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4



The
Reincarnated Prince
and the
Hero of Light

The Epic Tale of the Reincarnated Prince Herscherik



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Prologue: The Principality, the Secret Letter, and the Coming Storm

On the continent of Grandinal, which was unified long ago at the hands of the hero Ferris, there now existed a multitude of countries. Of particular note were the four largest countries on the continent, each located in one of the four cardinal directions.

To the south was the Lustian Confederation, a union of smaller nations inhabited by beastmen and demihumans.

To the east was the military nation of Felvolk. Valuing aggression and meritocracy, it had a history of invading its neighbors and expanding its borders with military force.

To the west lay the Atrad Empire, an autocratic power led by an emperor, and the second oldest country on the continent. The empire had long been plagued by internal conflict, as different factions of nobles attempted to seize power for themselves—but some years earlier the old emperor had passed away, and the new, younger emperor had demonstrated his political prowess by suppressing all dissent.

Finally, there was the northern kingdom of Gracis, the largest and most ancient country on the continent, which possessed a military strength befitting its size. However, in recent years it had started to see its reputation take a turn for the worse. Having grown complacent from a long period of peace, the kingdom had begun to rot from the inside. Between the tyrannical nobility, corrupt officials, and a king powerless to stop either, the people were suffering. What had once been the most prosperous kingdom on the continent was at risk of being dethroned, mocked by its neighboring countries as “The Kingdom in Woe.”

In a room located in the royal castle of the capital, four people were gathered. The room was completely blocked off from the outside, and a magical barrier

further protected the room so as to ensure that no information could be leaked. Shining through a window, the setting sun lit up the faces of a butler, a knight, and a Spellcaster, along with their master. The butler was furrowing his brow, while the knight repeatedly clasped and released the hilt of the sword hanging from his waist with a worried expression. The Spellcaster was sitting on a sofa, his face seemingly impassive, although those close to him would have said that he looked stern.

The Spellcaster was the first to speak.

“Why do you always have to be the one to put yourself in danger, Hersch?” he said, speaking what was on everyone’s minds. Three different gazes were directed at their master, who was also perched on a sofa, but he shook his head.

“I’ll keep doing it. I have to,” the master replied, after which the room fell quiet again. The first person to fold was the knight.

“When he sets his mind on something, there’s no stopping him. There’s no use arguing,” the knight said, letting out a sigh. The Spellcaster glared at his master, as if trying to stare a hole through him, before opening his mouth.

“I can’t accept that.” Being the newest of the three, the Spellcaster failed to comprehend why his master would throw himself headfirst into danger. However, it was not his master who spoke up against him.

“If this is what Hersch wishes, then our opinion has no bearing on the matter,” said the butler, the annoyed expression never leaving his face. Having served his master the longest of them all, he knew full well how stubborn the little prince was, and how impossible it was to change his mind.

“You always give Hersch a piece of your mind at every opportunity you can get, yet you won’t stop him when it actually matters?” the Spellcaster said in a mocking tone, at which the butler’s brows twitched. His dark red eyes glared at him coldly.

“Shut it, magic maniac.”

“Watch it, or I’ll burn you to a crisp,” the mage snapped back, almost bursting a blood vessel as he stared the butler down.

Tired of his coworkers arguing, the knight who was standing between them shrugged his shoulders in frustration.

“Will you two stop bickering over my head? Honestly.” The last time he had tried to stop the two from fighting, it hadn’t ended well for him. Since then, the knight had tried to make sure that they at least didn’t cause any trouble for any bystanders, but otherwise left them be.

The butler shifted his gaze from the Spellcaster to his master.

“Still, the magic nut has a point. It would be better if I—”

“No,” his master cut him short, then continued in a stern tone. “You can’t do that. Then everything would be for naught.”

He closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them to look at his men of service. “Thank you for worrying about me. But I’ll be just fine—as long as I have all of you.” He flashed them his usual innocent smile. His men of service couldn’t bring themselves to say anything in response to that. It was clear as day just how much faith he placed in his men.

“Lend me your strength.”

His men of service nodded in response.

At a later point in time, and in a different place, a different scene was unfolding in the office of the Principality’s parliamentary head.

The Principality of Parche was a maritime nation, with the sea to the west and north, and Gracis Kingdom and the Atrad Empire to the east and south, respectively. With Grand Duke Parche as its head of state, its parliament was split into two houses: the House of Peers, controlled by the nobility, and the House of Representatives, which represented the common people. The nobility and the people had long walked hand in hand, usually cooperating, sometimes quarreling, but always working for the common good of the country. Grand Duke Parche was less of a ruler and more of a speaker for the parliament, mediating between the two houses in an attempt to find common ground.

The Principality excelled in trade and diplomacy, and had so far managed to escape the grasp of both the neighboring kingdom and empire while

maintaining a favorable relationship with both. The current grand duke was an elderly man, soon to turn seventy.

The grand duke finished reading the two letters placed on the table before him, letting out a groan as he scratched his beard. By his side, the chairwoman of the House of Peers, a bespectacled young woman, as well as the chairman of the House of Representatives, a man in his prime, made similar expressions as they stared intently at the letters.

“Now then... What do we do?”

“Do we really have much of a choice...?” the chairwoman of the House of Peers asked, nervously adjusting her glasses as she picked up one of the two letters. This one was a secret correspondence that had been enclosed with a letter from the grand duke’s daughter, who had been married off to Gracis. “If we simply do as it says, they will be in our debt. Regardless of how matters turn out, there is little risk in it for our country.”

“Now this is fascinating,” the chairman of the House of Representatives interjected. He was a man of the sea—unshaven, tan, and sturdy. Wearing finely-tailored clothes in a disheveled manner, he stood out from the others in the parliament, but he himself didn’t spare a second thought for any of that. He took up the second letter, still sitting on the table. “All of our negotiations have been public so far, with no backdoor dealings to speak of, so this is a first. How very fascinating indeed.”

He smiled, seeming almost like a mischievous boy despite his age. The woman frowned at the sight, but quickly readjusted her glasses as if to hide her expression.

“I do not think it matters whether the dealings between two states are *fascinating* or not,” the woman coldly replied, to which the man smiled suggestively.

“Now, now, even you can tell that this is fascinating in all sorts of ways, can’t you?” the man said, waving the letter in the air a few times before placing it back down on the table. “A storm is coming for Gracis.”

