't be long before you've left me in the dust," I said as I patted him on the head. I'd always viewed the two of them as something closer to my children than my siblings, and when you took my thirty-five years of life in Japan into account, our relative ages made that distance feel pretty appropriate.

"You bet I am! I'm gonna get tougher than you, Rietz, and everyone else! Then I'll become a warrior and fight for you!" Kreiz said as he clenched his fist.

I was honestly quite impressed that he had such a defined dream for his future already. He had a pretty high Ambition score, but he was also such a purehearted child that he'd never struck me as the sort who'd do anything to get ahead. Then again, he was only six years old.

"Okay, one more round!" said Kreiz.

It ended up being a lot more than one round, in the end, and we kept sparring until Wren stepped in to intervene.

"All right, that's enough! It's time to study!" she shouted. I was pretty tired at that point, so her timing couldn't have been better.

"Aw, whaaat? But we were just getting started!" whined Kreiz, who apparently still had energy to spare. "Why don't you train with us, Wren?"

"There's no way I'm letting you swing those swords at me! That would be terrifying! Anyway, I've been waiting long enough—it's my turn, already!"

"She's right, Kreiz. Don't be selfish," I said.

"Hmmph!" Kreiz grunted, but reluctantly agreed to bring our session to an end.

We returned to the castle and made our way to the library, within which I was unsurprised to find Rosell with his nose buried in a book.

"Oh, Rosell! Are you studying too?" Kreiz asked. Rosell, however, was concentrating so deeply that he didn't even notice.

"There'll be no asking him to join us, then. He never listens to anyone when he gets like this," Wren said, sounding a little disappointed. The twins both loved playing with Rosell, though Wren was especially attached to him.

We left Rosell to his own devices and started a three-person study session. It had been quite some time since I'd studied with Wren, and it seemed that Rosell had been rubbing off on her. I was astonished by just how knowledgeable she'd become, and could hardly believe she was only six years old. Kreiz, on the other hand, had clearly been devoting his time to other pursuits and was lagging behind his sister by a fair margin. The gap between their respective levels made working with both of them at the same time a bit of a challenge, but I somehow managed to pull it off in the end.

"Nope. I can't. I'm done," Kreiz eventually groaned as he slumped over onto the table. He'd hit his limit for the day, and boiled his brain in the process. "Ha ha ha! I think you'd better focus on your studies a little more from now on, Kreiz," I said. "I'm impressed with you, though, Wren!"

"Rosell's been teaching me all sorts of things," Wren explained. "Kreiz is a blockhead, so I have to be smart enough for the both of us," she added with a mischievous grin.

I had a feeling that when the two of them grew up, Kreiz would end up doing Wren's bidding more often than not.

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Just as I'd decided that it was time to wrap up my break from administrative work and get back down to business, Rietz arrived on the scene with an astonishing invitation.

"Would you care to go fishing with me, Lord Ars?" he asked out of the blue.

Rietz was, on a fundamental level, a workaholic. I'd barely ever witnessed him goofing off or taking time for himself. I'd actually encouraged him to work a little less and rest a little more on a few occasions, but he'd never seemed to take that advice to heart. It was just about the only thing he *didn't* take my words as gospel for, in fact.

You'd think that living a life of hard work, day in and day out, would leave Rietz exhausted and bedraggled, but he never showed any signs of being worn down. Back in my last life when I was an office worker, I'd known people who did far less work than him and seemed like they were just barely pushing through their fatigue. Rietz, however, seemed to be living his best life. I had to wonder how he did it. My best guess was that he just liked working for other

people's sake, and enjoyed his duties so much he could keep at them indefinitely. That was why I'd decided not to pressure him into taking more breaks.

With all that in mind, the fact that Rietz was now inviting me to take a moment away from work with him was shocking. I didn't even know that he *liked* fishing! That being said, I'd always wanted to spend a day off with him, so while I was curious about what had brought this on I said, "All right, let's," without probing any deeper. It would mean putting off my work for a little longer, sure, but it could wait until I got a quick fishing trip in.

"Thank you very much! I couldn't ask for a better companion for this excursion!" said Rietz with a stunningly—almost blindingly—brilliant smile. The thought that going finishing with me made him that happy was a little embarrassing.

Rietz explained that we'd be fishing at a small lake located quite nearby to the city of Canarre. We gathered up our gear, trekked out to the lake, set up, and started fishing.

A few hours passed us by.

"The fish must not be hungry today, huh?" I mumbled.

"It would seem so," sighed Rietz.

We hadn't caught a single fish so far. It wasn't that there weren't any fish in the lake—the water was pure and clear enough that we could see them swimming about below the surface. They just weren't biting.

I hadn't been much of a fisher in my last life, but I'd had a friend who was, and he'd taken me out to fish with him a few times. I remembered catching

quite a haul at the time...but then again, fishing in modern Japan and fishing in another world could've been completely different beasts, for all I knew.

For lack of fish on our hooks, Rietz and I quickly turned to chatting with each other.

"Mireille's drinking is as out of hand as ever," he said to me. "I took a trip to Lamberg to check in on her just recently, only to find she'd drunk herself into a stupor."

"Ha ha ha," I laughed uncomfortably. "Do you think leaving Lamberg in her hands was a bad idea after all...?"

"Surprisingly, her followers' accounts would suggest otherwise. It seems she's been content to leave the day-to-day management of the barony to them, only stepping in when they find themselves at a loss, and providing clear, effective instructions whenever the need arises."

"Well, that's certainly something. I suppose that's how I'd imagine her managing a territory."

"Effective baron or not, I did make it clear that I wished she'd refrain from overindulging," Rietz added.

"O-Oh, did you...?" I said with a wince.

"And about Rosell," he continued. "He's been shut up in the library for days on end, and I'm concerned about his health. I've tried to encourage him to go outside and exercise on occasion, but he's been uninterested in lending me an ear."

"I've heard about him spending all his time in the library, yeah. I probably should've expected it, knowing him," I said.

Castle Canarre's library boasted a collection of books that dwarfed what few

we'd had back in Lamberg. Considering what a bookworm Rosell was, I imagined that his new home was something of a paradise for him.

"He's an incredibly fast reader, though," I continued. "It's only a matter of time before he's worked his way through the whole collection, and he'll start going outside again once he's done."

"I'd certainly hope so," said Rietz. "It's always seemed that he commits most books to memory after a single reading, but according to him there's always a danger he'll forget bits and pieces of them, so he makes sure to read every book he can at least twice. Reading the entire library twice over would take quite some time, even for him."

"Y-Yeah, you have a point," I said, resolving myself to encourage Rosell to get out and go for a run every once in a while. On the other hand, the more he learned, the more helpful he'd be for Canarre on the whole, so I'd have to take some time and consider whether making that a formal order would be for the best or not.

"Charlotte," Rietz began, then hesitated. "Well, Charlotte's more or less the same as she's always been, from what I can tell."

"Aside from the weight of her wallet," I noted. "She was rewarded quite generously for all her exploits in the war. You'd think a girl like her would use it to buy clothes, or something, but I've heard she's been spending all of her money on food instead."

"All of it...? I can't believe she's still so slender," said Rietz.

"She's the sort of person who just doesn't gain weight, no matter what she eats. Of course, *she* claims that all of it goes straight to her chest."

"That seems...borderline unfair," replied Rietz. "I put quite a lot of effort into

maintaining my physique, for what it's worth. Putting on too much weight would hamper my mobility, and I have to be ready to fight at any given moment."

I guess Rietz has things he struggles with that I've never even considered, I reflected.

We kept chatting away, and eventually, we ran out of subjects to talk about. A minute or so passed by in silence, until suddenly, Rietz looked over his shoulder, back toward the castle. The lake was close enough to the city that it was visible from here.

"All of this makes me a little emotional, I must admit," he said. "To think—you, the Count of Canarre!"

"I know what you mean," I said.

"I always had faith that you'd make your way to a station worthy of you, of course. But that you'd become the count in such a short span of time defied even my wildest expectations."

"I couldn't have done it without you and the others," I said. "In fact, I barely did anything at all myself!"

"That's not true!" Rietz said—almost shouted, really, loudly enough to make me jump. "Ah! My apologies," he continued. "But truly, that couldn't be farther from the truth, Lord Ars. If you hadn't made me your retainer, I'm confident I would've either wound up dead in a ditch, or spent the rest of my life wandering aimlessly through Missian, or maybe even some other duchy. Charlotte would have lived her life as a slave, and Rosell would have remained the talentless son of a hunter forever. And that's not to mention Mireille—she'd still be drifting from bar to bar, making a nuisance of herself."



Rietz turned to look me in the eye, his expression profoundly serious.

"I cannot express the gratitude I feel toward you, Lord Ars. I never would have become the person I am today if it weren't for you, and if the need arises, I will gladly lay down my life for yours."

Hearing all of that directly was, to say the least, a little awkward.

"I didn't make you my retainer out of good will," I said. "I did it for myself, and you've done more than enough to help and support me since then, so I don't think there's any need for you to feel that indebted to me... But of course, that doesn't change the fact that I'm very glad to hear how you feel."

The day was drawing to a close, and it wouldn't be long before evening set in.

"Should we head on home?" I suggested.

"All right," said Rietz. "A shame we didn't catch anything, in the end. My apologies. I feel like I've dragged you out to spend a day wasting your time."

"It's fine," I said. "We didn't catch any fish, sure, but talking with you was a great use of time in my book. Let's do this again sometime."

"Of course!" Rietz said with a smile.

The two of us made our way back to Castle Canarre, entering through the main gateway. The moment we stepped into the great hall, the roar of numerous voices rang out in unison.

"Happy Birthday, Lord Ars!"

I'd only just stepped inside, not expecting anything of the sort, and it was all so abrupt that my brain shut down for a second. A moment later, though, I finally managed to process what was happening.

My birthday...? Oh, that's right—yesterday was the seventh day of the eighth month, wasn't it? That means that today's the eighth...so it really is my thirteenth birthday.

I'd been so busy since I became the count that I'd forgotten about it.

"My apologies for not informing you, Lord Ars," said Rietz. "We carried out our preparations in absolute secrecy. We wanted it to be a surprise, you see."

"So this is why you invited me to go fishing with you?" I asked.

"Yes," said Rietz. "Ah, though I wasn't lying when I said I wanted to, of course!"

Suddenly, it all made sense. Still, though, I was astonished. I'd seen surprise parties portrayed in comics and cartoons over and over in my past life, but I'd never experienced anything of the sort in reality. I'd thought that a party being a surprise wouldn't make it any better than an ordinary sort of event...but, actually, I was a lot happier about it than I'd ever imagined a party could make me.

"You're really growin' up on us, huh, Lord Ars? Here, I got you a present!" said Charlotte with a smirk, pleased by how thoroughly she and the others had caught me by surprise. She handed me her gift, which turned out to be a bag that was packed to the brim with cookies.

Sweets were scarce and precious in this world, and I barely ever got to eat them, so it was a remarkably thoughtful gift that I appreciated.

"Thank you, Charlotte," I said.

"Just glad you like it! I really mulled it over, y'know? Thought it might be better to get you something that you could keep forever, but, well, nothing's better than eating, and you have to live for the moment, right? So I decided

that food would be best in the end," Charlotte explained. That did feel like the sort of philosophy she'd adhere to. "Oh, and I baked all of those myself, so you'd better savor them!" she added as an afterthought.

"You...huh?" I said, then gulped.

"What's that supposed to mean?" asked Charlotte.

I couldn't recall having ever heard anyone mention Charlotte knowing how to bake. They *looked* like perfectly ordinary cookies, but I was very apprehensive about how they'd taste.

"L-Lord Ars," said Rietz, "perhaps I should sample one of those before you-"

"Oh, for the—they're not *poisoned*, dangit!" Charlotte snapped. "Could you get any ruder?! They're good, so just eat one already!"

I couldn't very well say no to that, so I opened up the bag and sampled a cookie. They really were quite tasty, as it turned out, and I had to admit that Rietz and I had been a little rude by assuming otherwise, so I gave Charlotte a quick apology.

"I'm up next! Here! I got you some books!" said Rosell. The fact that he'd gotten me books wasn't a surprise, though the fact that he'd gotten me ten of them was quite something. "They're novels, and all of them are worth your time! Be sure to read them all!" he added.

Rosell had recommended novels to me before, and almost all of them had been so extraordinarily complicated that a single reading hadn't been enough for me to understand them on a basic level. Repeated readings, however, had led to me catching on, and by the time I understood what he saw in them I was always hooked. In other words, just one book took a long time to read, and he'd given me *ten*. I wouldn't be at a lack of ways to kill time in the immediate

future, that was for sure.

"Guess I'll go next," said Mireille. She'd traveled here from Lamberg specifically for the sake of my party, it seemed. "Here. It's booze. Got you the good stuff," she said as she offered me a bottle.

I had to admit, I was quite happy with her gift. I'd been a grown adult in my past life, so I was reasonably well acquainted with the joys of alcohol. *This* me, however, had only just turned thirteen, and that meant that booze was off the table. The standards of this world weren't different from my old society, in that regard. I knew that perfectly well, but I was also tempted to give it a try, and was just about to give in and accept her gift when Rietz cut in.

"Why in the world would you give him *alcohol*, you degenerate?!" he snapped. I, meanwhile, had been about to accept the bottle, but quickly snapped my hands back down to my sides.

"Oh, quit kicking up a fuss about every little thing, Rietz," said Mireille with a roll of her eyes. "What's wrong with a nice bottle of booze?"

"The fact that Lord Ars is only thirteen, for one thing! He's too young to indulge!" Rietz fired back.

"Always thought that was a stupid rule, personally," Mireille grumbled. "Okay, how about this, then?" she said, and handed me what I assumed was a backup present. It seemed to be a piece of white...triangular...fabric...

Wait, is this what I think it—?

"Underwear?! Are you out of your mind?! That's even worse! You mustn't touch such filth, Lord Ars!" Rietz shouted as he snatched Mireille's underwear out of my hand.

"What? Kiddo's thirteen, right? What could he want more than a pretty girl's

unmentionables?" Mireille said, then smirked. "Oh, I see how it is. You took 'em because you wanted 'em too, didn't you, Rietz? Come on, you can't go stealing your master's things! How about I give you the ones I'm wearing now instead?" she offered, already reaching for her waist.

"Keep them on!" Rietz bellowed.

When all was said and done, Mireille gave me a silver coin that she happened to be carrying in her pocket. I certainly wasn't one to turn down money, and was grateful, setting aside the process it took to get us there. This was my own personal funding, too, so I figured I'd use it to buy something just for myself.

Just as I accepted the coin, the castle's front doorway opened with a slam. A girl rushed inside, then planted her hands on her knees, panting and wheezing for dear life. It was, I quickly realized, Licia!

"Wh-Why wasn't I informed of this sooner...?" Licia said between heaving gasps. "How could I possibly not be present for Lord Ars's birthday party...?"

"M-My apologies," said Rietz. "We should have sent news to you sooner, yes. I fear the message didn't arrive until yesterday, or somewhere thereabouts?"

"As a matter of fact, it did," said Licia. "Yesterday evening, to be precise. Never before have I had to prepare for a journey on such short notice! I left Torbequista the moment I was able!"

Licia seemed exhausted. Judging by the bags under her eyes, she hadn't slept at all the night before. She was so haggard that part of me couldn't help but think she should've just written the party off and stayed home.

Licia took a moment longer to catch her breath, then stepped up to me.

"Happy Birthday, Lord Ars," she said with an elegant curtsy. The moment she managed to collect herself, all signs of her fatigue vanished into thin air and she was once more the very picture of refinement.

"Thank you for coming," I said.

"I've prepared a gift for you as well," Licia continued, passing me a beautiful bouquet of flowers. "I selected them from my personal garden in Torbequista."

Just as I was thinking what a nice, thoughtful gift she'd prepared for me, Licia's servants began carrying box after box into the castle.

"In addition," Licia said, "I've brought fruits grown in our Torbequistan orchards, as well as a number of dishes I cooked for you myself... Oh, this one has clothes in it, I believe... Ah, and I just *knew* that the accessories in this one would be the perfect fit for you..."

She shouldn't have. Like, really, she shouldn't have, I thought as the sheer scale of her gifts became apparent.

"I'm afraid Lady Licia's gift has rather outshone my effort, but nevertheless—Happy Birthday, Lord Ars," said Rietz as he presented me with his present.

Rietz had prepared a sword and a suit of armor for me. He explained that he'd commissioned them from a craftsman, and that the blade was both finely-made and specifically designed to suit my strengths. The armor, meanwhile, was a light, mobile set of clothing with chainmail sewn into it.

"Your safety is of the utmost importance," said Rietz, "so I spared no expense in obtaining the finest set that I could get my hands on. They'll protect you should you find yourself in battle once more, so please, be sure to wear them when the time comes."

I'd never been much of a fighter, so I needed every edge that I could get to keep me in battle. A well-crafted set of gear could mean the difference between

life and death, in that sense. It was a wonderful present.

"Thank you, Rietz," I said as I accepted his gift.

The party carried on for some time after that. By the time it drew to a close, I was certain beyond a doubt that this had been the best birthday party I'd ever experienced, in either lifetime.

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The day after my birthday, I decided that I'd had plenty of rest and called my retainers together to have a detailed discussion regarding the management of Canarre. Rietz, Rosell, Charlotte, and Pham all gathered for the meeting.

Before we addressed the main subject of the day, I had a question for Pham.

"How's Mireille? Is she doing a decent job of managing Lamberg?" I asked.

"According to Ben, she's been swilling booze like it's water and hasn't been the portrait of nobility when her subordinates come to her for advice. She's not making it *look* like she's taking it seriously, and I can't say she doesn't have issues, but she hasn't shown any signs of turning traitor, at least," Pham reported.

I guess I only just promoted her. It'd be strange if she was already causing more serious issues.

Her *lack* of seriousness was an issue in its own right, of course, but it wasn't as concerning as the worst-case scenario.

"All right, then—I think it's time for us to get started on our main topic of discussion," I said. "I've called you here today to discuss what areas we'll focus

on in our management of Canarre. I'll start by proposing that we prioritize gathering more capable personnel to help us."

Now that I was the count, the number of people I could keep in my service had increased substantially. Well, not as substantially as I would've liked, considering how the county was pressed for funding, but I could certainly bring a couple dozen people or so into my service.

"Seeking out skilled individuals is very much your forte, Lord Ars, so I believe that applying yourself to the task would be a suitable use of your time," said Rietz. "That being said, I believe the methods you've used up until now—going into town to seek out talented recruits to personally solicit, for instance—might be inefficient, at this stage."

Rietz had a point. All the walking involved in seeking people out personally always tired me out, and even if I found a diamond in the rough there was no guarantee they'd be interested in serving me, so all my effort sometimes went to waste. I certainly couldn't claim that it was an efficient method.

"Do you have any alternatives?" I asked. I knew that Rietz wouldn't bring up that sort of issue unless he had an idea in mind.

"I believe you should put out word that you're recruiting individuals with something to offer the county," said Rietz. "Make it known that you'll take anyone with talent, regardless of their social standing. It might also do us well to make it known that you have a gift for perceiving people's talents. That could draw people to you in the hopes that you can tell them what areas they're gifted in."

"I can spread that sort of notice far and wide now that I'm the count, so I could see that working well. Let's try it," I said with a nod.

Rosell spoke up next.

"Um, about that. Bringing in more people's all well and good, but there *is* a limit to how many we can afford to hire. I think it'd be a good idea to decide what sort of people we're looking for first," he suggested.

"That's...a very good point, actually," I said. "I don't know, though. If someone with talent shows up, I'm going to want to hire them no matter what it's for."

"I must concur with Rosell, Lord Ars," said Rietz. "Individuals with truly exceptional talent are worth making an exception for, perhaps, but for those less stunning but still worthy candidates, having a clear goal in mind will almost certainly be for the best."

"Okay, you win," I said. When Rosell and Rietz were both in favor of something, I could always be all but certain it would be my best course of action. "What sort of people should we be looking for, though? We have a battle on the horizon, so I guess capable fighters should be our top priority?"

"Perhaps... Currently, that does seem prudent. We may want to reassess our priorities after the war has come to a close, though," said Rietz.

"What about that new guy, Braham? He's about as capable as fighters get, right?" asked Rosell.

"Oh, Braham? I asked Rietz to take care of him. How has that been turning out?" I inquired.

"Well, he's as capable of a fighter as ever. The problem was his mind, but as it happens, he's turned out to be a quicker learner than expected," said Rietz. "As you predicted, Lord Ars, his intellect isn't as lacking as one might have believed at a glance. On the other hand, he's starting from an unenviable baseline, and I'd still be hard-pressed to call him, well, smart. As things stand I believe that

asking him to lead a large regiment would be too risky, but so long as a capable aide was assigned to him, he could command a smaller squad without issue."

Sounds like he's making steady progress, then. That's good to hear.

"Hey, if we're talking people who can fight, I think we'd better bring in a few more mages," said Charlotte, speaking up for the first time this meeting.

"That *is* a good point. We could always use more magic on our side," I admitted.

"Oh, and new mages is only part of the picture. We could also use people to teach other people magic, and a place to study it would be great too," Charlotte continued.

She was drifting away from the topic of recruitment, but I had to admit, I was stunned to hear such a reasonable and well-considered proposal come from Charlotte, of all people.

"What? Why're you all looking at me like that?" Charlotte grumbled. Apparently Rietz, Rosell, and I hadn't done a great job of concealing our shock.

At the moment, Canarre didn't have any sort of facilities for the research and instruction of magic. I had no doubt that making a place like that would be to the county's benefit, in the long run.

"A facility meant for magical studies would indeed be worth creating," said Rietz. "That being said, we'll need to bring in plenty of people with magical talent beforehand. Plus, there's the matter of the funding needed for construction, and then for any research. There are a number of barriers that make it somewhat less than practical, for now."

"Well, even if we don't make it right away, it sounds like it's something we should prioritize in the near future," I said.

"Indeed," agreed Rietz, "but let us return to the matter of recruitment. Focusing our search in the hopes of finding capable mages seems advisable, I would agree."

"Same," I said. "I think we have a plan, then! Let's get that notice sent out!"

With Rosell and Rietz's help, I drafted up a public notice that would hopefully bring as many candidates as possible to me, then gave the order to have it posted on signboards which would be set up all throughout Canarre.

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Our course of action was now firmly set, and I knew we'd be focusing on proactive recruitment for the time being, but that didn't mean we could slack off in other areas. We'd have to dedicate a fair share of time to preparing for the upcoming battle, as well. Mobilizing our forces took money and food, not to mention the resources required to keep them armed and armored. The troops were only the beginning, too—we'd also need to procure as many strategic resources as possible, chief among them aqua magia.

I was already feeling the loss of the money I'd pumped into airship development. Every coin devoted to that cause meant soldiers I wouldn't be able to pay and goods our troops would lack. Fewer troops, in the worst case, could damage Couran's opinion of me.

I guess I'll just have to make up for it by being extra useful on the battlefield.

Bolstering our numbers was only part of what it would take to prepare our army for war. We'd also have to train our troops, better preparing them for the battles to come. That task I left in the hands of Rietz and my other retainers. I,

meanwhile, spent my days appraising the people who came to us after seeing one of our recruitment signboards.

Said signboards seemed to be doing their job quite well, and a decent number of hopeful applicants soon started arriving in hopes of entering into my service. The people who arrived for appraisal came from all walks of life. Some were the children of disgraced nobles, some were ordinary townsfolk, some were farmers, some were former mercenaries or bodyguards, and some were hunters.

I quickly settled into a routine, first appraising the applicant, then telling them that we'd inform them of my decision in a few days' time and sending them on their way rather than giving them their results on the spot. We'd written that I was capable of perceiving people's talents at a glance on the signboards, but I had a feeling that if I really just *looked* at them and sent them home, the failed applicants would be less than satisfied. I figured that acting as if some sort of test were happening behind the scenes would make them take the news a little better, at least.

Of course, I'm basing my choices off people's long-term potential, not their current capabilities.

It still seemed possible that once the results were in, someone would decide to kick up a fuss about how someone who seemed superficially less useful had been accepted, while they'd been rejected. There just wasn't a perfect answer, at least as far as I could find.

On the first day, I appraised over a hundred people and wore my eyes into a state of exhaustion, but didn't find a single one who struck me as the perfect candidate. There was one person who was reasonably capable, with maximum stats in the seventies or so, and I spent some time wondering whether or not to

recruit him before deciding to ask Rietz for his input. He noted that the man's magical Aptitude wasn't remarkable, and since he wasn't exceptional in any other way, I took his advice and turned the man down. I did keep his appearance and where he lived in the back of my mind, just in case the county's fortunes turned around and I had the chance to reach out again and recruit him for real. Whether or not he'd accept was a whole different question, of course!

There was one other noteworthy fact about the first day of applications that caught my attention: every one of the prospective candidates was a man. As a general rule women weren't a match for men in close combat—with some exceptions, of course—but I knew that some of them could have incredible talent for magic slumbering within them, like Charlotte. Whether or not someone was smart or politically capable had nothing to do with their sex whatsoever, either.

I'd intended to hire any exceptional women who showed up, but in society's eyes, women were meant to stay at home while men went out to earn their family's keep, and that bias had proven powerful enough to convince Canarre's women not to even try. We'd written that anyone could apply, but we hadn't gone out of our way to specify that "anyone" included women. I'd thought that was just a given, but to the people of this world, "anyone" apparently meant "anyone, as long as you're a man." And so, even though it would be a bit of a pain, I had the signboards altered to include a specific note inviting women to apply as well.

Hopefully I'll have a few women start showing up in the next couple batches of applicants!

A few days packed full of appraisals came and went, but I just wasn't finding as many new retainers as I'd been hoping for. I'd *met* plenty of people, but they just weren't up to my standards, and the fatigue of it all was starting to take a toll on me. I briefly considered putting the whole project on pause and rethinking things, but in the end, I decided to push through and keep looking, however long it took.

I kept searching and searching until almost a month had passed. I took a few days off here and there over the course of that period, but still, interviewing the sheer number of people I'd gone through was brutal. To make matters worse, I still had yet to find anyone who suited my desires. After turning down that many people, I was starting to worry that rumors would start spreading about the requirements for the job being impossibly high. That could mean that my pool of applicants would dry up, and I was starting to think that it'd be a good idea to bring *someone* on board, even if they were less than ideal.

"Forty applicants await your judgment, Your Lordship," one of the castle's servants reported to me. That was a relatively small crowd, and I was relieved to think it would be an easy day.

The applicants filed into the room all at once. They were mostly men, as usual, but two women had shown up as well this time. I started out by offering them a quick greeting, then got right to my appraisals, starting with a conspicuously tall, red-headed man.

Oh? These stats aren't bad at all!

His name was Zaht Brouzdo, he was thirty-one years old, and he had a Valor score of 81, which told me he was quite the capable fighter. His Intelligence and Politics scores were in the seventies as well, which wasn't bad at all. His one

lacking skill was his Leadership of 51, which told me he wasn't the sort of person who excelled in a position of command. His Ambition was also 56, which was a little on the high side. His current scores and maximum scores were all almost equal, so I had to assume he'd been through some proper training.

Zaht had an A-ranked Infantry Aptitude, which was quite high. The rest of his Aptitudes were all around C or D-ranked, however, which meant that he wasn't much of a mage. Still, with stats like his, taking him into my service seemed like it would be worthwhile on the whole.

I moved on to the rest of my appraisals in an excellent mood, elated at having finally found my first exceptional new recruit. Neither my mood nor my luck would last, as applicant after applicant turned out to not live up to my standards.

Finally, I reached the fortieth and final candidate, who turned out to be a child. They were just about as tall as I was, and at a glance, I couldn't tell whether they were a boy or a girl. Their hair was pretty short, and their chest was flat as could be, so I assumed they were a boy until I appraised them and found out that I was wrong, and that *she* was, in fact, a girl after all.

Her name was Musia Trick, and she was sixteen years old—much older than I'd been expecting. The important part, though, was her status box...

Oh, she's not bad either, actually!

All four of her core stats had maximum scores in the seventies, and her Ambition score was 32, which wasn't too high at all. Her *current* stats were all in the forties, so I could imagine that her abilities weren't all that impressive at the moment, but I had high expectations for her growth.

It struck me as pretty rare for a woman as small as Musia to have that high of

a Valor score. Mireille had high Valor too, but *she* was practically a giantess, with muscles to match. That was when I looked at Musia's Aptitudes, and found my explanation: there, in the section for her Mage Aptitude, sat the letter "A."

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I had all of the day's applicants return to their homes, for the time being. Part of me had wanted to snap up my chosen candidates on the spot, but I didn't want to earn them the enmity of all the people I hadn't picked, and I also wanted to talk with my current retainers before I made the choice official. I was all but set on bringing Zaht and Musia into the fold. Especially Musia—an Aranked Mage Aptitude was exactly what I'd been looking for this whole time.

I eventually found the time to gather my retainers for a meeting. I'd more or less tasked Rietz with handling all of our war preparations, so his schedule was pretty packed and it took quite a while for us to find a good moment to get everyone together. But soon, everything fell into place, we all gathered up, and I gave everyone a brief summary of Zaht and Musia's capabilities.

"So you've finally found a talented mage! Well done, Lord Ars!" said Rietz with a broad smile.

"Even just a single capable mage more makes all the difference in terms of the strategies available to us! I'm so glad we got one, honestly. Who knows if they'll be battle-ready before the fighting starts, though," said Rosell, who was happy too, but a little more tempered in tone. It seemed he wasn't optimistic about Musia's ability to participate in the imminent conflict.

"Woohoo!" Charlotte cheered with a pump of her fists. "So, what's the new

mage like?"

"Well, she's a woman like you, to start," I said. "She's sixteen, and short for her age. We didn't talk much, so I'm not sure what sort of personality she has yet."

"A girl? Nice! I'll have to really press her nose to the grindstone," said Charlotte.

"Please don't," I sighed. "I mean, don't be that hard on her. It took a long time to pick her out, you know?"

The last thing I wanted was for Charlotte to go nuts with Musia's training routine and drive her away. Of course, knowing the sort of person Charlotte was, I couldn't imagine her *really* being that much of a drill sergeant.

"As for the other candidate you mentioned...Zaht, I believe? You said his abilities are exceptional, per your appraisal, yes?" said Rietz. "In that case, I believe that bringing both of them into your service is an excellent idea. Given how few results our search has produced so far, I was of the mind to suggest recruiting someone soon, no matter who they were."

Rietz, it seemed, had been thinking along the same lines I was, and since nobody had raised any objections, Musia and Zaht's recruitment was set in stone. I had letters dispatched to both of their homes at once, informing them of their offers of employment. A few days later, they arrived at Castle Canarre once more.

"It's an honor to enter your esteemed service, Your Lordship," Zaht said with a bow the moment he saw me. He was clearly a man who knew his manners, though considering how high his Ambition score was, I wasn't about to let myself lower my guard around him. Who knew what he might do if I was too careless.

"U-Umm... Did I really pass the test?" Musia asked in a tone devoid of selfconfidence.

"Yes, you did. You have remarkable potential," I replied.

"D-Do I really? I can hardly believe it... What sort of potential do you mean, Your Lordship?" she asked.

"The potential to be a mage. You have a talent for magic," I explained.

"F-For magic?! But I've never cast a spell in my life!" Musia exclaimed in bewildered shock. I could understand why being told she had a talent for something she'd never even tried would be hard to swallow, to be fair.

"With enough training, you will become a mage among mages. I can promise you that with absolute confidence," I said.

"B-But...mages are soldiers, aren't they? You expect me to fight?! Even if I can use magic, I think I'd do better work far away from the front line," Musia muttered. Her apprehension about my proposal was plain to see.

It struck me that Charlotte's willingness to march right into battle without a hint of protest made her quite the rare exception. By this world's values, sending a woman to war was an incredibly cruel thing to do. I'd sort of assumed that her talent for magic meant that Musia would be just as much of a weirdo as Charlotte was, but it turned out that she was an ordinary girl, at least in terms of her personality.

"And wait," Musia continued. "Are you saying that women can use magic?"

"Yes, they can," I replied. "One of my retainers is a female mage who's achieved great things on countless battlefields. You haven't heard of her?"

"N-No, I haven't. I had no idea," Musia said with a shake of her head.

I'd thought that Charlotte was pretty famous, so I was a little surprised. To be fair, I wasn't on Earth anymore and my current society didn't have the ability to diffuse information like my old world did, so maybe it was only natural that word hadn't gotten around in the way I'd thought it would. On the *other* hand, it felt a little strange that someone who was trying to enter into the service of the count wouldn't have looked into that sort of thing before signing up.

"I-I don't know if I can fight, and I don't know if I can use magic, but I'll do my absolute best anyway!" Musia said with a panicked bow. And with that, House Louvent formally welcomed two new retainers into its service.

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"Hey! I'm Charlotte. I think they said your name was, err... What was it again, actually?"

"M-Musia," House Louvent's newest recruit timidly replied. She and her senior retainer were a short distance away from the city of Canarre, in a training ground set up for the count's troops.

Where in the world have I let myself get dragged off to? Musia thought to herself as she glanced around at all the male mages in the training grounds. They were all looking back at her, their gazes sharp and appraising. They weren't trying to intimidate her, though—that was just how their expressions wound up while they were training. Soldiers like them took their practice very seriously, and there was always an almost electric air of tension in the air when they ran through their drills.

"U-Umm," Musia said, raising a trembling hand into the air. "I'm, well, a girl... and I've never used magic at all, so...is it really even possible for me to have a talent for it?"

"You're not the first female mage in this crew," Charlotte pointed out. "Plus, Lord Ars picked you out! That means you've got some crazy talent for sure. But, eh, might as well give it a try and see for yourself, right?" she added, passing Musia a small catalyzer already full of aqua magia.

"What do I do with this?" Musia asked.

"Just chant a spell. That's all it takes to use magic! Here, I'll show you one."

Charlotte recited the incantation for Fire Bullet, a flame-aspected spell. Musia, in turn, repeated the incantation in an almost inaudible mutter. Fortunately, the volume of a mage's voice was unrelated to the effectiveness of the spell they cast. A mage couldn't get away with just mouthing the words, of course, but past that point, how loudly they cast wasn't a factor.

The very instant Musia finished reciting her spell, an orb of flame burst forth before her. It slammed into a target and detonated in a moderately-sized explosion. It wasn't an outlandishly large blast, by any means, but for an absolute beginner's very first spell, it was without a doubt remarkably powerful.

"Ooh," one of the nearby mages exclaimed in admiration.

"Impressive," said another.

"That was a far cry from one of Charlotte's spells, but it's quite something to see a beginner cast like that," added a third. Now, at least, their businesslike frowns faded away, and they complimented their new ally with smiles on their faces.

"Huh? Was that pretty good, or something?" asked Charlotte, who'd never

had a proper grasp of what counted as a reasonable level of magical power.

She had been casting outlandishly ultra-powered spells from the very beginning, and was very much an outlier—enough so that she couldn't judge other mages' abilities by any reasonable standard. The other mages, however, had a clearer perspective, and explained how impressive Musia's spell was by using the stories of their own first spells as a comparison.

"Huh! That so?" said Charlotte. "Guess she really is amazing, then! I knew Lord Ars wouldn't screw up that sorta call."

Musia, however, didn't hear so much as a word of Charlotte and the mages' exchange. She was too busy staring blankly at the charred wreckage of the target she'd just immolated.

I...I can really use magic? Musia thought to herself, so moved by the revelation she began to tremble. Until she'd recited the spell—until she'd seen the fireball conjured by her own will slam into the target—she had never truly believed that she had the potential to be a mage. A person like me? Really...? And it was pretty powerful, too...

Musia had never seen magic in person before, so by her standards, the spell she'd cast had appeared tremendously destructive. At the absolute least, she could tell that if she'd directed a spell like that toward a person, terrible burns would be the best-case scenario for them.

Nothing I've ever tried to do before now has felt like it clicked...but maybe I've found the one thing that does.

In that moment, Musia could tell that her life was about to change dramatically.

And so, Musia's training as a mage began.