The man smiled cheerfully, as if to show just how confident he was, while the woman averted her gaze. She was well aware that, in spite of the man’s

facetious attitude, he did have a point. The matter at hand would greatly affect the relationship between their own country and the kingdom going forward. After a moment, the woman turned to the grand duke.

“Your Grace, how shall we proceed? This is not a matter for the parliament...” the woman said, implying that the matter had to be kept behind closed doors. The grand duke furrowed his brow, and after a moment of silence, he opened his mouth and informed them of his decision.

“Are you sure, Your Grace? This is more or less a gamble. I thought you weren’t very fond of gambling,” the man asked, amused. In response, the grand duke furrowed his brow even deeper and nodded.

Chapter One: Sunrays of Spring, the Undeclared General, and the Duty of the Royals

The markets overflowed with goods, the castle town was bustling, and the laughs of children could be heard throughout the streets—as one might expect from the largest country on the continent as it welcomed the spring. However, beneath this superficial veneer of peace, a worrying shadow lurked.

On a mezzanine in a library lit up by the gentle spring sunlight, a young child occupied the sunniest seat of the floor. His blonde hair, seemingly woven from the very rays of the sun that poured down on him, was only just long enough to hide his ears. His face was childlike yet beautiful, and his eyes shone like emerald as they ran over the pages in front of him.

His name was Herscherik Gracis, the Seventh Prince of the Gracis Kingdom. Currently seven years of age, he was soon to start his first year at the academy. However, the history books he was in the middle of reading were far beyond the level of any ordinary seven-year-old. Even many adults would have found these books a difficult read, yet Herscherik breezed through them, not showing a hint of boredom. In fact, he was smiling as if these dry tomes were entertaining.

Any normal person would doubt their own eyes and question if he was actually reading these books. However, he was not only reading them, he also understood the contents and even analyzed them in his head. It was not a feat a normal child would be capable of, but he was no normal child. Herscherik possessed memories of his previous life.

In his former life, his name had been Ryoko Hayakawa, a woman born and raised on Earth, in a country called Japan. She had worked in a corporate office, all the while living for her hobbies as an average otaku spinster. The day before she was supposed to turn thirty-five, she had been in a traffic accident, the result of which was her unfortunate early departure from this mortal coil. When she next opened her eyes, she had found herself in a world where magic was

real, reincarnated as the youngest prince of a kingdom.

Seven years had already passed since Ryoko was reincarnated as Herscherik, who had learned the grim truth about his country at the tender age of three. Now, he was making full use of his knowledge from his previous life to fight the darkness that infested the country. He had only recently, with the help of his attendants, managed to prevent a terrorist attack by the Church; as a result, his popularity had increased exponentially among the people of his country, young and old.

So, while Herscherik may have been a seven-year-old child on the outside, on the inside he was a woman in her thirties. Add this to the years he'd lived after his reincarnation and Herscherik could be considered in his forties, a perfectly normal age to be reading such specialized academic books. Not to mention he had been quite a bookworm in his previous life.

However, to the eyes of others he was still only a child, and his strange behavior thus had a tendency to attract curious glances. Today, though, he had someone even more eye-catching at his side who stole any attention that would otherwise have fallen upon him. Herscherik lifted his gaze from the fine writing of the book, moved his head around to relieve his stiff neck, and quietly stole a glance at the person sitting across from him.

The target of his glance had long white hair that reached all the way to the hip, amber eyes that could be confused for liquid gold, and an appearance that could only be described as a blessing from the goddess of beauty herself. With a single smile, they could have captivated countless men—anyone would have thought this rare beauty was a gorgeous woman. However, to the disappointment of many, he was very much a man—and one famous in the castle for smiling rarely, if ever, at that. His name was Weiss, Herscherik's Spellcaster of service, usually called Shiro by his master. Incidentally, Herscherik additionally had a butler of service and a knight of service, but at that time they were both preoccupied with their own work.

Shiro, famous for his grumpiness, was currently wearing a very rare smile on his face, busy fiddling with the item in front of him.

"Are you having fun, Shiro?"

“Mm-hmm.”

“I see...”

Shiro answered his master with a single word, instead devoting his full attention to the object in his hand. The item in question belonged to Herscherik himself, and was an antique-looking silver pocket watch which had been entrusted to him by the late Count Klaus Ruseria. To Herscherik—who possessed not one ounce of athleticism or magic, not to mention being the most plain-looking among a family of beautiful royals—it was a useful item, as it allowed him to use some limited magic.

It had recently been revealed that this pocket watch was actually a very valuable Ancient relic. And so the magic-loving Shiro, called a “magic maniac” by his comrades, had shown great interest in it. Most of the Ancient relics that had been discovered so far no longer worked, and while there were relics that had been successfully duplicated through research or used as a reference for other devices, it was rare to find one still functioning. Thus, Shiro’s inner magic nerd had been activated.

Shiro would fiddle with the pocket watch whenever he could—in fact, if he had no time for it he would *make* time—in an attempt to figure out how it worked and how its formulas were designed. Even now, he was staring intently at it as he moved his finger across its surface, only to suddenly break out his fountain pen and scribble something down every now and then. He would then turn to his magic books to look something up, then resume his fiddling again, on and on ad infinitum.

Quietly observing this goddess-like beauty as he carefully observed the pocket watch, Herscherik was reminded of the passion he’d had for his hobbies in his previous life. He knew from experience that nothing good ever came from encroaching on someone else’s interests. Of course, he’d learned this from having other people stick their noses into his own obsessions.

“Just don’t break it, okay?” Herscherik warned Shiro to be on the safe side, but Shiro only nodded in response. Herscherik was not the type to make a fuss about his authority as master, but he still couldn’t help but feel left out. He turned his sorrowful gaze back to his book—just as someone suddenly flung the

doors open with a violent *bang* that sounded wildly out of place in a library.

Herscherik instinctively whirled around to see the source of the noise, only to find an out-of-breath official, seemingly searching for someone. As he did so, the librarian could be seen approaching him at tremendous speed. One of Herscherik's fellow book aficionados, this man was usually of a rather calm and gentle disposition; however, he spared no mercy for anyone who would dare disturb his library.

"What's *his* problem?"

Herscherik turned to the source of the voice to see Shiro, who had been in a good mood just seconds before, staring in irritation at the official.

"Good question. It looks like he's looking for someone," Herscherik replied with a contemplative look. Just in case, Herscherik reviewed his schedule for the day in his head. Before lunch he had attended one of Shiro's lectures on magic, but he had nothing in particular planned for the afternoon. Usually he would have spent this time studying in his room or visiting the castle town, but today he had stopped by the library after hearing from the librarian that they had procured the newest volume in a particular series of collaborative novels. After borrowing the book in question, he had decided to spend the rest of the day there, reading through a history book that he was not allowed to remove from the premises. Hearing that his master was going to the library, Shiro had accompanied him as well, not unlike a duckling following its mother.

Nope, can't think of anything in particular I'd be needed for, Herscherik concluded and returned to his book. However, with his voice raised almost to a shriek, the official disproved Herscherik's conclusion.

"Is Prince Herscherik here?!" he shouted far too loud for a library, after which Herscherik could hear the librarian's accusatory voice. Herscherik closed his book with a sigh.

"I guess this is the last of my easygoing days," he mumbled and got to his feet. He then followed the official down a corridor and on to the main council chamber.

The main council chamber was an assembly hall where the leaders of the

kingdom, including the king, could all meet together. With that in mind, Herscherik theorized that the meeting he was about to attend was one important enough to sway the fate of an entire nation.

On the way there, they passed official after official, all carrying paperwork with distressed looks on their faces, sprinting as if they were all in some sort of race, which lent further credence to his theory.

“Please hurry, Your Highness,” the official urged Herscherik.

I can't really do much about the length of my legs... Herscherik complained internally, as the image of his Spellcaster of service, whom he had just parted ways with, popped into mind. Herscherik had asked Shiro to go fetch his other men. He had also informed the official that his men of service would be joining the meeting, albeit belatedly. When the official frowned at the suggestion, Herscherik had made his very best puppy eyes and said in a worried tone, “But if they’re not with me, I probably won’t understand very much,” to which the official agreed immediately.

Shiro, having been separated from his beloved pocket watch, was now in a bad mood. In addition, since the use of magic on the castle grounds was generally forbidden, he was forced to find his fellow men of service by foot, which only made him grouchier. Herscherik imagined Shiro intimidating everyone he passed like an upset cat, and couldn’t suppress a sad smile.

As a result of his upbringing, Shiro had some—or more accurately, significant—issues trusting others. In addition, as his appearance tended to attract unwanted attention, he was constantly in a hostile mood. But Herscherik knew that his hostility toward others was merely a defense mechanism.

If only Shiro could learn to communicate a little better... He didn’t need Shiro to be perfectly pleasant with everyone, but him isolating himself from others was a problem. His otherworldly appearance already made him stand out enough.

But that’s a topic for another day. Now, let’s see what we have here... Herscherik thought as he looked up at the entrance to the main council chamber. The doors were large and magnificent, befitting one of the most important rooms in the castle. The official swung them open and showed

Herscherik inside.

On the other side of the heavy doors awaited everyone involved in the country's politics: nobles, important officials, generals, the king, as well as the royal family. It was a strange place for a child who had not yet entered the academy to be.

Let's see how this plays out, then. Now the center of attention, Herscherik pretended to look confused—while chuckling fearlessly in his head.

The man shrugged his shoulders and sighed, tired of the worrisome mood in the assembly hall.

I can't take this anymore, he muttered internally, waiting for what was already the fifth meeting on the matter to start. Annoyed, he ran his fingers through short blue-gray hair, squinting his similarly-colored eyes as he let out a yawn. His name was Heath Blaydes. With a cross-shaped scar adorning his forehead and stubble his chin, he was a thirty-five-year-old mercenary-turned-general, and a rather unique one at that.

For one thing, it was almost unheard of in Gracis for former mercenaries to reach the rank of general. And on top of that, Heath had never even wanted to become a general to begin with. Not to mention that he was awfully young for his position.

Heath had originally been affiliated with the mercenary guild, but his life had taken a strange turn when, seeking a more stable career, he decided to enlist in the military. He hadn't minded the mercenary life when he was young, but as he grew older, turning twenty and then twenty-five, he began to worry about his future. Given the choice between two careers that both involved risking his life, he decided that rather than walking the dangerous and unstable path of a freelancer, it made more sense to become a soldier employed by the state. Luckily, the army had been recruiting soldiers just around around that time, and he decided to join—obtaining a regular salary, guaranteed leave, and a more secure retirement plan. Or so he'd thought.

Heath's bright future soon vanished before his eyes. During a particular battle, the sergeant of his squadron lost his life, and Heath, having previous

experience as a mercenary, was temporarily given command in his place. Then, after distinguishing himself in the battle, he was promoted for real.

Heath was baffled. Promotions had not been part of his retirement plan. For better or worse, he had planned to keep at it as a mere soldier for a few years, after which he was going to leave the front lines for administrative work before finally retiring to the countryside where he would spend his time quietly tending a farm.

However, what was done was done. It was never a good idea to get on the bad side of those above you, so he became a sergeant as they asked, executing his duties flawlessly without ever exerting more effort than he needed to.

During yet another battle, his superior commander—a lieutenant—was killed in action. Heath was once more asked to take his commander's place, distinguished himself, and found himself being promoted yet again. The same thing happened over and over, until he found himself a captain, and then a colonel, rising through the ranks with extraordinary speed. It was unprecedented for a former mercenary, and a commoner at that, to reach that level of prestige.

Then, finally, his luck ran out when the head of the Aldis family—famous for its knightly lineage—and then-general Marquis Roland Aldis set his sights on him. Roland made a habit of highlighting Heath's achievements, and whatever reckless strategies Roland came up with, Heath would, begrudgingly, pull them off without a hitch. As a result, Heath distinguished himself in one battle after another before finally finding himself a mercenary-turned-general personally sponsored by the Aldis family.

"Why in the world did I end up a general...?" his adjutant would often spot him muttering, gazing off into the distance as he smoked a cigarette. Of course, knowing that he was only trying to escape the paperwork towering over his desk, the adjutant made no effort to console him. However, he did consider Heath a very capable general; while he might spend all his time complaining and dumping the training of soldiers, meetings with the National Defense department, and any paperwork on his subordinates, no one was more reliable on the battlefield. Whenever Heath stood on the front lines, he would distinguish himself without fail.