The first time she saw Charlotte, the leader of Canarre's mage division, cast a spell, Musia was stunned. She realized instantly that the spell that she had cast was nothing compared to the sheer power that Charlotte wielded. That being said, she didn't feel frustrated by the revelation, as she was still a rank and file beginner. To the contrary, she felt a sense of admiration toward Charlotte. The knowledge that a woman like her was capable of casting such mighty spells made Musia begin to wish that she, too, could be that skilled one day.

She soon had opportunities to watch the other mages cast as well, and found that, Charlotte aside, none of them were particularly impressive. They were all capable of casting more effective spells than Musia's had been, of course—it was, after all, her very first attempt—but none of them blew hers out of the water like Charlotte's had. Musia realized on an intuitive level that it might not be long at all before she surpassed them.

As time passed by and her training continued, Musia's magical capabilities never spiked dramatically. They did grow, though, little by little and day by day, which was enough to catch Charlotte's attention and give her a positive impression of Musia's capabilities. Many of the other mages never seemed to improve no matter how much they practiced.

"Hey, Musia! Let's go get some grub!" Charlotte called out one day after the mage unit's training came to a close. She'd taken quite a liking to the newest mage in their force, and was hoping to get to know her a little better over a

meal.

"W-Well, all right," Musia agreed hesitantly.

Their meals were waiting for them in Castle Canarre's dining hall. Musia and Charlotte returned to the castle together, collected their food, and sat down to eat at the same table.

"So, looks like you've been enjoying yourself, eh? I bet you're pretty glad to get to throw some magic around, huh?" asked Charlotte.

"Huh? Oh, I mean, yes! It's been wonderful!" Musia replied with a smile.

"Great! That's good to hear, seriously. The more you like it, the easier it is to get motivated, y'know?" Charlotte said as she nodded.

"So, umm-can I ask you a few questions?" inquired Musia, who was starting to get a little worked up. She'd been hoping to speak with Charlotte about all sorts of things for quite some time.

"Sure, go for it!" said Charlotte.

"Okay, then-how do you use such incredibly powerful magic?"

"Oof, that's a toughie," said Charlotte. "I just kinda do it, and then it's like...bam! Magic! Nobody ever seems to get it when I try to explain."

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"So, umm...bam?"
"Right."
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"…"

Musia paused to ponder Charlotte's words, but just couldn't understand what she was trying to describe. The two of them sank into silence for a moment, and eventually, Musia decided to ask a new question and change the topic. "So, how did you become a mage?"

"Oh, that was thanks to Lord Ars! I was a slave, see, but then he came along and bought me. Said he was buying me as a retainer instead of a slave, though, and, well, here I am!"

"A s-slave...?" Musia repeated in shock. She'd never imagined Charlotte had such a history.

"Yeah, I screwed up and got nabbed by a snatcher," said Charlotte. "If Lord Ars hadn't found me, I'd probably be a sex slave right about now. I've got the looks for it, right?"

She certainly did, though Musia was a little put off by the fact that Charlotte had pointed the fact out herself.

"What about you? What's your story? Before you got here, I mean," inquired Charlotte, turning the question back around on Musia.

"I was just a plain old peasant," Musia replied. "I spent all of my life helping out at home. It was, well, very ordinary."

"Huh," mumbled Charlotte.

One might've expected her to ask why Musia had chosen to enter into a lord's service, but Charlotte did no such thing, much to Musia's relief. It wasn't a topic she cared to discuss, though not because the answer was complicated or touchy. To the contrary, she was embarrassed to explain herself because her motives were so plain and simple.

"Well, glad to have you, in any case!" said Charlotte.

"Thank you!" said Musia with a nod, returning Charlotte's smile.

Meanwhile, Zaht was already regretting his decision to become Ars's retainer.

"Graaaaaah! Show some backbone, you buncha slugs!"

The source of his regret: Zaht's direct superior Braham, who was, charitably, an idiot.

On Ars's orders, Zaht had been stationed as the second in command of a small troop of elite soldiers. That wasn't a problem, in and of itself. The problem—or rather, the *many* problems—were on account of the commander of the troop, Braham. The man exuded an aura of stupidity, no matter where he was or what he was doing. It wasn't long before Zaht found himself questioning why he'd been made to work under a man like *that*, and it was only shortly thereafter that he found his patience for the situation dangling by a rapidly-fraying thread.

The recruitment sign was weird enough to get my attention, and everything seemed all well and good up until I passed the test...but how was I supposed to know I'd end up working with someone like him? Maybe it's time for me to make tracks, Zaht thought to himself as he fretted over his immediate future.

Zaht hadn't been born into a distinguished family, and had never achieved anything especially great upon the field of battle. He was a capable enough fighter, but he knew that wouldn't be enough to get him far in the world. There was no guarantee he'd be able to find employment if he left Canarre, which meant that he couldn't afford to make any hasty moves.

"All right, Zaht, it's sparring time! let's do this!" Braham shouted.

The proposal had come out of nowhere, and Zaht hesitated for a moment,

but then decided to take Braham up on his offer. The man was an idiot, yes, but judging by the way he carried himself, Zaht judged that he was exceptionally physically capable. This struck him as a good opportunity to judge Braham's ability as a fighter firsthand.

The men took up wooden swords and faced off against each other. Braham's specialty was the spear, but he'd chosen a sword today in spite of that fact. He was capable of holding his own, even without using his weapon of choice.

"Let's do this!" Braham bellowed as he swung his sword toward Zaht. Braham's small stature belied the sheer power packed into his compact frame, and his first strike was a heavy one.

Zaht skillfully parried the attack rather than blocking it head-on. The duel wore on in much the same manner for some time, but in the end, Braham's strength won out and Zaht's sword was knocked clean out of his hand.

Zaht found himself so frustrated by the loss that he soon chose to challenge Braham to a duel in turn. They fought again, and then again, but time after time, their battles ended in Zaht's defeat. He had no choice but to admit that Braham was a remarkable warrior, in spite of his stupidity.

"I'm on a whole new level of strength thanks to Rietz's lessons!" Braham proudly declared. "I'll pass on some of his wisdom, so listen up: When you're fighting someone, you've gotta watch their movements *really* carefully!"

That's the most basic of the basics! Zaht's inner voice shouted indignantly. It was so basic that it went without saying, in fact.

"When you watch how the person you're fighting moves, it makes it easier to hit them *and* to dodge their attacks! You should see how Rietz fights—he's a master, through and through!"

Zaht had to wonder: if Braham had only learned that particular lesson recently, then how in the world had he been fighting up until then? And moreover, what did it say about Zaht that he was incapable of defeating a man who didn't know how fighting worked on a fundamental level? A budding sense of self-loathing was beginning to grow within him.

Guess I won't be quitting after all, Zaht thought. Not until I manage to take this idiot down, anyway!

And so, Zaht found his resolve, by way of intense, bitter frustration.

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A few weeks had passed since I took Musia and Zaht into my service, and I decided to check in with everyone and see how the two of them had been acclimating to their positions.

Musia, it seemed, had been diligently training away to improve her magical skills. Although her Mage Aptitude was quite high, the spells she cast weren't as fearsomely powerful as Charlotte's just yet. I'd come to understand that some people with high aptitudes learned and grew quicker than others, and Musia seemed to be on the slow and steady end of that spectrum. That being said, she was still capable enough to almost immediately wield more powerful magic than the rest of our mage division. Her talent was unmistakable—it was just still developing, and she hadn't quite reached a level where she could participate in a real battle.

Charlotte, meanwhile, had grown quite fond of Musia and had taken it upon herself to act as the fledgeling mage's personal tutor. I wasn't convinced that

affection was a two-way street—Musia was, after all, getting an up close and personal view of Charlotte's whimsical nature—but Musia *did* at least seem to genuinely admire Charlotte and the powerful magic she wielded.

Zaht, on the other hand, was an exceptionally skilled combatant and was easily capable of going out into battle already. His lack of Leadership meant that he wouldn't be commanding any armies any time soon, so I'd formed a small division of relatively capable soldiers and made him one of its members.

I'd entrusted the leadership of that division to Braham, a former enemy soldier who I'd recruited after a recent battle. Braham had the potential to be an incredible leader, but at the moment, his Leadership score was less than impressive. I'd decided to start him out in command of a small force, hoping that would give him the chance to get some experience and boost his score. I gave Zaht the role of the division's second-in-command, tasking him with aiding Braham in his duties. Braham had a rather over-the-top personality, but Zaht was a little older and considerably calmer, so I was hoping that the two of them would balance each other out.

I kept up my recruitment drive even after bringing Zaht and Musia into the fold, and eventually found ten other individuals who struck me as capable enough to hire. Musia was the only one with a talent for magic, in the end, but the rest of them were gifted enough in their own rights. Some of them were already capable and ready to go out into battle at once, while others' talents were still latent and would take some fostering before I could use them. Most of the people I chose were either commoners or disgraced nobles, and a few of them had come to Canarre from other duchies.

My search had taken quite a long time in the end, and I'd only managed to recruit twelve or so people, so I found myself questioning whether this new

method was as efficient as we'd hoped it would be. I wished there were some way for me to cast a wider net. My best idea for the moment was to foster relationships with the counts of the nearby counties and put myself in a position where I could search their territories for talent as well. That, surely, would make for a more efficient process. My hands were full just dealing with my own county, and I'd had no opportunities to socialize with my fellow counts so far, which seemed like something I'd want to make happen in the long run.

Maybe I'll have to invite all the counts I can to a party, or something to that effect? And if I get an invitation from any of them to any gatherings, I'll definitely have to make attending it a priority.

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Several months after I assumed leadership over Canarre, Rietz came to me with a report.

"Lord Ars," he said, "a letter from Lord Couran has arrived for you."

"Oh, has it?" I said.

"Indeed. I presume the war is soon to resume, and he has chosen to order you to assemble your troops and march to the front lines."

Rietz handed me the letter, which I opened and read on the spot. It was exactly what he'd anticipated: a request that me and my troops march to join forces with Couran's army. That said, it also noted that there were reports of suspicious movements in Seitz, and instructed me to leave behind a standing force to deal with any sudden developments on the border.

I had actually already been made aware of Seitz's questionable movements,

and Rietz, capable as he was, had recognized the importance of the news. He hadn't even waited for me to give the order before using all our available resources, the Shadows included, to start amassing information. It wasn't long before I'd received a full report on the situation in Seitz.

Seitz's leadership had recently been disrupted by a rebellion, and the man responsible had managed to drive the now former Duke of Seitz out of the duchy and install himself as the new leader. It was a classic case of a retainer unseating the lord that he served. The rebellion's success was still a recent development, so the situation in the duchy was still far from settled and I'd initially assumed that they wouldn't be capable of any aggressive moves for some time, but there was also the possibility that the presence of an external enemy would bring the armies of Seitz together faster than I was anticipating.

The easiest target of invasion for Seitz, however, was not, in fact, Missian. Scheutz, the duchy to Seitz's north, presented a more appealing target, and if Seitz was to march on any of its neighbors it seemed more than likely they'd head in that direction. Missian still couldn't let its guard down, though, and strengthening our borders was a clear necessity. Of course, the fact that I'd been told I didn't have to bring my whole army to the front meant that even if I showed up with a somewhat unimpressive force, Couran wouldn't blame me for it. The situation wasn't *completely* devoid of upsides.

"Spread the word, Rietz—we'll begin preparing to march into battle at once!" I ordered.

"Yes, Your Lordship!" said Rietz.

On Couran's command, we set about preparing to sortie on the double.

Meanwhile in Castle Arcantez, Vasmarque's followers were delivering a report to their lord.

"Our attempts to sabotage Couran's alliance with Paradille have failed, Your Lordship."

"With regards to our appeal for an armistice with the Emperor, we have regrettably received a letter denying our request."

Vasmarque scowled. Velshdt had fallen, his right-hand man Thomas taken captive, and now Couran was rallying his troops for another offensive, leaving Vasmarque in a genuine predicament. He'd tried everything he could think of to extricate himself from his dilemma, but to no avail.

"We've few options left...and little choice but to make do with the means available to us. We must fight to our last breath—or otherwise, lay down our arms and surrender," said Remus. Although he'd led his troops to victory in countless battles, the old veteran seemed half-resigned to defeat already. "I would have it be known that even were we to fight to the last, we would gain nothing more than needless bloodshed. For Missian's sake, I believe our proper course is to admit defeat."

"No. Never..." Vasmarque muttered, his fists clenched so tightly they trembled. "I have never thought myself to be a man of great ambition. I am well aware that my talents suit the role of a counselor more than they do a leader. But...I would *never* leave Missian in Couran's hands."

A tinge of fury crept into Vasmarque's words as he spoke on.

"Couran is a man held in high esteem, I will grant him that. His underlings

adore him, and he is by no means inept. I, however, have spent my whole life watching him. I know him all too well—I know his pettiness, his small-mindedness, and his utter inability to *truly* trust anyone. The moment he claims the highest seat in Missian, he will purge any of his subordinates who may be capable enough to challenge him, and in their absence, the duchy will begin its inevitable decline. It would be bad enough if we lacked external foes, but in this day and age, the slightest sign of weakness will bring our neighboring duchies down upon us. They will feast upon Missian's carcass, and House Salemakhia will fall to ruin. That, above all else, I cannot allow to come to pass."

Being Couran's younger brother offered Vasmarque a unique perspective into the man's personality. That perspective—those memories of his brother—led him to conclude that Couran did not have what it took to lead the duchy.

"But, Lord Vasmarque," said Remus, "you mustn't blind yourself to reality.

The simple truth is that we have no moves left to make."

"No," said Vasmarque with a shake of his head. "Not quite. We still have one remaining ray of hope. If it fails, then I will concede that we've exhausted our last option...but not until then."

At that moment, another of Vasmarque's subordinates burst into the room.

"I've returned from Seitz, Your Lordship!" he shouted.

"Excellent work! What news do you bear?" Vasmarque asked.

"The rebellion has unseated the duke, and Lord Grenda Domatson has claimed his position! He has stated that he's willing to negotiate, and entrusted me with a letter for you!"

"He has?! Let's see it!"

Vasmarque believed that if he could bring Seitz into the conflict on his side, he

would still have a chance to turn the tide in his favor. To that end, when he heard that the rebellion was nearing victory, he'd had a letter dispatched to Seitz's current rulership. The new duke, Grenda Domatson, had seized his position in a remarkably short period of time, and was unmistakably as capable as rulers come. He would surely prove to be an invaluable ally.

Vasmarque scanned the letter. As his subordinate had reported, it stated that Grenda was willing to open negotiations. It did not, however, make any concrete promises of an alliance to come—that would depend on how their talks played out.

A chance to negotiate was a boon, to be sure, but there was no guarantee that the negotiations would end in Vasmarque's favor. Knowing how recently Grenda had ascended, it seemed all but certain he would have his hands full with internal issues as well. Even if he were looking for opportunities to stage an assault on his neighboring duchies, Scheutz would be a far easier target. Moreover, Scheutz was home to a cavern known colloquially as Mage's Paradise, in which an incredible variety of magistone deposits could be found. Seitz was comparatively limited in its magical resources, so a potential windfall of that nature would be almost impossible to resist.

We've few cards to play, and the tide is flowing against us. But that doesn't mean it's over—whether or not we can secure this alliance will all come down to our ability to negotiate, thought Vasmarque. He was determined to come out of the talks with a new ally, no matter what it took.

My retainers and I rallied our troops, and began our preparations to join forces with Couran's army. As I'd anticipated, however, we lacked proper funding, and could only afford to bring some of our men into active mobilization. Then, there was the matter of Seitz, and the fact that we needed to leave a standing force behind to ward off any unexpected assaults. Between those two factors, we wound up with a considerably smaller army that was ready to march than we'd had last time we sortied.

Then again, it's not like Couran's lacking in manpower to begin with.

I had a pretty clear idea that he didn't want me there for my rank and file troops—he wanted me for my exceptional retainers and the out-of-the-box ideas they could supply him with for his attack. Considering how small Canarre's population was, I would have been shocked if he'd expected us to bring along many soldiers in the first place.

I was to understand that Couran's force would hold a considerable advantage in manpower during the fight for Arcantez, but that wasn't to say that Vasmarque's personal troops would be pushovers by any means. I was certain that the battle would be winnable, but I was also certain it wouldn't be easy. We'd have to do everything we could to tip the odds in our favor and make it as simple of a conquest as possible, in the hopes of putting me deeper into Couran's good graces.

"The troops are prepared to move out whenever you're ready, Lord Ars," Rietz reported.

"Great! In that case, let's get—" I began, but before I could finish giving the order, a man burst into the room.

It was Ben, the Shadows' resident message-runner. He was usually an impassive man, but for once, there was a clear hint of panic on his face. I didn't

like what that impression implied one bit. It seemed unlikely he was here to deliver good news.

"What happened?" I asked.

Ben took a moment to catch his breath, then returned to his usual blank expression and gave his report in an almost indifferent tone.

"Seitz's troops are preparing to mobilize, and they're gathering up in the County of Purledo, which is just across the border from us. Their objective isn't clear yet, but the odds are high that they're preparing for an invasion of Canarre."

"They're...what?" I gasped. I was in a state of utter and complete shock. I'd known there was a chance that Seitz would make a move on Canarre, but now, of all times? Moreover, they were gathering what sounded like a sizable invasion force. I couldn't begin to guess how many soldiers that would mean, but it certainly sounded like they intended to take the county by storm.

"How many soldiers are we talking?" I asked.

"Around eighty thousand," said Ben.

"E-Eighty thousand," I stammered. It was almost too large a number for me to wrap my head around, and was far greater a force than Canarre had any hope of fending off. In fact, it was a large enough army that I had to wonder if they were planning on starting with Canarre, then rolling over the rest of Missian while they were at it. "F-First things first—call off the sortie, and be ready to send a message to Lord Couran on the double! Then, gather everyone up for an emergency meeting!" I ordered.

"Understood," said Rietz.

Mere moments beforehand I'd been occupied by the thought of how I could

make myself more useful to my superiors. Now, though, I'd shifted gears and was single-mindedly focused on how I could protect my territory. To start, I returned to my room and drafted a letter to Couran as quickly as I could manage, explaining the situation and requesting as many troops as he could possibly spare to back us up. I entrusted it to one of my retainers for delivery, then hurried off to meet with Rietz, Mireille, Rosell, and the others, who would hopefully help me figure out what in the world we could do about our newfound crisis.

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"Well, we're sure in one hell of a pickle this time, aren't we?" said Mireille. She sounded rather casual for a woman who'd just rushed from Lamberg to Canarre at a breakneck pace, but then again, she'd never seemed to react dramatically to this sort of crisis. Part of me suspected she enjoyed the thrill of an oncoming disaster.

"Wh-Why are you acting like nothing's wrong?! Th-This is a disaster!" Rosell shouted. He was so stressed he'd gone pallid, but also, I had to agree with him. Blind panic was the natural reaction in this situation. Mireille's aloof attitude *did* help me feel a little reassured that we could still turn things around, though, so I didn't fault her for it.

"Assuming the Shadows' report is accurate, the enemy force is far larger than we have any hope of dealing with on our own. Waiting for reinforcements is our only option," said Rietz, who seemed relatively calm and collected. His conclusion was undeniable, as well. Canarre's army stood no chance of defeating eighty thousand men.

"The question is, how many men will he even bother sending...?" Mireille muttered.

"I believe Lord Couran has ample cause to send a sizable force," said Rietz. "Canarre may not be a location of vital importance, but we *are* quite close to Semplar, which serves as his base of operations. Should Canarre fall, Lord Couran will face a distinct threat on his doorstep."

Mireille shook her head.

"That's wishful thinking," she said. "If Seitz has eighty thousand troops on the border, that pretty much guarantees they're convinced they'll profit from an invasion. And if that's true, then odds are good they've got some sort of trick up their sleeve."

"Such as...?" I prompted.

"I'd put money on Seitz and Vasmarque working together on this one. Dunno what sort of deal they could've made with each other, but I'm positive that Vasmarque's going to use Seitz's assault to spring some sort of trap of his own. That'll keep Couran busy, and he won't be able to send us the backup we need as a result."

Mireille's explanation seemed weirdly convincing to me. There was something unnatural about Seitz's offensive, when she put it that way, and them having made a deal to work together and take down Couran would make everything make sense again. We didn't have any concrete evidence, of course, and there was always the possibility that Seitz had just decided to invade and take over Missian on its own initiative. If we received a message from Couran saying that Vasmarque was on the move and he wouldn't be able to help us, though, then I would consider Mireille's theory all but proven.

"I think Master's right," said Rosell. "Vasmarque's supposed to be a tactical genius, so I'm sure he could have pulled a plan like that off without much trouble."

"There's no telling how the situation may develop, but for the moment, it would behoove us to plan for the worst-case scenario. After all, should reinforcements not arrive, then protecting Canarre will fall upon our shoulders." said Rietz.

"Okay, but...protect it how?" I asked.

Mireille, Rietz, and Rosell all fell silent. Even with all three of their exceptional Intelligence scores put together, it seemed that figuring out how to repel a force of eighty thousand men wasn't such an easy task.

"Yeah, nah. It's a lost cause," said Mireille. "Not only do we not have the manpower, but our cities aren't designed to repel a serious invasion. Castle Canarre's walls aren't equipped with any half-decent magical weapons or defenses at all. If Seitz *really* wanted this territory, they could have it within a year, at most. Our only hope's that Couran will defeat Vasmarque before then and send reinforcements our way."

In other words, Mireille was recommending that we fight a defensive battle and stall for as much time as possible.

We'd be leaving our fates in the hands of our allies...but is that our only choice?

"Well, there is one other option," Mireille continued.

"What would that be?" I asked.

"Surrender to Seitz before the battle even starts," said Mireille. "They'll probably ask us to lay down our arms before they invade in earnest, and if we

say yes, they might decide not to kill the lot of us. I'm sure the Duke of Seitz would love to get his hands on your power, and if you play your cards right, you might even manage to move up in the world. Seitz'll move in to hit Couran in the flank and take Semplar, most likely, and if you manage to contribute enough in that battle, he might just set you up in charge of the place. Hell, you might even be able to keep Canarre too, for all I know."

I could think of a word to describe that proposal: a betrayal. Mireille was right that stabbing Couran in the back could save the lives of me and my retainers, and it seemed less risky than the other options on the table. Considering that I'd made a point of prioritizing the continued existence of House Louvent, it should've by all rights been an option that I took into serious consideration...but I just couldn't help but balk at the idea.

Why was I so opposed to betraying Couran? Simply put, one of the biggest reasons was because I'd taken a liking to him as an individual. He was understanding, honest, and generous in treating his followers to lavish rewards and feasts. He also seemed to hold me in high esteem, whereas I had no idea how the Duke of Seitz would view me if I jumped ship. The promise I'd made to Lumeire played a motivating factor as well. He was deeply loyal to Couran, from what I could tell, and having inherited his former territory, using it and its resources to stab Couran in the back would feel downright coldhearted.

I quickly reached my decision.

"I'm afraid I would prefer not to surrender, Mireille," I said.

"Lemme set something straight, kiddo. You think that surrendering would mean betraying Couran, right?" Mireille replied. "Well, this whole scenario's assuming that he either doesn't send any reinforcements to help us, or sends too few to make any difference. If one of his vassals asks for his help and he doesn't deliver, that means he's failed in his lordly duties. If you're faced with unbeatable odds and your lord doesn't send anyone to back you up, then when you surrender, it's not *your* fault—it's the lord's, no question. That means that nobody will see it as a betrayal, and you won't damage your family's reputation."

I have to admit that I found her argument compelling, and a part of me wavered, but I'd made my choice and I felt compelled to stick with it. Rietz and Rosell seemed to see the logic in surrendering as well, and while they didn't like the idea of giving up without a fight, they were of the opinion that in the worst-case scenario it might be our only option. I wasn't excited about the idea of fighting to the death, either...and if it came down to it, I knew that surrender could be the best way to save my retainers, my family, my fiancée Licia, my citizens, and, of course, myself.

"Well, none of this will matter if Lord Couran can get us the troops we need," I said. "Let's wait for his response before we make any major decisions. That, and send what troops we have on hand toward the border. Can we deploy them right away?"

"We were already preparing for a sortie, so they can move out at once," said Rietz. "I believe we should have them set up camps at a number of strategic points immediately."

"Then I'll leave commanding the army to you. I'm counting on you," I replied.

"Yes, Your Lordship!" Rietz said, then headed out to give the troops their orders.

A few days had passed since the news of Seitz's impending invasion arrived, and the possibility of Vasmarque making a move and preventing Couran from sending us reinforcements was still nothing more than speculation on Mireille's part. Her Intelligence score was exceptional, but that didn't mean she was always right. I hoped she'd gotten this one wrong, frankly, but all I could do was await news from Couran.

Finally, a soldier came hurrying into my office.

"I bear urgent news, Lord Ars! A message has arrived from Lord Couran!"

"It's finally here?!" I exclaimed, then hurried over to accept and read the letter.

Couran's report read like a summary of Mireille's predictions. At the same moment Seitz's forces began massing on our border, Vasmarque's troops had gone on the warpath. He sent out a vast number of his troops—enough to leave the capital almost undefended—in an all-out effort to recapture Velshdt. At first Couran had assumed that Vasmarque was trusting Arcantez's fortifications to hold the castle while he was away and staking the war on a gamble, but when news of Seitz's preparations reached him, he realized that it was no gamble at all, and that Vasmarque had made a deal with Seitz behind the scenes.

Velshdt had been hard-won, to say the least, and would be incredibly important for the sake of the war. Losing it could prove fatal, and so Couran had no choice but to throw everything he had into its defense. The force marching toward Velshdt was substantial, and since Couran had to send just as many troops to support the city, that left him with very few reinforcements to dispatch to Canarre's aid.

He did not, however, intend to abandon Canarre entirely, and pledged to dispatch a small force to back our troops up. Small, in this instance, meant twenty thousand. Canarre's standing army numbered eight thousand, giving us twenty-eight thousand troops to work with in total. That meant we were still outnumbered, but not by so dramatic an extent as to make it possible for the enemy to rush in and overwhelm us in a flash. In addition, while he wasn't able to send us many men, he did promise to send resources and provisions in abundance.

Couran also mentioned that the Maitraw Company would be among the reinforcements he sent to us. I'd fought with the mercenaries before, and I knew that their leader was exceptional and his troops highly skilled. I'd learned in our previous engagement that they weren't the sort of sellswords who did the bare minimum to earn their pay, and I felt that I could trust them.

Couran, it seemed, had every intention of warding off Vasmarque's assault and coming to our aid before Canarre fell. Until then, our job was to buy time and hold out for as long as possible with what troops he could spare. He emphasized that he *would* send more men, no matter what, and asked that I keep up the fight in spite of our inferior numbers and not surrender, no matter how dire the situation seemed. Clearly, he'd realized that we'd be considering raising the white flag if the situation devolved.

The difference in numbers hadn't been balanced, but on the other hand, if we were to devote ourselves purely to defense, I had a feeling that we might just be able to pull through. Couran was no slouch in battle, and I didn't imagine he'd have a hard time winning the day on his front, even with his brother as his opponent. I resolved myself to believe in him and fight as hard as I could... though first things first, I needed to call my retainers together for a meeting on the double.

I was still in Castle Canarre, but Rietz had headed out to the border to help set up our defensive encampments and wasn't available at the moment. As such, we'd have to conduct our meeting without him this time. He was always a source of calm, sensible analysis, and I would have preferred to have him around, but there wasn't much I could do to make that happen under the circumstances. I sent word to the rest of my people and got things underway at once.

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"Twenty thousand, eh? That's gonna be dicey, but I can't say it's impossible," Mireille said after I finished updating her on the situation.

"So they outnumber us three to one...? This isn't good at all... At least we'll have the Maitraw Company on our side... But when all's said and done, war's a game of numbers..." Rosell muttered to himself. I could tell by the pallid gloom cast over his face that he was going into pessimist mode again.

"It'd be handy if we could get more detailed info on how many we're up against, or about the state of the provisions and resources they're working with. Do we have anything along those lines yet?" asked Mireille.



I'd asked the Shadows to investigate the enemy forces, and as luck had it, their initial report had arrived just moments before Couran's letter. According to that report, they had yet to begin their invasion in earnest, but the fact that they intended to attack Canarre was no longer in question. They numbered roughly eighty thousand, as we'd expected, and they were well-stocked with the provisions needed for an extended campaign. They could keep it up for a year, at minimum.

Their magical resources, in contrast, were somewhat limited. Fire-aspected magistones weren't a resource that Seitz had in abundance. The most common sort of magistone in that region was earth-aspected, and while earth magic was quite useful for creating walls and moats in a flash, those were primarily for defensive purposes, and it wasn't especially useful when fighting an offensive war. A capable mage could use it to attack by synthesizing chunks of metal and sending them flying through the air, but for an average mage, digging holes and making walls was the best you could hope for.

Missian's relationship with Seitz had been rocky for quite some time, so very few fire magistones had been exported in recent memory...at least, in theory. Somehow, though, the Shadows reported that Seitz's army was stocked with a supply of fire-aspected aqua magia. Vasmarque, clearly, had engineered a means to deliver those resources to Seitz, and that meant that we couldn't assume they'd be lacking in straight-up firepower.

The report also mentioned that the assault would not be led by the newly-ascended Duke of Seitz. Rather, it would be spearheaded by his most trusted retainer, a man named Boroths Heigand who had played a key role in enabling the new duke's rise to power. He was a very capable leader who had once crushed an army of a hundred thousand with a force half their size. That victory

had dealt a serious blow to the former duke's resistance, and had ultimately played the deciding factor in the war.

I realized, in retrospect, that I should've known the new duke would have capable followers on his side, considering the dramatic rise to power he'd pulled off. I wasn't the only lord with people who knew their stuff, and I knew I had to get in the habit of taking that fact into consideration.

"So they have plenty of provisions, not much flame aqua magia, and a small stock of explosive aqua magia," Mireille summed up. "And the enemy commander's a force to be reckoned with, huh...? What about their morale? That can make or break a battle, when all's said and done."

"Not so great, apparently," I said. "They just finished one large-scale war, so I imagine none of their soldiers are very excited about jumping right into another one."

"So their morale's pretty low, then," said Rosell. "Though if their commander's as capable as you say he is, I'm sure he has a trick or two to raise morale up his sleeve. We can't assume his troops won't be fighting their best."

"In other words, we're still in dire straits," Mireille muttered. She didn't sound optimistic, but the smirk on her face told a different story.

"Do you think we stand a chance?" I asked.

"Well, first off, we can't let that story about their commander taking on an army twice the size of his and winning scare us. It's not exactly rare for military men to exaggerate their victories, and even if it is true, sometimes a little luck makes all the difference in battle. It's possible that he caught a lucky break and his plan worked out perfectly by pure chance."

Rosell nodded in agreement.

"That's true," he said. "Not to mention that taking on a large force with a small one and taking on a small force with a large one require totally different tactics."

"Plus, our goal this time is to drive them away, not to wipe them out. Considering that, I'd say yeah, we stand a good chance," added Mireille.

"Seitz wouldn't be invading if they didn't think they stood to gain something," Rosell claimed. "I figure they must have made some sort of deal with Vasmarque, but if we can put them in a position where they'd lose more by carrying on the invasion than they'd gain from the deal, they'll probably withdraw. I don't know what they're gaining by attacking us, but I can't imagine it's enough to justify getting the better part of their army killed."

"So, essentially, you're saying we have to convince the army of Seitz that their losses would outweigh their gains?" I asked to make sure I was following his logic. Rosell nodded.

"And that means everything hinges on the start of the war," said Mireille. "We need to make this invasion look as unappealing as possible from the outset. If we can take the wind out of their sails right away, it'll ruin their morale so badly that even the most skilled commander would need time to bring their troops back around. That'll make them less likely to press the attack."

Taking the wind out of their sails, huh?

Her reasoning was sound. Considering the advantage in numbers the enemy held, that felt like our best bet at keeping their invasion at bay. We had an incredibly powerful mage on our side in Charlotte, and a very capable battlefield commander in Rietz. We also had the Maitraw Company on the way to reinforce us, and they were sure to equal the enemy's troops in skill. In fact, I

was willing to bet they'd surpass our foes.

"I guess we'll be relying on Charlotte again," I said.

"We're counting on you, Charlotte!" Rosell chimed in.

Charlotte was present at the meeting...physically, anyway. She must not have been keeping up with the conversation, though, and the closest we got to a reply from her was a slovenly snore. She was also drooling, which didn't make her look like *less* of a moron. I had my apprehensions about staking Canarre's future on her, but I knew that for all her flaws she was a magical monster on the battlefield, so I decided to try my best to have faith in her.

"Okay, then," said Rosell. "First, let's have the Shadows keep watch on the enemy, report on their movements, and try to figure out how they'll be coming at us. That aside, we should also find a place to set up our main encampment that'll give us as much of an advantage as possible. Considering how many troops the enemy has compared to our force, I'm sure they'll go on the attack even if we have a clear upper hand in terms of positioning. Then, we'll use that advantage to turn the tide and drive them back, or something to that effect."

For the time being, we just had to watch and wait for the Shadows' report. I wasn't expecting them to figure out every last detail of the enemy's strategy—that seemed like it'd be hoping for too much, however capable they were—but what they *could* tell us would determine our course from then on. Well, with enough time they might've been able to figure out the enemy's entire plan, but I doubted they'd be giving us that sort of time to work with. Rosell and Mireille's theories would have to suffice, as far as predicting the enemy's movements went.

With that, we'd made all the plans we could for the moment, and our meeting came to a close.

Couran's reinforcements ended up arriving before the Shadows could get us any more solid information to work with. Thankfully, the army of Seitz seemed to have had some delays in transporting their aqua magia, so they had yet to march on the border. The downside was that it had turned out they had a fair bit more aqua magia to work with than the Shadows had first reported, which made them more of a pressing threat than ever. Thankfully, our reinforcements had brought plenty of flame-aspected aqua magia with them as well. Even though they were only twenty thousand men strong, their resources gave us a massive boost to our overall combat potential.

With the Maitraw company, of course, came their leader, Clamant.

"We meet again," he said when we reunited.

I don't think either of us had been expecting our next meeting to be so soon. The look in his eyes was as chilly as ever, and the way he stared at me made it feel like I might freeze over.

"I can't understand how a child like you could end up becoming a count. Is it those strange eyes of yours?" Clamant asked.

I had to wonder who had told him about my Appraisal skill. He'd said something about not liking the way I'd looked at him the last time we met, so maybe he'd figured it out on his own? He was far more observant than the average person, that was for certain. In fact, he was exceptional enough that I would've loved to make him my retainer, but I got the sense that if I tried to recruit him now, he'd turn me down in a heartbeat. He struck me as the sort of man who wasn't fond of serving others, and unless I could make him *really* like me, bringing him into my service would be a lost cause.

"On second thought, I don't care," Clamant said before I could answer him.

"I've been told the situation here's grim, but we were paid generously for this job, and we'll give you your money's worth."

"I'm relieved to hear it," I said, and I meant it from the bottom of my heart. His policy as a mercenary was to fight as hard as he'd been paid to fight, and I had a feeling that Couran had really shelled out for his services this time. That meant I could expect great things from him and his men on the battlefield.

With our reinforcements in tow, we made our way to the most important defensive site on the border with Seitz: Fort Coumeire. Holding the fort against an enemy attack would prove difficult, so we were planning on stationing the bulk of our forces there to shore it up. It would serve as our headquarters, and all of the orders we gave our troops would be dispatched from there.

Rietz had set up an encampment on a nearby road in record time, helping to expand our line of defense. That line would be the front in our defensive war, and with any luck, we'd both hold it and inflict major damage to the enemy force in the process, convincing them that the war wasn't worth it and that they should withdraw to Seitz...or at least, that was the best-case scenario.

As we moved our troops about and prepared for the oncoming battle, word arrived that the army of Seitz was on the march. The war was about to begin in earnest.

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"So they're finally on the move?" I said. "All right—our goal's to deal as much damage as possible in the first skirmish, and convince them that this invasion

isn't worth it after all! As such, I want Rietz, Charlotte, and the Maitraw Company to all fight on the front lines."