His ax would cut his enemies down and water the earth with their blood. In a pitched battle, he could hold his own against the Blazing General himself. He also excelled at predicting his enemy's movements, made decisions at light speed, and always issued appropriate orders. As a result, the survival rate of the soldiers under his command was an order of magnitude higher than other divisions. The soldiers would say that if you got assigned to Heath's division, you'd come home safely from any battle. In time, the people of Gracis started referring to him as the "Undefeated General," though Heath himself took no joy in the nickname.

Now, however, Heath was sitting in on an emergency meeting, along with the royal family and the leaders of each branch of the government. He had only yesterday returned from an expedition to slay some monsters, and between the expedition and his ever-growing pile of paperwork, he was exhausted. Using this as an excuse, he had been scheming to flee his responsibilities and go into hiding, but he was discovered and scolded by his adjutant, who forced him to attend the meeting. If he seemed to be slacking off for even a moment, Heath had one of his most serious subordinates sitting behind him, waiting to cough or lightly kick Heath's chair as a reminder.

All in all, Heath was very uncomfortable right now.

The meeting concerned how to respond to the southwestern Atrad Empire having increased their presence at the kingdom's border.

"Based on our surveys, the empire has stationed roughly ten thousand soldiers along the border."

Several people gasped upon hearing this report. However, Heath was not among them.

Yeah, things have been pretty fishy down there lately, Heath muttered internally, as if the matter at hand did not concern him. While it was not a large army by any means, it was still too large to be described as simply a minor brush with the enemy. The kingdom and the empire had had a number of skirmishes over the past few years, but those had never involved more than a few hundred soldiers.

Gracis and Atrad had long been on poor terms. While both countries were

similar in that they were ruled by a monarch—a king and an emperor, respectively—their governments were structured quite differently. While Gracis was nominally ruled by a king, the nobility also possessed significant power, and in practice they were the ones who truly controlled the country. Atrad, on the other hand, was an autocracy headed by the emperor, who had complete control over what went on within his nation's borders. The emperor was considered a superior being—taken to the logical extreme, if the emperor claimed that white was black, then that became the truth for the citizens of Atrad.

The empire had launched invasions, large and small, against the kingdom multiple times in the past, but so far the kingdom had managed to repel the enemy force each time. The kingdom had itself declared war on the empire in turn many times over. The last large battle against the empire had taken place roughly ten years before, when an imperial army of a hundred thousand soldiers had stormed the kingdom's territory. However, the commander-in-chief at the time, General Roland Aldis, had defeated the imperial forces with the help of his capable subordinates, ultimately costing the empire almost half of its army.

Twenty-five years old at the time, Heath had also participated in that battle as a mercenary, and what had played out before his eyes had truly been the stuff of nightmares. The mercenaries in particular, who were considered expendable, were sent straight into the middle of the fray, and Heath had commended himself on making it out of there in one piece. That had also been the very moment when he'd thought to himself, "At this rate, I'll be dead before I even have a chance to grow old," and had decided to enlist as a soldier.

A little over a decade had passed since then, and in part due to the empire's internal conflict, the few invasions that had taken place in the intervening time had been rather small-scale. However, that internal strife had been snuffed out, and the new emperor who held control over the country had ordered an attack on the kingdom as a demonstration of his power. This much the National Defense department's intelligence division was already aware of, and plans to strengthen the border were already in motion. However, the imperial army had arrived far sooner than the kingdom had expected, and while not as large as the

attack ten years ago, the fortifications at the border had little hope of defeating an army over twice its size. The best they could hope for was to maintain the current situation.

This meeting concerned the deployment of more troops to meet the enemy at the border, as well as the provisioning of supplies.

And I bet I'm the one who's gonna have to command that army... Heath thought, letting out an exasperated chuckle. Hearing the adjutant clear his throat behind him, he hurriedly put on a serious-looking face, but he was still fed up internally. Everyone here was a noble except Heath. Even though he was a general, they viewed him as being lower rank than them, and would have him take care of anything remotely troublesome. However, he would accomplish every task dumped on his shoulders without a hitch, which in turn only annoyed the nobles more. Heath could only laugh about it.

His gaze drifted around the room. There, he found someone who seemed out of place in this council chamber—Herscherik, the youngest prince, with a confused look on his face. He was currently sitting quiet in a chair reserved for him in the corner of the assembly hall, surrounded by his siblings in all directions.

Something's gotta be going on here. It would be one thing if they were preparing for an all-out war, but it was highly unusual for the whole royal family to be present to deal with an army of a mere ten thousand enemy soldiers. While this may have been an urgent matter involving the empire, for an attack of this size it would normally suffice for National Defense to deliberate the matter internally, write a report, and ask for the minister's and the king's approval once they'd made a decision. But this time around, not only the National Defense top brass, but also other important officials, nobles, the minister, and even the king were all gathered here. Of particular note was the presence of the king's children.

Heath glanced at the seat of honor, where a beautiful, youthful king was sitting. He had silver hair that looked as if it was spun of moonlight, magnificent emerald eyes, and a graceful face that displayed a hint of sorrow, perhaps from exhaustion. Though he looked to be in his twenties, King Solye was in fact in his forties.

Next to the king was the crown prince, Marx. His face radiated the same seductiveness as his father, with vivid red hair that looked like it had been formed by melting down the finest rubies, and piercing eyes of the same color that betrayed his strong will.

On the other side of the king from Marx, was the minister, Marquis Volf Barbosse. Barbosse patted down his light brown hair as his similarly-colored eyes ran across the papers he clutched in his hands. His stern expression seemed somehow insincere to Heath.

Heath knew the truth about the state of the kingdom, but he had no interest in attempting to do anything about it himself. He kept his distance from politics, worrying only about protecting his country. His duty was to protect the nation and its people—not the king. Whenever he voiced his thoughts on this matter, though, his adjutant would scold him about his lack of loyalty, but considering that the only reason he joined the army to begin with was to lead a quiet and comfortable life past retirement, loyalty was not among his foremost concerns. He was, however, attached enough to the country to stand in the way if ever the power that should be protecting the people was instead used to hurt them.

Now then, what happens next? Heath sighed quietly, for which his adjutant kicked the leg of his chair to reproach him.

Paying no heed to the lethargic Heath, Herscherik looked around the council chamber while putting on a confused expression. He was stationed in a corner of the room alongside his siblings, observing his father, who was sitting next to his oldest brother, Marx, and the chair, Minister Barbosse. Along with the higher-ups of the various departments and some of the more powerful nobles, all of them were sitting around a long table placed in the center of the room.

“The imperial army is located roughly...”

There was a large map on the table, though Herscherik was unable to see it from where he was sitting, and someone from National Defense was using it to report on the current situation. Herscherik drafted a map in his head as he listened to the report, analyzing the situation quietly.

A new emperor, huh... Well, I guess winning a war would be the fastest way to

go about establishing his reign, he thought. Not only would it allow him to demonstrate his power both domestically and abroad, it would also expand his own territory. *Depending on the outcome, the empire might advance on us with an even larger army down the road.*

Now, *what is he up to?* Sandwiched between his brothers, Herscherik shifted his gaze to Minister Barbosse... The man who manipulated people however he pleased and sacrificed lives without hesitation, all while enjoying the spectacle from a safe distance, controlling the country from the shadows. The person responsible for robbing Herscherik of so many people he cared about.

Herscherik placed his right hand on the pocket that held his silver watch, then caressed the gently shining copper-colored earring in his left ear before bringing his hand back to his lap. The original owners of these items were no longer with him. One had been executed as a result of this minister's schemes, and the other had sacrificed herself to protect Herscherik. The prince remembered the expressions on their faces as they died and clenched his fist.

"How many are stationed in the border fort?" an official asked, snapping Herscherik back to reality.

"We have around three thousand soldiers there. However, the report states that food reserves are running low, since they were forced to shelter civilians who couldn't be evacuated in time. That means a prolonged battle would be difficult. We did arrange for the evacuation of nearby villages, reinforcements, and provisions as soon as we were informed of the situation, but..." In response to the noble's question, the head of National Defense made a sullen face, which told the whole story. "The main problem is low morale."

Herscherik had a good idea why that might be the case. There were three reasons why the soldiers there were likely uneasy. First, they hadn't faced an army of this size in a long time, so they were not used to battle. Second, the enemy empire possessed a military strength on par with that of the kingdom, meaning victory was hardly assured. Third, the much-beloved Roland Aldis, also known as the Blazing General, had retired three years previously. Having emerged victorious from numerous battlefields, the Blazing General was still influential even now, after his retirement. If Roland were to return to the front lines, he could rally the soldiers and demoralize the enemy at the same time,

whether they wanted a war or not. Supposedly numbers were everything in war, but that wasn't exactly the whole truth. Even if faced with an overwhelming opponent, if the enemy had no will to fight, the situation could always be turned around.

A new general as influential as Roland had yet to appear in the Gracis army. Thus, the head of National Defense was deeply concerned about morale on the field.

"I... have a suggestion." The person who spoke up was the minister, who until now had only facilitated the meeting from his place next to the king. The air of the room turned tense in response to his words. The minister turned his gaze to Herscherik, his hazel eyes meeting Herscherik's emerald eyes. "How about we let Prince Herscherik accompany the expedition as the king's proxy, to cheer on the soldiers and raise morale?"

It's almost like time's stopped, Herscherik thought, as though he was unconcerned about the events actually unfolding. He could feel how everyone's gazes turned toward him as the people in the room held their breath. The first to break the silence was Marx, sitting next to the king.

"Do you understand what you are saying, minister?" Marx, who was normally careful about his conduct, always wearing a smile on his face, now shook his red hair as he turned his piercing gaze toward the minister. "Herscherik is only seven. Having him on the battlefield is out of the question. If someone from the royal family is necessary, I shall go instead."

He spoke without hesitation, putting his hand on his chest so as to indicate himself. However, Barbosse shook his head in response.

"Prince Marx, what are you saying? Your Highness is the *crown prince*," Barbosse spoke with a troubled expression on his face. In response, one of the brothers right next to him stood up.

"In that case, I will go." Herscherik looked up at the person who had spoken, only to find the Second Prince William directing an even sterner look than usual at the minister. His hair, the same silver as his father's, was braided, and he gazed at the minister with blue eyes as deep and cold as the bottom of the sea. "I am the Second Prince, and I'm plenty old enough for it."

“Oh no, Your Highness has the important task of assisting Prince Marx. And have you not your own duties to attend to?”

William frowned. Having graduated from the academy this year, in addition to his royal duties, William had also joined the Foreign Relations department. Though he was a member of the royal family, he was still new to his job and thus always found himself busy with work.

“Then...”

“Neither Prince Arya, Prince Reinette, nor Prince Eutel are suited for this encouragement mission, either.” The minister interrupted the Third Prince Arya, who had just stood up to volunteer. “Princess Cecily goes without saying, being a woman, and along with Prince Arya and Prince Reinette, your contributions to this country’s magical research are invaluable. Your research on combination magic in particular is of national interest. Prince Eutel is still recovering from his illness, so the battlefield would be hard on him. Prince Tessily is currently studying abroad, while Princess Meno is receiving treatment away from the city.”

Herscherik could hear his brother holding his breath above him. Looking up, he saw the triplets grimacing in frustration, their usual warm expressions gone, while Eutel’s face was twisted into a malicious sneer. Everything the minister had said was correct. The triplets, who had slowly but surely been improving their combination magic technique, were indispensable for the country. And for Eutel, who was bedridden just a few days ago, a mission like this would be far too taxing.

“And so,” the minister said, his gaze fixed on Herscherik, “considering Prince Herscherik is already a popular and well-known figure since the incident with the Church, he would be sure to inspire the soldiers, were he to accompany them.”

The minister continued with a radiant smile on his face. “Why, there is nothing to be worried about. The expedition will number more than double that of the enemy forces. There is not a single chance that Your Highness would be exposed to danger. I beseech you, Your Highness, won’t you accept this mission—for the good of the country?”

Herscherik rolled his eyes internally in response. *Cut the crap, you old schemer. As if it's not obvious what you're trying to do.*

Even the barest amount of common sense would say that sending a seven-year-old child to the battlefield was a ridiculous proposition, and while the minister had attempted to give the best arguments he could, they were all far-fetched and forced. He was simply doing everything in his power to pass his absurd proposal. The fact that none of the other officials and nobles were speaking up must have meant that the minister had already bought them off.

He had rejected the idea of sending every one of his siblings, preached about the good of the country to block off any and all arguments, and then given his advice knowing full well that Herscherik would have no option but to accept. Herscherik had been given one, and only one, possible answer. Of course, even had he been given other options, Herscherik had already made up his mind. However, before he could reply, a voice reverberated through the room.