"Understood," said Rietz. Charlotte and Clamant offered no particular reaction, though.

"We need to win a crushing victory here for the sake of our overall strategy, but if the enemy force is tougher than expected and things start to turn for the worse, I want you to get out of there as quickly as possible. We're not fighting to the death here, so stay safe," I added.

I couldn't afford to lose Rietz and the others, no matter what happened. Winning big here and prompting the enemy to withdraw was the best possible outcome, but I knew there was no guarantee the battle would proceed that smoothly. Fortunately, even if it didn't turn out well, we had plenty of provisions and resources to hold out for a long time, and Couran would be sending reinforcements in droves the moment he could. If worse came to worst, holding out and buying time was always an option.

The problem with that option, of course, was that it would be a constant, perilous struggle, and we'd likely lose plenty of soldiers in the process. There was also the danger of them laying waste to wide swaths of the county if the enemy army managed to push past our borders. Driving them back immediately with a one-sided shutdown was the best possible way that this could end.

In any case, Rietz agreed to not put himself at risk, but I knew that there was a real chance he'd push himself too hard anyway when the fighting began. In a sense, that was my biggest concern. Being a mercenary, Clamant knew exactly when to cut his losses and withdraw, and Charlotte wasn't dedicated enough to hesitate if the time came to run. Rietz, on the other hand, was dedicated and loyal to a fault, which meant he might try to hold out past the point of reason.

I would be staying in Fort Coumeire and wouldn't be able to give orders directly, so I was concerned for Rietz's safety. I considered heading out to the front lines myself, for a moment, but quickly thought better of it. I was the count, after all—the leader of Canarre on the whole—and if I got myself killed here, the chain of command would shatter and we'd lose the war before it even began. I appreciated now more than ever that my own personal safety was directly linked to the safety of my retainers and my domain. Plus, in all practicality, I wouldn't have been very useful out there even if I did head for the front lines in person.

"The time has come, then. We depart for battle, Your Lordship!" Rietz said, then led his troops off toward the front line.

I watched him go, still deeply concerned. Thanks to my Appraisal skill I knew that he was objectively one of the most capable warriors I'd ever met, but still, I couldn't help but worry about him. In the end, I cared more about Rietz returning to me safely than I did about whether or not we won the battle.

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Fort Purledo stuck out like a sore thumb. Built in the wilds of Purledo, a county of Seitz, the fort featured a beautiful design that contrasted sharply with the rugged wastes that surrounded it. It was from that fort that the army of Seitz would march into battle, and it was within that fort that the man they called the Duke of Seitz's right hand, Boroths Heigand, watched over his men.

Boroths was a tall man with a long, well-kept mustache. He was in his early thirties, and his rather narrow eyes combined with the slightly raised corners of his mouth made it seem as if he was constantly smiling. At a glance, most people assumed he was a pleasant, good-natured person.

The duke had directed Boroths to command his army in the oncoming battle, and Boroths had chosen Fort Purledo to serve as his headquarters, from which he dispatched orders to the leaders of each of his army's divisions. Boroths wasn't much of a fighter himself, but as a strategist, he had his fair share of talents.

"I can't say I understand what His Lordship is thinking this time. I suppose this is what I get for choosing to serve a master who sees things in such a peculiar way," Boroths muttered to himself as he restlessly stroked his mustache. "It's not as if the rewards Vasmarque offered in exchange for us occupying Canarre are all that remarkable. We'll hardly gain any territory worth speaking of, and the provisions and resources weren't much better. I suppose that having him in our debt once he's united Missian has its merits... But I'm sure we could have asked for more in exchange, as well... Is His Lordship truly that dedicated to making Canarre's vassals his own?"

To most of his retainers, the Duke of Seitz had claimed that he'd determined that Vasmarque was a more worthy and capable ruler than Couran, and that by helping him unite Missian under his banner, Seitz would gain a powerful ally. In private, however, he had told his closest associate Boroths his true motive: he believed that finding skilled individuals to serve him was of the utmost importance, and that he who brought the most talent under his banner would one day rule all of Summerforth.

The duke was aware of Ars, the newly-appointed Count of Canarre. He had been struck by the promotion of one so young to a position of such importance, and had concluded that there must be more to the boy than meets the eye. He

had gathered up as much information on the young count as he could, and after a careful investigation, the duke had learned that Ars was either exceptionally capable of perceiving people's talents, or otherwise of drawing those talents out.

The duke had immediately decided that he needed Ars as one of his vassals, and that he wanted the various talented retainers Ars had gathered so far as well. The duke believed that having capable followers was paramount, and someone who could either find or create those with talent would be the most essential follower of them all.

There were a number of ways to bring another lord's vassal into one's service, but this time, the duke had decided that engaging Ars in battle, defeating him, and bringing him into the fold after he chose to yield was the only practical possibility. Convincing a lord who ruled over a sizable region to defect to your side would be difficult without a similarly-sized territory to offer them, and at the moment, Seitz had no appropriate regions that could be spared. This was no time to be tearing territory away from one of Seitz's current lords, either—the fallout of such an act would be instant and dramatic.

Buying Ars's allegiance would be similarly difficult, considering the sheer wealth that Couran had at his beck and call. If Ars was dissatisfied with Couran's rule, then convincing him to turn traitor on his own initiative may have been possible, but at the moment, there were no signs whatsoever that he was. Occupying Canarre, taking Ars into captivity, and forcing him to enter the duke's service seemed both the quickest and most likely method to succeed. *That,* in truth, was why the duke had decided that war would be a necessity.

He had, of course, considered the possibility that his actions would earn Ars's enmity, and that the boy would refuse to serve him as a result. The duke

believed that he could talk Ars into working for him, but in the event he was unsuccessful, Boroths was quite certain the duke intended to put Ars to death. Anyone with talent who wouldn't serve him, after all, was a threat, and would remain so until they were removed from the picture for good. As things stood, having Ars ruling over a county directly across the border from Seitz made him a clear and immediate threat. In the eyes of the duke, either making Ars into one of his own men or otherwise killing him was a vital step to securing the future of the duchy.

"Could this Ars Louvent really be that special? He's still just a child, isn't he? Maybe he can see people's talents, or maybe he can raise them up...or, maybe he just got lucky and blundered his way into a host of capable subordinates," Boroths said to himself, then sighed. "Then again, His Lordship is rarely wrong, in spite of his peculiarities. I thought his rebellion was hopeless as well, at first, and look at us now. I'm sure he has the right of it once again."

The duke had Boroths's wholehearted trust and loyalty. Even if he had no clue what his master was thinking, he never truly believed that the duke was wrong.

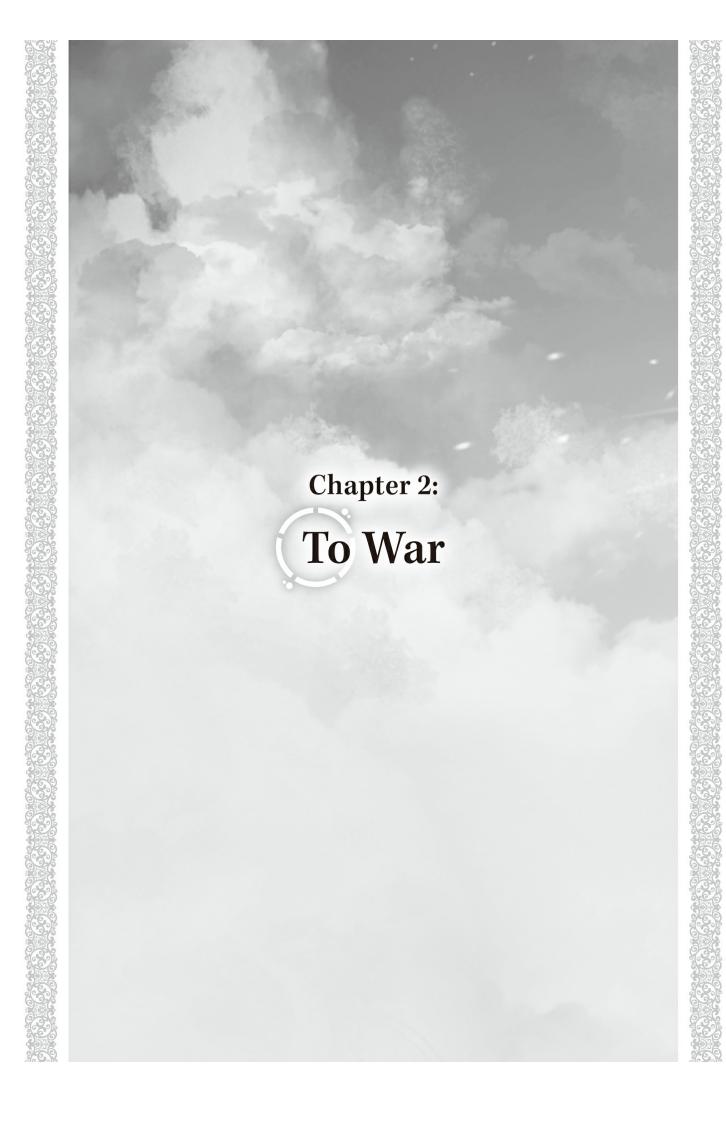
"We hold the advantage of numbers, but our foes have a host of exceptional individuals on their side. This may not be an easy fight, but His Lordship has instructed me to bring it to a close as soon as possible, even if I have to lose scores of men in the process. I must win this war, for his sake!"

Even if Canarre's army proved more capable than expected and the fighting turned fierce and bloody, Boroths had no intention of calling off the assault. The plan was for him to carry on the fight after Canarre was occupied, moving deeper into Missian to invade Semplar and storm Couran's headquarters from its flank. As such, he couldn't afford to lose too many men in the early stages of the war, but so long as he managed to secure or slay Ars before the war was

finished, his most important mission would be accomplished even if the worst came to pass and Vasmarque fell, leaving Missian in Couran's hands.

If Boroths let this chance slip past and Couran united Missian before Ars was dealt with, he knew there may never be another chance to take Ars out of the picture. Couran valued Ars's service highly, and was unlikely to ever let him go or treat him poorly. Ars had talented spies in his employ, as well, which made assassination a bad prospect. The duke had made it very clear to Boroths that this was their best, and perhaps only, opportunity.

"Well then—time to get this war underway," said Boroths. He was dead set on making his lord's will a reality, so wasted no time putting his plan into motion.



The first thing Rietz did upon arriving at the front lines was call a meeting with the leaders of each squad and give them their instructions for the upcoming battle. Present at the meeting were Rietz himself, Charlotte, Braham, Zaht, and Clamant. Mireille and Rosell had both stayed behind at Fort Coumeire with Ars.

"All right!" Braham shouted. "The second the enemy shows up, my squad'll charge in and wipe out the lot of 'em! We'll take them down, no matter how many of 'em there are!"

Rietz gave Braham a scathing look, and Braham instantly realized what Rietz's intense silence was meant to communicate. Braham's enthusiasm vanished in the blink of an eye, and he muttered "Sorry..." as he withered away.

Zaht watched the whole exchange with a look of exasperated disbelief on his face. The fact that he was wondering why he'd been forced to serve under a man like Braham was plain to see.

"Our encampment is set up on the bank of a river," said Rietz. "The water is shallow in that vicinity, and it's possible to ford the river on foot, but the enemy's movements will be slowed while they do so. That's when we'll bombard them with magic. They'll be expecting us to attack while they're on the move, of course, and I'm sure they'll have their defenses raised, but Charlotte's magic should be powerful enough to blast through any shields they can prepare. While they're shaken by her attack, our archers will step in to riddle their ranks with arrows. The enemy's likely to make a strategic retreat and attempt to regroup, at which point we'll pursue them. If all goes as planned, we'll inflict significant losses upon them, and maybe even force them

to withdraw."

Rietz believed that his plan had a high chance of inflicting substantial casualties upon the hostile army. The enemy's commander supposedly had a keen mind, but he was likely unaware of just how fearsome some of Missian's soldiers could be. Rietz didn't believe their guard would be down, but he *did* believe they'd be unlikely to send a force so large that the Missian army couldn't overwhelm and repel them. They would be feeling the waters, at first, and would only mount a full assault once they had a preliminary grasp of what they were up against.

Rietz's hope was that if they suffered a crushing, one-sided defeat, they would come to the conclusion that the Missian army's advantage in skill outweighed the Seitz army's advantage in numbers. That would lead to the realization that they could, in fact, lose the war, and would ultimately prompt their withdrawal.

Rietz had thought the whole situation through, and concluded that forcing the enemy to turn back was well within the realm of possibility. The current Duke of Seitz had only just ascended to his position, and it seemed very unlikely that he had already settled all of the duchy's internal issues in that short span of time. There were surely plenty of factions within Seitz that still opposed him, and losing a war in dramatic fashion could embolden those factions and plunge the duchy into yet another civil war. It still wasn't clear what Vasmarque had offered Seitz to incentivise their invasion, but given the perilous position he was in, Rietz couldn't imagine that Vasmarque had anything he could give that would justify the duke taking on that sort of risk.

"Charlotte? I'm aware that Lord Ars took Musia in as his retainer on account of her talent for magic, but to what extent has it manifested itself? How capable is she at this moment?" asked Rietz. Having a second capable mage would make the odds of his plan turning out well substantially higher, and since Charlotte had been watching over Musia's training, she would know better than anyone how powerful the fledgeling mage had grown.

"Eh, she's not really there yet," said Charlotte. "I brought her along anyway, though. She casts a spell with some punch to it every once in a while, but most of them are still pretty weak."

"Understood," said Rietz with a disappointed frown. He believed his plan would work with Charlotte as their only capable caster, but still, having another powerful mage on their side would have made a massive difference.

"What about me, teach?! What should I be doing?!" Braham asked.

"Weren't you listening when I explained the plan?" Rietz countered. "Can't you figure that out for yourself?"

"Nope!" Braham proudly declared.

"Have you no shame whatsoever...?" Rietz sighed. "Your division's work will come toward the end of the battle. Once the enemy line crumbles and they begin their retreat, I want you and your men to charge in and pursue them."

"Pursue them?! Wait a minute—I'm not the sorta guy who kicks a beaten enemy while they're down! Gimme a different job!" Braham insisted. He was not a man who minced words, whether or not he was in a situation where doing so would be to his benefit.

"Chasing after a broken enemy is a valid and necessary aspect of warfare," said Rietz. "If you simply stand back and let your foes escape, then whatever victory you may have claimed will be rendered all but meaningless. Your division is mobile, and your men are highly skilled. In other words, you're

perfect for the task."

The men in Braham's division had been chosen from among Canarre's most capable close-range fighters.

"Valid and necessary, huh...? Well, if you say so! I don't like it, but I'll do it," said Braham, caving to Rietz's argument with uncharacteristic ease.

"Sir Clamant," Rietz said, turning to the mercenary captain next. "How many mages, archers, infantry, and horsemen have you brought with you?"

"More infantry and horsemen than the others," replied Clamant. "We're short on mages, but we have a few men who know their way around a bow. If you want concrete numbers, we have eight infantry and eight horsemen for every three archers and one mage."

Clamant's troop numbered roughly three thousand men, and since only those with a natural talent for magic could learn to wield it effectively, it was only natural he'd wind up with very few capable mages. It was a consequence of not prioritizing their recruitment.

"More mages is never a bad thing, but I'm more concerned with their level of skill. How capable would you say your men are, in that respect?" asked Rietz.

"I wouldn't have recruited them if they weren't capable. I don't have any mages who could stand up to *her*, though," Clamant said with a nod toward Charlotte. "Not even close. The first time my best mage saw her cast, he said she was 'an outlier.'"

Charlotte stood taller than before and smirked, practically exuding an aura of smug self-satisfaction. Compared to her, the Maitraw Company's mages came out looking inadequate. She was simply too powerful to assess on the same scale as more mundane mages. Still, Clamant insisted that his mages were far

from inept, and that at least some of them would be of use in the coming engagement. Even one more mage would make Rietz's plan more likely to succeed, so in his eyes, this was a positive development.

After that, Rietz made sure everyone knew and remembered the signals they'd be using out on the battlefield and polished his preparations to perfection. No sooner had he finished than a scout arrived to report that the enemy army was on the move.

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After Rietz's meeting came to a close, Charlotte gathered all the army's mages and began preparing for battle. She and her men set up large catalyzers and determined who would use which of the catalyzers they had available, with Charlotte directing the process and giving orders all the while. Her usual lackadaisical attitude was nowhere to be found—on the battlefield, Charlotte transformed into a woman who could issue clear, precise orders at the drop of a hat. It was almost hard to believe she was the same person. However, the rest of the mages in her contingent only knew her from the battlefield and their training sessions, and never got to see her everyday personality. They thought of her as both exceptional and terrifying, and treated her with an almost reverential air.

"U-Umm, Miss Charlotte? Am I supposed to fight too?" Musia nervously asked.

"Yup," said Charlotte. "Lord Ars says that you have the talent to be an incredible mage, and need all the experience you can get. We can only use so

much aqua magia during our training sessions, so the only time we get to play with these big catalyzers is out on the battlefield. Plus, you've managed to cast a few real nice spells here and there, so who knows? Maybe we'll get lucky and you'll bust one of those out mid-battle."

"This battle's supposed to be important, though, isn't it? What if I end up getting in everyone's way?"

"No need to worry about that. Even if you do get in the way, I'll win this battle for us no problem! It'll be a piece of cake!" Charlotte said with a confident grin that Musia couldn't help but admire. "Anyway, it's not an issue if your spells are kinda puny, but hesitating to cast them's a whole different matter. I don't really get it, but apparently that's an issue for a bunch of people. They can cast just fine until it's time for the real deal, and then all of a sudden they can't sling a spell to save their lives."

It was only then, as she mulled over Charlotte's words, that Musia realized that wielding magic on a battlefield would mean taking people's lives. She had never killed before, and as the understanding she would soon have to sank in, a rush of terror began to well up within her.

Charlotte could tell that Musia was starting to panic, and decided to give her some advice.

"Listen," she said, "you can't let yourself think that killing your enemies is a bad thing. You know why all those people are gonna be running at us? To kill us, and our friends too. If you don't kill them, you can bet *they* won't hesitate when you're the one at *their* mercy."

"Y-Yes, that's right," Musia stammered.

Unfortunately, this wasn't the sort of problem that could be solved with a

quick word of advice. She would need to experience the reality of a battlefield for herself, and overcome her fear on her own. Ars had said she had potential, though, and that was enough to convince Charlotte that Musia would make that leap in the long run.

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A few days later, a report arrived informing Rietz that the enemy's arrival was imminent. By that point the catalyzers were all in place, and his preparations for the battle were complete. Whenever the enemy showed up, he would be ready for them.

Rietz gazed out in the direction the army would be arriving from. Before long, a distant rumbling began to shake the air. The army of Seitz had arrived, and was rushing toward his position, but Rietz held fast, waiting to give the order to attack. First, he had to wait for his foes to reach the river. He would aim for the moment they began to ford it, slowing their pace and making them an easier target. The army of Seitz, of course, was aware that would be their moment of weakness and would deploy defensive magic to protect themselves, but Rietz wasn't concerned. After all, his force had Charlotte to lead their attack.

Finally, as Seitz's forces began to cross the river, Rietz gave the signal for the mage division to begin.

"Attack!"

Charlotte completed her spell first, unleashing the strongest of all fireaspected magics: Hellfire. This would have been a perfect moment to bring out explosive magic, but that was in short supply, and had to be conserved to protect particularly significant locations. Some of Ars's retainers had lobbied to use it anyway, considering how much they were wagering upon this single battle, but in the end, it had been decided that it wasn't worth the risk. Fire magic lacked in destructive potential compared to explosive magic and was easier to guard against, but when Charlotte was casting it, those factors hardly mattered.

A single cast of Hellfire exhausted all of the aqua magia in a large catalyzer, and the spell couldn't be cast at all using any of the smaller models. When cast by an ordinary mage, it was capable of engulfing an entire battlefield in raging flames, turning the landscape into a veritable hell on earth. When Charlotte cast it, the word "hell" didn't do the scene justice. Her spell shredded the enemy's defenses so quickly it was like they hadn't been there at all, and transformed the battlefield into a sea of flame in the blink of an eye. Rietz had speculated that the river would dampen the spell's effects, but it was so overwhelmingly powerful that any difference the river might have made was impossible to perceive.

The other mages' spells followed soon after Charlotte's. Their army only had a limited number of large catalyzers on hand, so most of them used medium or small ones instead. The mages stationed on the large catalyzers were the cream of the crop, with one exception: the division's newest mage, Musia, had been given a large catalyzer to operate as well.

That had been Charlotte's decision. She was in charge of her mages' stations, and while Rietz had decided not to question her choice, he *had* been somewhat concerned about it. Musia's magic could be incredibly powerful on occasion, but she was still inexperienced and her spells failed sometimes as well. Wasting an entire large catalyzer's worth of aqua magia was an expense they simply couldn't afford. All Rietz could do was watch over Musia and pray that she

would pull her spell off...but the moment the battle began, his worries were obliterated.

In spite of her inexperience, Musia's Hellfire swept across the battlefield to nearly as devastating of an effect as Charlotte's had. It seemed luck was on Canarre's side, and this was one of her good days. Even Musia seemed shocked by the power of the spell she'd cast—most likely, this was her most effective spell to date. It was a happy miscalculation, to be sure: Charlotte's spell had already thrown the enemy army into a state of turmoil, and Musia's had crashed down on them just moments later, shaking them even further.

In an instant, the enemy soldiers began to break ranks and run. Their commanding officer didn't seem to have given the order to retreat—this was an uncoordinated withdrawal. Most likely, the brutality of the situation had driven the soldiers into a panic. They'd lost their will to fight, disregarded their orders, and decided to flee. They weren't inexperienced or poorly led soldiers by any means, but nevertheless, the spectacle was simply too devastating and their spirits were broken in an instant. Watching one's comrades be burned to death—seeing them writhe and suffer as the flames consumed them—had dealt an incredible psychological blow to the entire enemy force.

Once Rietz confirmed that they were retreating, he ordered his mages to cease fire and ordered his cavalry to charge. Clamant and Braham both led their troops into the fray, chasing after the hostile soldiers. Rietz's goal was to deal as heavy of a blow as possible, and that meant his men would have to pursue their foes as they retreated and cut down as many of them as they could. Thankfully, with their chain of command shattered and their withdrawal a chaotic jumble, chasing after them was child's play. One by one, the fleeing soldiers were slain.

Soon, Braham spotted the leader of the offensive, who was withdrawing

along with the rest of his force's rearguard. Braham led his men in a charge. Since they were mounted and their foes were fleeing on foot in a disordered mess, it wasn't long before they had overtaken the enemy leader and scattered what little remained of his personal guard. Finally, Braham himself engaged them in single combat.

"Your head is mine!" Braham bellowed as he laid down his challenge. The leader of Seitz's force fought desperately, but Braham was a more than capable warrior, and this time he *didn't* make the sort of mind-numbingly stupid mistake that had led to his defeat the time he dueled Rietz. It was a one-sided battle, and in almost no time at all, Braham came out on top.

And so, the first battle ended in Canarre's overwhelming victory.

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Later that night, Rietz and his men were back in their encampment, celebrating their success.

"Did you see me out there?! I stormed into the enemy's lines and struck down their commander!" Braham declared.

"You struck down the remnants of a broken army who were fleeing from you," commented Zaht. "If anyone deserves praise for their exploits in battle tonight, it's Charlotte."

"I mean, sure, I did the *most* out there," said Charlotte, "but Musia comes in at a close second, I'd say. Who knew she could sling a spell like that? Goes to show that Lord Ars knew what he was doing when he chose her!"

"Wh-What? You're exaggerating," Musia said with a distinctly strained smile.

Her spell had been a massive success, certainly, but it had also resulted in the deaths of more people than she could count, and she had yet to work through the mental trauma she'd sustained from that knowledge.

Musia aside, the majority of the soldiers who'd participated in the battle were experienced enough to turn a blind eye to the horrors of war and celebrate without reservation. Rietz, meanwhile, watched on from the sidelines. He was a little worried that his men were overdoing it, but he also knew that soldiers needed the chance to cut loose every once in a while, and resisted the urge to tell them off for their revelry. As their commanding officer, however, he couldn't let himself engage in it. While everyone else was having the time of their lives, Rietz was perhaps even more on guard than ever.



We've won our first battle with only a few dozen dead on our side, while the enemy suffered over a thousand casualties, Rietz thought to himself. They still have more than enough men to spare, but there's no denying that we've gained significant ground today. I just hope they'll take this as a sign and withdraw.

Rietz knew, though, that expecting them to do so was naive. The army of Seitz turning around and abandoning their invasion would be the optimal outcome, yes, but however stunning of a failure this first battle was for them, they still had tens of thousands of men on their side. Losing one battle and then fleeing would set a bad precedent for their force, and Rietz knew it was likely that they'd make a point of achieving *something* before giving up their cause.

We'll win a few battles more, then offer to negotiate an armistice. We may need to make concessions to secure Seitz's withdrawal, but so long as we can keep winning until then, bringing an end to the war through negotiations may well be possible.

If Seitz was able to secure a promise of money, valuable works of art, resources, and the like, then they could claim that their invasion had been a success and save face, to an extent. Carrying on the fight and continuing to lose had to be the worst-case scenario, from their perspective. That would be like asking for Seitz's precarious state of stability to come crashing down again.

So long as Canarre could offer a reasonable compromise, Rietz believed that there was a good chance their foes would accept their terms. The thought of making concessions despite coming out ahead in battle vexed him somewhat, but if it meant driving an army tens of thousands strong away from Canarre's borders, it would be a small price to pay.

After that disaster of a first battle, their troops' morale must be dangerously low. They probably thought they could judge our capabilities after the first

battle and work out a plan to deal with us from there on out, but there just isn't much that can be done in the face of Charlotte's magic. We'll win the next engagement as well, Rietz thought with confidence.

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The news of our army's total victory in their first battle arrived at Fort Coumeire.

"Our forces slew over a thousand enemies, and our own casualties number in the dozens. The battle was a great success," said Ben, who'd come to deliver the report. His summary of the battle was as concise and to the point as ever. I could always trust him to tell me what I needed to know in as few words as possible.

"Ha ha ha! Sounds like Rietz and the others are doing some nice work out there! I didn't think they'd crush the Seitzans *that* badly," Mireille said with an elated laugh. "Maybe they weren't as tough as we were expecting them to be? Either way, this was a major step in the right direction," she added with a satisfied smirk.

Is it just me, or is she going out of her way to tempt fate?

"M-Master, please! You can't take the enemy lightly!" insisted Rosell.

"When this war's over, I'm gonna drown myself in the most expensive booze I can get my hands on," Mireille said wistfully.

Again, you're really tempting fate here! I'm starting to get a bad feeling about this war!

"They still have far more troops left than we had to begin with," said Rosell. "I doubt I need to tell you this, but having more manpower puts you at a clear advantage in war! We can't let our guards down!"

Rosell, at least, wasn't the sort of person to let a great victory go to his head. I have to admit that when I heard we'd crushed our foes I'd let myself get a little complacent too, but now, I decided to do away with that mindset.

Just then another report arrived, this time from one of Fort Coumeire's soldiers rather than one of the Shadows.

"Lord Ars," the soldier said, "Lady Licia Pleide has arrived at our gates, and requests an audience with you. Shall we show her in?"

"L-Licia's here?!" I gasped. I hadn't seen her arrival coming!

Fort Coumeire was on the war's front line, which made it a very dangerous place to be. Hostile forces wouldn't be rolling up to our gates within the hour, granted, and since the whole war didn't hinge upon us holding the fort—not to say it wasn't important, mind you—we would probably withdraw long before anyone got around to storming it. It wasn't *likely* that she'd get hurt just by being in this vicinity, but that didn't make it a *safe* place to be, either.

But, one way or another, she was here now.

What could she want? I wondered. Licia was smart, and she surely knew there was a war going on, so I couldn't imagine she would have made the trip without a very good reason. I'd better meet with her as soon as possible!

I left my room behind me and set out to find my visiting fiancée.

"Lord Ars! Forgive me for my sudden intrusion," Licia said the moment she saw me.

"Yes, about that—why are you here?" I asked.

"When I heard that a war was brewing, and that you would be leading from the front lines, I just got so nervous... I couldn't simply stay at home and worry, so I decided I would rather be here, with you. I don't know if there's anything I'll be able to do to help, but may I at least stay by your side?" Licia asked.

To be frank, I was happy to hear that she wanted to be here with me. I could tell that her request wasn't coming from a calculating or self-interested place. She truly was worried about me. That said, being here would put her at risk of meeting a terrible fate should the war go awry. I didn't want to expose her to that sort of danger.

"I'm pleased to hear that you feel that way," I said. "However, I can't allow myself to drag you into harm's way. If you would stay somewhere safer, I'd be much—"

"No!" Licia shouted, cutting me off before I could even finish my request. "How could I possibly be content in safety when you're out here, risking your life...?" she asked. Tears began to pool in the corner of her eye, but she wiped them away. "And moreover, I'm certain beyond a doubt that you will emerge victorious! You've used your power to choose the most capable followers a lord could possibly ask for, and they would never allow you to be defeated! I know for a fact that no harm will befall me here!"

Licia looked me straight in the eye, her expression determined.

I wavered, unable to decide which course to take. On one hand Licia didn't

know the first thing about warfare, but on the other, part of me felt somehow reassured by her presence. I didn't have a rational reason to want to be with her, but I felt that way nonetheless.

"I'd say you ought to keep your cute little fiancée around, personally," said Mireille from behind me. "Girl's got a strong will, and she's pretty smart, too. Plus, she's a girl. Might give her the perspective to come up with stuff that we'd never think of."

"Aren't, umm, you a girl too, Mireille?" I asked.

"Oh. Right, yeah, guess I am. Ha ha ha—slipped my mind for a minute there!" Mireille said with an amused chuckle.

I guess thinking of her as a girl might not be the best idea, when she puts it that way, I reflected. She was unlike a normal woman in too many ways for me to count, after all. She felt more like an old man than anything else.

All questions of her gender aside, Mireille's input had helped me reach a decision. Having Licia around would help me on an emotional level, and if we found ourselves in a fix, it was always possible that she'd have an idea that could get us out of it.

"You win, Lady Licia," I said. "If you would be so kind, I'd be honored to have you here by my side."

Licia gave me a smile so pure and carefree, it was downright angelic.

"Gladly!" she replied.

Rietz, who was still on the front lines to lead Canarre's army, waited within his force's encampment for the scout he'd sent out to report back on their foe's movements. It was right around time for the scout to return, by his best estimate, and sure enough, no sooner had the thought crossed his mind than the scout rushed to his side.



"We've sighted the enemy army! They're on the move!" the scout reported.

"Are they staging another attack?" asked Rietz.

"They are! And while they only sent a small portion of their men at us in the last engagement, this time, they're moving en masse!" the scout succinctly reported.

"How's their morale?"

"High, by the look of it!"

"And who's commanding the attack?"

"The vanguard is led by Rantolk Rooder, a Seitzan commander well known for his unparalleled bravery. Rantolk is accompanied by his brother, Trapaul Rooder, as well as Barl Rogue, Levanton Mackrend, and Lopat Termika, all capable commanders in their own rights!"

Rietz had heard those names before. Rantolk Rooder and his brother Trapaul had both commanded troops in the Seitzan civil war, and had both achieved great things on numerous battlefields. The same could be said of the other commanders who had been named—all of them were well-reputed.

Rietz wasn't capable of picking out their strengths like Ars could, and didn't have precise figures by which to judge his foes' strength, but judging by their many accomplishments, he couldn't imagine that any of them were incapable. It seemed clear that Seitz was done testing the waters, and was now prepared to begin their invasion in earnest.

In addition, it seemed that the massive force marching upon Rietz's position was not, in fact, the entire army of Seitz. They were still holding a number of divisions in reserve. Rietz had hoped that his foes would give up and abandon the attempt after a few setbacks, but it seemed the war wouldn't end so easily

after all.

How could their morale be high, though? Rietz wondered. I'd think their troops would be quaking in fear after Charlotte and Musia scoured the battlefield last time. Whoever's leading their army must be capable indeed.

Seitz's frontline soldiers had witnessed their comrades getting burned to death before their very eyes, and it was likely they'd spread that story to the rest of the army. After witnessing a sight like that it was only natural to want to tell the tale, and once a rumor like that started spreading, it would disseminate throughout the whole force in a flash. Rietz tried to imagine how he would've helped his men find the will to fight again after an event that traumatic if he'd been in charge of Seitz's army at the time, and found himself less than confident that he could have pulled it off.

In any case, if the enemy's on the move, we have to be ready for them.

However many troops Seitz threw at them, Rietz knew that with Charlotte and her mages guarding their encampment, it would be difficult to break through. That being said, they were up against the sort of numbers that could manage to do so anyway through sheer, brute force alone. Rietz began working out the tactics he'd employ in this engagement, well aware that it might not end as easily as the first battle.

Rietz thought through all the options available to him, and eventually decided that centering his plan of battle around magic would still prove to be the best option available to him. He knew that his foes would prioritize strengthening their magical defenses, after what had happened last time, but Rietz had a plan to break through those bolstered defenses in turn.

Magical defenses were only effective against magical attacks. In other words, if an archer could bring down the mages maintaining a magical barrier, the force it was protecting would be left exposed to magic. Thanks to Ars's Appraisal skill the soldiers of Canarre had all learned what their personal strengths were, and their army had grown considerably more formidable as a result. Its archers were no exception, and a few dozen of them were skilled enough to serve as snipers in a pinch. Of course, if they *didn't* choose to bulk up their magical defenses, Rietz figured that his troops would be able to drive them away with magic in the same way they had before.

Rietz and his troops quickly finished their preparations, and a few days later, a soldier rushed over with a report.

"Sir Rietz! The enemy is upon us!" he cried.

The second wave had arrived, and this time, the enemy was not holding back. The size of the force they'd sent was breathtaking, but Rietz knew he couldn't let himself lose his nerve. If it was for Ars's sake, he could take on an army of any size without so much as a hint of fear.

"You saw the sort of men we're up against last time," Rietz proclaimed to his troops. "The enemy is weak! It doesn't matter how many of them they throw at us—we'll drive them back all the same!" he asserted, doing his best to rouse his men's spirits in the face of the overwhelming numbers that opposed them. His speech had its intended effect. Many of his soldiers had looked nervous before, but now they regained their confidence.

Once Rietz was sure that morale had been restored, he turned to survey the enemy army with his own eyes and found that his prediction had been entirely off the mark. There was no sign of any significant mage presence among their number—just an incredibly vast quantity of troops, all marching toward the

river. On the one hand it looked like a thoughtless, reckless move indicating a total lack of a real strategy, but on the other hand, it was a paradoxically difficult tactic for Rietz to deal with.

The enemy force dramatically outnumbered Canarre's, and if they just kept pouring in, Rietz's men would be overwhelmed. No matter how devastating Charlotte's spells were, large catalyzers had to be refilled after their aqua magia was exhausted, and that took time. She couldn't sling spell after spell nonstop, and in the meantime, the enemy would be advancing uncontested.

Even if it works, tactics like that are going to make their losses even bigger than ever. Are they more serious about taking Canarre by storm than I expected...? Or is this a show of force aimed at convincing us to surrender? Rietz wondered. He simply couldn't think of anything the enemy could hope to gain from taking over Canarre that would justify this sort of sacrifice. If they keep coming at us like this, we'll have to consider falling back. Thinning their ranks with magic before beating a retreat should keep our losses low while also dealing significant damage to their army.

Rietz's force was at a significant numerical disadvantage, but if he played his cards right, he knew he could use this situation to close that gap. The one flaw in that plan was that if he fell back here, his troops wouldn't be able to take their large catalyzers with them. If they were going to withdraw from the engagement and prepare to confront the enemy again at a later date, they'd have to do it quickly, and large catalyzers were heavy and difficult to move about. Bringing them along would slow Rietz's force down enough that the enemy could catch up to them.

Large catalyzers were highly valuable, and losing them would be a blow, but in this instance Rietz saw it as a necessary sacrifice. He'd lose them whether they left them behind deliberately in a retreat or was forced to leave them after the enemy broke through their lines, so the end result would be the same regardless.

Rietz kept his gaze fixed on the advancing forces. The moment they entered into his mages' range, he gave the signal for them to begin casting.

"Attack!"

Canarre's mages began to unleash their spells. Charlotte's magic was incredibly consistent, and her spell was as fearsomely powerful as ever. Musia, in contrast, couldn't replicate her remarkable firepower from the previous battle and suffered a miscast. Charlotte's assessment of her had been on the money: she had talent, but every once in a while it let her down.

Musia's spell had considerably strengthened Canarre's firepower in the last battle. Needless to say, its absence reduced the impact of the mages' volley. Charlotte's spell was still tremendously powerful, of course, so Seitz's army was far from safe, and once again, a mountain of corpses began to build up in the river. This time, though, they didn't turn around and flee. Seitz's troops advanced dauntlessly, stepping over the bodies of their fallen comrades and spooking Canarre's soldiers in the process.

The spell Charlotte was casting, Hellfire, took some time to invoke even if the large catalyzer she was using was already full of aqua magia. The rest of Canarre's mages who had been stationed at large catalyzers were casting the same spell, but their version of it paled in comparison to hers. Musia, meanwhile, failed to cast several times in a row.

The gaps between Charlotte's spells provided moments of relative respite for Seitz's forces, and they used them to continue advancing through the river. Eventually, Seitz's advance overtook Canarre's ability to refill their catalyzers,

and the invading force reached the opposite bank. Canarre's troops were waiting for them, and the moment Seitz's army stepped onto dry land a brutal melee ensued.

The troops on Canarre's front line fought their hardest, but for every enemy soldier they felled, another stepped up to replace them. Rietz concluded in an instant that it was only a matter of time before the enemy broke through their formation.

Just then, Charlotte finished her preparations for another spell. Firing it off into the melee would mean catching her allies in the blast, so she targeted an area full of nothing but Seitzan soldiers. She incinerated them in droves, but there were just too many, and their momentum didn't so much as slow.

This isn't looking good. I think it's about time for us to pull back, Rietz thought. Otherwise, every Canarrean soldier present was liable to be killed. Rietz decided to leave a number of troops behind to hold the enemy back while the rest of his army withdrew. He'd had embankments raised and palisades constructed in preparation for the battle, so it wouldn't take all that many men to hold the line and give the main force the time they needed to flee.

The longer Rietz waited to give the order, the deeper the enemy would push into their lines and the greater the damage they would suffer. Delaying the withdrawal by even a second too long could prove disastrous, so the moment he settled on his decision, Rietz sprung into action.

"Fall back!" he shouted.

As soon as Rietz gave the order to withdraw, a nearby mage on sound magic duty cast Hyper Voice to issue a massive, booming signal, sending the message to the entire army. Hyper Voice worked by amplifying the caster's words, so directly ordering everyone to fall back was an option, but it went without saying that doing so would have been less than wise. Instead, Canarre's army had worked out a set of code phrases in advance. In this case, "commence plan D" indicated that it was time to withdraw.

Issuing orders in code was useful in a number of ways. It put the enemy army on guard, for one thing, buying Canarre's forces precious moments to prepare for their flight. Once you'd used a code phrase it had to be changed, of course, and in the next battle "operation D" would mean something entirely different.

Preparing for moments like these was vital. If you only made plans for your victory, then you'd suffer far greater losses than you would have if you'd prepared yourself for defeat as well. Canarre's forces had spent ample time preparing for an emergency retreat, and under Rietz's command, they began preparing for their withdrawal in a quick and orderly fashion.

The soldiers on the front line would be responsible for stalling the enemy. Orders issued with Hyper Voice were loud enough to cross the whole battlefield to reach them, and the moment they received their new directive, they began deliberately dragging out their battle, buying as much time as they could manage.

Once their preparations were complete, Canarre's army began to withdraw with Rietz at their head. They had prepared a secondary encampment in advance, and would be regrouping there to take up position within it. Thanks to the efforts of the soldiers who stayed behind, no enemy forces were able to pursue the main army, and Rietz's withdrawal succeeded with only a minimal

number of casualties.

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After his army had safely retreated and taken up position in their secondary encampment, Rietz took stock of the situation.

"How bad were our losses?" he asked.

"Around two hundred and fifty men in total, sir!" a soldier replied.

Most of the men who'd stayed behind to buy time, it seemed, had been either killed or captured. Only a few of them managed to make it to the secondary encampment, and most of those who did were wounded badly enough that they couldn't be sent back out into battle. Considering the total size of Rietz's force it hadn't been a small price to pay, but their losses quailed in comparison to the casualties the enemy army had sustained.

Rietz didn't have any concrete numbers to work with, but by his best estimate over a thousand Seitzan soldiers had been killed or incapacitated by Canarre's magical barrage. The soldiers who'd stayed behind had fought like men possessed, as well, and had likely done a fair deal of damage in their own right. Seitz's losses were considerable, no matter how you looked at it.

From a perspective of pure numbers, Canarre seemed to have come out well ahead in the battle. The fact that they'd been forced to retreat, however, was a major loss. If they were driven back further still, they'd have to leave all sorts of supplies behind for fear of the weight slowing them down, and that would be far too great of a loss to write off as a necessary expense.

In spite of Couran's support, Canarre's resources were still very much limited.

They almost certainly weren't as well-equipped as the army of Seitz was, and they'd already left several large catalyzers for the enemy to claim due to their bulk making them hard to move around. Charlotte's ability to cast multiple times in sequence using multiple catalyzers, as such, had been greatly diminished.

It didn't seem like the enemy cared about what happened to their men at all, Rietz reflected. How could their morale be so high with a strategy like that in play...? I did my best to minimize sacrifices during our retreat to preserve our own morale, but it's still had a clear impact. In any case, I have to report to Lord Ars as soon as possible!

Rietz jotted down a letter and had it sent off to Fort Coumeire posthaste.

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Mireille, Rosell, and I had all gathered up in Fort Coumeire to read a letter from Rietz. The message-bearer had ridden a horse to get it to us as fast as possible, so our update on the situation at the front arrived on the same day Rietz had dispatched it. It seemed that the enemy's onslaught had proved too overwhelming, and our army had been forced to retreat.

"Hmh," I grunted with concern.

I guess I knew it wasn't going to be that easy.

"Sounds like the other side's got some real motivation worked up," Mireille observed. She must not have anticipated that their morale would be as high as it had turned out, and looked just as surprised by the news as I was.

"Wh-What should we do?! If they keep pushing that hard, they'll reach this

fort before we know it! And there are just so many of them—not even Mister Rietz or Charlotte could hold off numbers like that," Rosell moaned. He'd been consumed by his own pessimism once again, though considering how bad things looked, I couldn't blame him for it.

"I'd say our first move should be trying to negotiate an armistice," said Mireille. "They've lost a solid chunk of troops over these past two battles, so if we offer enough bonuses to sweeten the deal, they might just take us up on it."

"What do you mean, bonuses?" I asked.

"Y'know, supplies, money, resources, art-valuable stuff, basically. Might as well just write down your terms, plus a list of everything you're willing to hand over to get them to leave, and have it sent over to the enemy side."

"I'll give that a try, then," I said with a nod, then got to work on implementing her advice and moving toward peace talks.

I took some time thinking through all the provisions, funds, and resources we could spare, plus all the artwork that happened to be lying around in my castle. Then, I wrote up a list of everything that seemed worth offering, plus the terms I was hoping they would accept, and had a messenger carry it off to the enemy army.

To make a long story short: the attempt was a failure. They didn't literally kill the messenger, at least, but they did send him back with a letter refusing my terms. They weren't outright opposed to the idea of laying down arms, but the deal I'd offered wasn't to their liking, and they'd offered a different set of conditions instead.

"The County of Canarre is to be annexed by the Duchy of Seitz. Lord Ars Louvent may maintain his position as count, and should he desire anything of

His Lordship the Duke of Seitz, his requests will be accommodated. Should Lord Couran of Missian assault Canarre in an attempt to win back the territory, reinforcements will be dispatched to support you..." I read out loud.

I had serious and immediate apprehensions about handing over my territory... but on the other hand, they'd made it explicit that I'd be able to maintain my position. In a sense, accepting their offer wouldn't change much of anything for me at all, aside from the fact that I'd answer to the Duke of Seitz instead of Couran.

"Hmm," said Mireille. "So Seitz isn't set on taking all of Missian right away—they'd be satisfied with just Canarre, looks like. Canarre's not the most desirable territory out there, but it *would* give them a launching point to threaten the rest of the duchy from. I guess this means they're playing a long game and looking toward their future strategies? And even if they go after Scheutz instead, they'd still have to keep an eye on Missian just in case, so having Canarre under their control certainly couldn't hurt."

Seitz had just emerged from a regime-changing civil war, and in order to bring the duchy together, they needed an external enemy to focus on. In that sense, a war in some form was a necessity. No matter who that war ended up being against, Missian or Scheutz, having Canarre as part of their territory would be handy in some way or another, and since Missian was going through its own period of internal turmoil, it was the perfect chance for them to snatch the territory up.

"If that's true, then we might want to consider accepting this offer," Rosell muttered. "There's no telling how things will end if we decide to keep up the fight, after all. At the very least, accepting their terms would mean that Ars can keep his position as count."

At that point, Rosell paused.

"No, wait," he said, then started muttering once more, arguing in an entirely different direction. "What if this offer's a trick to begin with? There's no reason why they couldn't execute Ars after we accept... And even if it is a genuine offer, accepting it while Lord Couran's troops are fighting under our banner would be a betrayal that House Louvent's reputation might never recover from... And it's so important to maintain trust..."

Betrayal was an option, then, but one that carried plenty of downsides.

"I don't believe that betraying Lord Couran would be for the best," said Licia, who was sitting close at hand. "You've judged his capabilities and seen for yourself that he's an exceptional leader, yes?" she asked, turning to me.

"I have," I confirmed.

"And it seems that he values your capabilities highly as well. Furthermore, a failed attempt at betrayal could end with Lord Couran crushing all of us underfoot."

Crushing us? Yeesh, that's a scary way of putting it.

She was not, however, wrong. The fact that Couran thought so highly of my skills meant that if I were to become his enemy, he would approach his conflict with me very cautiously. Worse still, if Couran was the sort of person who would never trust a person who'd betrayed him once, and if he managed to reclaim Canarre, he'd put me to death.

Of course, none of that would be a problem if I surrendered to Seitz, joined up with the Seitzan army and Vasmarque's forces, and crushed Couran entirely. On the other hand, I'd only just been given control over Canarre, and turning around and using my position to wage war against the man who'd promoted

me would feel downright ungrateful. It would mean coming into conflict with Lumeire, as well, and I was worried that some of Canarre's soldiers would decide to rebel rather than fight their former lord. It didn't seem like a very wise plan of action, all around.

"I give it high odds the whole thing about letting you stay as count's a lie, honestly, so if you want to keep your position, better not to take 'em up on this," Mireille continued. "I mean, from their point of view, you're a thirteen-year-old brat with no accomplishments to speak of, right? It'd be a whole different matter if they knew about your power, but you haven't been blatant enough with that for the info to get all the way to the Duke of Seitz, have you?"

Again, she had a point. If Canarre was intended to be their staging point for an attack on Missian, it would be way too important to leave in the hands of a young, inexperienced ruler like me. Furthermore, unless the Duke of Seitz was an absolute master when it came to gathering information, it seemed unlikely that he'd know about my Appraisal skill.

"I mean, who knows. Maybe they really won't kill you, and maybe you could get some other territory out of the bargain," said Mireille. "If you can use your power to make yourself look helpful, you might even manage to become the retainer of some Seitzan bigshot. Staying on as count, though? I can't see it."

In spite of the fact that she'd suggested surrendering to Seitz before the war started, Mireille seemed firmly against the decision now. Having gone through all the pros and cons of the option, I was convinced as well: it just wasn't the right move. I wouldn't have been excited about it even without a logical argument against it, to be fair, since betraying Couran would mean breaking the promise I'd made to Lumeire.

"But if we don't accept their offer, won't that take peace off the table

entirely...?" I muttered.

"Yup, so we'll just have to beat 'em," Mireille said with an air of casual indifference.

"And what are the odds of us pulling that off?" I asked, looking to both Mireille and Rosell for a reply. I knew that with our peace talks scuttled fighting was our only option, and I wanted to know if either of them thought that victory was feasible.

"Considering the possibility of Lord Couran and his army arriving to reinforce us, we stand a chance as long as we do our best to drag the war out. I can't say I'm *totally* sure we'll lose, anyway..." Rosell said with an anxious frown. The look on his face gave me the sense he was worried about something, and a moment later, Mireille piped up to clue me in on what was concerning him.

"When Couran will be able to help us out's a total unknown, and all. It's pretty likely that something or other will end up tying him up for a good long while, and even though he didn't send us *many* men, any number of reinforcements here represents a chunk of men who aren't fighting to wrap up his side of the war. Not that I think he's gonna lose Velshdt, or anything."

"Good point," I said. "And if we're dragging out the fight for reinforcements that might never show up, it's going to have an impact on our soldiers' morale."

"But we also don't know that Lord Couran won't arrive to help, and stalling tactics can be effective," piped up Rosell. "Of course, the longer we drag the war out the more we'll lose, and if the fighting spills into Canarre proper we might see some of our citizens get caught up in it as well."

Preventing as many deaths as possible was a high priority for me, and I was

afraid that if things went on for too long we'd have to withdraw from Fort Coumeire, allowing the enemy army to run rampant throughout the county. Who knew what sort of chaos they would wreak? That was a scenario I wanted to avoid at all costs.

"I'd like to prevent any harm from coming to the people of Canarre, if at all possible. Is there any chance that we could repel the enemy, using only the troops available to us now?" I asked. That would be the best possible option, if it was on the table, and would make for the cleanest finish to the war.

If we could repel the enemy while minimizing losses on our side, we might even be able to follow it up by launching an attack on Arcantez to gain even more favor with Couran. The enemy's overwhelming numbers, however, were still a factor I didn't know if we could cope with. It was clear that they were serious about taking Canarre, so we wouldn't be able to offset that advantage without some serious tactics backing us up.

"If we're fighting them by conventional means? Nah, that's off the table," Mireille said matter-of-factly.

"Well, yes, I know that," I sighed.

At that point, Rosell stepped in to lay out our options in Mireille's place. "There are a number of tactics that are suitable to opposing a numerically superior enemy, but not many of them would be possible for us to put into practice," he said. "Convincing their commander to defect to your side's one, but that's not doable unless you've laid the groundwork for it in advance, so it's off the table for now. Beating them on a pure tactical level's not technically impossible, but in our case the difference in numbers is just too substantial. Even if we win battle after battle to start, it'd only be a matter of time before they wore us down."

"So then, what can we do?" I asked.

"I believe our best option would be to use the Shadows to our advantage," Rosell proposed. "Seitz's army is vast, but deploying that many soldiers takes a lot of provisions, and their mages will need plenty of aqua magia as well. If we could sabotage their stores, we might be able to cripple their ability to carry on the fight, and I believe the Shadows are skilled enough to make that happen."

Aiming for their supplies? Interesting.

Reducing their aqua magia supplies would certainly make their mages less of a threat, and mages were half of what made going into battle so terrifying. Plus, it would damage their ability to raise magical defenses just as much, making our own magical assaults all the more effective. A lack of provisions, meanwhile, would make it hard for their soldiers to fight in the first place. Rosell was right that the Shadows were incredibly capable, so I was sure they'd be able to at least partially accomplish that objective.

"I like the sound of this, but not even the Shadows would be able to take out all of our enemy's supplies. Would wiping out a chunk of them be enough to win us the war?" I asked.

"Destroying all of them would be hard, yeah, but if we can get rid of *enough* of them, it could let us hold out against their army no matter how big of a difference in numbers we're dealing with," Rosell replied. "Magic rules the battlefield in this day and age, and is especially necessary when you're assaulting a fortress. As long as we can deplete their aqua magia, we'll have okay odds of holding this fort."

Mireille frowned. "I'm not so sure about that," she said. "It'd be a different story if this place were more defensible, but if I'm being honest, it's not the sturdiest fort I've ever seen. For a fort on the border, it's kind of concerning just

how poorly fortified it is."

It was true that Fort Coumeire was far from a heavily-fortified citadel. It had been known as one at some point in history, supposedly, but times had changed. Between the fort's deterioration and the advent of magical warfare rendering what was left obsolete, it could hardly be called well-defended in this day and age. The previous Count of Canarre, Lumeire, hadn't put much effort into repairing the fort. Canarre's finances were far from stable, to be frank, so a large-scale renewal just wasn't possible given the budget he was working with.

"Then again, I can't deny that taking out their aqua magia would be a big boost to our odds, whether we're fighting in a siege or on the open field," said Mireille. "I just think that if it's our *only* plan, it'll fall short. We need something else, too."

"Do you have any ideas, Master?" asked Rosell.

"Nope."

"Seriously?!" I moaned.

She doesn't? None?

Something about the flow of the exchange had convinced me that she'd thought up a master plan ages ago.

"Look, kiddo, if I could come up with perfect plans at the drop of a hat, my job would be a hell of a lot easier," said Mireille.

"Okay, but...isn't that basically what you did all throughout our last war? You never made it look hard then, either," I countered.

"Yeah, 'cause it was an easy war. We had numbers on our side pretty much every battle. Their castles were pretty tough, but that was the worst of it," said Mireille. It seemed an overwhelming numerical disadvantage was a tough

problem to solve, even for her. "Anyway, I'm with you—I doubt just buying time's our best bet, either. Trust me, *nothing's* more irritating than sitting around and dragging out a war without going on the offensive at all. We've gotta come up with something that'll let us deal a solid blow to their army."

Not exactly the most logical reason to choose a tactic, is it?

At that point, Mireille let out a yawn.

"Anyway, all this thinking's made me sleepy. I'm gonna hit the sack," she said, then headed for the door.

Considering she'd just made it sound like she was about to start planning for real, I was beside myself with shock.

"Wait, what?! You're going to *sleep*?! I thought you were going to pull out all the stops and really start planning!" I exclaimed.

"Why bother? I'm not gonna be having any good ideas while I'm this tired," said Mireille.

"I mean, you have a point, but this is a critical juncture in the war! And it's the middle of the day!"

"The nice thing about humans is that we can sleep whenever we feel like it, day or night," Mireille said, then yawned as she left the room without another word. Presumably, she was heading for her chambers.

"W-Well," I said, "she's certainly a free spirit."

"O-Oh, gods. I have to think as hard as I can," Rosell moaned, then started racking his brain for a solution.

"Hee hee hee! Mireille's just such an interesting woman, isn't she?" Licia said with an amused smile. "But I can tell she's also quite reliable. The situation's

dire, but she wasn't even flustered! I'm sure she has absolute faith that we'll manage to win the day somehow."

Rosell and I had both been well on our way toward succumbing to anxiety, but Licia's words helped us feel a little better about things. She was right—Mireille hadn't seemed panicked in the slightest. She probably believed that everything would work out for the best, one way or another. I, meanwhile, noted that Licia had remained just as composed and unshaken as Mireille had. In my mind, she was just as reliable as the older woman.

"Oh, and I believe you should make contact with the Shadows before you expend any more effort on planning," Licia added.

"O-Oh, right! Good point. I'll give them their orders right away," I said. I'd almost forgotten that I still had to tell the Shadows about the sabotage I wanted them to attempt, but thankfully, Licia had been there to save me at the last minute.

"Oh! You should do that, yes, but you should also send orders to Mister Rietz," said Rosell. "I'd say that for now, we should tell him to do his best to buy as much time as he can."

"Got it," I replied, then went off to send out my instructions.

The Shadows were currently focusing their efforts on information gathering. That didn't take all of their efforts, so they'd left Ben with me to serve as a point of contact, and I gave him the message that I was changing their current mission. Ben had a way of relaying messages incredibly quickly, so I felt confident that Pham would know what I wanted him to do next within a day or so. As for Rietz, I simply wrote a letter describing the current state of things in Fort Coumeire and asking him to buy us time, then dispatched it to the battlefield.

"The negotiations have failed...the Shadows are working behind the scenes... and I'm supposed to be buying time," Rietz muttered as he read Ars's letter and tried to grasp the current state of things. "Buying time, huh...? That's not going to be easy."

The enemy army was massive, their troops' morale was high, and they were pressing forward at a rapid clip. They were a force to be reckoned with, all around. On the other hand, the fortification of Rietz's force's new encampment was proceeding smoothly. They'd lost a fair number of large catalyzers when their previous line was breached, but they hadn't set up every single catalyzer they had in reserve for that battle, so they were once again able to prepare a decent enough line of them for battle. Still, even with those preparations complete, Rietz wasn't convinced they'd be able to hold the enemy off for long.

It'll all come down to how well the Shadows' sabotage plays out, Rietz thought. If they can eliminate enough of the enemy's food and aqua magia, then their troops won't be able to go on the offensive with the sort of vigor they displayed during the last battle. I suppose all I can do is have faith in the Shadows and their skills. Buying the time we need is going to be difficult, but I have no choice other than to see it through.

Rietz made a silent vow to accomplish the mission he'd been entrusted with.

A Malkan like him would never have had the opportunity to prove his capabilities and be granted control over an army if it weren't for Ars's support, so there was very little he wouldn't do to live up to Ars's expectations.

Seitz's forces were already close at hand, and this time, Rietz expected them to charge in at their full strength without bothering to test the waters first.

We don't have the time to come up with an elaborate strategy, he thought, and that only leaves us one other option...

If clever tactics were off the table, Rietz's only option was to rely on brute force. That, needless to say, would involve Charlotte. Without her magic, any plan would be doomed from the outset. Rietz was worried, though, that in this case, her power alone wouldn't be enough.

Using magic meant spending time filling catalyzers with aqua magia, so if it was the only cornerstone of their offense, there would be unavoidable periods during which their attack would stall out. If they let hostile forces close the gap during those periods again, they'd be forced to retreat, just like they had in the previous battle. That ran contrary to their purposes—they wouldn't be buying anywhere near enough time if they had to pull out that quickly.

Rietz needed some way to hold the enemy army back while his mages were preparing their catalyzers. That task would logically fall to his infantry and cavalry, but their foes numbered far too many. If they charged in and tried to hold their foes back by conventional means, they'd be overrun in an instant.

I suppose my only choice is to take this into my own hands, Rietz concluded. If he led the charge, bringing the fight to the enemy and making a show of his prowess, he thought he might be able to scare them enough to slow their advance. Seeing their commander fight in the vanguard could give his allies a morale boost, as well.

Ars had ordered Rietz to take care of himself. Not only was Rietz an incredibly capable subordinate, but he was also the person who Ars trusted above all others. Ars had made it clear that he didn't even want to consider the

possibility of Rietz's demise. In the absence of the time to plan out a detailed strategy, though, Rietz decided that unless he disregarded Ars's orders and put himself in harm's way, his side would have very little chance of winning the day.

But of course, none of that will be an issue. I just have to make it back alive.

Rietz had no intention of dying. He had the utmost confidence that he would make it through the battle alive, and carry out his plan to perfection. He believed in his abilities—in the abilities that Ars had discovered and drawn into the light.

"I can't die here. A man who earned Lord Ars's acknowledgement would never perish in a place like this!" Rietz told himself. It wasn't his own abilities he believed in, in truth. No, he believed in Ars's Appraisal skill.

"Prepare for battle! We're buying as much time as we can manage!" Rietz shouted to his men, then began giving out detailed orders to each division. First, he instructed Braham, Zaht, and the Maitraw Company to accompany him in his offensive push.

"All right! Now *this* sounds like a battle I'll be able to rack up some accomplishments in!" Braham excitedly declared.

Zaht, on the other hand, was smart enough to not be excited about his assignment.

"Umm... It seems to me that the encroaching army is a little too large to hold back that easily... In fact, is it even going to be possible with our numbers?" he asked.

What Rietz was proposing would be far from easy. They had roughly five thousand men, and those five thousand men would need to stop a force numbering in the tens of thousands that was running on high morale.

The combined forces of Canarre's army and Couran's reinforcements numbered almost thirty thousand, but it wasn't feasible to use that entire force for this sort of stalling tactic. Seitz wouldn't be sending all their men onto the field either, most likely, but they'd still have several times the manpower as Rietz's force would. Quality trumped quantity when it came to the value of mages on the battlefield, but foot soldiers were a different matter. Strength in numbers was the single most important factor for them, and when your opponent held that advantage, holding them back was a very tall order.

"It's all right. I know we're up to this task," said Rietz. He didn't explain where his confidence was coming from, but it came through enough to encourage his comrades nonetheless.

"One thing," said Clamant, the head of the Maitraw Company. He wasn't the type to express his opinions, even during tactical discussions, so Rietz was caught off guard by him speaking up.

"Yes?" said Rietz.

"If our goal is to buy time, we should rethink how we're arranging our defense. As is, the enemy's probably going to break through our lines," said Clamant, his expression as unchanging and impassive as ever.

Clamant had a wealth of experience on the battlefield, and Rietz knew that any opinion he expressed would be an informed one. "How do you mean? What's wrong with our current formation?" Rietz asked.

"We have our large catalyzers all lined up in a row, and the plan's to cast with all of them at once, right?" Clamant confirmed. "It's true that more firepower means more dead enemies, in our current situation, and most of the time turning a battlefield into a sea of flames is enough to scare your enemy so badly their morale plummets and they can't even fight properly. However, we're up against a commander capable enough to keep his men in line and fighting in the face of that. It'd be one thing if we could wipe them all out in one blast, but with numbers like theirs, they'll keep coming until they overwhelm us. Instead, we should have our mages carry small and mid-sized catalyzers and send them into battle with our vanguard to provide covering fire."

"Wait a moment," said Rietz. "I'm inclined to think that you're misunderstanding the driving purpose behind my plan. It's true that a round of magic from our large catalyzers wasn't enough to shake our enemy during the last battle, but each time we hit them, they'll need time to regroup before they can come at us once more. That's how we'll buy time, which is our whole objective. We *need* the large catalyzers active if we want to have any hope of pulling this off."

"I'm not saying that you should take the large ones out of commission," said Clamant. "I'm saying you should cut down on them. That Charlotte woman's spells would be enough to inflict the damage we need on their own."

Rietz fell silent as he considered Clamant's words. Having Charlotte as the only mage stationed on the large catalyzers would reduce the firepower his forces were capable of putting out in a single burst. However, it was also unmistakable that Charlotte's spells had done far and away the most damage to the enemy army. Part of Rietz was convinced that she could handle the task on her own, but part of him was still worried that they wouldn't have the destructive potential they'd need with Clamant's proposed setup.

"If you don't think she can handle it, then just put another mage over there with her—the one called Musia. Her spells are the second most powerful in your force, aren't they?"

"It's not quite that simple. Musia's magic is powerful at the best of times, yes,

but her consistency leaves a lot to be desired," said Rietz. In his mind, putting Musia in such an important role would be a dangerous gamble.

"I think Musia can handle it," Charlotte chimed in. She also rarely spoke up during meetings, though in her case, half of the time that was because she was asleep. "She's had a look in her eyes lately that I've never seen from her before, and she's been practicing with a small catalyzer whenever she has free time. Been getting better and better with it, too. I figure going into battle must've been good for her. We won't know until she tries casting something big, of course, but I've got a feeling she'll do just fine."

"A feeling...?" Rietz repeated skeptically. Charlotte's confidence struck him as baseless, and trusting in her judgment would take quite a bit of courage, but he decided to muster that courage up and have faith in her anyway. Ars had handpicked Musia for her potential, just like he had Rietz. There was no denying that she had the ability to do great things slumbering within her, and it wouldn't be strange at all for that capability to awaken during combat.

And so, in the absence of any concrete evidence, Rietz decided to be optimistic. He took Clamant's advice and assigned Charlotte and Musia to be the only mages who'd use the large catalyzers during the upcoming battle. The remaining mages in his force would join his division in the vanguard, using their magic to slow the enemy army down from up close. Having that many mages supporting them would make the fight substantially easier for the foot soldiers out front, and would make it significantly trickier for the enemy to fight their way through to the back lines.

Rietz's troops followed his orders to the letter, gearing up and moving to their assigned positions. Soon all their preparations were complete, and all that was left was to wait for the enemy to arrive. That time would come all too soon. The

army of Seitz marched onward, and under Rietz's command the army of Canarre stood fast to intercept them.

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Musia's breath came in heaving gasps as she laid her hands on her large catalyzer. The pressure and tension of the situation was enough to send a fledgeling mage like her into a hyperventilating fit.

In the last battle, she'd known that she was just one of many mages on her side. She'd thought that meant that everything would be fine, even if she screwed up. This time, though, it was just her and Charlotte. If her spell failed again, the consequences would be devastating.

That wasn't the only cause for her nervousness, though. She also had yet to grow desensitized to the act of using her magic to kill people. It was kill or be killed, and she knew it, but that didn't stop her from feeling a moment of hesitation before every spell she tried to cast.

"I have to do this... I have to," Musia muttered to herself as her hands started to tremble. The pounding of her heart grew faster and faster, and a bead of cold sweat trailed down her cheek, dripping off her skin and spattering to the ground below.

"Calm down, Musia."

Musia jumped as a voice rang out from nearby. She'd been staring at the ground, but now she looked up to find Charlotte standing beside her. The look on her face was nothing like how she usually presented herself. Her expression was kind in a way Musia had never seen before.

"I know you can do it," Charlotte said in a gentle tone.

Musia felt reassured upon hearing that, and clenched her fists.

I've always wanted to change, she thought.

Musia had responded to Ars's solicitation for retainers because she was sick of herself, and sick of the environment she'd been trapped in. Men held all the power in the Summerforth Empire. It was true no matter what duchy you found yourself in, and Missian, Musia's birthplace, was no exception. Women were expected to marry a man, bear children, and dedicate themselves to supporting their household.

Musia was taught that being treated that way was a matter of course. Her family had trained her to do housework, and nothing else. She'd never had a proper education, and had settled into a vague acceptance of the fact that everyone lived this way. Still, though, somewhere deep down, a part of her had always wondered: was this what she wanted?

Is marrying a man really my greatest ambition? Is raising children really all that I want out of life?

Again and again, she found herself harboring doubts that no imperial woman was ever meant to consider. Once the thought had struck her, she couldn't stop it from taking root. She'd never had anyone to discuss those feelings with, though—after all, if she told anyone, there was a good chance they'd treat her like a lunatic. That was when Musia had chanced upon one of the signboards that Ars had put up to gather new talent. She'd read that anyone could apply, even women, and had realized that this could be her one chance to make a big change in her life.

Musia had set out to Castle Canarre determined to change, but when she was

told that she had a talent for magic and was offered a position as a mage, her first instinct was to assume she was being lied to. She hadn't heard the tales of Charlotte's exploits, and had always thought that a woman could never serve as a soldier. She'd assumed that being the count's retainer would be something like being his maid, assigned to do chores around the castle.

In spite of her apprehensions, Musia had agreed to become a mage, and when she cast her very first spell, she found herself profoundly moved.

So women like me really can use magic, she'd thought. Our spells aren't any less powerful than the ones men can cast, either.

Musia realized that what society thought of as common sense was wrong, plain and simple. For the first time, she was confident that the doubts she'd harbored for so long had never been mistaken.

In that moment, Musia swore a silent oath to herself: "One day, I will be a great mage."

Day after day of magical training followed. She hadn't had very much time to practice, in the grand scheme of things, but she'd poured every ounce of effort she could into developing her skills.

I have to gather my resolve. It's fine if I make mistakes, but if I let my fear take hold of me, I'll never get anywhere! she told herself. Gradually, the shaking of her hands subsided and the panic that had almost consumed her began to dull. Charlotte said that I can do this. That means I can, without question!

Musia had only cast a few perfect spells so far. That lack of experience had left her unable to fully believe in herself...but she *could* believe in Charlotte's faith in her.



"Okay, here they come. Time to focus," said Charlotte.

Musia looked out over the battlefield. The enemy army was drawing closer, and she and Charlotte had been entrusted with the job of bombarding them with magic. Musia tried to follow Charlotte's advice, shutting her eyes and taking a slow, deep breath to sharpen her focus. Her hands were no longer shaking, and her pulse was very close to its usual pace.

Musia had a feeling that she could rise to the occasion. No sooner had the thought crossed her mind than a signal, amplified by sound magic, rang out. It was the sign that Rietz had ordered her to begin casting.

Musia's eyes snapped open. She chanted her spell, and her magic flared to life.

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Rietz proceeded out to the front of his formation to command his troops. They would be on the defensive in their upcoming battle, and maintaining his army's morale was critical to their success. A commander who led from the back line would never be able to motivate his men to fight to the death, but a commander who rode out ahead of all others, leading the charge, would drive his soldiers to fight even harder—assuming, of course, that he survived the attempt.

Going out into battle personally meant he carried the inescapable risk of being struck down. Not even Rietz could go forth onto the battlefield without some apprehensions. The fear of death forever lurked within him. He had also, however, served as a mercenary long before he entered Ars's service, and risking his life had long since become a matter of course for him. The one key difference was that when he was a mercenary, Rietz had received orders, whereas now he was the one who had to issue them.

He had, of course, fought on the front lines countless times before. He'd had his fair share of close calls, as well. Rietz had learned one thing in particular from all those battlefields and the experiences he'd had upon them: so long as he could stay calm, he would live to see another day. Keeping his composure and doing what had to be done at the right moment would carry him through any battle, no matter how vicious. His incredibly high Valor stat came in handy as well, of course.

In this battle Rietz would be fending off an army with several times as many men as his own, but all he had to do was calm himself, and he knew he'd be able to fight to the best of his ability. Rietz took a deep breath, and settled his nerves. Meanwhile, the enemy drew ever closer. It was now time for him to give the signal for Charlotte and Musia to unleash their magic. Rietz raised his right arm into the air. A nearby mage took notice of the gesture, and cast a sound magic spell to send a signal ringing out across the army's ranks.

Barely an instant later, magical death rained down on the battlefield. Rietz had been concerned about whether or not Musia would be able to cast to her full destructive potential, but it seemed he needn't have worried. The spell she cast wasn't quite as powerful as the one she'd let loose during the battle before last—her first battle ever—but it was still more than sufficient, and combined with Charlotte's consistently mighty magic, the two of them sent forth a wave of destruction just as powerful as Rietz had been hoping for.

Enemy soldiers fell in droves. Charlotte and Musia didn't stop, though, casting again and again until the battlefield had transformed into a veritable hell on

earth. At that point, they'd exhausted their aqua magia supply and their large-scale spells came to a halt. It would take time for their catalyzers to be refilled, and until then, Rietz and his men would have to hold the line.

The Seitzan forces clambered over the corpses of their comrades to advance on Rietz. Hellish though the sight was, they didn't falter in the least. Rietz could only imagine the hours of training and toil it had taken to drive that mindset into them, and he found himself impressed by their skill and professionalism, even as he waited for the perfect moment to give his men the order to attack.

Rietz couldn't order his infantry and cavalry to charge yet, on account of the mages equipped with small and medium catalyzers who stood behind them. His plan was to have his mages open the battle with their magic, sending the enemy ranks into a state of disarray. *Then*, he would have his cavalry charge, followed by his infantry.

Rietz himself wasn't riding a horse this battle. He believed that seeing him down on the muddy ground, fighting man to man, would raise his soldiers' morale more effectively than seeing him parade around on horseback would. Braham and Clamant had taken command of the cavalry division in his stead. Braham fought his best unmounted, but he was a perfectly capable horseman as well when the need arose. Clamant, on the other hand, stood head and shoulders above all others no matter how he was called upon to fight. The two of them easily had the ability to lead the cavalry division to victory.

Soon, the enemy soldiers stepped into Rietz's mages' effective range. Rietz raised his left hand this time, sending the signal for his battlefield mages to begin casting. They leaped into action without delay, sending a storm of low-level spells flying into the enemy ranks. Magic of that level wasn't powerful enough to inflict any serious damage, and their enemy was far from defenseless

to boot, using their own mages to deploy shields and intercept the majority of Rietz's offensive.