"Absolutely not." A short, but powerful declaration. All eyes fell upon the owner of the voice.

That owner was the king, Herscherik's father, the 23rd king of Gracis, King Solye Gracis. His face pale, Solye repeated his declaration.

"Absolutely not."

"Your Majesty, I understand that you disapprove, but this is a matter of public order. Prince Herscherik may be young, but as royalty, does he not have a duty toward the kingdom?" Barbosse, ostensibly a mere minister, rejected the king's objection flatly.

"Even so..."

"Might it be that Your Majesty objects because it concerns Prince Herscherik in particular? Are you giving preferential treatment because he is the only child of your favored wife?"

Solye could say nothing in response. He had never treated his other children poorly. However, to Solye, it was unavoidable that Herscherik would end up being his favorite child. Herscherik's siblings understood this, and they all considered him their dear youngest brother. Not to mention that Herscherik

had a tendency to dive headfirst into danger—so they had all done their best to protect him.

But suddenly, the object of the discussion stood up and took a step forward.

“I will go,” Herscherik said with a sweet smile on his face, in a tone so casual that one might have thought he was talking about going on some minor errand.

“Hersch?!” Solye stood up with such force that he almost knocked over his chair. Herscherik’s siblings observed him, dumbfounded. Even so, he continued speaking, his smile never faltering.

“You are all in quite a predicament, correct? I’m powerless by myself, but if there is something even I can do to help, then I will gladly do it.”

“But Hersch, it’s dangerous.” Eutel spoke in a soft tone and with a gentle expression—although to Herscherik, who knew what he was really like, it came across as a threat more than anything. However, Herscherik still refused to change his mind.

“I’ll be fine,” he said, looking straight at Barbosse. Having removed the mask of a confused young prince, the person who now stood there smiling was the true Herscherik. He continued, his voice ever so slightly more serious, “I have my men of service to protect me.”

The only ones who noticed the change in his voice were his family. Though the change was ever so subtle, they knew this was Herscherik declaring war. As if prompted, the doors to the main council chamber were suddenly flung open. Through them came Herscherik’s trusted men.

“Excuse us.” A man with messy orange-and-gold hair entered the room. The outfit he was wearing, resembling the uniform of a royal guard, marked him as the youngest prince’s knight of service. His slightly downturned eyes, blue like the sky, looked around the room. Finding his master, he showed a relieved expression for a split second before turning serious once again.

“Prince Herscherik’s knight, Octavian Aldis, requests permission to enter.” Though he had already entered the room, Octavian—called Oránge or Oran by his master—raised his right arm in front of his chest and gave a knight’s salute.

In response to this, the nobles, many of whom were already displeased that

he'd been granted this status in the first place, began to disparage and criticize him. "We're in the middle of a meeting! You might be a mere knight, but do you lack even the most basic manners?!"

"Pardon me," a cold, tranquil voice interrupted. "My liege has already arranged for our participation in this meeting. Furthermore, a man of service is someone who has been recognized by the king himself. Does a mere *noble* have the right to look down upon that?"

The person speaking, a bright smile on his face, was a man with glossy black hair and eyes like dark rubies that gleamed with a threatening light. Clad in a well-tailored suit, Schwarz Zweig—or Kuro as his master liked to call him—took a bow, after which he glanced around the room.

"We serve not the country, but our master and no one else. We have received permission from His Majesty to stay at our master's side and to always put him above all else. Is not criticizing and disparaging us the same as criticizing His Majesty?"

The nobles fell silent upon hearing Kuro's merciless sermon. As much as the minister may have been controlling the country from the shadows, the king was still the actual ruler. It was unthinkable for a noble to disparage the king out loud.

"Hey, is Herscherik okay?" said Shiro, failing to read the room and forgetting to address his master by title. Looking around with the same cranky expression as he'd had when they last parted, Shiro spotted his master and his expression softened slightly. However, that only lasted for a moment. Noticing that Herscherik was standing up front all by himself, he twisted his blessedly-beautiful face into a frown. To him, it only looked like his master was being publicly reprimanded.

"Oh?" Shiro said, narrowing his eyes, as the atmosphere in the room grew even more tense. It almost seemed like the temperature had dropped as well. It was said that the beautiful had the fiercest tempers, but Shiro was well past "fierce" and deep into "terrifying" territory—or so the gossip in the castle went. He was famous for using magic to retaliate against those who persisted in mistaking him for a woman, despite being informed otherwise.

Once, a high-ranking official had even tried to make a move on him, to which Shiro responded by sending him flying with wind magic—and that was only the beginning. At the same time, the official's wig was also sent flying, exposing the bald head he'd tried to hide to the public eye. Though he came out physically unscathed, the same could not be said for his pride.

Another time, a noble had attempted to grope Shiro. In retaliation, Shiro had trapped him inside a magical barrier and then surrounded it with ice, creating something like a magical refrigerator—all while never losing his stony expression. Shiro had said, "Well, he said he liked my cold demeanor, so I just gave him what he was looking for." In a display of thoroughness, he had also set up an additional barrier to block any outside magic, preventing other Spellcasters from rushing to help. If not for Herscherik hurriedly forcing Shiro to remove the barriers, the noble would have certainly suffered frostbite, even if he wasn't necessarily in mortal danger.

When a knight, also convinced that Shiro was a woman, took to following him around, Shiro had chased the knight around with a fireball under the pretext of training, leaving the man terrified. Incidentally, Herscherik was later informed by Kuro that Shiro had actually looked very amused at the time.

Herscherik's Spellcaster of service, who did as he pleased despite the ban on magic inside the castle—though the true blame generally lay with his targets—was now so feared that people had taken to saying, "Don't play with Weiss and you won't get burned." However, he was still popular with the castle maids, who had also been bothered by the bald official, the refrigerated noble, and the fireballed knight. All three had been well-known for abusing their status to harass women.

Thanks to a combination of the targets' misdeeds and the pleas of the maidservants, Shiro had managed to make it out with only a warning for his actions. When the maids had come to give Shiro their thanks, he had simply replied, "Whatever. It's not like I did it for you," his cheeks turning ever so slightly red. This sight had apparently made the hearts of every girl present skip a beat, and Shiro was now more popular with them than ever.

Shiro had a tendency to make even the most innocent remark sound threatening, setting others on edge. It was commonly understood in the castle

that Herscherik was the only person capable of taming this wild beast.