Spells cast from a large catalyzer could punch through defensive magic, but spells from a small or mid-sized catalyzer didn't have the power to manage such a feat. Unless, of course, they were cast by a mage as skillful as Charlotte, who could break through barriers using any sort of catalyzer.

We'll need to take out their mages before we stand any chance of making this work, thought Rietz. And they're stationed in the enemy's back ranks...

Targeting soldiers in the rear of the enemy's formation wasn't easy. There were two ways Rietz could approach the problem: having his archers target the mages, or having his cavalry navigate around their formation and strike them from behind in a surprise attack.

Defeating the enemy's mages using archery alone would be far from easy. The enemy army, after all, knew very well that their mages were a weak point to be protected. Their mid-sized catalyzers were made to serve a dual purpose as shields, allowing them to protect themselves even as they cast, and small catalyzers fit in a person's hand, so the mages wielding them could hold small shields in their other hands. They were ready to defend themselves if Rietz's army launched a volley of arrows their way, making eliminating them in that fashion a difficult prospect indeed.

The attempt, however, could force the army to advance at a slower rate. Running with a shield raised wasn't exactly easy, so by ordering his archers to fire on the enemy mages, Rietz could slow their advance to a walking pace. If the main army advanced too far ahead of the mages, they wouldn't remain protected by the barriers, so if the mages' pace slowed, the rest of the army would have to match them. Even if it didn't result in any fatalities, it could still

give them a leg up.

Rietz, however, chose not to bring his archers into play just yet. At this stage in the battle, slowing the enemy's advance just wouldn't make enough of a difference to be worth the effort. Rietz knew that the only way he could buy the time he needed was to break the enemy's formation and force them to retreat—just slowing them down for a moment wouldn't be anywhere near enough. That meant that using his cavalry was his only option.

First, Rietz would send his foot soldiers forward to engage with the enemy. If they could gain an advantage in that melee, even just for a moment, they would be able to draw the enemy's attention to them and away from their cavalry. At that point, the cavalry division could use their momentarily low profile to slip around the enemy formation and strike them from the rear, cutting down as many mages as they could before the opening closed. Rietz's infantry would then withdraw, and while the enemy pursued his cavalry, his mages would open fire and his infantry would charge back in once more, hitting the enemy while their formation was at its weakest.

Rietz had his plan fully formed in his mind, but that wasn't to say it was without flaws. For one thing, the enemy army's morale was incredibly high, and gaining the upper hand over them wouldn't be easy. That stage of the plan would hinge on how effectively he could lead his men and how much damage he could deal on his own. He was also planning on directing his archers to fire into the enemy's front ranks rather than at their mages. The enemy's infantry were equipped for mobility rather than defense, and a well-placed arrow should be capable of bringing one of them down. They'd likely chosen to equip their troops in that fashion under the assumption that Rietz's archers would only be targeting their mages.

The cavalry division's attack on the rear of the enemy's formation could also be a stumbling point. A maneuver like that would be far from easy to pull off, and it was possible that it would fail entirely. Even if it did succeed, the danger of Rietz's cavalry not making it out of the attack was very real. Clamant and Braham would be leading the attack, and both of them were skilled horsemen, but Rietz had his concerns about whether Braham would be able to carry out such an important task.

Clamant's competence was beyond question, and while some part of Rietz was concerned that a mercenary like him could turn tail at any moment, he reasoned that Clamant wouldn't have come to help Canarre's forces to begin with if that was his inclination. Rietz assumed that Couran had promised him a massive sum of money for the task, and with that in mind, he believed that Clamant would see it through.

Rietz signaled a nearby soldier to send a message for him. He'd be fighting on the front lines and wouldn't be able to issue moment to moment orders, nor grasp the situation of the battle in its totality, which would make gauging the right moment to send out his cavalry difficult. As such, he instructed Clamant and Braham to judge the situation themselves and choose the right moment to make their move together. Braham's ability to make that call was questionable, to say the least, but Clamant was a storied veteran, and Rietz had no doubt the mercenary would find the perfect moment to strike and take advantage of the enemy's opening.

With his message dispatched, it was time for Rietz to set forth and engage the enemy.

"The time has come! Follow my lead—charge!" he shouted, then spearheaded the attack, rushing forward to meet his foes head-on. His archers acted in time

with his attack, peppering the enemy formation with arrows.

Rietz let out a bellowing war cry as he fought. The enemy soldiers poured in one after another, and what they'd sacrificed in defensive capabilities had gained them substantial mobility. They came so swiftly that for each one that fell with an arrow in his breast or a sword in his gut, another would be there to replace him without missing a beat. Rietz, however, fought valiantly against their endless onslaught, cleaving through his foes in droves. He didn't give them the chance to strike back, and his armor was soon stained red with the blood of his enemies. He fought like a vengeful deity descended to the battlefield.

Zaht fought by Rietz's side, and performed admirably in his own right. Ars had recruited him knowing that he was already a capable warrior, and although he lacked the ability to command troops, his skill in direct combat was tremendous. He was a man who Rietz felt comfortable trusting his back to, and Zaht fought hard enough to justify that faith.

The two of them carved through the melee, and their might and fury roused the spirits of all the men around them. The enemy was fearless enough to walk into Charlotte's inferno, but Canarre's soldiers met them head-on, never faltering in the face of their foes' bravery. Gradually, the battle began to turn in Canarre's favor.

"Hah..." Rietz panted. He'd slain droves of enemies, and fatigue was beginning to set in. Strong as he was, his endurance was not unlimited, and it was only a matter of time before he grew too tired to carry on the fight.

He would have to withdraw before that happened, one way or another. Rietz knew very well that if he fell here, the army of Canarre would suffer massive losses. If he withdrew too soon, however, he'd ruin any chance of buying the time that his men needed.

I'm not done yet, Rietz told himself. I can still...fight...!

Rietz's limits weren't bearing down on him just yet. He had stamina left to keep up the fight—stamina left to slay more of his foes. He roused his spirits, raised his sword, and plunged back into the battle.

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"All right, let's move," Clamant said as he surveyed the battle from atop his horse. He'd been keeping careful track of the enemy troops, and had judged that their focus was sufficiently diverted by Rietz and his foot soldiers to let the cavalry division slip around the outskirts of the battle.

"Huh?! Already? You sure?" asked Braham, who didn't know what he was looking at well enough to assess the state of the battle. He'd been through plenty of battles himself, but since his former superiors had judged him to be a strong liability, he'd very rarely been deployed to the front lines. Reading the state of the enemy's focus was beyond him. "Y-Y'know what? You seem like you know your stuff just a little better than I do, so I'll take your word for it!" Braham added before Clamant could reply.

The old Braham would have chosen to trust in his own instincts and rush into battle when his whims told him to, but now, he decided to follow his ally's advice. He'd learned, at least, how to judge whose calls were worth listening to. Thanks to Rietz's guidance, Braham was growing as a person, little by little.

Clamant and Braham's force rode as swiftly as they were able. Their goal was to catch the enemy off guard, so they'd taken as few troops with them as possible. The more horsemen rode with them, the more likely it would be that

the enemy noticed them. Furthermore, keeping their numbers low meant they could handpick the most skilled troops for the task.

Their division was made up of roughly a hundred horsemen, each of whom was highly skilled. More of the Maitraw Company's men had made it into the mission than Canarre's cavalry. The fact that Clamant was leading the charge partially explained that imbalance, but it was also true that the Maitraw mercenaries were more skilled at mounted combat on the whole. They'd trained well, and many of their men rode as if they and their mounts were of one mind and body.

The elite cavalry squad galloped in perfect formation, maneuvering around the battle toward the mages at the back of the enemy's formation. The soldiers caught up in the melee up front didn't have time or attention to spare, and took no notice as the horsemen rode to their sides. They drew closer and closer to the mages, who were occupied with the barriers they were maintaining and took no notice either, until the cavalry were all but upon them. The moment they realized what was happening the mages began to shout and panic, but Clamant and Braham were already crashing into their formation, swinging their spears from atop their horses and mowing down the mages around them.

The mages reacted quickly, switching from protective magics to offensive spells as they tried to drive the horsemen back. Magic burst forth from point-blank range, and several horsemen fell as spells slammed into them, but since every member of the attacking force was so skilled at riding, most of them avoided the assault. The horses themselves deserved credit as well—they were just as capable as their riders. Most horses would be thrown into a panic at the first sight of magic and render their riders unable to fight, but these were exceptionally well-trained mounts that didn't so much as flinch at the sight of a spell.

Mages were more vulnerable than most soldiers in close combat, and while they fell left and right, the horsemen attacking them were largely unscathed. One of the mages cast a sound spell to alert their allies of the danger they were in, but it had taken far too long for them to get the spell off. You could only keep one type of aqua magia in a catalyzer at once, and the mages had all been using flame-aspected aqua magia, which allowed them to cast barriers that were effective against flame-based spells. Few of the enemy mages, if any, had been carrying a catalyzer full of sound-aspected aqua magia when the attack began. And as a result, their warning went out long after it should've.

Finally, though, the spell rang out and the rest of Seitz's force was made aware of the peril their mages had found themselves in. The battle at the front was still ongoing, however, and the rank and file soldiers were unable to break away and help the mages. To the contrary, the news just contributed to the chaos. All the while, Canarre's cavalry kept at their assault, whittling away at the mages' numbers.

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It's time! Rietz thought as he heard sound magic ring out from deep within the enemy's ranks. He would order his soldiers to fall back, and as soon as they'd broken free of the enemy lines and the Seitzan forces moved to pursue them, Rietz's mages would begin their barrage.

If Rietz's troops stayed engaged with the enemy, the risk of friendly fire would be too great for his mages to cast safely. However, pulling out from a frenzied melee was easier said than done. Under normal circumstances the enemy would pursue and deal heavy damage to the retreating troops. In this case, however, the enemy was confused and distracted. Rietz believed he could take advantage of that opening to slip away. He could have also taken advantage of it by pressing the attack, but the current state of chaos wasn't intense enough for him to feel confident they wouldn't regroup before he could gain enough ground. Rietz chose to trust in his own judgment, and issued the order to fall back.

"Formation three!" Rietz shouted, issuing the order with a code phrase to ensure the enemy army wouldn't catch on to his plan. Orders like that would normally be issued using sound magic, but since Rietz was on the front line he could give the signal in person, using his own voice.

Changing the code phrase for a retreat battle after battle was a confusing nuisance, but Canarre's troops were well-trained and remembered each battle's codes without trouble. No sooner had the words left Rietz's mouth than his men started falling back, suppressing the urge to cut down their distracted foes.

The enemy's troops noticed that the army of Canarre was falling back, but they were in no position to rush to pursue. Even if they'd had that leeway, they'd taken notice of Rietz's retreat far too late to take advantage of it. Their commanding officer was only informed that the enemy was falling back a matter of minutes after the retreat began. He issued a frantic command for his men to pursue, and when his men moved to carry out that order and chase after Rietz's men, Rietz's mages took that as their cue to rain magic down upon the enemy formation.

The cavalry division's surprise attack had succeeded. That wasn't to say that they'd slain every hostile mage, but they'd brought down enough of them to leave their magical barrier full of holes. This time, Canarre's mages' spells met their mark and blew away Seitzan soldiers one by one.

That didn't stop their advance, though, and Rietz's foot soldiers immediately shifted their formation to intercept the enemy and protect the mages behind them. They'd been prioritizing their offense during the prior melee, but now they fought with defense in mind, sending soldiers armed with shields and spears to the front. Shifting formations in that manner wasn't something that most armies could do in such short time, but Canarre's forces had trained diligently for just such an occasion, and Rietz's skill as a commander aided them in their efforts. In their case, the shift was all but instantaneous.

The Seitzan troops found themselves unable to break through Canarre's front line. Meanwhile, the troops behind Seitz's front line were picked off in droves by Canarre's mages. They relied entirely on their mages' barriers to protect them from magical attack, and without those barriers, they couldn't even protect themselves from spells cast with a small or mid-sized catalyzer.

As more and more of their men fell, Seitz's morale began to plummet. It was now plain to see that Canarre held the upper hand, but Seitz's strength in numbers still carried them onward, and the shieldmen at the front of Canarre's formation gradually began to fall. It seemed inevitable that Seitz would break through...but that was when Charlotte and Musia finished preparing for their next set of spells. Once again, blasts of incredibly powerful magic rained down on the hostile forces, incinerating many among them in the blink of an eye. Musia's second wave of magic was less powerful than her first had been, but it was still devastating in effect.

That, it seemed, had dealt the finishing blow to Seitz's morale. Their troops' spirits were shattered, and they began to break ranks and flee. Their leaders seemed to realize that they would be in trouble if they couldn't regroup, and chose a strategic withdrawal.

The battle had gone as Rietz had planned, and he'd managed to drive the opposing army into retreat. He was relieved by his victory, but at the same time, his expression remained grim. The lengthy melee had proven costly, and many of his men lay dead on the ground. His cavalry division's losses were less heavy, and his mages were untouched.

The enemy's losses, meanwhile, had been grave. By all rights it had been an incredibly fruitful battle, but Seitz still had plenty of troops kept in reserve. They would keep attacking, no matter how many of their allies were killed, and since their leaders were sure to work out a counter strategy to deal with the tactics Rietz had used today, the same plan wouldn't work twice. That wasn't the biggest problem that he faced, though. Of far greater concern was his stock of aqua magia.

At the rate we've been expending our reserves, they'll last for two more battles, at most. Our foes, on the other hand, have plenty to spare.

There was still a stock of aqua magia at Fort Coumeire, but defending the fort with no aqua magia whatsoever was impossible. Canarre's success in battle so far had been reliant upon their ability to drive the enemy off with magic, though, and without aqua magia, their defeat would be all but set in stone.

We need to have the Shadows eliminate the enemy's aqua magia supplies, and soon, Rietz thought. He couldn't keep buying time forever. Eventually, he would have no choice but to retreat, and if the Shadows had yet to accomplish their mission by that time, the war would be lost. Rietz said a quick prayer for the Shadows' success as he set about preparing for the next battle.

"So we're supposed to take out their aqua magia and provisions, eh?" Pham muttered as he accepted Ars's letter.

His band of spies, the Shadows, had recently become Ars's formal retainers. In truth, though, their work hadn't changed much compared to how they'd conducted themselves as mercenaries. They no longer had the right to turn down their client's orders, but their members still reported directly to Pham, and they accomplished their missions in the same manner they always had.

The mission they'd been given this time would not be an easy one. Pham had gathered extensive information on the army of Seitz, and had learned that they too employed a band of spies much like the Shadows. They were less skilled than Pham and his people, but their presence still made all the difference for the Shadows' purposes. The enemy's spies, after all, weren't participating in the war to gather information on Canarre's forces—they were there specifically to root out and counteract sabotage by enemy spies. In other words, Seitz's army was well-defended against Pham's tactics.

Seitz, presumably, had decided that with the advantage in numbers they held over Canarre, there was no need to resort to trickery. If they fought head-on, as they always did, they would win regardless. The only problem would arise if circumstances conspired to *prevent* them from fighting as they always did, and the only way that could happen would be if Canarre slipped spies into their camp to sabotage their provisions or aqua magia supplies. The spies were there to make sure that didn't happen, and using them in that manner was a logical decision on Seitz's part. It takes a spy to catch a spy, after all. No one else would handle the task more effectively.

Sabotaging an army under the protection of spies was a tall order. Worse still,

Pham was operating under a strict time limit. The job might have been reasonable enough with sufficient time to prepare, but he needed to make it happen as soon as possible. An average spy would probably say that the mission just wasn't doable...but the Shadows were far from average. They were the best spies that money could buy.

"Guess the boss's word is law. If this is what he wants, we've just gotta get it done," said Pham. He took pride in the knowledge that he and his compatriots could achieve any mission, no matter how difficult. Not to say he could have turned it down to begin with, of course. He was Ars's retainer now, not just an independent contractor, and that meant he had to live up to his lord's expectations.

Pham put his mind into overdrive, running through every possible method he could use to guarantee the success of his mission. There were a number of means he could use to deprive the enemy of their provisions and aqua magia. Broadly speaking, he could target them while they were being transported, or target the storehouses they were kept in. Those storehouses were kept close to the battlefield as a matter of necessity, and the Shadows had determined their locations.

The one issue was that the army of Seitz had spread their supplies out over a large number of sites, rather than keep them all grouped together. Putting all their eggs in one basket would've been too risky, and they'd planned accordingly. That would make distribution slightly less efficient, but it seemed they'd decided it was worth the price, and Pham suspected there were even more sites that the Shadows hadn't managed to discover.

The supplies being spread across numerous locations meant it would be exceedingly difficult to destroy them all. Hitting them in transit would pose

difficulties as well, though. They'd be protected by a large squad of soldiers that the Shadows would have a very hard time breaking through.

We're not supposed to take out all of their supplies this time—just shave away at them. It won't do any good if we just get rid of a little, though. We need to eliminate as much as it takes to give Canarre the edge in battle, thought Pham, trying to get a grasp of Ars's intentions. Ars had written the orders hastily, and had neglected to specify quite a few pertinent details about his priorities. We'll probably be better off picking just one target: their food, or their aqua magia. You have to feed your soldiers if you want to send them into battle, and fighting without aqua magia's doable in a pinch. It might make more sense to aim for their food...but maybe not...

When he was a mercenary, Pham had only thought about accomplishing his mission and getting paid. Now that he was in the service of a lord, though, he had to think past those goals and consider his benefactor's long-term victory.

Losing a few sites' worth of food won't have any immediate impact on their ability to fight. Unless we can destroy all of them, we won't make them retreat—we'll just make them more eager than ever to end this war soon. Why would we light a fire under our enemy's asses? That could bring the whole army down on us at once.

What about the aqua magia, though? Seitz isn't supposed to be all that rich in magistones, so if they lost that, they wouldn't be able to replace it in a hurry. Running low on aqua magia has a direct effect on an army's ability to fight effectively, too. Even if we're losing in numbers, if we can beat them in terms of our aqua magia reserves, winning a defensive battle might just be doable.

After considering all his options, Pham reached his decision.

"We'll go after their aqua magia!"

With that decided, Pham moved swiftly. He started by looking into which sites the army of Seitz was keeping their aqua magia at. He would prioritize taking those sites out, though the sheer number of them made eliminating all of them impossible. The number they could feasibly destroy just wouldn't make that much of a difference, in the long run.

"But what if we didn't destroy their aqua magia? What if we stole it instead...?"

Making off with the enemy's resources would damage their ability to wage war and prop up Canarre's in one fell swoop, killing two birds with one stone. However, stealing a stock of aqua magia from a battlefield would be harder than destroying it by an order of magnitude. All you had to do to destroy a storehouse was set it on fire, but stealing its contents would involve finding an opening, sneaking into the enemy camp, and carrying it all out again, without getting caught.

Pulling off a heist like that undetected would be close to impossible. It would be a different matter with access to shadow magic, but Pham had used up the last of his appropriately aspected aqua magia saving Couran's life some time earlier. It was a rare and prized resource, and he had yet to find a way to replenish his stock.

If Pham wanted to steal the enemy's aqua magia, there was only one way he could think of to make it happen. The question was, was pulling it off realistic? If his scheme succeeded, he would be able to gather up the better part of the enemy's aqua magia supply in one place, then steal it all in one fell swoop. Canarre's forces would benefit considerably from that outcome, and the more he thought about it, the more he realized that it was doable.

The one issue: the Shadows wouldn't be able to handle it on their own. He

would have to communicate his plan to Ars and ask for his cooperation. Pham quickly explained his plan to Ben, then sent him off to deliver it to their lord.

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Eventually, Ben returned with the reply from Ars that Pham had been waiting for: the soldiers he needed would be readied for him at once. It had taken him less than a day to make it back, meaning he'd managed to deliver the message at quite an impressive speed. Ben's speed had always been one of his strong points, and his stamina was exceptional to boot. His plain appearance belied his remarkable abilities.

At the moment, the Shadows were operating in the city of Purledo, the seat of the County of Purledo. There was a fortress located a short ways away from the city, from which the commander of the army of Seitz dispatched his orders to the front lines.

Purledo's proximity to the fortress meant that people affiliated with the army passed through every once in a while, and that made it a decent place for the Shadows to pick the enemy's brain indirectly and accomplish their current objective: gathering information. Seitz's spies were working behind the scenes to block the Shadows' efforts, but gathering information was the speciality of more than one of the Shadows' operatives, and they'd managed to pull it off without running afoul of the enemy so far.

As soon as Ben had finished his report, Pham started giving out orders.

"All right, let's get this operation rolling," he said. "Remen, Lambers, Mulad–go get it done."

The three spies Pham named would be responsible for the day's operation. Pham wasn't one to shy away from getting his hands dirty out in the field, but after deciding what the task of the day would entail, he'd realized that his subordinates would be more suited to seeing it through. Their skill sets were a better fit for the mission, so he'd handed it off to them.

Lambers was a master of disguise, and Remen was an expert when it came to seduction. Remen wasn't an exceptionally beautiful woman, to be clear. She was hardly ugly, but she wasn't any more or less remarkable than any of the other moderately pretty women you could find just about anywhere. Her barely above-average looks, however, did nothing to hamper the area in which she shined: her ability to charm men through the art of conversation. In fact, a truly beautiful woman wouldn't have been able to do what Remen did without arousing suspicion in her marks, so in a sense her looks struck the perfect balance with her area of expertise. Mulad, meanwhile, was a fighter born. Remen and Lambers weren't much for battle, and if the operation took a turn for the worse, Mulad would be their lifeline.

The three Shadows acknowledged Pham's orders, then got to work at once.

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"So that's the guy, eh...?" Remen muttered as a somewhat frivolous looking man walked into her field of vision. His name was Kaisas Lopardo, and he was a non-combatant official in the army of Seitz. The term "official" may have been giving him too much credit, though—he was essentially a flunky, not responsible for any important tasks.

The bulk of his work revolved around checking the stockpiles that the army transported. In other words, he was responsible for making sure their provisions, aqua magia, and the like were in stock. With a little luck and some skillful maneuvering, he had the potential to rise to an overseer role for the army's whole supply chain, but at the moment, he was little more than an assistant to those with real authority.

Kaisas had finished his work for the day, and was on his way to a local pub to drink the evening away. He was fond of drinking without company, and entered the pub alone. Remen followed just a moment behind him, and took a seat at a nearby table. Kaisas was hardly a prolific skirt-chaser, but he proved no match for Remen's skillful wiles, and had soon taken an interest in her—just as she had hoped he would.

Before long, Kaisas invited Remen to retire to a room with him. The pub he'd chosen functioned as an inn as well, and he quickly rented out a room, which Remen was all too happy to follow him into. There they engaged in a romantic tryst, interspersed with occasional conversation...all of which Lambers, who was lurking in the next room over, listened in on. That was all it took for him to commit Kaisas's manner of speaking and personality to memory.

Mulad was lying in wait in the same room as Lambers. Eventually, Lambers gave him a signal and Mulad left the room, went over to Kaisas and Remen's chamber, and walked right in. He dashed over to Kaisas faster than the eye could follow, wrapped his arm around the man's neck before he could even scream, and choked him into unconsciousness before snapping his neck, killing him instantly.

The spies stripped the clothes off Kaisas's corpse. Lambers quickly dressed himself in them, then took a lengthy moment to study Kaisas's face, memorizing

every last little detail of his countenance so he'd be able to reproduce it later on. Finally, the three of them hid the body somewhere it wasn't likely to be discovered any time soon, then departed from the room and the pub.

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"Damn them all... They've no idea what I do for them, fools that they are," Raktor Brandol muttered irritably in his chamber in Fort Purledo. He was a short, plump man in his late thirties. He didn't look like an especially capable fighter, and in his case, appearances were not deceiving. He had, however, been entrusted with an important role by Seitz's commander: overseeing the transport of their supplies, from food to aqua magia and everything in between.

Raktor had never struck down enemy generals and achieved mighty deeds on the front lines, but he was nevertheless a man who contributed greatly to the army behind the scenes. The maintenance of supply lines was a critical factor in war, and the fact that he had been given responsibility over the task spoke to the trust that had been placed in him. Up till recently, that trust had been well-earned. He'd ensured that the soldiers on the front lines had ample and immediate access to everything they needed, and had contributed greatly to his army's success. Word of his achievements hadn't spread far and wide across the land, but among the inner circle of the army of Seitz, his efforts were much praised.

Due to the army's most recent battle, however, Raktor had found himself the subject of scathing criticism. He had ensured the army's resources were moved carefully and cautiously, storing their provisions and aqua magia in a multitude of locations to ensure that even if the enemy caught them unawares, they

would avoid losing a fatal quantity of their resources. That choice, however, had impacted the efficiency of the transportation process. The slow speed with which resources had been transported across the battlefield had resulted in the army not having enough of everything they'd needed to press the attack and keep the pressure up on their foe. As a result, his colleagues had started blaming Raktor for the fact that Canarre had managed to mount a counterattack and push them back.

"I've been doing everything I possibly can! They just don't see it," Raktor said with a grimace. For all his talk of not being at fault, he knew deep down that their criticisms, in truth, were not off the mark. He was used to running supply lines for a force fighting at a numerical disadvantage, and supplying an army that held an overwhelmingly superior position was new to him.

Grr... There must be something I can do! Raktor thought. I told my underlings to submit any good ideas they had to me, but they're a bunch of worthless louts to a man. I can't expect anything from them.

The transportation of resources was hardly a glamorous affair, and very few capable individuals were chomping at the bit to get involved. Just when Raktor resigned himself to the fact that he'd have to think up a new, efficient, and risk-free means of transporting goods to the battlefield, an associate stepped into his chamber to deliver a report.

"Sir Raktor," said the man, "Kaisas says he wishes to speak with you. Do you have a moment to spare?"

Kaisas? Wasn't he the third son of House Lopardo...? thought Raktor, whose memory was exceptional. He'd memorized the backgrounds of most of his subordinates in surprising detail, but he knew very little about Kaisas aside from his status in his family. He knew what the man looked like, at least, but only

vaguely. They'd had few opportunities to meet.

"I'm thinking right now," said Raktor. "Tell him I don't have the time."

"But sir-Kaisas claims he has a proposal to deal with our supply line situation!"

"A proposal...?" Raktor parroted skeptically. He had no idea how capable of a man Kaisas was, but he did know that if he was the sort of man who had good ideas, he wouldn't have escaped Raktor's notice for this long.

Then again, it would hardly be the first time I've written a youth off, only to discover they have talent deep down after all. There's no telling who might have latent potential, in the end. I suppose I should hear what he has to say, Raktor concluded, then agreed to see Kaisas, albeit with rather subdued hopes for the meeting.

Kaisas soon arrived at Raktor's room.

"Thank you for sparing the time to meet with me, Sir Raktor. I'm well aware of how busy you are, and appreciate you going to the trouble," said Kaisas.

"Enough with the formality," Raktor sighed. "I'm told you have a plan. Out with it."

"Very well," Kaisas said, then quickly summarized the tactic he had in mind. In short, he proposed that the supply chain could be made more efficient by allocating their resources in a more centralized location, but making that location an underground site, thus rendering it beyond their enemy's ability to detect.

"Underground, you say...?" said Raktor.

"Yes, sir," Kaisas confirmed. "An aboveground site capable of holding all our stores would be large enough in scale that our foes could find and assault it with ease. If we can establish an underground site, however, then the odds of them finding it will be next to nothing, regardless of its size."

"But wait—how would we build an underground facility of that size? You're proposing the impossible!"

"It would be perfectly possible, through use of earth magic."

"Earth magic...?" Raktor repeated, then sank into thought. Building structures was indeed an accepted use for earth-aspected magic, so Kaisas had a point. Building a large-scale underground facility through magical means wasn't implausible. "Tell me, Kaisas. How did you come up with this idea?"

"I enjoy reading in my spare time, and happened to come across a record of an old war some time ago. That record described the army of another duchy–Rofeille or Canshiep, I believe–making use of a similar tactic."

"Hmm..." Raktor was somewhat educated in military history, of course, but the historical tactics of the far northern duchies weren't an area of study he'd committed to memory. He'd never thought they would be of any use to him. "That's not a bad plan you've come up with, Kaisas. I'll begin putting it into practice at once, and you can expect a healthy bonus for your trouble."

"Much obliged, Sir Raktor," said Kaisas with a bow...followed by an almost imperceptible smirk. "You needn't bother with the bonus, though," he added quietly enough that only he could hear it.

"Now then, let us decide upon the particulars of our plan! I'll be expecting your help, of course," said Raktor.

"So? How'd it go?" Pham asked his three fellow spies after they returned from their mission.

"Swimmingly, Boss. Raktor's all set to shift his strategy for his supply lines."

"Is he? That's a surprise. Didn't think he'd go for it that easily...not that I'm complaining," Pham said impassively. It didn't show on his face in the slightest, but inwardly, he was relieved and overjoyed to hear the news. The plan hadn't succeeded just yet, though, and Pham forced his feelings of accomplishment to the side.

The Shadows had known from the start that Raktor was in a pinch, but Pham hadn't expected him to go along with the plan they'd fed him without question. At the absolute least, he'd expected that Raktor would take some time to think it through and consider the potential implications of the shift in strategy before adopting it.

Kaisas, the man Lambers had impersonated, was a grunt. He'd ended up as the Shadows' target because killing and assuming the identity of someone important would've been too much of a risk, what with the enemy's spies working to obstruct any potential subterfuge. Kaisas simply wasn't significant enough to earn his side's spies' attention, so impersonating him was a comparatively low risk. That carried downsides, of course, chief among which was the fact that getting their plan adopted would be rather difficult with only an underling's influence to back it up. Pham had expected it to take quite some time and maneuvering, but much to his surprise, it had gone off without a hitch.

Not only was it true that using underground supply depots was a tactic with

some precedent, it had proven quite successful when implemented in prior wars. Raktor was also an open-minded man who understood the need to be flexible with his plans, which might have explained why he was so open to the suggestion.

Looks like that flexibility's about to stab him in the back, Pham reflected.

Building a supply depot underground was an effective plan, yes. Having all their supplies in a centralized location would boost the efficiency of their distribution dramatically. Setting up multiple sites would involve finding optimal locations for every one of them, plus the actual work of constructing the facilities and the effort involved in communicating the supply lines to the rest of the army. It was, in short, a difficult and bothersome tactic.

Centralizing their network would resolve all those issues in one fell swoop, and locating the supply chain's nexus underground would minimize the risk of enemy detection. To make the prospect even more attractive, aqua magia was known to be less likely to deteriorate in underground facilities than it did on the surface. Aqua magia was highly unstable and prone to deterioration, so one had to take careful steps to store it in a way that would maintain its optimal condition.

Furthermore, locating the site underground would make it harder for the enemy to infiltrate it. Aqua magia's instability meant that it didn't take much at all to render a batch unusable, and even a single enemy agent could deal a critical degree of damage to their stock, in the worst case. Keeping it in a large building would, of course, make it that much easier to infiltrate the supply site, so centralizing one's aqua magia stockpile was generally not a feasible idea. Putting it underground, however, meant that even if the site's location was discovered, all it would take was a careful guard kept over the entrance to

render infiltration all but impossible.

The plan had plenty of merit. Duchies with ample supplies of earth-aspected magistones had gone so far as to set up tunnel systems to run their supply chains through in the past, and while Seitz lacked the aqua magia reserves needed to go that far, they had enough to implement the plan that Lambers had used Kaisas's identity to propose, and Raktor wasted no time in doing just that.

Lambers being party to the discussion, of course, meant that Canarre would know where the site would be located the instant it was decided upon. That would give the army of Canarre plenty of time to use earth magic to set up their own underground space in the immediate vicinity of Seitz's chosen site. Then, all they would have to do is wait for Seitz to finish their facility, tunnel over to it using earth magic, and steal all their aqua magia right under the army of Seitz's nose.

"Thanks to Lambers, we'll know exactly where Seitz's supply hub's set to be built. Let's get to work, boys," Pham ordered, sending the Shadows out to make their preparations for the upcoming operation.

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The army of Seitz constructed their new supply network at a breakneck pace. They brought in a contingent of reasonably skilled mages to do the bulk of the work, and had underground caverns hollowed out in no time flat. It seemed their numbers had made getting that sort of work done in short order a simple task.

The speed of the network's construction, however, worked out in Canarre's favor. Rietz could only hold the line and buy time for so long, so the sooner the Shadows could put their operation into motion, the better it would work out for their army's prospect of victory. Raktor's efficient work had, paradoxically, become a boon for his foes.

New supply sites were typically constructed in areas where they'd be difficult to find—within forests, for instance. In this case, however, Lambers had used Kaisas's identity to propose the plan, and had been present at the meeting where the sites were chosen, rendering all attempts at secrecy futile. That said, the army of Seitz did diverge from the plan he'd suggested in one major way: instead of going all-in and building a single site, they'd chosen to make a still modest six, using three of them to store provisions and three to store aqua magia.

Even with the aqua magia split between three locations, however, stealing all of it at once was not an impossible prospect. The Shadows would just have to hit all three sites simultaneously, and all they would need to do so was proper backup.

After the new supply depots were finished, Seitzan forces started hauling their resources in from their old sites. Once that process was complete, it was time for the Shadows to take action. They used earth magic to dig tunnels near the new supply hubs, broke into them, and carried off their precious resources with no one the wiser. An army that was used to operating underground could have magically reinforced their facilities, making it difficult for an enemy force to burrow their way in, but Seitz had rushed the construction process and had taken no such precautions. As a result, Canarre seized their supplies with ease, carrying them off to Fort Coumeire before their foes even knew what had hit them.

My jaw dropped as I looked over the spoils of the Shadows' latest operation that had arrived at Fort Coumeire. A massive quantity of aqua magia sat before me. When I'd heard that we'd be taking it all for our own rather than destroying it, I thought the plan sounded too good to be true, but it seemed the Shadows were somehow even more capable than I'd been giving them credit for. This was an achievement beyond my wildest expectations, and I knew I'd have to find a way to reward them accordingly. There was always a chance they'd go find someone else to serve if they grew dissatisfied with their pay, after all, and that was a scenario I wanted to avoid at all costs.

Rosell and Mireille were just as astonished by their success as I was. The two of them had been a little more optimistic about the plan than I was, but not even they had anticipated it going *this* perfectly. Now that we knew it had, though, the three of us got right to discussing our next moves in the war.

"Well, we've managed to claim an incredible amount of aqua magia from the enemy," I said. "I think this increases our odds of coming out on top of this war considerably."

"It's a big achievement, yeah, but it's still too soon to assume we're out of the woods. Keep in mind that our army's still a fraction of the size of theirs," Rosell cautioned.

Apparently, I'd been letting the minor successes go to my head. We hadn't won the war yet, so I tried to take Rosell's advice to heart.

"All right then, do either of you have any ideas about what could win this for

us?" I asked. I'd done my best to think up a plan as well, putting all the tactical knowledge I'd accrued to use, but in the end I hadn't come up with anything that felt just right. I'd need to make use of Mireille and Rosell's talents if I wanted to get through this.

"Not sure I'd say I came up with a plan, per se, but now that the Shadows have achieved their mission, I think what we should do next is pretty obvious," said Mireille.

"And what's that?" I asked.

"Rally our troops and march on Seitz's forces," said Mireille.

"I-I'm sorry, what?" I asked, flabbergasted by her left-field reply. We were still at a disadvantage, so engaging the enemy in open battle on purpose seemed like a very questionable decision to me.

"Our enemies just had the better part of their aqua magia stolen from under their noses, and you'd better believe that'll send them into a state of chaos. Their supply chain's going to be next to useless until they fix things, and whatever aqua magia might be left sure as hell isn't gonna make it to the front lines in time. That's a state of affairs we can take advantage of. Giving them time here means they'll rebuild their supply lines and set up a new distribution system, so we need to strike now, before it's too late."