Slightly concerned about how each man of service had made his entry, Herscherik opened his mouth.

“Weiss, calm down. You too, Oránge and Schwartz,” he said in a reproachful tone as he approached his men. Upon hearing this, Shiro started sulking, while the other two shrugged their shoulders. To them, their master’s safety came before anything else.

Herscherik had his men of service stand behind him, surveyed the room, and then continued speaking.

“My apologies for interrupting the meeting. But, Father—I will be fine,” he said resolutely, his expression brimming with confidence. “I have an invincible butler, the strongest of knights, and the greatest Spellcaster in the land. There aren’t many who would be able to put up a good fight against my men of service, be it in the kingdom or elsewhere.”

With a bright smile, he continued, “If anyone wants to hurt me, they need to be prepared for what’s coming.”

His gaze was fixed on one person as he spoke. It was an indirect challenge: “Just try me.”

Everyone in this room knew that Herscherik’s men of service were no ordinary individuals.



His butler of service, Schwartz, had served Herscherik since the boy was even younger as his guard dog and shadow. While he now went by the surname of Zweig, no one knew his true past. It was said in the underground that any person who attempted to look into his background would disappear without a trace. Anyone with enough training would, from observing his movements and figure, be able to tell at a glance that he was not your average butler.

Octavian, his knight of service, was the third son of the Blazing General, Marquis Roland Aldis, and had been the youngest person to ever win the Games of Contest. In addition, he was well known for only recently having emerged unscathed from a battle against a hundred drug-enhanced templars while he foiled a terrorist attack by the Church.

Finally, the Spellcaster of service, Weiss, might have been the newest face here, but his extensive knowledge of magic—along with his strange ability granting him practically unlimited Magic Within—had shocked the top Spellcasters of the kingdom. He would construct complicated magical formulas without breaking a sweat, and if he made full use of his vast reserves of power, he could quite literally reduce a whole country to ashes.

Do you really think you'll make it out alive with them in your way? These were Herscherik's implied words.

"So I'll be just fine, Father," he said softly to King Solye, who had gone pale, and then looked at his siblings and nodded.

I'll escape any scheme that that minister is plotting, he smiled toward his family.

"Herscherik..." Solye was still unable to completely discard his worries. It was as if a cold shard of ice was stuck inside his chest. But like a ray of spring sunshine, Herscherik directed a smile toward his Father, as if to melt away ice in his heart.

"Please trust me, Father."

He then turned his eyes to the minister.

"Now then, Minister Barbosse. As the king's proxy, I will be the commander-in-chief for this mission, correct?" Even if he was but a figurehead, a royal

participating in a military expedition would automatically be the highest-ranking officer present.

Barbosse gave an affirmative answer, after which Herscherik surveyed the leaders of each department present in the room.

“Please let me know once you have a schedule, personnel, a draft budget, data from past expeditions, and suggestions on countermeasures against the empire. Also, I would like the opportunity to meet with the persons from each department responsible for handling these matters. I will now be taking my leave so that I can start making arrangements,” Herscherik spoke, having discarded his façade of a gentle, harmless little boy. He then took a bow and turned to leave. “Schwartz, prepare an office immediately and amend my schedule to include the necessary meetings with the department representatives. Oran, collect all available intelligence from previous encounters with the empire and bring it to my room. Shiro, is there any research from the department of Magic...”

Herscherik gallantly exited the main council chamber while doling out orders to his men of service, and the room fell silent. Heath observed the four figures of varying height leave with a dumbfounded expression on his face—and then could not help but burst into laughter, breaking the silence.

“General Blaydes...” a disapproving voice behind him said.

“Oh, oops. Sorry about that. I’m really sorr—*pfft!*” Heath attempted to apologize, but before he could finish speaking he burst into laughter again.

Come on, how can you expect me to keep a straight face after witnessing that?! The whole room had just been overwhelmed by a seven-year-old child. Had this been a play, Heath would have been giving a standing ovation right about now.

Turning his gaze to the royal family, he found them all sighing and shrugging their shoulders with a resigned expression as if to say, “Of course it would end up like this.” In other words, in their minds this was all within the realm of possibility. And it was also clear just how much they cared for the youngest prince.

I certainly didn’t expect practically every member of the royal family to

volunteer in his place. Those with power had a tendency to value their own safety above all. Regardless of how safe you might think you are, being on a battlefield is a frightening experience, as you necessarily expose yourself to the danger of death. Most people would be happy to avoid risking their lives, yet the royals had all stood up in an attempt to protect the prince. *That must be what they call familial love.*

Heath decided that he had had the wrong impression of the royal family, if only ever so slightly.

However... He turned his gaze to the minister, who was glaring at the door through which the youngest prince had disappeared, his eyes cold but filled with burning rage. Herscherik's speech had clearly been directed at the minister in an attempt to provoke him. *It looks like this mission might be a tad more troublesome than normal.*

Heath cared little about the conflict between the royal family and the nobles. The youngest prince, however, had caught his interest. He let out a small chuckle, to which his adjutant kicked his chair for the nth time.

Chapter Two: The Prince, the People, and the Departure Ceremony

Disguised beneath a hooded poncho, Herscherik was visiting the castle town for the first time in a while. He had been unable to do so the two past weeks, having been busy with the preparations for the upcoming military expedition where he was to serve as the king's proxy.

After the meeting had concluded, Herscherik's father had been worried about him, his siblings had scolded him, and his men of service had lectured him until he couldn't take it anymore. And then after suffering through a few hours of lectures, all that awaited him was preparations, preparations, and yet more preparations. As urgent as all of this may have been, Herscherik couldn't help but feel that the infamous corporate crunch he'd experienced in his previous life was nothing compared to this.

Herscherik was actually on top of the chain of command for this expedition, being the king's proxy and thus the highest-ranking person on the field. As a result, officials from the various departments involved were flooding into his hastily-prepared office day and night. These past two weeks, he'd worked so hard that he'd almost forgotten that he was only seven years old. If someone from his previous life had been there, they would have been quaking with fear at the return of the "MIL from Hellquarters" right about now.

Faced with all this paperwork, most normal seven-year-olds would have had no idea what to do with it; likely, they would simply sign it without so much as skimming it. And that was in fact what many officials expected him to do, as they began by handing him documents that were filled out in an extremely sloppy manner.