"I was thinking the same thing. If we're going to take the fight to Seitz, it's now or never," said Rosell. It was pretty rare for him to advocate for a plan as bold and decisive as this one, pessimist as he was. I took that as a sign that this was our best chance. "Considering the fact that we'll have way more aqua magia than them in our next battle, we could deal some major damage if we can lure them into a position that'll limit their mobility. It won't work if they can just turn tail and run, so we'll have to make absolutely sure they take the bait."

The more we could limit the mobility of our enemy's infantry, the more effective long-ranged attacks from our archers and mages would become. Our highest priority for our next battle was to whittle down their numbers as much as possible. Even if we technically won the battle, it wouldn't matter in the long term if their soldiers could escape unharmed, regroup, and come at us all over again. That would gain us a healthy chunk of time, and it was always possible that Couran would defeat Vasmarque and send reinforcements our way, but I wasn't interested in structuring our plan around an unknown factor like that. If we wanted to drive the Seitzan army out of Missian, we'd have to make a decisive move.

All that being said, I had no idea whether or not we'd be able to lure our foes into a trap. My first assumption was that our enemies would wait to attack until the chaos among their ranks died down.

"Where would we be able to lure them that would limit their mobility?" I asked.

"Maybe the woods...or a marshland? What's available nearby...?" Rosell muttered to himself as he looked over a map of the local area. Seconds passed, and he didn't seem to find anywhere that suited his purposes. "No, not here, it's too far away... And this place would leave them too mobile... Maybe there isn't anywhere well suited after all?"

It seemed that Rosell's ideal battlefield was nowhere to be found, at least in this area. Unfortunately, luring our enemies into a trap was off the table if we couldn't find anywhere to set said trap in.

"There's a river over here, though..." said Mireille. "Hey, have you taken inventory of all the aqua magia we stole from Seitz? Do we have a list of what types we got?"

I did, in fact, have such a list available to me. I remembered receiving it, and had stored it on a nearby shelf. I tracked it down and handed it over to Mireille, who gave it a look and smirked.

"Looks like we've got a lot of water aqua magia, huh?" she said.

"What are you planning?" I asked.

"If we use water magic to bulk up the river's flow, we can cut off their escape route. We don't have to lure them in anywhere after all—we can *drive* them to the river instead," Mireille explained.

The river in question was slow enough that normally, you could just wade from one side to the other. If we flooded the river, however, we could render crossing it on foot impossible and turn it into a major roadblock.

"Driving them to the river and pinning them against it, huh...? I dunno—won't putting their backs to the wall like that just make them harder to deal with?" I asked.

"Wall? What wall?" asked Mireille. Apparently, that wasn't a common expression in this world.

"What I mean is that if we pin them against the river, their soldiers will realize they have nowhere to run and decide that they have to fight or die. Situations like that have a way of driving people to fight way harder than they usually would," I explained.

"Ohh, I get it. You mean like the Harmant turnabout. That tends to happen because being put in a do-or-die situation raises the defender's morale, and also because the attackers tend to get complacent with that sort of advantage backing them up. This is the era of magic, though. No matter how high their morale gets, they won't be able to turn the tables if they don't have the aqua

magia they need to pull it off. A situation like that might give them a boost in close combat, sure, but it won't stop our magic from blowing them away," Mireille reassured me.

I'd heard the phrase "Harmant turnabout" at some point over my studies of tactics. It referred to a situation in which an army had their back up against a wall and mounted a successful counterattack, with Harmant being the location where the battle had taken place. I couldn't remember where Harmant was for the life of me, though—somewhere in Paradille, maybe?

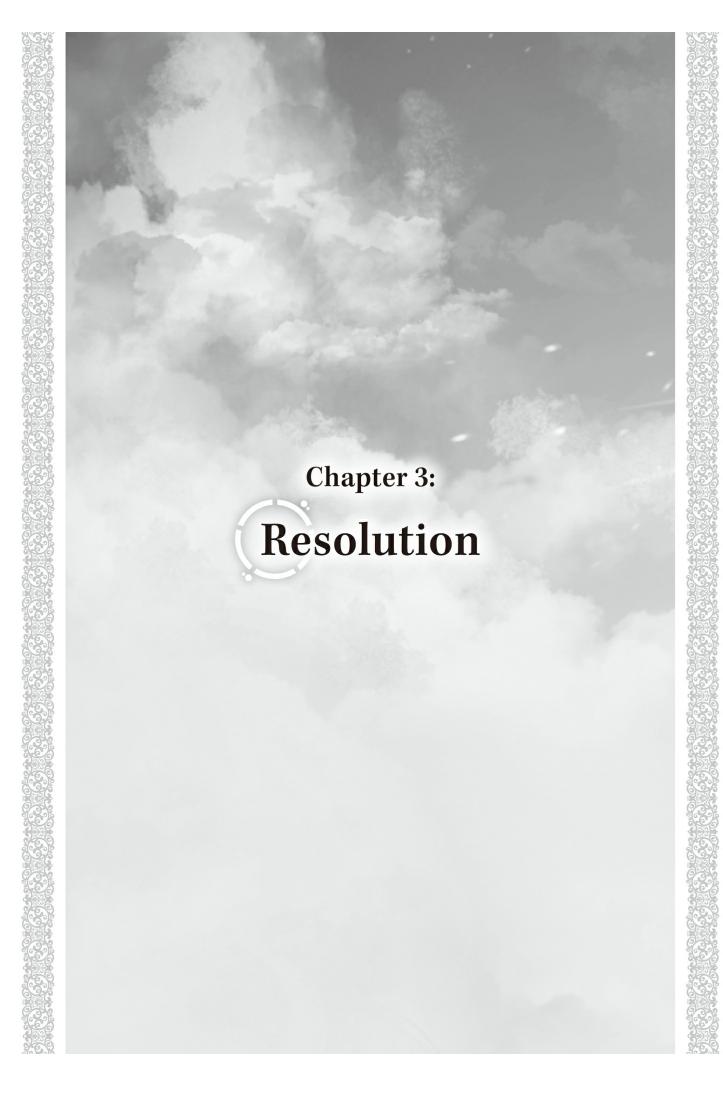
"Will they even try to retreat across the river?" I asked. "Even with their supply chain in chaos and their resources inaccessible, they still have the advantage of numbers. If they can work out their supply issues, they'll be able to push us right back, so don't you think they'll try to avoid retreating at all costs? They know that if they take too long, Vasmarque could lose his war and Couran could send us more men."

"True enough," Mireille admitted. "We might have to go into battle once, gain an advantage over them, then send in the Shadows to spread some misinformation through the enemy camp, or something to that effect."

What sort of misinformation is she talking about? Maybe we could have them spread a rumor that Canarre managed to steal a shipment headed their way, so they wouldn't get any more aqua magia any time soon? Or we could trick them into thinking that Vasmarque's already lost, and a horde of reinforcements is headed our way.

It would only matter if the enemy troops believed the rumors, of course, but I had every confidence that the Shadows could make that happen. It seemed clear that we'd be relying on them yet again, and I was starting to feel a little guilty for working them so hard.

"Well, I'm convinced," I said. "Let's use Mireille's idea as the basis for our plan. We'll wipe out as many of their troops as possible, and ensure they never advance even a step farther into Canarre," I declared.



We wasted no time putting the plan we'd settled on into action. To start, we sent a message through the quickest means available to Rietz, who'd fought his hardest to hold the enemy back. We informed him that the Shadows' plan had been a success, and told him our strategy for the battle to come. We also requested that he write us a detailed update on the current state of Seitz's troops.

Rietz's reply soon arrived, and he offered no objection to the strategy we'd proposed. I had to presume that he agreed with our assessment of the situation, but I still felt the need to meet him and talk it out in person before we put our plan into action. He also reported that, as expected, our enemies were in a state of turmoil. They'd kept up the attack with unwavering ferocity at first, and Rietz had just barely managed to ward them off, but his soldiers' stamina had withered and his aqua magia reserves were running dry.

For a moment Rietz had considered falling back, but then, without warning, the enemy's attacks had ceased. I had a feeling that if I asked, I'd find it was the very same day the Shadows had pulled off their operation. They'd likely judged that carrying on the attack with their supply lines in shambles would be too tall a task, and had brought their offensive to a momentary halt. I had a suspicion that they'd used up the last of their aqua magia in the battle with Rietz's force, and had been counting on more being delivered when the Shadows' plan succeeded. If that was true, then this really would be our ultimate chance to go on the offensive.

I also sent a message to the Shadows. There was no real need for them to infiltrate the enemy ranks at the moment, so I instructed them to return to our

vicinity for the time being. I was planning on sending them out to slip into the enemy's ranks shortly before our next battle, where they'd spread misinformation and encourage our foes to withdraw.

"All right—I should be heading out soon, myself," I said. I'd kept a decent number of troops with me at Fort Coumeire, and I was planning to sortie with almost all of them and join the attack on Seitz's army. Going into battle carried some risks, of course, but Rietz's force just wasn't large enough to guarantee the sort of enemy casualties I was hoping for. Without the troops in Fort Coumeire, he'd have a hard time winning the upcoming battle, and we had to bring an end to this before the enemy could regroup, one way or another.

"Lord Ars..." Licia said wistfully. There was just no way I could bring her along on this mission, so she would have to remain at the fort. I'd wanted to see her before I left for the front, so I'd called her over to a room where we could have some privacy.

"I'll be leaving Fort Coumeire mostly unguarded," I said. "Staying here will be far too dangerous. I'd feel much better if you'd travel back to Torbequista, or Castle Canarre. You'll be safer there."

"I won't be safe *anywhere* if your plan fails. No, I shall stay here and await your return," Licia replied firmly.

I thought back to our first meeting. When I appraised her and discovered her remarkable Ambition score, I'd thought that she had the potential to be an exceedingly dangerous girl. Since then, though, I'd learned that she was more dependable than anyone, and I'd grown very fond of her—so fond, in fact, that before I even knew what I was doing I'd pulled her toward me and kissed her. I was acting on pure impulse, and as our lips parted, my heart started pounding like a drum for more reasons than one.

"Ah..." Licia gasped, her face beet red.

For a moment I was convinced I'd screwed up big time...but then *she* leaned in to kiss me in return.

"Lord Ars," Licia whispered as we parted once more. Our second kiss had lasted longer than the first one. Part of me wanted to stay that way forever, but I suppressed the urge and forced myself to break away from her.

"We'll continue this after you return safely, and after we've had our wedding ceremony," said Licia, who was still blushing vividly.

I nodded, aware that my face was probably in much the same state as hers. "I'll be off, then. I swear I'll come back," I said.

"I know you will," said Licia.

With that, I stepped out of the room...and immediately caught sight of a pair of people failing to act nonchalant as they walked down the hallway, away from the door I'd just exited. Even from behind, I could tell at a glance that they were Mireille and Rosell. I had a terrible feeling, and chased after them.

"Hey!" I shouted.

"Y-Yes?" Rosell replied.

"You weren't watching me, were you?" I asked.

"N-N-No way! We most certainly did not see you and Lady Licia kissing! Perish the thought!" Rosell replied, confessing his crime before his interrogation had even begun. That settled it: they'd been snooping.

"Sounds like you'll finally become a man after the war's over, eh, kiddo?" said Mireille. "Shame, that. I was hoping to snatch your first time myself."

"That was never going to happen!" I shouted indignantly.

Will this woman never find herself a filter?

"Well, guess I'll just have to make do with Rosell's," Mireille sighed.

"Wh-What are you saying, Master?!" Rosell shrieked.

And so, amid some turmoil, we departed from Fort Coumeire.

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We marched out from the fort with a host of roughly eight thousand soldiers following behind us. Our goal was to rendezvous with Rietz's force and advance upon the Seitzan army as soon as possible, so we set a rapid pace.

I had spent some time agonizing over which of our mages to put in charge of the water magic spell our plan would hinge upon. If we couldn't flood the river thoroughly enough, we wouldn't be able to corner the army of Seitz. Our only options, as far as I could tell, were to have Charlotte do it or to have a large number of mages work in unison. If I gave that job to Charlotte, then she wouldn't be available to decimate the hostile forces after we had them cornered, which would be a major loss for our offensive potential. The firepower she could put out was a vital tool in our arsenal.

That said, losing a whole group of mages would obviously be a problem in its own right, and we only had so much aqua magia we could devote to the task. We'd stolen some from Seitz's stockpile, but not enough to guarantee success under those circumstances. If Charlotte was casting on her own, she'd only use a single mage's worth of the stuff, so running out wouldn't be an issue. Mages with her level of talent could cast spells many times the power of an average mage using the same quantity of aqua magia, and on the flip side, having a

group of mages cast enough spells to equal her power output would consume many times the quantity of aqua magia she would. It seemed very likely that we'd run out.

In the end, I decided to entrust the task to Charlotte and one of our force's other top-ranking mages. Losing her in the main attack would be a blow, but I'd received word that Musia, the fledgeling mage my skill had led me to recruit recently, had gone through something of a magical growth spurt and improved her skills by leaps and bounds. I had no doubts about her talent, and if she'd improved that dramatically of late, I was sure she'd make a massive difference in the battle.

A period of marching later, our force met up with Rietz's and I gathered my usual advisors for an immediate meeting. I wanted to keep our discussion as fast and to the point as possible.

"I'm sure you understand the plan after reading my letter, but just to be safe, I'd like to make sure we're all on the same page," I said to Rietz as soon as he arrived.

"The vast majority of the army of Canarre is to march on the army of Seitz and catch them off guard. They will be unable to fight back through magical means, thanks to their deficient supply of aqua magia, and with our foes in that weakened state our odds of victory will improve dramatically. Should the enemy attempt to retreat after the battle is won, we will flood the river behind them, cutting off their path to safety and allowing us to wipe them out to a man," Rietz recited.

"Perfect," I said with a nod.

We'd have to clear a number of hurdles to make this plan a success. First was the simple question of whether or not we could defeat the army of Seitz, even in its magic-deprived state. Charlotte would be in charge of flooding the river, so she wouldn't be able to participate in the battle from its outset. There was also a danger of them retreating too fast, in which case they could potentially cross the river before she was ready to flood it. That would mean that we'd wasted her firepower and lowered our chances of victory for nothing.

Even assuming we did win and pinned our foes in, whether or not we could wipe them out was still in question. The river wouldn't stay flooded forever, and if the Seitzans could hold out well without magic on their side, there was a chance that some or most of them would still get away.

Those were only a few of the ways I'd thought up in which the plan could go sideways, and since Rosell, Mireille, and Rietz were all sharper than me when it came to tactical scenarios like these, I had a feeling they knew even more ways in which it could end in disaster for us. Nevertheless, we were committed to seeing it through. A small force like ours had no hope of taking down a numerically superior foe without taking some risks in the process.

"Charlotte, you'll head upstream accompanied by a small division of soldiers," I continued. "Be extremely careful not to let the enemy see you. We'll use sound magic to send a signal when we want you to cast your spell and flood the river."

"Gotcha. And hey, even if they do see us, I can just blow 'em away with my magic, so no need to worry," said Charlotte, who seemed as casual and carefree as ever, even though she'd been given the most important role in our whole operation.

I wasn't quite sure whether I should be worried or reassured by her confidence. Not freaking out about the task would hopefully make it easier for her to pull it off, at least.

"I'm more worried about you guys. You sure you'll be able to win this battle without me?" Charlotte jabbed in a joking tone.

"We'll manage," I replied.

"I sure hope so," said Charlotte. This time, I could feel an element of sincere concern behind her less than serious front. I never would've imagined that *Charlotte* of all people would worry about me, but then again, she was right in the sense that we relied a lot on her firepower. Not having her around was a legitimate cause for concern.

"Are the soldiers ready to march?" I asked.

"They are. We can leave for the front whenever you give the order," said Rietz.

"Well then, no sense in wasting time. Tell the men to-"

"Hey, wait a sec," said Mireille, cutting me off. "We should send the Shadows to start spreading their misinformation before we go on the march."

"Now? Shouldn't we wait until after we've won this battle?" I asked.

"Nah," said Mireille. "If we do it now, then if everything goes well, their morale will take a hit before the fighting begins. No sense in putting it off."

"That's...a good point, actually. What sort of rumors should I tell them to spread?"

"That Couran's won his war and is heading for Canarre, or something like that? Oh, and we could say that the army of Canarre's been emboldened by Couran's victory and is getting ready to crush Seitz in one fell swoop. Since that last part's true, it'll make the rest of the rumor seem more believable when the attack happens. They could figure out that Couran winning's a lie if they took the time to dig in and verify the rumor, of course, but Seitz just doesn't have

that sort of time to spare right now."

None of us could think of any reason not to accept Mireille's plan, so I communicated it to the Shadows and ordered them to begin putting it into practice.

"All right! Now we just have to wait to hear back from the Shadows, and then we can set out," I said. "Oh, Charlotte? You should head upstream and get ready to cast right away."

"You got it," Charlotte readily replied, then went along on her way. We didn't want to draw the enemy's suspicion with a large group, so I sent her out with just a few mages and a small number of soldiers to serve as their bodyguards.

Now, all that was left was to wait for word from the Shadows.

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The Shadows' report arrived the very next day—much faster than I'd expected. It seemed our foes had bought the story we'd fed them. I didn't know how the Shadows had gone about spreading the rumor, but really, all that mattered was that they'd succeeded.

It seemed that the Seitzan army had gotten word of the fact that me and my troops had sallied forth from Fort Coumeire, and had reasoned that I wouldn't make a move like that unless I had some cause to believe I would win the ensuing battle. Just when they were at their most cautious, the rumor that Couran had won his battle arrived, and suddenly, everything seemed to fall into place. The wrong place, of course, but there was no way for them to figure that out in time.

The Shadows also gave me a report on the current state of the enemy army. Apparently, opinions on what their next move should be were thoroughly split. Some of them believed they should march straight to Fort Coumeire and claim it before Couran could arrive, some believed they should retreat at once, and others believed they didn't have a full picture yet and advocated for gathering more information before making any drastic moves.

The commanding officer present on the front lines was apparently not heavy-handed with his authority, and took his subordinates' advice into serious consideration, which in this case had left him in a state of indecision. His soldiers, meanwhile, picked up on his bafflement and had grown restless in turn. Per the Shadows' analysis, now was our perfect chance—the chance to strike at the army of Seitz, and deal a decisive blow.

"All right, let's move! This time, I'll be heading into battle with you!" I declared at the head of my army. I wouldn't be fighting on the front lines, but I'd decided to at least set foot on the battlefield alongside my troops. I knew very well how much of a morale boost having their main general present could give my forces.

"Are you certain about this, Lord Ars...?" Rietz asked apprehensively.

"I'll be fine," I said. "I've been through my fair share of battles, and I'm not the child I used to be. I won't be reduced to a quivering mess by the sight of a criminal's execution anymore."

Back then, I'd given my father no choice but to go out into battle, and the strain had reduced his remaining lifespan. No matter how much manpower I brought over to my side with my Appraisal skill, none of it would mean a thing if I couldn't show that I had a lord's bravery and keep all my followers dedicated to my cause. Defeat would mean death, yes, but that didn't change the fact that

sallying forth onto the battlefield was a necessity for me.

All that said, it wasn't like I was planning on hurling myself into the enemy lines with a sword. That was exactly what my father used to do, supposedly, and he was known to fight like a man possessed—especially in pivotal battles like today's. I was by no means a swordsman, though, so feats like the ones he achieved were beyond me.

"So, uhh...where should I be standing?" Rosell asked with an anxious air.

I was planning on commanding from a little ways behind the front lines, and ideally, I was hoping he would be nearby enough to give me advice on what orders to give.

"I want you to stay close to me and give me any advice you think is necessary," I said.

"R-Right! Got it," said Rosell with a nervous nod.

Mireille and Rietz would be out on the field as well, leading our troops on the absolute front line. My position in the central force behind them would allow me to have a grasp of the whole battlefield and give orders to my allies. I was prepared to order the central force to move up and meet the enemy head-on if necessary, of course. Rosell's instructions would be vital for that sort of judgment call, and he was clearly feeling a great deal of pressure, but I knew he'd come through for me.

Finally, Clamant would be leading the Maitraw Company as something of a mobile strike force.

"I'll follow your orders for the most part, but you should know in advance that I may take it upon myself to act on my own initiative," he told me. "If that happens, know that I am not double-crossing you or acting on impulse.

Whatever I decide to do, I do for the sake of winning this battle, and nothing else.

I could feel the weight of his ample experience on the battlefield backing up his words. I wasn't exactly excited about having someone inform me he wouldn't necessarily follow my orders, but he didn't leave me any room to argue with him, and I knew very well how difficult winning this battle would be without him.

"I want you protecting Lord Ars in this battle, Braham," said Rietz.

"Huh? But I wanna fight on the front line!" Braham whined.

"Don't underestimate the importance of this task, Braham," Rietz cautioned.

"If Lord Ars is struck down, our army will crumble. This is a duty I could only entrust to a warrior as strong and capable as you."

"As strong as me, eh...? W-Well then, guess I'm the only choice you've got! Gra ha ha!" Braham bellowed.

Rietz, clearly, had gotten very good at convincing his troublesome pupil to do as he was told. He went on to assign Zaht and the rest of the elite squad that Braham led to my unit. Having them around would dramatically reduce the odds of my untimely demise.

"And us? What should we be doing?" asked Pham.

The Shadows had already contributed more than enough to this battle, and part of me wanted to tell them to just take it easy, but they were also capable enough that I knew they could still do plenty to turn the tide in our favor.

"How 'bout we stir up a fuss around the enemy commander and take him out in the confusion? I can't guarantee we'll pull it off, but it could be worth a shot," Pham suggested. "Hmm... That's not a bad idea, but do you think you could join our mages for this battle instead? You have a knack for magic, so I bet you know some attack spells that would come in handy," I replied.

Pham grimaced.

"I mean, I can use attack magic, sure, but I've never had to use it to blast away on an open battlefield before."

"We're running a magical firepower deficit with Charlotte out of the picture, so every little bit matters. Would you be willing to at least give it a try?"

"Hey, if those are our orders, we'll do it. Just don't get your hopes up," said Pham. He still sounded reluctant, but at least he wasn't arguing with my decision.

On the subject of mages, Musia would be fighting on the front lines. Our mages were going to stand at the head of our formation and hit the enemy army with everything they had, and I could hardly make an exception just for her. A line of soldiers would be there to defend them, but that didn't change the fact that it would be a dangerous role—and yet Musia didn't seem to be any more or less scared than the rest of the mage division. It seemed the battles she'd fought in so far had helped her grow as a soldier, in a mental sense.

According to Mireille, the first strike would set the tone for the rest of the battle in a magic-heavy engagement. Landing that first magical barrage would shred your foes' morale, and unless they pulled themselves back together quickly, they'd be forced into a withdrawal. Magic really did hold that much sway over the battlefield even at the best of times, and with Seitz at a lack of aqua magia, it was all the more true today.

We didn't have the time to iron out any intricate details for our battle plan, so

we'd have to just play it by ear after the battle began. I had Rietz and Mireille to direct my troops on the front line, and both of them were skilled enough to do the job well, but I knew that didn't mean I could slack off. Commanding the central unit was also important, and a weighty responsibility, even if I knew I could count on Rosell to steer me in the right direction.

It wasn't long before our soldiers were ready to sortie.

"All right—all units, march!" I shouted from the front of our ranks with as much gravitas as I could muster.

We set off toward the enemy encampment with my whole army in tow. The army of Canarre plus Couran's reinforcements numbered over ten thousand men, so catching our foes unawares was out of the question. That was why we sent scouts ahead to keep watch over their force and inform us how they were moving once they'd learned of our offensive.

When word from our scouts arrived, I was unsurprised to learn that they'd chosen to meet our attack head-on. Even if they were low on aqua magia, they still had enough of a numerical advantage to make retreat the less likely option. The area we'd be fighting in was largely devoid of hills, and the army of Seitz had set up their formation in a wide open plain. Making their stand on elevated ground would have given them an advantage, so I was grateful for the region's flat plains. Of course, defending against an all-out magical barrage would've been difficult whether they had the higher ground or not.

Broadly speaking, our plan was to avoid engaging the soldiers in melee combat as much as possible, and instead whittle away at them from a distance using magic. They would try to close the gap, of course, so we'd keep blasting at them as we gradually retreated. From an outside perspective it would look like they were attacking us, even though the reverse would be true.

The one thing we had to be vigilant about avoiding above all else was getting surrounded. Even if they only managed to partially encircle us, being attacked from multiple flanks at once would put us in a nasty predicament. They had far more men at their disposal than we did, so they could split their force and come at us from several directions. If our foes attempted to use that sort of tactic, it would be the Maitraw Company's job to intercept the flanking force. They were exceptional warriors to a man, and had the capability to go into a lopsided battle and tip the scales in their favor.

Needless to say, we would have to keep constant lines of communication running throughout the engagement. As soon as I received an update on the state of the battle, Rosell and I would decide what move we should make next, then send out our orders to our forces. Of course, I was anticipating that Rosell would end up doing most of the actual planning.

As we marched onward, a scout arrived with bad news.

"Part of the enemy army is on the move!" he cried. "It's only a small contingent of a few hundred men, but they're heading toward Charlotte's division! They mean to wipe them out!"

"What?!" I shouted. This was an emergency, and since Rietz and Mireille were off in the vanguard, I couldn't ask them for advice. Rosell was the only one close enough to consult. "Does this mean they've figured out our plan?" I asked him.

"Not necessarily," answered Rosell. "They didn't send very many men, relatively speaking. Considering how big their army is, they would've dispatched a much larger force if they knew what she was there for. A force of a few hundred means that they know she's there, but haven't figured out why yet. I doubt this is anything more than a precautionary measure on their part."

"That makes sense... But still, a few hundred men? She's in serious danger!"

"She is, yes. Considering how powerful her magic is Charlotte could probably send a force of that size running for the hills, but there's always a chance they get the better of her. I think we should send backup."

"Backup...? Who could we send right away, though? I suppose there's Braham," I muttered, but frankly, I didn't have much faith in the man. I knew he'd grown *slightly* smarter thanks to Rietz's guidance, but could I trust him with such an important task?

Then again, nobody else sprung to mind as being capable enough to manage it, so Braham was my only option. I tried appraising him, just for reference, and found that his previously embarrassingly low Intelligence score *had* gone up somewhat, at least. In the end, I decided that trusting in him and giving him the order to back Charlotte up would be my best bet.

"Braham," I said. "I need you to go to Charlotte's current position and reinforce her squad."

"Huh?" Braham grunted. "Wait, but I thought my role was to fight by your side?"

"Your role's changed. Charlotte has enemies bearing down on her, and is in a pretty nasty situation. Take a hundred men and make sure she survives."

"Isn't Charlotte the lady who does all that crazy magic? Won't she be fine on her own?"

"She might be able to drive them away, yes, but she also might not, and that's not a risk we can take. For the sake of us winning this war, and for the sake of Canarre's future in general, we can't let her die no matter what happens."

I was invested in Charlotte's safety on a personal level as well, needless to say, but I knew that as the count it was important for me to view these things in a pragmatic manner and tried to frame my decision in terms of our future prospects. Sending away Braham and his men would be a painful loss, but I was sure we'd be able to work things out without him.

"All right, then. I'll get it done," said Braham. I told him what route Charlotte had taken, and ordered him to get there as quickly as possible. Then, he gathered up his hundred horsemen and rode off to reinforce Charlotte's squad.

"Well, that's one problem solved...probably," I said.

"B-Braham's a lot less wild than he was at first! I'm p-pretty sure it'll be fine," said Rosell, exhibiting a rare moment of optimism that the unease in his expression immediately offset. I couldn't let myself worry about my choice to send Braham, though. I had to believe it would work out, and press on.

We marched onward, and eventually drew close enough to the army of Seitz to see it with the naked eye. Once we sighted them and confirmed that we were close enough to put their camp within our mages' effective range, I ordered my whole army to a stop.

My division, the army's main force, was positioned in the central rear of our formation. To either side of the main division were troops in charge of protecting us. They were few in number, but the soldiers in each of them were quite capable. Rietz and Mireille's divisions made up our formation's front line, and Clamant and his mercenaries were right behind them.

Our plan was to fight a reactive battle, taking stock of the enemy's movements and responding accordingly, and that necessitated my unit being in a position where I could give orders to the whole rest of the army efficiently. The two divisions in the front of our formation consisted of soldiers with shields in the front, and rows of mages behind them. We'd brought twelve large catalyzers into battle, and the mages who weren't placed on one of them were

carrying small or mid-sized models.

There was almost no chance that the enemy hadn't seen us, at this range, and as expected, they were in a state of high alert. They did not, however, go on the attack. I imagined that if they'd had a sufficient stock of aqua magia, our inferior numbers would have led them to sally forth and drive us back immediately. Lacking those resources, though, they adopted a more passive approach. I had to wonder if their commander had yet to decide what his best move would be.

Regardless, if the enemy had no interest in moving toward us, that just meant we had free rein to use them as target practice. I had given Mireille and Rietz permission to act with a degree of autonomy when they saw fit, and they weren't the sort of people who'd let a chance like this pass by. They ordered their mages to attack, and a volley of fire-aspected spells rained down upon the enemy encampment.

Our foes weren't all out of aqua magia, and at first, they managed to raise their barriers and repel our spells. Gradually, though, their defenses began to weaken. It was becoming increasingly clear that going on the attack was their only choice, and before long they came charging at us in a mad dash, throwing caution to the wind.

I hadn't witnessed it in person before this moment, but I'd been told that throwing hordes of soldiers at their enemy without sparing a care for the casualties they suffered had been the army of Seitz's standard practice in this war. It looked like a mindless suicide rush to me, but considering their sheer numbers, it had the potential to be an effective method. More than just the potential, even—they'd managed to successfully break through our line once already, after all.

In this battle, however, we had mobilized almost every soldier that the army of Canarre had to offer. Furthermore, we were effectively the only side able to make use of aqua magia. Charlotte's absence was a cause for some concern, but I believed that we'd be able to stymie their brute force tactics even without her magic, and it soon became clear that I had been right.

Enemy soldiers fell one after another to our mages' relentless storm of spells. Musia's magic in particular proved even more powerful than I'd expected. She was no Charlotte, of course, but her spells were still potent. I knew that one's Valor score impacted their ability to do magic, but it seemed that their Aptitude as a mage played an even greater factor.

Rietz and Mireille's clear and precise orders helped tremendously as well. They kept us at a constant distance from the enemy, ordering our troops to fall back and advance as needed and ensuring the vanguard could keep up its attack without risking an enemy breakthrough. If our foe's situation became too grim they would have no choice to retreat, and forcing them to do so was our primary goal in this engagement, but they proved remarkably resistant to that decision. Coming this far had cost them dearly, so perhaps that was no surprise. They'd faced down Charlotte's magic on multiple occasions, and I could understand the stubborn desire to get something to show for it.

That said, they weren't *just* being stubborn. There was a strategy informing their tactics as well, which became clear when they sent a massive cavalry division galloping toward our ranks. Mages ruled the battlefield, but horsemen came in second thanks to their incredible mobility, especially given that riding fast enough made it very hard for mages to land their spells. The cavalry weren't aiming for Rietz, Mireille, and their mages, however. They were heading for me and our main division.

The enemy cavalry split into two groups, riding at us from both sides to catch us in a pincer attack. Aiming for the enemy commander was the oldest trick in the book, so we'd laid plans to combat it, so Rietz and Mireille didn't let the enemy's charge throw them out of sorts and kept their soldiers in line. My troops and I didn't panic, either, and Rosell seemed to have read our enemy like a book, predicting both that they would send out their cavalry and when they would do so. The instant they made their move, he was ready to shout out orders to counteract it.

"Maitraw Company! Fall back to reinforce the main unit's guard!" Rosell shouted.

The Maitraw Company moved to obey his command at once, proving that they could take orders when the situation called for it. I'd had a preconception that mercenaries ran wild over the battlefield however they saw fit, but it seemed I was mistaken on that front. That, or I was correct and the Maitraw Company was unusually professional and willing to work within the chain of command.

Clamant had an exceptional way of leading his men, and he and his mercenaries fell back to smoothly reinforce our guard against the cavalry charge before I knew it. They placed spearmen in their front ranks to prevent the enemy from charging straight into them, and Rosell followed suit, ordering our soldiers into an anti-cavalry formation in a sequence of movements smooth enough to rival the Maitraws.

The enemy cavalry bore down upon us. I couldn't tell if their horsemen were skilled or if their horses were the remarkable ones, but one way or another, they were incredibly fast. The horses looked a little larger than the ones I was used to, too, and I could imagine how forceful their charge would be. Still,

though, I held fast and kept command over my troops.

"Get ready, mages!" I shouted. We hadn't put *all* of our mages into the front divisions with Rietz and Mireille. We knew the enemy might attempt a cavalry charge like this, and had kept some stationed within my unit and with the Maitraw Company. We each only had twenty or so mages to work with, but that was plenty for their magic to make a real difference.

On Rosell's order, the mages unleashed fire magic upon the charging cavalry. Some of their horses faltered in the face of the inferno, and their charge grew disordered. An effective cavalry charge required you to either ensure your horses were protected from your enemy's spells, or otherwise to ride horses that had been trained to not panic in the face of magic. Some of the enemy's horses cleared that bar and didn't falter, but others failed, and their erratic movements became an obstacle to the more well-trained steeds. Just a few flinching horses was all it took to slow down an entire formation.

A full-speed cavalry charge was a terrifying thing indeed, but once their pace was slowed, they were nothing to fear. The enemy cavalry arrived at my unit at a reduced pace, and my men intercepted them with long spears, aiming for the riders rather than their mounts. One by one, the horsemen fell. The moment their formation had fallen to pieces, we had already won.

The enemy cavalry soon fell into a retreat. The Maitraw Company had proven just as successful at repelling them as my men had. In the end, anticipating our enemy's maneuver had allowed us to thwart their attack with ease.

After their cavalry charge failed, the enemy army attempted to use all sorts of tactics and came at us using all sorts of formations, but under Rietz and Mireille's command, our front line divisions drove each and every one of them away. Our foes were in a uniquely vulnerable state thanks to their lack of

magical defenses, but those two and their incredible leadership abilities deserved plenty of credit as well. Their orders were so clear and concise that their soldiers could move to carry them out the instant they were issued.

As things stood, our army had suffered few losses, while our foes had died in droves. I couldn't see any option for them other than to retreat, but they'd proved stubborn in the past, and I wasn't convinced they would go for it. As I pondered their options, though, a report came in from the front.

"The army of Seitz has begun to fall back!"

We'd done it. Everything on our end had gone as planned, and now all we had to do was act in coordination with Charlotte and drive our foes to the river. She'd already reported via sound magic to tell us she was in position. Casting sound magic over that sort of distance would be difficult for an ordinary mage, but for someone with her skills, it was as easy as could be. Me and my men would be on the move while we herded our enemies, of course, but I didn't imagine we'd leave her sound magic range. The one problem left, then, was that of the soldiers that had been sent toward her position.

Well, I sent Braham to deal with them, so he'll work it out... I hope.

I was a little concerned, but decided to have faith and focus on driving our enemy into position.

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A few hours before the army of Seitz began their retreat, Charlotte was standing by near the river, waiting for Ars to send her the signal to cast her spell. She'd sent her own magical sign shortly beforehand, and had received a

reply telling her to wait for further notice. Until she received her order to start casting, waiting was all she had on her plate.

"I'm sooo booored," Charlotte droned. Her catalyzer was already full of water-aspected aqua magia, so there weren't even any preparations remaining for her to get done. "Hey, I'm bored as hell over here! Got any good ways to kill time?" she asked, turning to one of the soldiers who had accompanied her.

"Really, Charlotte...? This is a battlefield, not a picnic," the soldier sighed with exasperation.

"Why not try fishing if you're that bored? That's what I do whenever I get a moment to myself," suggested another, significantly less serious-minded soldier.

"Fishing? How's that work?" asked Charlotte.

"All you need's a fishing rod and a body of water, really. I've got the rod, and hey, there's a river right there!" said the second soldier as he produced his fishing kit.

"Wh-Why in the *hell* did you bring a fishing rod onto a battlefield?!" barked the first soldier. "I was *wondering* what that pole you were carrying was!"

"Oh, lighten up. I can fight just fine, even with my rod handy."

"That is *not* the issue, and if you ever bring that thing into battle again, I'm reporting you to Rietz!"

"Oh, you wouldn't! Come on, cut me some slack! I'll buy you a round next time we're at the pub, okay?"

Meanwhile, Charlotte had claimed the second soldier's fishing rod and wandered over to the river. She baited the hook, cast her line into the river, and waited for all of several minutes.

"Nothing's biting, and I'm bored again," said Charlotte.

"Umm, Charlotte?" said the second soldier. "It's only been a few minutes, you know? It takes a little longer than that to catch a fish, most of the time."

"And what, you're supposed to just sit around until then? How's that any different from doing nothing at all?"

"Well, I mean...that's sort of what fishing's all about, in a sense... It's all about the anticipation of it, I guess? Sitting there, knowing a fish could bite at any moment!"

"Well, that's boring and I'm done with it," Charlotte grumbled as she tossed the fishing pole away and started looking for some other way to kill time.

"Hey, uh...shouldn't you people be taking all of this a little more seriously? You know we're in real danger right now, don't you?" said a third soldier, who was trembling and looked just about ready to pass out.

"What danger?" asked Charlotte.

"I mean the enemy soldiers that are headed our way! We got a report about them, remember?"

"Oh, right. But they said they were sending us reinforcements too, so it'll be fine."

"Will it, though? Really?"

"Eh. It'll work out, one way or another," Charlotte said with an unconcerned air. She had never been one to let other people's worries get to her.

"Um, Charlotte?" said the third soldier. "You never seem to worry about anything, do you? Aren't you scared of dying?"

"Nah, not really," Charlotte replied offhand.

The soldiers were baffled. They were all courageous men in their own rights, but every one of them feared death. The idea of *not* being scared to die was hard to fathom.

"And, I mean, think about all the soldiers I've killed in battle so far," Charlotte continued. "I lost track of how many people I've killed ages ago. It'd be pretty pathetic for someone with a kill count like mine to be afraid of dying, wouldn't it?"

"I d-don't think that whether or not it's pathetic is the question at hand," said the third soldier.

"Oh? Well, I've always been a weirdo, so maybe it's just different for me," Charlotte said, then went back to looking for entertainment.

Just then, a shout rang out.

"Emergency! Enemy soldiers sighted!" yelled the party's scout, who'd gone out to do some reconnaissance.

"So they're here, eh? What about those reinforcements?" asked one of the soldiers.

"No sign of them so far," said the scout.

"Does that mean they're not going to make it in time?"

"It might!"

A pall came over the soldiers' faces. The situation had gone from bad to worse.

"Well, not like running away's an option. We'll just have to hold here and fight to the last," said Charlotte, as unconcerned as ever. Seeing her, the highestranking member of their party, act so calmly helped soothe the soldiers' nerves. "It'll be all right. We just have to wipe them out like we always do," she continued, trying to reassure them.

The enemy soldiers drew closer to Charlotte's party's position. They hadn't sent an especially large unit of troops, but Charlotte's group was small enough that there were still several enemy soldiers for every one of theirs. In a straight-up fight it wouldn't even be a contest.

Charlotte began preparing the small catalyzer she was carrying on her person. Her group had brought a large catalyzer with them as well, but it had already been filled with water-aspected aqua magia, and they couldn't afford to waste it in the oncoming skirmish.

The enemy soldiers arrived on the other side of the river, and Charlotte immediately cast a Fire Bullet spell, sending it flying toward them. The ball of flame met its mark, and burst within their ranks. It couldn't compare to the spells that she cast with a large catalyzer, but it was still an impressive explosion, and sent several dozen Seitzan soldiers flying.

Despite the carnage they'd just witnessed, the enemy soldiers' advance didn't falter. They waded into the river, one by one, which slowed them down and made them easy targets. Their numbers gradually thinned, but defeating all of them before they forded the river proved too much to ask, and a few managed to make it to the other side.

The soldiers that had been chosen to accompany Charlotte were capable warriors, and they managed to hold the enemy forces off at first, but as more and more of them made it to their side of the river, Charlotte's men were overwhelmed. Charlotte, meanwhile, couldn't use her magic as effectively after the melee broke out for fear of catching her allies in the blast. She was capable of limiting the power of her spells, but if her control slipped she could easily

hurt her allies, and she had to cast with the utmost caution.

"O-Okay, this might be pretty bad," Charlotte muttered. Not even she could deny the gravity of the situation.

Charlotte knew that at that particular moment, whether she lived or died wasn't *just* her problem. If she were to perish, then so would the army of Canarre's hopes of prevailing in the war. She didn't fear her own death, but she *did* fear the possibility that her death could put her lord and her friends in danger.

I have to do something, but how? I can't use my magic like this, Charlotte thought. Unfortunately, thinking had never been her strong suit and a way to break out of her predicament eluded her. She was starting to panic, and in her distraction, an enemy soldier drew close to her.

"Charlotte, look out!" cried one of Charlotte's men.

Charlotte chanted a spell at a breakneck pace and blew away the enemy who'd gotten close to her. It had all happened in the blink of an eye, and in her haste, Charlotte failed to dial back her spell's power as much as she should have and was caught in the blast. The force of the spell sent her flying, and while she was lucky enough to escape grave injury, her leg scraped across the ground when she landed and she found herself unable to stand. Meanwhile, her enemies drew closer and closer still. This, Charlotte realized, could be the end... or so she thought.

"Graaaaaah! Pick up the paaace!"

A bellowing voice rang out across the battlefield—Braham's. He had finally arrived with his reinforcements. Braham steered his horse into the crowd of enemy soldiers and swung his polearm with all his might, cutting down his foes.

Braham's usual weapon of choice was the sort of spear one would thrust with rather than swing, but when on horseback, he switched to a type of spear with a longer blade that was more suited to slashing attacks.

Many of the soldiers that had accompanied Braham were among the most skilled in the army of Canarre, and they quickly overwhelmed the Seitzan force. They were still technically outnumbered, but the gap in skill proved to be the more consequential difference. Charlotte's magic made an impact as well, and numerous enemy soldiers died wreathed in flames thanks to her spells. In the end, the attackers chose to turn tail and flee before they were wiped out. Charlotte had escaped mortal peril by a hair's breadth.

"Gra ha ha ha! We've won a great victory, all thanks to me!" Braham declared with an elated cackle.

"You're, uhh...Braham, right?" said Charlotte.

"That's right! Braham, the man who just saved your life!" Braham said, then let out a pathetic, squealing grunt as Charlotte kicked him, hard, directly in the groin. The blow caught him by surprise, and he crouched down in a pigeon-toed ball of suffering.

"That's for being so late. What the hell took you so long?" said Charlotte. She wasn't the sort of person who got angry often, but clearly, this was one of the rare exceptions to that rule.

"U-Uhh... I, umm...might've taken my time getting here, just a little... I mean, I thought 'eh, it's Charlotte, she'll be fine,' that's all," Braham wheezed. He was usually a man with a wealth of confidence and an attitude to match, but now he withered in the face of Charlotte's fury.

Charlotte sighed.

"Well, whatever. You saved us in the end, and you put up a good fight, so I'll let it slide."

"Th-Thank you very much," Braham replied reflexively.

"All right! We're out of the woods now, so this seems like a perfect time to take a rest," said Charlotte as she began to sit down and recover from what had turned into a mentally taxing battle. Just then, however, one of the other soldiers in her squad began to shout.

"Charlotte! We have a signal from the main army! They're saying you should cast your spell now!"

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Vasa Lupericol, one of the army of Seitz's commanding officers, blazed with fury as he coordinated his force's retreat. His direct superior, Boroths, hadn't deigned to set foot on the battlefield himself, and had appointed Vasa to lead the army in his stead.

None of this would have happened if it weren't for the damned fools in charge of our supplies! Vasa thought indignantly, and rightfully so. If it hadn't been for the blunder in the supply chain, and if their force had received the aqua magia they needed, the battle would have played out in an entirely different manner.

That was not, however, to say that Vasa was without fault. He had known that he didn't have the resources he needed, and if he'd ordered a retreat the moment he became aware of the aqua magia situation, he could have saved the lives of countless soldiers. A truly skilled leader would have chosen to fall back the instant that fact became clear.

We'll withdraw for now, regroup, and invade once more. I'm sure we'll bring Canarre to heel when we do...but will I be the one leading the army when that time comes? Have I wasted my one big chance to move up in the ranks?! Vasa fretted. He had left a contingent of soldiers to serve as a rearguard, engaging the enemy to buy time while the rest of the army fled. He'd left a slightly larger number of troops to handle the task than he felt he needed to, too, so it seemed very unlikely that the enemy army would break through his back lines and reach his own contingent. Even considering their foes' one-sided access to magic, Vasa believed that his retreat would succeed.

He was terribly, terribly wrong.

"What the blazes is that *sound*?" Vasa muttered as he neared the river. A strange noise in the background had given him pause, but he didn't have the time to worry about anything other than fleeing, and pressed onward.

It was only when the river came into view that the truth came to light, and Vasa's jaw dropped. The river was inundated. Its waters surged and roiled, and its current was strong enough that even at a glance, it was obviously uncrossable.

"I-Impossible. How could this be...? It hasn't even rained," said Vasa in dumbfounded shock. He even glanced up at the sky in his confusion, though of course it was still as bright and clear as ever.

It wasn't long before Vasa realized what had happened. His foes had sent a mysterious squad of troops upriver some time beforehand. Vasa had sent a small division of Seitzan troops to eliminate them, just for the sake of caution, but it seemed he hadn't been cautious enough.

That squad must have included a powerful mage, he thought. I'd bet this is the work of that woman—the monster who bathed the battlefield in flames, over

and over. Did she kill all the men I sent to stop her?

No spell's effects could last forever. The river would return to its normal state eventually, and if Seitz's rearguard could just hold out until then, Vasa knew there was still a chance he could escape. Once again, though, his hopes were betrayed.

"Canarre's army broke through our back line! They're coming!"

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Shortly after I sent the order for Charlotte to cast her water spell, Mireille, Rietz, and their soldiers in the vanguard broke through the enemy lines. Our foes had put up a harder fight than I'd expected and it had taken a fair chunk of time, but not long enough to put our plan at any risk of failure.

I gave the order for our whole force to corner the enemy soldiers. Charlotte's spell had gone off without a hitch, and the river was raging at a tremendous speed. Anyone brave enough to try jumping in would be swept away to their doom. I was reminded all over again of just how terribly powerful Charlotte's magic was.

The army of Seitz had clearly not foreseen any of this. They must have been in a state of total chaos, and wound up stopping dead in their tracks by the riverside. Their commander, it seemed, was not good at adapting to unexpected circumstances. Their troops weren't poorly trained by any means, according to Rietz and the others, and they were very good at raising and maintaining their soldiers' morale, so I had to assume that training and morale-boosting were their strengths, while adaptability was their one big weakness. I

wouldn't necessarily say it disqualified them from being a capable leader, but unless they had a talented second-in-command or tactician to advise them, I couldn't see a person like that doing a great job in the long term.

We spread our army out, pinning in the panicking remnants of the army of Seitz, then battered them with magic. They had nowhere left to run, and no choice but to take the spells we slung head on. I saw countless soldiers fall to our mages' blasts, and we still had plenty of aqua magia left to keep up the assault for as long as it took. The fact that Charlotte wasn't around still had me concerned, but even without her firepower on our side, the fact that the Seitzans were unable to magically defend themselves made our tactic astonishingly effective.

A few enemy soldiers threw caution to the wind and plunged into the river, only to be swept away. I couldn't see them making it out of that current alive. Others, meanwhile, made an attempt to mount a counterattack, but that was something we'd planned around.

This was the battle's most critical moment. Our enemy was more ready than ever to fight to the death, and nothing was more dangerous than a warrior who knew that they had to kill or be killed. Normally, our magic would intimidate our foes, but if those enemies knew that choosing to flee would mean death, then that wouldn't be in play.

A mage's one greatest weakness was that they couldn't allow their enemies to get close to them. That was why we stationed a line of soldiers in front of our mages—to keep the enemy away. Yet our foes fought with the crazed strength of dead men walking, and the men we'd sent forward to stand guard soon found themselves hard pressed to hold the line. They probably wouldn't have managed it, if it weren't for the individual efforts of some of my most trusted

retainers.

Rietz was the first to jump into the fray, hurling himself into the enemy's ranks and making short work of them with his masterful swordsmanship. As he cut his foes down, he let out a spirited battle cry, rousing the rest of my men to turn the tide. I felt uneasy watching him fight on the front lines like that, to be honest, and I wanted to order him to fall back to the safety of the rearguard immediately, but I couldn't deny that having him out there to support and encourage the vanguard was making a massive difference. I decided to believe in Rietz and his exemplary Valor, and watch on without interfering.

Rietz hadn't set out for the front lines alone. Zaht, who hadn't accompanied Braham on his mission, was out there as well, fighting by Rietz's side. His Valor was remarkably high as well, and he was doing an incredible job of supporting Rietz in battle. His fighting style wasn't flashy, but it was more than effective enough to make up for it.

Mireille, on the other hand, hadn't rushed out to the front lines. She was certainly strong, and she was an incredibly capable warrior for a woman, but she couldn't keep up with men like Rietz and wasn't capable of running wild in the thick of battle like he did. Instead, she stayed back and shouted, "I hope you miserable louts know what'll happen to you if you turn tail and run!" at our men.

I had no idea what she meant by that, but apparently our soldiers did, and they fought noticeably harder from that point onward. The boost of motivation put them on just about even footing with our foes, though I couldn't help but notice that our men looked downright terrified as they fought.

What on earth has Mireille been doing to those poor men during their training sessions...? I wondered. In any case, thanks to my retainers' efforts, our forces

managed to overcome our enemy's last-ditch attempt to fight their way out of the trap they were caught in. My belief that having the right people on your side made all the difference was reaffirmed once more. Since our foes were effectively surrounded, the troops at the center of their formation were left with no one to fight and nowhere to go, turned into living targets for our mages. The longer we kept this up, the more their numbers would dwindle.

As our soldiers held their ferocious attack back, Musia unleashed one of her spells. I'd heard that she would cast a spell that rivaled Charlotte's magic every once in a while, but I hadn't fully understood how destructive that meant she could be. The spell she'd cast landed squarely in the center of the enemy formation, where I'd expect their main force to be found, and for a moment I thought she might have taken out their commander in a single blow. As time went by and their formation didn't collapse I concluded that he must have been elsewhere after all, but her spell had still thinned their ranks by a fair margin.

Moments later, the effects of Charlotte's spell faded and the river began to return to its normal flow. The Seitzan forces hurried to ford the river and beat a retreat, once again leaving a contingent of soldiers behind to delay our pursuit. It seemed they intended to ensure that their commander and his division escaped, and they were even willing to sacrifice the rest of the army to make sure that happened. We tried to pursue after wiping out their rearguard, but unfortunately, their withdrawal was a success. We couldn't catch up in the end, but considering how many enemy soldiers we'd slain, we'd still accomplished our objective with flying colors.

After the fighting was over, I went to inspect the site of the battle up close. The corpses of innumerable enemy soldiers littered the ground in a scene that might as well have been drawn from the depths of hell itself. I could barely stand to look at it.

Hellish as the aftermath was, however, our military victory was overwhelming. After confirming the number of enemy soldiers who'd died and sending out scouts to see how many had escaped, we learned that we'd killed somewhere in the vicinity of forty thousand men over the course of the battle, leaving roughly thirty thousand remaining in their army. They'd lost about ten thousand in all our previous battles combined, but today four times that number had died, for a total of fifty thousand casualties over the course of their campaign.

Canarre, on the other hand, had gotten off somewhat lightly. We'd lost some men, yes, but our casualties amounted to only five thousand in total, leaving us with twenty-three thousand soldiers remaining.

"In other words, they still have a leg up in terms of numbers," I muttered. I'd thought that we'd claimed the advantage in this latest battle, but that judgment had been premature.

Is it too early to assume we've won this war...?

"They still have more men, yeah, but I doubt Seitz is going to attack us again," said Rosell. "The defending side of a battle holds an advantage, generally speaking, so defeating us with only seven thousand extra troops is tough. And that's not even starting on the fact that they lost fifty thousand of their men, and only killed five thousand of ours in the process! If they can swallow that truth, then there's no way they won't conclude that seizing Canarre will be impossible."

"That's exactly right," said Mireille. "And honestly, even if they did try to take another swing at us, we'd just have to treat 'em to another slaughter for their trouble. They don't have the numbers to overwhelm us anymore, so driving them off will be a cinch."

"Is there any chance of them replenishing their forces and attacking again?" I asked.

"We've got a decent enough picture of the state of Seitz's internal affairs, and they don't have the men to spare," said Mireille. "Even if they do manage to gather enough reinforcements somehow, I figure it'll take them a long time to pull it off. Couran'll have taken Vasmarque down by then for sure."

Judging by Rosell and Mireille's read on the situation, we were more or less out of the woods. Eighty thousand men wasn't *really* all that impressive of an army, when measured in terms of a duchy's standing force. As a matter of fact, Couran could mobilize a larger army himself, and he wasn't even in control of Arcantez, the capital of Missian and its largest source of troops. Seitz's duke had just taken his throne and the upheaval in his duchy had yet to fully die down, so it was no wonder he didn't have the sort of manpower his neighbors did. The invasion of Canarre had been a wild throw of the dice to begin with, and it was hard to imagine he'd be willing or able to spare any more resources on it.

We soon made our way back to Fort Coumeire. I was fairly convinced that the enemy wouldn't be taking another shot at us, but I wasn't ready to let my guard down quite yet, and intended to keep the border well protected. I was also planning on continuing to dig up as much information on the enemy as possible, and proceed with all due caution.

A number of months came and went without any sign of movement from the army of Seitz. Then, on the twentieth day of the fourth month, year 212 of the

Imperial Era, as fall set in, the news we'd been waiting for arrived.

"Lord Couran is victorious! Vasmarque's army has been repelled!"

And so, at long last, the forces of Canarre regained our peace of mind.



"I admit it. They got the better of us on every level," Boroths Heigand, commander of the army of Seitz, muttered to himself. News of Vasmarque's defeat had just arrived in Seitz. Boroths had been hard at work putting his army back together for another attempt at conquering Canarre, but with Vasmarque no longer on the offensive, he knew his chances of victory were low enough to be practically nonexistent. "Now the only question is what punishment I'll face for this miserable defeat..."

Boroths was well aware that after a loss this spectacular, there was little to no chance he'd be allowed to keep his current position. The knowledge that he'd betrayed his lord's expectations deeply wounded him. Canarre's clever schemes and stratagems certainly played a factor in their victory, but Boroths couldn't deny that his decision to leave the role of battlefield commander to his subordinates had contributed to the ultimate outcome of the war as well.

Boroths knew perfectly well that he wasn't cut out to lead from the front. He was *more* capable than your average battlefield commander, perhaps, but his true strengths lay in the development of strategies and the effective delegation of the army's most important tasks. Hence his decision to entrust command in the field to Vasa. Boroths had believed the man had what it took to lead his army to victory, but time had proven that he had been mistaken. He had thought that Raktor, the man he'd placed in charge of the army's supply logistics, was a reliable man as well, but instead he'd been caught up in an enemy scheme.

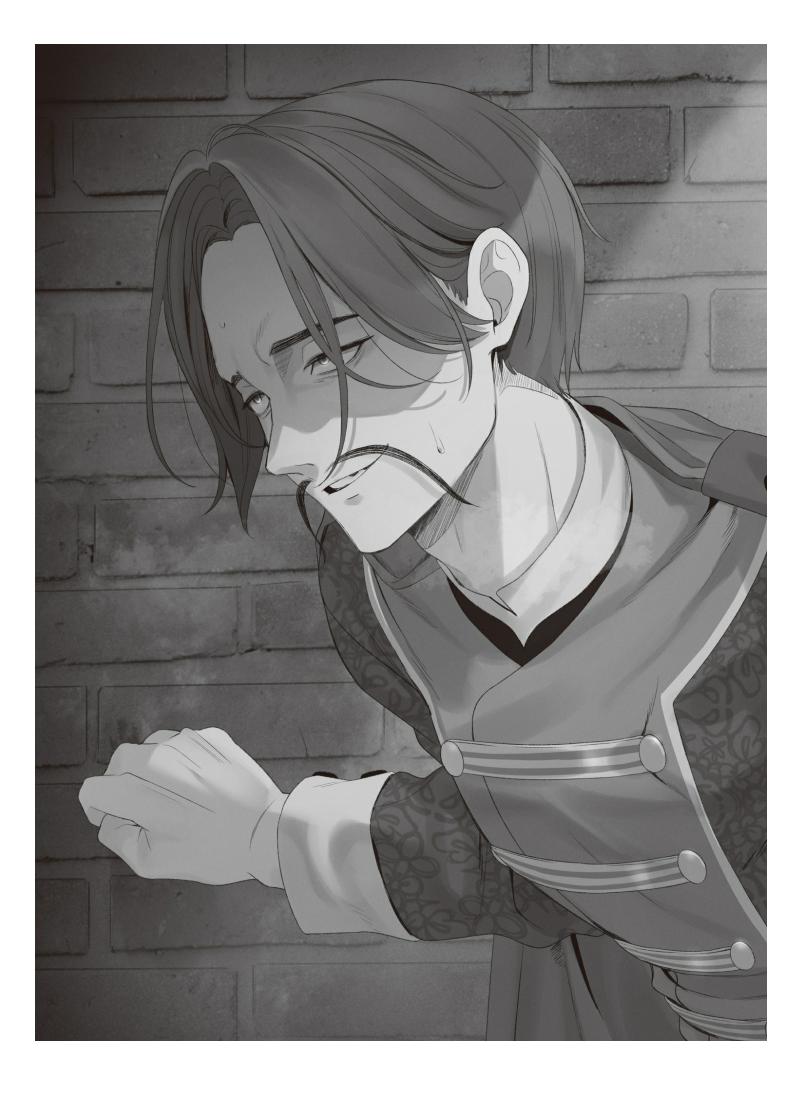
Vasa and Raktor were both men with ample accomplishments to their names. That was why Boroths felt he could trust them to do their jobs, and do them well. The truth, however, was that results rarely spoke for themselves. Sometimes luck could carry a man to high places, and his record could tell a very tall tale compared to his true abilities. People occasionally experienced moments where circumstance allowed them to perform far beyond their true potential for just a brief instant. Unfortunately, judging the precise strengths of the people around you was impossible...unless you happened to possess a truly exceptional ability.

In spite of all the blunders the army of Seitz committed, their sheer numbers should have been enough to overwhelm Canarre...and yet, they hadn't. Canarre's forces had flipped the war on its head, and Boroths knew that they would never have been able to do so if it weren't for the talent of the individuals in their upper ranks far exceeding that of those under Boroth's command.

"Ars Louvent. A dangerous man indeed," said Boroths.

It hadn't been long at all since Ars had ascended to the status of count. No matter how capable of picking out talent he was, it would take time for him to find those talented people and gather them to his side. And yet, even at this early moment in his career, he already had enough of them to open a gulf between him and his enemies. How much would that gulf widen in the future?

A sense of impending doom rushed over Boroths. The crisis that his master, the Duke of Seitz, had foreseen now felt all too real to him. It felt almost palpable.



I've lost this battle, yes, but that wasn't my only order. I will see Ars Louvent dead, no matter what it takes.

If Ars could not be made into Seitz's asset, he would have to die. Such were Boroths's orders, and the man no longer had the luxury to be picky about how he carried them out. He would stoop as low as it took...and so, Boroths resolved to employ the finest assassins he could find to engineer Ars's death.

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Some time after the news of Couran's victory arrived, reinforcements dispatched from his army showed up at Fort Coumeire. I'd informed him of the current state of the war, and it seemed he'd judged that we were no longer in need of a large host and had only sent a modest contingent.

While we were defending Canarre, Couran had been defending Velshdt. He'd repelled Vasmarque's assault, wiping out a hefty chunk of his army in the process, and had then pushed back, marching on Arcantez in a joint effort to besiege it with Paradille's army. It struck me as truly remarkable how quickly Couran had switched from defense to offense. He'd known that was his chance, and had acted upon it without hesitation. That judgment was part of what made him seem like such a capable leader to me.

I, however, would not participate in the siege of Arcantez. While Couran oversaw that front of the war, I was to stay behind in Canarre and keep a careful eye out for any movements from Seitz. Couran had ordered me to do so, explaining that another Seitzan attack would be a nuisance, and that we needed to be ready if that time came.

Time passed by, and there was no sign of Seitz resuming its attack. I didn't expect them to make another attempt, frankly, and while Canarre's nature as a border county meant that I'd never be able to abandon our watch over our neighbors, I did eventually let myself relax a little. I was tired of war on a personal level, and was grateful to have an opportunity to take it easy for once.

Vasmarque's defense of Arcantez was persistent, but at this late stage in the war there was simply no way for him to turn the tables. Couran had conquered all the castles and forts in the capital's vicinity, and Vasmarque had no allies left. He was trapped and isolated, and at the end of the day his struggle was in vain. Castle Arcantez finally fell to Couran on the fifteenth day of the sixth month, three months after Couran had repelled Vasmarque's attack on Velshdt. On that winter's day, Missian was united under Couran's banner.

A banquet celebrating the war's end was to be held in Castle Arcantez, and my presence was requested. I set off for the capital with an armed escort, among whom Rietz was not, in fact, present this time. We still couldn't afford to completely write off Seitz, so he and Charlotte had to stick around in Canarre just in case the unexpected occurred. Instead, I brought a troop of fifteen handpicked bodyguards, including Braham and Zaht. That would leave everyone back home with ample means to defend the county, and since Braham and Zaht were such capable fighters, they made for the perfect bodyguards.

A round trip to Arcantez from Canarre and back again took about thirty days by carriage. Our journey proved uneventful, and we arrived in Arcantez on the thirtieth of the sixth month. I'd never been to the capital before, and it was exactly as large as one would expect from the seat of the duchy. The symbol of the city, Castle Arcantez, loomed large over its surroundings...though of course, it wasn't quite as impressive in scale as the Emperor's palace in the imperial capital had been.

Arcantez was certainly impressive, but in terms of the town and its people, I had a feeling that Semplar had been a little livelier. Semplar was a port town, which made it a natural economic hub. Financially speaking, I wouldn't have been surprised if Semplar was better off than even the capital.

Before the festivities could commence, there was one matter left for Couran to take care of: the execution of Vasmarque, the cause of the civil war. I'd been convinced at first that Couran would never kill his own little brother, but I soon learned how naive I had been. Couran refused to make any exceptions for Vasmarque, and sentenced him to death. Family or not, he couldn't turn a blind eye to anyone who would raise arms against him...or perhaps it was *because* they were family that he couldn't afford to show mercy. Because of their shared blood, so long as Vasmarque lived he would always be in a position to take another stab at claiming the throne. Killing him was the only way to prevent that with certainty.

Vasmarque was to be beheaded—decapitated with a massive axe, specifically. That was standard practice for executions in this world. Some executions were carried out in more brutal ways to set an example—burning them at the stake or drawing and quartering them, for instance—but Couran wasn't cruel enough to sentence his own brother to such an agonizing death.

The execution took place in the plaza in front of Castle Arcantez. When I arrived, I was unsurprised to find that a massive crowd had gathered to watch Vasmarque meet his end. I'd gone back and forth on whether I wanted to watch, but had eventually decided that since I'd fought in the war against his faction, it would only be right for me to witness his final moments.

Moreover, I'd never actually seen Vasmarque in person, and wanted to get at least one look at his face. I wouldn't appraise him, though. I was curious about

Vasmarque's abilities, yes, but there was nothing to gain from learning how capable a man was moments before he was killed. All I'd get out of it would be regret, if he turned out to be exceptional—and from what I knew about him, I had a feeling that was likely the case.

Vasmarque was led up onto a scaffold at the center of the square. My first impression of him was that he didn't resemble Couran at all. His hair was black, and his features weren't quite as handsome as his brother's, either. I also noted that he didn't look at all afraid. It seemed, to my eyes, that he had accepted his fate.

Vasmarque took a deep breath, then shouted to the crowd around him.

"Mark my words!" he said. "A time will come when Missian will be divided once more! My death changes nothing! Couran has neither the right nor the ability to rule over any of you!"

To me, that just sounded like the braying of a sore loser. I knew for a fact that Couran was capable, and he struck me as an excellent leader. The idea that he didn't have the ability to rule just felt preposterous to me.

"I know him well-better than anyone! I know the petty, despicable fool who lurks behind the polite pretenses. There will come a day when his followers see what I have seen, and abandon him! I see it now, clear as day!"

Couran watched on from afar in silence. He wasn't flustered by his brother's words, and in fact, he didn't react at all. Either he didn't think anyone would take Vasmarque's shouting to heart, or his allegations were so far off the mark that Couran couldn't even bring himself to care. Whatever the case, it was clear that not a word that Vasmarque said resonated with him.

Couran raised a hand into the air, and in unison, the headsman raised his axe.

Then, Couran brought his hand down...and the axe descended, slicing clean through Vasmarque's neck. Blood scattered into the air as his head fell from the scaffold, coming to rest on the ground below.

And so, the curtain fell on the life of Vasmarque Salemakhia, second son of the former Duke of Missian.

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The banquet was held following Vasmarque's execution. Nobles arrived to celebrate in droves, some of whom I recognized.

"Oh! Well, if it isn't Ars!" a very familiar voice rang out. The former Count of Canarre and acting Count of Velshdt, Lumeire Pyres, approached me. "I'm told you've been doing splendid work, truly splendid! I see leaving Canarre in your hands was the right path indeed!" he said with a beaming smile and a flushed face that told me he'd already started drinking.

"And you, Lord Lumeire? How has Velshdt been treating you?" I asked.

"Velshdt? A fine place indeed, but so *large* compared to Canarre! I find myself overwhelmed at every turn by the scale of it all! But to be fair, all the boorish nobles who wouldn't give me the time of day when I ruled over Canarre practically hang on my every word now, so, yes, there are some upsides!"

Canarre was one of Missian's most remote counties, and it wasn't especially large, either. In these turbulent times the relative status of nobles was determined by the power they wielded, and the easiest measure of power was the number of soldiers one was ready to deploy at a moment's notice. It was only natural that ruling over a larger territory would elevate Lumeire's standing

in the eyes of his peers.

Soon, the banquet began in earnest. Couran stood before the assembled nobles and gave a speech, but I barely heard a word of it. Instead, I found Vasmarque's last words echoing through my mind once more.

One day, he claimed, Missian would be divided all over again. Couran had no brothers left, younger or older. His eldest son surely knew that all he had to do to inherit the territory was wait for his time to come, so unless Couran did something truly appalling to him, I couldn't imagine he would be inclined to start a revolt. I just couldn't see any practical risk of Missian fragmenting any time soon.

But why, then, had Vasmarque chosen to give his warning? I recalled him saying that Couran's followers would lose faith in him and abandon him. Did he mean that Missian would go the way of Seitz, with one of Couran's most capable vassals raising the banner of rebellion and splitting the duchy apart? Was that what he'd foreseen?

It wasn't unthinkable, but then again, I'd now seen all of Missian's counts in person, and I knew that none of them were as capable as Couran himself. The idea of a vassal less talented than him rising up and unseating Couran was, of course, ridiculous. It just wouldn't happen, and once again, I found myself concluding that Vasmarque had simply missed the mark.

"And above all others, I would acknowledge the Count of Canarre, Ars Louvent, for his many and mighty contributions to our cause! Step forward, Ars!"

While I was lost in thought, Couran called me out by name. I couldn't just ignore him, so I made my way to the front of the crowd and stood before the gathered nobles.

"Canarre was set upon by a mighty host of Seitzan soldiers," said Couran. "Had they achieved their aims and conquered the county, we may not have been able to bring Arcantez under our control. Eighty thousand men marched upon Canarre, and between Ars's men and the sparing few I could send to him, he had only thirty thousand with which to repel them. But repel them he did! Outnumbered by more than twofold, Ars stood strong and protected his realm! His is an achievement worthy of celebration!"

After an explanation like that, none of the nobles in the room could protest the treatment I was being given. Plenty of nobles had opposed the idea of granting a child the title of count, and I hoped that this would help quell their protests.

"Will you say a word, Ars?" Couran asked without warning.

I froze. I hadn't even begun to consider how I could address the hall, and when I failed to do so, a heavy silence fell. The atmosphere grew unbearable, and I knew I had to say *something*, even if it turned out to be painfully trite.

"Umm," I began. "Canarre was in real danger for quite some time, but in the end, we managed to prevail. I intend to continue devoting myself to Lord Couran's service and to the betterment of Missian as a whole."

It was far from a masterfully delivered speech, but at the very least it wasn't a complete flop with my audience. I got the sense that many of the nobles who'd previously had a rather poor image of me were now seeing me in a new light. The way they looked at me had changed. Defeating a superior foe, it seemed, was the sort of achievement that could change an aristocrat's mind.

"You have my thanks, Ars, and you will, of course, be well rewarded," said Couran, who ended up presenting me with a massive amount of gold coins. My coffers had been hurting lately, so I couldn't have been happier. Once again, no

one spoke up to object to my reward. They were too busy celebrating my accomplishment instead.

After the festivities concluded, we made our way back to Canarre. Then, on the eighth day of the eighth month—my fourteenth birthday—I would be formally wed to Licia.

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A wedding.

I'd dreamed of marriage in my previous life. Up until around the time I graduated from college, I'd held onto the baseless belief that I was sure to get married someday. Then, I went out into society, got a job, never met anyone I clicked with, and was a thirty-five year old bachelor before I knew it. I'd never even had a girlfriend, so getting married was a fantasy I hardly even dared to dream about anymore.

That was the life I led, and the life that was passed on to the new me, Ars Louvent...and so, never in my wildest dreams would I have imagined I'd get married at the age of fourteen. Upon reflection, I found myself thinking that fourteen was just a little too young for that sort of thing. I wasn't even half as old as I'd been when my previous life came to an end! I *could* technically sire offspring, I supposed, for whatever that was worth.

Those were among the thoughts that preoccupied me as I sat around in my tuxedo. The ceremony was scheduled to begin in about two hours, and I was well beyond the point of no return.

The marriage would be held in the great hall of Castle Canarre. Holding

weddings in churches wasn't traditional in this world, it seemed. I'd already gotten changed, and was standing by in my chambers. Licia was still changing into her dress—women's wedding attire was a lot more time-consuming to put on than men's, so I'd ended up with some time on my hands.

I was so nervous, I could hardly stand it. The actual ceremony shared some similarities with how they were conducted in my old world. The couple was expected to exchange vows and a kiss, for instance. The religious aspect of swearing your vows before God was missing, though, and instead you swore before a human witness. Nobles like me usually brought in a higher-ranking noble to play that role, and Lumeire would be mine. I'd asked him if he would be willing right after the celebration in Castle Arcantez had wrapped up, and he had readily accepted. Couran was a higher ranking noble as well, of course, but by such a wide margin that asking him to be my witness felt disrespectful.

After our witness finished his speech, we would exchange a kiss, and that was it. The bride and groom weren't expected to give speeches of their own, or anything like that, so in a certain sense my role in the ceremony was quick and easy. Still, for some reason, I couldn't suppress my anxiety.

Some time later, one of Castle Canarre's maids arrived to inform me that Licia had finished changing. In other words, the time had finally come. I would meet Licia by the entrance to the great hall, and we'd enter the chamber together, walking up to Lumeire. That was more or less all I'd have to do.

I stood up, took a deep breath, and set out.

I made my way to a waiting room near the great hall. A few minutes after I arrived, Licia stepped inside. She was wearing a pure white wedding dress, and was so strikingly beautiful I found myself at a loss for words. I just stared blankly

at her, which I soon realized was making her pretty nervous.

Crap, what am I doing? I need to man up and tell her what I'm thinking!

"You look stunning, Lady Licia," I said.

Licia beamed, her cheeks ever so slightly flushed.

"And you look dashing, Lord Ars," she replied, setting my heart aflutter.

The two of us walked into the hall together. A red carpet had been laid out to guide us to the front of the chamber, and as we proceeded along it, a band serenaded us with a soothing musical number. All sorts of people had come together to attend the ceremony, and my retainers, of course, were among them.

I glanced at each of them in sequence as I walked along. Rietz had broken down into tears the moment he saw me, and I could hear him muttering, "Oh, how you've grown, Lord Ars... I'm so proud," as I passed him. You'd almost think he was an old man, the way he was acting.

Charlotte, meanwhile...was eating. Musia was with her, and I had to imagine that Charlotte had been the one who'd suggested that this would be an appropriate time for a meal. Musia noticed us enter the hall and tugged at Charlotte's sleeve to get her attention, at least, but Charlotte was so focused on her food she didn't even notice.

Rosell was so nervous, his face was a corpse-like shade of white. That, I assumed, was because he was scheduled to read out a message to the two of us during the ceremony. Rietz would be reading his first, but Rosell would be right after, and he wasn't exactly used to public speaking. I couldn't blame him for freaking out a little.

Mireille was three shades to the wind and getting handsy with one of the

maids. That maid, upon closer inspection, was Pham, the leader of the Shadows. The maid outfit was just a disguise, and he was doing his best to deal with Mireille in a convincingly maid-like fashion, but I could tell how irritated he was behind the facade. I could only hope he didn't lose patience and beat Mireille to a pulp before the ceremony ended.

Braham was seated next to Zaht, quietly watching as we made our entrance. I was surprised to see a sizable lump on his head, when I looked a little closer, and imagined that he'd done something he shouldn't have and earned a scolding from Rietz.

Licia and I walked along the red carpet, eventually coming to a stop in front of Lumeire. The music cut off at the same instant, and for a moment, silence filled the hall. Even Charlotte's muttering about how good the food was and Mireille's incessant solicitations toward Pham ceased.

Finally, Lumeire's voice broke the silence.

"Ars Louvent. Licia Pleide. On this day, the two of you shall be joined in matrimony. Do you swear to stay together, in sickness and in health, until the end of your days?" he asked.

Our answer was obvious.

"I do!" Licia and I declared at the exact same moment.

"Then let your vow be sealed with a kiss," Lumeire urged.

I stepped up to Licia and gently pressed my lips to hers, lingering for a few seconds before I broke away.

"I, Lumeire Pyres, have witnessed your vows, and do hereby declare them binding and unbreakable!"

After our ceremonial kiss, we listened to the congratulatory speeches that

Rietz, Rosell, and the others had prepared. Couran hadn't come in person, but he'd sent me a letter expressing his congratulations to make up for it, and I was once again impressed by how thoughtful he could be.

Then, the ceremony more or less transitioned into a banquet. We ate, drank, and made merry to our hearts' content. We also had a few performances put on, and it soon felt like we were throwing a full-blown festival within the castle. I'd always imagined noble parties to be more elegant, refined affairs, but this celebration was anything but. I wasn't disappointed, though. Actually, I felt a lot more comfortable in this sort of atmosphere, and truly enjoyed myself.



"You should try this meat, Lord Ars! It's exquisite," said Licia, who seemed to be having just as good of a time as I was. "Oh, allow me to feed you! Say aah!" she added, holding a piece of meat out toward me with a fork.

Being fed like that was on the top three list of things I'd always wanted my girlfriend to do for me someday. Although, we were in a great hall, surrounded by people. Doing it here would be incredibly embarrassing...but still, I wasn't about to let the opportunity slip by. I tried to pick a moment when as few people were gaping at us as possible, then took the bite she'd offered me.

"What do you think?" asked Licia.

"I-It's delicious," I replied. It really was, though frankly, I was more taken with the act of being fed than I was with the meat itself.

"Well, aren't you two getting feisty," said Charlotte. I had no clue how long she'd been standing next to me.

"W-Were you watching that?" I asked.

"Every bit of it," she said with a smirk. I knew that face. It meant she was about to tease me mercilessly.

"Y-You really shouldn't disturb them," said Musia, bringing some muchneeded reason into the picture. Unfortunately, Charlotte just ignored her.

"All right! If that's how we're playing, I think I'll feed Lord Ars too!" Charlotte said, then jammed her fork into a slice of cake and brought it up toward my mouth.

"W-Wait a second," I stammered in dismay.

"Oh, Lady Charlotte? What, precisely, is the meaning of this?" asked Licia in a tone of voice that terrified me. I glanced back at her and found her smiling in

that very particular sort of way that made it clear she was not pleased.

"H-Ha ha ha, just kidding around!" Charlotte said with a forced laugh, then ate the piece of cake herself. Not even she was capable of resisting the silent pressure Licia could exude.

"I believe you would do well to turn her down more clearly, Lord Ars," Licia continued. "Whyever were you so flustered?"

Gah! Now it's my turn?! You're scaring me, Licia!

"I was going to tell her no, of course! It was just so sudden! I'm afraid I was too startled to reply clearly," I said.

"Oh, is that so? In other words, you hadn't even the slightest interest in eating her cake?"

"No, of course not!"

"Well, I'm glad to hear it!" said Licia, still smiling in the most intimidating manner possible. It was starting to dawn on me that she would be keeping a firm handle on the reins of this marriage.

After all of us finished eating, everyone presented me with gifts. It was my birthday, after all. I'd received a wide variety of presents every year, but the fact that this year's celebration doubled as my wedding led to me receiving even more valuable gifts than usual.

The festivities went on for hours on end, and finally came to a close after nightfall. I was exhausted, and fell asleep the moment I had the opportunity.

The next day I saw Lumeire and Hammond, Licia's father, off on their journeys home.

"I trust...no, I humbly request that you treat my daughter well, Count Louvent," said Hammond. I held authority over him, as things stood, and he was doing his best to speak with a deference that reflected that fact, which made me feel more than a little uncomfortable considering he was now my father-in-law.

"I swear to you that I will make Lady Licia happy," I replied, then turned to Lumeire. "Thank you again for traveling all this way, Lord Lumeire."

"Think nothing of it!" said Lumeire. "The two of us are compatriots, are we not? And I must say, for having just suffered a large-scale invasion, I'm astonished that Canarre itself seems all but untouched!" he added with a surprised smile. "I have faith that you will lead this county to growth and prosperity. Best of luck to you, Ars!"

"Thank you!"

With those parting words of encouragement, Lumeire and Hammond set off for their respective domains.

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The day passed by, and night fell. The day of my wedding had been so busy I'd fallen asleep the moment I had the opportunity, so I was a day late, in a sense... but the fact that I was married now meant that I had a certain responsibility to fulfill at nighttime. Licia and I, shall we say, had to spend our first night together.

I bathed myself, making sure to scrub every inch of skin as clean as possible, then returned to my bedroom. Licia hadn't arrived yet, but I knew it was only a matter of time. I sat down on the bed and fidgeted restlessly as I waited for her to turn up.

A-Are we really doing this tonight? Will I be able to manage it?

I never lost my virginity in my previous life, and it goes without saying I didn't have any experience in this one either. Suddenly, I felt myself starting to get cold feet.

I could always pretend to have already fallen asleep...? No, no, I'm not that much of a wimp, and I can't let myself disappoint her like that!

Before I managed to gather my resolve, a subdued knock rang out from the door. My heart was pounding so loudly, I could hear it.

"Lord Ars? It's me, Licia. May I enter?"

"Y-Y-Yes, go ahead!" I shouted back.

"Pardon me, then," said Licia as she opened the door and stepped inside. She was wearing a dressing gown, and her whole face was flushed red. She also took great pains to not look directly at me and fidgeted, which made it very clear how nervous she was.

I was a little surprised. I'd imagined her as the sort of girl who would always keep her cool, even at a time like this. Upon further consideration, though, it struck me that this would almost certainly be her first time too, so perhaps her nervousness was a given.

Licia stepped toward me, but it was a clumsy, faltering step. She was as stiff and awkward as could be, and it was so funny to watch, I couldn't stop myself from bursting out laughing. That made her blush even harder than before, her face as red as an apple. She sped up, rushing over to the bed and plopping down beside me.

"I-I can't believe you! Why would you *laugh* at me?" she said, her lips pursed in a sulky frown. She was cute when she was mad, and seeing her that way made me feel just a little less nervous.

"S-Sorry," I quickly replied. "I just thought it was odd for you to be so out of sorts."

"F-For your information, I *tried* to learn how to conduct myself in the bedroom, just so I could be prepared when the time came. I asked the oldest of the maids at our estate to teach me...but she claimed that the less I knew the more pleased the gentleman I wound up with would be, and told me nothing. I've reached this day without learning a thing...a-and if I'd known it would turn out this way, I would have insisted..."

I said a silent but emphatic word of thanks to the maid in question. If she were here, I would've tipped her a few gold coins on the spot.

"Your maid was right, actually. Deep down, all men would prefer to take the lead when it comes to these things."

"I-Is that so? But still, I am older than you..."

"Age has nothing to do with it. Plus, you're so adorable right now that I can hardly tell."

Once again, Licia's face turned a bright shade of red.

"O-Oh, don't tease me!" she said.

"I'm not! I mean it."

"O-Oh, you..."

"Ah, I know!" I said. "You haven't been taught about these things at all, right? So you have no idea what it entails?"

"U-Umm... Y-You take off your clothes...and embrace...?" Licia muttered bashfully.

It seemed her knowledge was surface-level, at best. It struck me that she couldn't be prepared for what we were about to do if she had no idea what we'd be doing, so I took a moment to give her a quick but detailed sex ed crash course.

"Y-You what?! S-So then, that means...y-you'll have to see and touch just about every inch of my body?!" Licia exclaimed with her brightest blush yet.

"W-Well, more or less, I guess," I replied.

"H-How utterly shameful! How could I...ah, but wait. Would that not mean that I would get to see and touch every inch of your body, too...? That...certainly has quite the appeal...ah! I-I didn't say anything!" Licia shouted as she shook her head, driving away the fantasies that had almost consumed her.

A few seconds of silence passed by. Finally, I steeled my nerves, laid a hand on her shoulder, and pulled her toward me. Before I knew it, we were face to face.

"Lord Ars," Licia said, then closed her eyes.

I leaned forward to kiss her, then gently laid her out on the bed.

"Lady Licia," I said as our lips parted.

"We're husband and wife now," said Licia. "I'd prefer if you'd cast aside the formalities and call me by my name. Speak to me casually, like you do with the others..."

She had a point. It felt strange to keep up the formal courtesy now that we

were married.

"V-Very well... I mean, all right, Licia," I said. Licia looked ecstatic the moment I said her name. "I'll ask the same of you," I continued. "Will you call me by my name alone?"

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"Huh?" Licia blinked. "But, I couldn't possibly..."
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"If you're willing, I'd like to think of you as my partner and my equal."

For a moment, Licia fell silent. Then, hesitantly...

"A-Ars..."

...she said my name.

"Licia..."

"Ars..."

We kept saying each other's names, over and over until they flowed naturally from our mouths. I knew this was the sort of behavior that would've made me wish a painful death upon all the happy couples of the world if I'd witnessed it back in my old life, but I couldn't bring myself to stop. Then, after we'd said each other's names time and time again, I kissed her—deeply this time, which was a first for me across both of my lifetimes.

And so, we whiled away the night in each other's passionate embrace.

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When I woke up the next morning, the first thing I saw was Licia's face. I was so startled I almost shot to my feet, but then the events of the night before

came back to me.

Oh. That's right...

I remembered now. Last night, I finally lost my virginity. I didn't recall how the experience had felt in any intricate detail, honestly, but I could say for a fact that the instant we were joined together was the single most joyful moment I'd experienced since I was reborn in this world.

For all the joy of that moment, though, I was *now* feeling an all-encompassing sense of sluggishness.

Oh, that's right, I thought as another detail came back to me: I'd wanted to go to bed after the first time, but Licia just wouldn't let me sleep. I didn't know if she'd just adapted to the idea at a record pace, or what, but she was so aggressive it was almost hard to believe she'd been so shy and innocent at the start, and she'd left me in a state of exhaustion. Licia, it seemed, had quite the libido.

"Mnh..."

As I thought back over the events of the night before, Licia's eyes fluttered open.

"Ah, Lord Ars... Wait, no...I mean, Ars... Good morning," she said with a smile.

"Good morning, Licia," I replied, then fell silent as my thoughts returned once again to the night before and I got embarrassed. We spent a moment just looking at each other...and then my gaze fell to her chest, which was exposed to view.

Licia followed my gaze, realized what I was looking at, and covered herself up in a fluster.

"I-I suppose it's a little late to be embarrassed by these things, considering

what we did last night," she said with a bashful smile. It would've felt awkward to lie around in the nude, so we quickly changed into our sleeping clothes.

"Does this mean I'll bear a child?" Licia wondered out loud as she stroked her midsection.

"No, I think the odds of that happening after just one time are pretty low," I replied.

"Is that so? Then we'll just have to do it as many times as it takes," said Licia. "Fortunately, you seem to have plenty of stamina! I'm sure it won't be any trouble."

"W-Well, if I wasn't embarrassed before, I sure would be now..."

"I'd like about twenty children or so, which means we'll certainly have to keep busy."

"Twenty?!"

Surely that's a few too many?!

"House Louvent has only recently risen to power, and lacks a broad and established bloodline! I believe having as many children as possible will be to our house's benefit, and I'm certain that any child of yours will prove to be exceptional in their own right!"

She wasn't wrong in the sense that I had very few blood relatives, and could do with more. Our children turning out exceptional, however, I was less convinced of. Licia was an outstandingly talented woman, yes, but I...well... I couldn't use my Appraisal skill to see my own stats, so I couldn't speak to my talents with any real certainty. Still, I couldn't imagine that my numbers were very impressive. And, regardless, twenty was just way too many kids!

"We'll have to strive to reach even greater heights, for our future children's

sake!" said Licia. "Our goal is to make you the Duke of Missian...no, the emperor of all of Summerforth! I know you'll be able to manage it, Ars! I'll be doing my utmost to aid you, all the way!"

Hearing her bombastic declaration made me realize that she really did have as high of an Ambition as my skill claimed.

"Let's talk about becoming a duke or an emperor another day, okay...? Right now, we need to focus on making Canarre as prosperous as we can," I said.

"Of course! That's what you'll be discussing at today's meeting, isn't it?"

Now that I was no longer busy, I'd decided to bring my most trusted retainers together and discuss the future of Canarre at once. The civil war was over, and Seitz had suffered such a crushing defeat that they were unlikely to attack again any time soon. This was a golden opportunity to focus inward and build up Canarre on the whole.

"I intend to participate in your meeting as well, by the way," said Licia.

"Of course. I'll be counting on you," I replied. I had a feeling she'd have helpful ideas to contribute, and had been hoping she'd join us.

As I got up and moved to change out of my nightclothes, Licia grabbed me by the hem of my shirt. She blushed as she looked up at me, clearly wanting something, and it only took me a moment to figure out what that something was and give her a kiss.

Apparently, I'd guessed right. The kiss lasted longer than I'd thought, and gradually grew more and more passionate. I'd felt so sluggish after getting up, but kissing her like that blew away my fatigue and roused my lower half before I knew it. There was no stopping us now. Licia and I got right back to our marital business first thing in the morning, and wound up arriving late to our meeting

as a result.

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By the time Licia and I arrived at the meeting, everyone else had already assembled. Rietz, Mireille, Rosell, Charlotte, and the rest of the usual crowd were all there.

"Sorry I'm late!" I said immediately, only for Mireille to smirk at me.

"Hard at work first thing in the morning, eh? Well, guess I can't blame you, mister newlywed," she teased.

Yup, we're busted. Was she watching us? Or was that just a really good quess?

"Producing an heir is a lord's responsibility. You should ignore her teasing, Your Lordship," said Rietz in a complete deadpan. The fact that I knew he was being totally serious made it more embarrassing than ever, and I felt myself begin to blush. I almost would've preferred him to tease me, though knowing Rietz, that would have been way too much to ask.

In any case, I wanted to get off this topic as quickly as possible and did my best to propose a new one and move the conversation along.

"Incidentally, Mireille, I've been told you've obtained a house in Canarre and have been living here, as of late. What about Lamberg? How are they going to get by without you?" I asked.

I'd entrusted the Barony of Lamberg to her in the hopes she'd take care of my old domain, but to my understanding, she'd been spending most of her time in

Canarre instead. That made her easier to summon for meetings like this one, but I also had to worry that Lamberg itself was being left ungoverned.

"Not an issue," said Mireille. "Lamberg's a stone's throw away from here, and I shoved all the petty beancounting onto my subordinates. It's all under control."

"You shoved it onto them? Really...?" I sighed.

"Yup, and if anything ever comes up that they can't handle on their own, I pop in to take care of it for them. Everyone wins!"

It was hard to imagine how she could be any less responsible, and I was starting to wonder if I could rest easy with Lamberg in her hands. I'd received reports that no serious problems had arisen in the barony—and, in fact, that it was flourishing—but I had no way of knowing if that meant that Mireille's style of management was surprisingly effective, or if she'd just gotten lucky so far. One way or another, I couldn't exactly strip away her title without a clear reason for doing so, and had no choice but to let her keep at it for the moment.

The conversation moved along, and we began discussing Canarre's immediate future. To start, the end of the civil war meant good things for our local economy. The counties that had sided with Vasmarque and the counties that had backed Couran had been operating in economic isolation from each other, and with lines of trade and commerce now renewed, all of Missian was experiencing an economic surge.

The flow of people across county lines had been boosted as well, and it went without saying that Canarre was reaping the benefits as much as everywhere else. I had a feeling that we'd be seeing an income spike very shortly, and having new people make their way into the county meant that I'd have better opportunities to bring new talent into my fold. I'd taken down the recruitment

signboards over the course of the war with Seitz, but now that it was over with, I'd had them put right back up again. That meant I was in for another round of day in and day out appraisal in the near future, but that was simply the price I had to pay. I'd also received a bounty of gold from Couran for my service in the war, and I was planning on using that to fund Shin's airship project.

With Vasmarque's demise, many of the nobles who had sided with him had been either exiled or executed, leaving a large number of territories in need of new management. I wasn't given any new territory this time, though. I presumed that Couran knew that the more territory—and, by extension, influence—I was given all at once, the more other lords would oppose me as a result. I'd have to take things slow and steady.

Since Couran would be ruling over Arcantez as the duke, his old county, Semplar, would be given to his son, Rengue, of all people. I'd met him before, and frankly, he struck me as more or less incompetent, so I was rather worried about his ability to keep the county under control. He'd apparently be given an advisor, at least, so that was something. In any case, I suspected that Couran had been extra generous with his financial reward to make up for the fact that I wasn't given any new territory. I was fairly certain that this sort of money would be plenty to let Shin build his airship.

Aside from investing in Shin's project, my retainers also proposed pouring money into developing our local mines, sponsoring local craftsmen who made catalyzers and the like, and a variety of other potential opportunities. We didn't have the funding to take on all of them, so we had to be a little choosy. Sponsoring craftsmen felt like an easy project to lead to success, since I could choose individuals that my skill identified as having a high Weaponry aptitude. Canarre wasn't blessed with an abundance of natural resources, so selling manmade products had the potential to boost our economy far more efficiently

than trying to bolster our ability to harvest raw materials, and in the end, I decided to lean in that direction.

With the matter of our funds settled, we moved on to the next topic at hand: our military. There weren't any wars looming on the immediate horizon, but that didn't mean we could afford to lower our guard.

"I could really do with some more mages," Charlotte said, echoing the sentiment she'd expressed the last time we talked about this. "Oh, and make them cute girls like Musia, if you can. Makes training 'em feel worth the effort."

It seemed that Charlotte had taken quite the liking to Musia, and was hoping to strike gold twice and find another woman just like her. I was in agreement, mostly, and certainly wanted to bring in more mages, but they just weren't as easy to find as she was making them out to be.

"Speaking of our mages, I have an idea," said Rosell. "Why don't we put some time into training a magical cavalry unit?"

Magical cavalry was a fairly self-explanatory term that referred to mages that ride into battle on horseback. They would typically intermingle with traditional cavalry, using their spells to aid in their charges. The idea of a dedicated unit of magical cavalry, though, was less typical, and I wasn't certain what Rosell meant by it.

"I was picturing a unit made up entirely of magical cavalry—a few hundred to a thousand of them, or so," Rosell explained. "As far as I know, no military's ever established a unit like that since finding people with the ability to ride *and* cast isn't easy. With your power, though, I think it might just be possible."

"And would it be worth it? Just how much of an impact would a unit like that have on the battlefield?" I asked.

"Oh, I can think of all sorts of ways we could use them! We could have them slip around enemy formations to blast them with magic from behind, or move them to quickly guard our troops from magical attack when we're caught by surprise. They'd be a unit capable of both offense and defense, and they'd have the mobility needed to do it all at once! The only downside's that magical cavalry can only use small catalyzers, so in terms of pure power they'd lose out against a traditional mage."

Rosell was making a very compelling case. It sounded like the unit he was proposing would make a massive difference in battle. That said, no matter how much I used and abused my skill, I didn't imagine that finding the people for a unit like that would be easy. I figured that magical cavalry would need at least a B-ranked Aptitude as a Mage and as Cavalry, and I'd already been having enough trouble just finding plain old mages. This was not going to be a simple project.

"Hey, can I get a word in?" said Mireille. "I've been curious—you heard anything about my little brother, Thomas? Any idea what he's been up to lately?"

I knew that Thomas had been captured, of course, but that was the last news I'd received of him.

"Do you know anything, Rietz?" I asked.

"Thomas Grunzeon has been transferred to a prison in Arcantez, supposedly. He shows no inclination to serve Lord Couran, as of yet," Rietz immediately replied. He'd always had a keen ear for that sort of information.

Thomas is still rotting in prison, then. Guess that's no surprise.

He'd been devoted to Vasmarque, who Couran, in turn, had put to death.

There was no way Thomas would turn around and serve Couran after that. I assumed he'd either live out the rest of his life in jail, or otherwise be executed himself.

"It doesn't have to be right now or anything, but I was hoping I could go meet him and bring him back here with me," said Mireille.

"You want to bring Thomas here?" I asked.

"Yup," said Mireille with a nod. She seemed confident enough that I had to assume she had a plan to make it happen. "You got a good look at him, right? I bet you could tell he'd be pretty useful."

I thought back to Thomas's status screen. I didn't remember any specific numbers, but I was pretty sure that he'd had multiple stats in the nineties. He was a capable man, all right, no question about it.

"Yes, he would," I agreed.

"Then bringing him onto the team wouldn't be an issue, right?" Mireille pressed.

"I mean...not in and of itself, but would he even agree to that? I know you're his sister and all, but I was under the impression the two of you weren't on good terms."

"Yeah, nah, he probably hates my guts. No matter how much he can't stand me, though, he's still my little brother. I'll make him play along, one way or another," Mireille said with a terrifying sneer. I didn't know much about their relationship, but I gathered it was a complicated one.

In any case, I had no objections to recruiting Thomas, so I gave her a nod.

"All right, then. Just let me know when you decide you'll be going out to persuade him. I'll dispatch a letter to Lord Couran when you do."

"You got it," said Mireille.

Next, we moved on to discussing how we could forge stronger relationships with our surrounding counties. Seitz still loomed on our western border, and considering the scale of the war we'd just had with them, we wouldn't be making true peace any time soon. They seemed obsessed with taking control of Canarre, and I couldn't see any path toward reconciliation aside from giving them what they wanted and joining them, which I had no interest in doing.

Unless something major and unexpected shook the situation up, it seemed safe to assume our relationship with Seitz would not be improving in the near future. The other counties of Missian, however, posed an opportunity to build up some positive relationships, and we decided to proactively work toward that end.

The largest and most powerful counties in Missian were Arcantez, Velshdt, Maasa, and Semplar. Arcantez and Semplar stood out as exceptionally powerful among those four, being the capital and a coastal economic powerhouse, respectively. Couran ruled over Arcantez now, and his son Rengue controlled Semplar. I already had a fairly amicable relationship established with Couran, and while Rengue didn't have any particular fondness for me, his father's influence over him meant that I had no reason to build up a friendship with him so long as Couran was on my side.

That, however, would only be true as long as the status quo remained unchanged. When Couran eventually passed away, Rengue would likely become the new Duke of Missian. I was also closer to Rengue's age than I was Couran's, so my relationship with him would likely be a longer lasting one than my relationship with his father. From a long-term perspective, getting in Rengue's good graces was for the best. He was a simpleminded man, at least, so I didn't

imagine that earning his trust would be all that challenging.

Velshdt was ruled over by Lumeire, who I had a strong and long-standing relationship with already. The Count of Maasa, in contrast, I'd barely even met, so it went without saying I didn't have a relationship with him yet. Maasa was fairly close to Canarre, so if I managed to establish a line of contact, it could prove helpful for both trade and military purposes. Reaching out to him felt like it would have a lot of merits.

"What exactly should we do to establish a friendship with Maasa, though?" I asked.

"You could invite their count to a party, to start," suggested Licia. "Attending a party that he throws could be a good opportunity as well! You could also send him gifts, or get in the good graces of his allies to draw closer to him indirectly. The most certain method would be to forge a familial bond through marriage, but that may be difficult in your case."

I was already married to Licia, and my siblings were both too young for their marriages to be on the table. As for the Count of Maasa, I didn't know who was in his circle of friends and allies, but I had to assume that Lumeire had some degree of acquaintance with the man. Couran likely would as well, considering the Count of Maasa had sided with him from the very beginning of the war. It was hard to imagine he'd do that if they weren't on good terms.

The question, then, was how to broach the subject. Sending them a letter saying "I want to make friends with the Count of Maasa, will you help me?" felt like it'd be something of a breach of etiquette. I figured my best bet would be to attend any parties that Lumeire or Couran held, approach the Count of Maasa there, and start sending him gifts to express my desire to build a friendship with him.

I didn't have any evidence to back my assumption up, but I had a hunch that the Count of Maasa would be interested in figuring out my intentions in much the same way I wanted to ascertain his. I'd climbed the social ladder and gathered immense power in Missian at a breakneck pace, and I had to assume that had garnered me a fair deal of attention, especially considering my age. There was no guarantee that attention would be positive, of course. He might be wary of the possibility I could act against him, for all I knew, but as long as I had his attention, I figured that would give me the chance to forge a relationship.

Gathering as much information as possible was also an important aspect of diplomacy, so I sent the Shadows out to learn as much as they could about all of Missian's counts. That sort of information-gathering was easy work, by their standards, so I had confidence they'd do an excellent job.

With that, our meeting came to a close. For the time being, my primary occupation would be searching for new talent, though if a party was ever scheduled I'd have to make time to attend it. I also wanted to get Shin's airship project moving along as soon as possible, so that very same day I sent him a letter requesting his presence at the castle.

A few days later, Shin arrived at Castle Canarre.

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"Is it true?! You got the money?!" Shin asked the moment he saw me, his eyes shining with excitement. I could instantly tell just how eagerly he'd been awaiting his funding.

"I was rewarded for my service in the war, so yes, I did," I replied.

"Hot damn! I'm startin' to think you might be some sorta bigshot, Lord Ars!" said Shin in a very impressed tone. "Before you hand over the cash, though, mind taking a look at the fruits of my research so far?"



"Should I take that to mean said research is proceeding smoothly?" I asked.

"You already handed over a third of the money I needed, and I've been putting it to good use! I have a feeling that once you've seen what I've managed so far, you'll feel like giving me an even bigger budget," said Shin.

It seemed, then, that he was fishing for additional funding. Shin didn't seem to have any interest in anything other than airship development, so I wasn't worried about him wasting whatever funds I gave him and was open to the possibility of boosting his budget a little. I hadn't blocked out all of the money I'd received from Couran for him, either, so I had a little flexibility in that regard.

Couran had rewarded me with nine hundred gold coins this time around. It was an outrageous amount of money, and proved once again how generous of a man I was serving. Shin, meanwhile, had estimated that he'd need a thousand gold to build his airship. Considering the amount I'd already paid him, giving him the full sum of Couran's reward would put his total funding over that estimate, but that wasn't necessarily an issue. I had the money the county had collected in taxes to work with as part of my budget, so I had a little breathing room to use Couran's reward to bump Shin's funding up if I felt the need.

"All right, then," I said. "I can't promise I'll increase your budget, but if you've made progress, I'd certainly like to see it."

"That's right—you can decide if you wanna hand over the coin after you've seen what I've done! Let's get a move on!"

Shin led me off to see the fruits of his research. Rietz, Rosell, and Licia all came with, and Charlotte tagged along as well because it "sounded like fun," dragging Musia with her. We followed Shin to a grassy field outside of town, where a few people were already at work preparing the demonstration, which

seemed like it would center around what looked like a small sailboat.

"Is that...?" I questioned.

"A miniature airship," Shin confirmed. "Had 'em start setting it up the moment I got your letter. Doin' all the work on my own would've been tough, so I used the first batch of coin you gave me to hire on a few extra hands."

"Does it fly, then?" I asked.

"Sure does," Shin said without hesitation. "It's a puny li'l thing, though, so there's not gonna be much use for it. My goal's to make a proper, full-sized airship, in the long run."

I could see plenty of uses for an airship, from trade to warfare and everything in between, but a ship that small *would* probably be pretty limited in use, like he said. I could still see some applications, though. I didn't know how high of an altitude it could reach, but if it was high enough it could be quite the resource to have in a war.

Shin stepped onto the airship. Apparently, he was planning on flying it himself. If that thing crashed he'd either die outright or at least sustain terrible injuries, so I took the decision to mean that he was very confident it would remain airborne. Shin started fiddling with some sort of controls on the ship's deck, and a moment later, it gently floated off the ground. It didn't stay merely floating for long, however—within moments it was soaring through the air.

I just stood there and gaped as I watched it go. Rietz was just as awestruck, and seemed speechless, while I heard Licia mutter, "Th-That's incredible," from beside me. Rosell was muttering too, though *he* seemed to be attempting to work out the scientific principles that allowed it to fly.

"Okay, I've gotta ride that thing! Come on, Musia, let's give it a go!" said

Charlotte with a look of pure excitement in her eyes.

"B-But that sounds terrifying! How can you be sure it won't crash?" asked Musia, who looked just plain scared.

I was astonished. It really *could* fly after all. I'd always known that Shin had talent, thanks to my Appraisal skill, but that didn't make seeing a functional airship with my own eyes any less shocking. It wasn't very fast, and it wasn't all that high up in the air, but it was still flying, and that was a major step forward in its own right. It was still a work in progress, after all—speed and altitude could come later.

Shin guided his ship back down to the ground, jumped off, and sprinted back over to us.

"How'd you like *that*?!" he shouted. His whole body practically exuded an aura of triumphant smugness.

"How in the world did you make it fly like that?" asked Rosell.

Shin launched into an explanation. The better part of it sailed right over my head, to be honest, but the long and short of it was that wind-aspected magistones were doing the bulk of the heavy lifting. They were a relatively popular variety of magistone, and while they were available in abundance in northern Summerforth, virtually none could be found in Missian. Wind magic was less useful in battle than fire magic and getting ahold of large numbers of the appropriate magistones was a challenge, so it wasn't used much in Missian at all.

According to Shin, he'd used a custom-made piece of machinery to draw out the power of the magistones and convert it into a source of buoyancy. Significantly, he didn't have to synthesize aqua magia for that part—he just used the magistones as-is. The theories he was operating off of were rather different from those that drove spellcasting, but they were similar at least in the sense that they both drew out the power of magistones and put it to practical use. It was starting to dawn on me, incidentally, that it would be a good idea for me to study up on magical theory a little more in the future.

Once the ship was floating, Shin used another machine that drew out the power of wind-aspected aqua magia to make it move. The fact that it used magistones to make the ship float and aqua magia to propel it struck me as unnecessarily convoluted, frankly.

"Did you invent all of those machines yourself?" I asked.

"I'd *like* to say that they're all my work, from start to finish...but nah, I got the idea from the theories of a preeminent magical researcher who used to live in the capital. We use catalyzers to cast magic, and we can use magic of all sorts of different aspects with them, but apparently that's not efficient. According to that researcher, if we used catalyzers specialized for particular aspects of magic, we could trade the ability to use any sort of aqua magia in exchange for using way less aqua magia with each cast, and upping the sorts of single-aspect spells we could cast as well."

Rietz's eyes lit up when Shin mentioned the magical researcher.

"Oh, I'm familiar with him as well! You're talking about the theories of Hyness Brown, aren't you?"

"Yeah, Hyness! That's the guy. How'd you know about him, though? He got chased outta the capital before his theory could really pick up steam."

"Huh? He was?" said Rietz. "I just read about him in a book, that's all. Why was he chased away?"

"Cause he was a real freak."

They ran him out of the capital for being a weirdo? Just how much of a freak does someone have to be to earn that sort of treatment...?

If this Hyness's theories were what made Shin's ship fly, though, it stood to reason that they were correct. Part of me wished he'd wander into Canarre so I could recruit him, but that was too much of a coincidence for me to hope for.

"I'll be working on a way bigger ship next," said Shin. "The more funding I get, the quicker I'll be able to get it done. Whaddya think?"

I took a moment to confer with Rietz.

"What do you say? Should we boost his budget?" I asked.

"I don't see the harm," said Rietz. "His research is unquestionably worthwhile, so it seems like a good idea to me."

"Yeah, that's what I was thinking too," I said, then made my decision. "All right! I'll see to it that some extra funding is sent your way."

"Sweet, thanks! We'll have this sucker done for you in no time flat!"

It seemed I could anticipate having a functional airship at my disposal sooner rather than later.

Afterword

Thank you very much for purchasing volume four of this series! This is Miraijin A, speaking!

I made a big change this past year: I moved from way out in the countryside to the big city! The change in environment was a lot to deal with, at first, but I've been growing used to my new surroundings. Living in the city's convenient in all sorts of ways, but since all my hobbies are pretty indoorsy, I've barely been getting out at all (lol). Still, I've been enjoying how many places there are to choose from whenever I decide to go out and eat something nice. I can go to all sorts of events and concerts with ease now, too, so I often find myself thinking how glad I am to live here. The pricey rent's a big downside, though!

Anyway, that's enough about me—let's move on to volume four. Once again, this volume centers around a war. It also brings the story of the war in Missian to a close. I was planning on having that plot arc last for around two volumes or so, so it ending in this one puts it right on schedule. The civil war may be over, but that doesn't mean Missian's internal conflicts are done just yet—this story's still in its opening stages! Still, it's relieving to know that I've written all the way through to the end of that first conflict.

Since I was depicting battles fought in another world, full of magic and whatnot, I tried to make them a little flashy. I hope you enjoy the way I depicted them! *Reincarnated Aristocrat* is also receiving a manga adaptation, and speaking as the story's creator, I can't wait to see how the manga depicts volume four's battles. This volume also includes Licia and Ars's first night together, and since I'm not used to writing scenes of that nature, working on it was a very fresh experience.

In volume five, I'm planning on writing about Ars's efforts to find new retainers, and about the growth of the retainers he's already recruited. It will probably be a rather laid-back volume with a very different tone than volumes three and four ended up having. I believe that the search for and development of talent is what makes *Reincarnated Aristocrat* compelling on a fundamental level, and I'm leaning toward going all-in on that aspect! I also know that there are elements of the setting that I haven't clearly explained to my readers, and I'm hoping to slowly but surely fill those in as well.

With all that said, I hope to see you again in volume five! Thank you very much for continuing to read *As a Reincarnated Aristocrat, I'll Use My Appraisal Skill to Rise in the World*!

Author

Miraijin A

Thank you very much for purchasing the fourth volume of this series! This volume features the continuation of the war that the previous volume kicked off. I hope you enjoy it! Between moving and all sorts of other events this year, I've been very busy, but I'll keep writing to the best of my ability! Please look forward to the next volume, and onward!

Illust.

jimmy

I'm the illustrator, jimmy! It's been a while since I got to draw Ars and friends, so it was nice to get back to them! I hope you enjoy the book!

As a Reincarnated Aristocrat, I'll Use My Appraisal Skill to Rise in the World 4

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