Herscherik, however, would take one look at a document like that and start pointing out every last little thing that was wrong with it. "These calculations are wrong," "the phrasing here is too vague," "what's your source on these numbers?" He would go on at length before stamping the document with a

large “rejected.” If an official ever dared to argue with him, Herscherik would ask, “And what grounds do you have for that claim?” and give them a verbal brow-beating before waving the now-teary-eyed official goodbye with a smile. According to the butler helping him with his work, he was like “a mother-in-law picking on her son’s wife.”

Incidentally, Ryoko Hayakawa’s bosses had said more or less the same thing after having witnessed her work—a fact that was well known to everyone but her.

The day before the departure ceremony, Herscherik was visiting the castle town by himself. His men of service were not very pleased at his suggestion that he do so alone, to which Herscherik replied, “Do you really think that Barbosse would attempt to assassinate me in town after going to so much effort to lay that obvious trap?”

Herscherik declared that the minister would never waste his time like that.

However, that was not the only reason for his suggestion. His men of service were extremely attractive, charming, and likely had bright futures ahead of them. It was thus inevitable that, if they went on an excursion all together, they would end up surrounded by women trying to woo his men. That in itself wasn’t necessarily a bad thing, but today Herscherik needed to move through the town unhindered, much like he had the first time he’d visited. After much discussion, they reached a compromise where Kuro would watch over him from the shadows, while Oran and Shiro would meet up with him at sunset.

Herscherik greeted the people of the castle town with a smile.

“Now then, where do I head first?” he mumbled to himself, before deciding on the orphanage. It was the same orphanage that had fallen victim to one of the Church’s plots when Herscherik was five, and which was currently run by the Aldis family.

Pausing at the gate, he observed the facility. It had been nicely renovated, and Herscherik relaxed a bit when he caught the sound of children laughing. Suddenly, the door to the orphanage opened and a small girl peeked out. From the bucket clutched in her hands, Herscherik gathered she must have been

cleaning.

That's...

“Vivi?” Herscherik spoke to the girl, at which she quickly turned around and smiled like the sun. Her sienna hair was tied at the back of her head and her cheerful hazel eyes beaming. She would grow up to be a beautiful woman one day, Herscherik thought as she approached him, her simple one piece dress fluttering.

“Prince Her—”

“Vivi,” Herscherik interrupted the girl, placing a finger to his lips. Realizing what he meant, the girl quickly corrected herself.

“Ryoko! It’s been too long.”

The girl’s name was Vivi. Originally it had been Violetta, and she was the daughter of Marquis Barbosse—but she had left the Barbosse family and now lived at the orphanage.

“Hi, Vivi. How have you been?”

“I’ve been great!” she replied cheerfully.

“Do you have a moment to chat?” Herscherik asked, at which Vivi blushed and nodded happily. They sat down next to each other on a bench beneath a nearby tree and started conversing enthusiastically. Vivi talked about how she’d baked bread for the first time, and how badly she’d messed it up; how she was happy to have learned how to do the laundry and clean things up; how she had made a lot of friends; how everyone at the orphanage loved the song her sister had written; how she was studying hard.

“I’m really happy to see that you’re doing well, Vivi.”

“Ryo...ko...?” Vivi looked at the smiling Herscherik with a puzzled look. He seemed somehow different from usual. “What’s wrong?”

Hearing Vivi’s worried tone, Herscherik stopped smiling and furrowed his brow.

“Well, the thing is...”

“Hey look, it’s Ryoko!” another girl shouted, interrupting Herscherik. The two of them looked behind them to find someone peeking out from the door to the orphanage. It was a girl with brown hair and big round eyes—a girl Herscherik had first met when investigating the drug trafficking incident of two years ago. Her name was Colette.

“Hello, Colette. How is everyone?”

“They’re all doing great! I’ll go get them!” Colette replied, then ran back into the building, while Herscherik saw her off with a smile. He then noticed that someone was looking at him, and turned to find a boy glaring at him from the shadow of the building. Herscherik made a troubled face at that.

The boy’s name was Rick. Baron Armin, the former owner of the orphanage who had passed away during the drug trafficking incident, had been like a father to him, and he believed that Herscherik was responsible for the baron’s death and resented him for it. While not an accurate picture of what had actually happened, Herscherik had come to terms with the boy’s anger. After all, Herscherik did bear some responsibility, having indirectly caused the baron’s death by insisting upon investigating the incident.

Rick noticed that Herscherik was looking at him and quickly retreated. Herscherik watched him go with regret in his eyes, but at the same time he was happy that the little boy had not given in to his sadness.

Then, Herscherik turned his gaze back to Vivi, who was looking at him with a worried expression.

“Ryoko, were you about to say something?”

“No, it’s nothing. Everything is fine,” Herscherik replied, forcing a smile while he gently patted Vivi’s head.

Herscherik then spent the rest of his morning at the orphanage talking to and playing with the children whom Colette had fetched and speaking to Anne, the wife of Marquis Aldis who worked as a teacher there. He then bid them all farewell and set off toward the market. He gave Vivi, who was still looking worried, a warm smile as he left.

His next stop was the fruit shop owned by a married couple who Herscherik

had spent a lot of time with in the castle town. On his way to the shop, he passed through the red-light district, where some drowsy men and women said hello to him. Incidentally, everyone had told Herscherik to avoid this route at night.

“Oh, hello, Ryoko!”

“Hello, Louise,” Herscherik replied to the lady who ran the shop, who had rolled up her sleeves to expose her healthy-looking skin and was carrying a box of fruit in her arms. As vigorous and hard-working as the day he had met her, she was currently tending the shop as cheerfully as ever. However, there was one thing about her that was different.

“Louise, are you sure you should be lifting something that heavy?” Herscherik asked as he turned his gaze toward her stomach. Her waist, which Herscherik would have been immensely jealous of in his previous life, had swelled visibly. She was expecting a child.

“Haha, it’s not like I’m sick or anything! I’ll be just fine,” she responded merrily. She hadn’t changed since the day they met.

Suddenly, someone else reached out to jerk the wooden box out of her hand. It was a bear-like man, so large and brawny that he could carry four Herscheriks without so much as breaking a sweat, and so expressionless that his face might as well be frozen. The man was a lumberjack by trade, Louise’s husband, and the owner of this fruit shop. Though one should not judge a book by its cover, Herscherik still found it difficult to imagine someone so grumpy-looking carefully polishing fruit with his large, rough hands—despite having witnessed him doing exactly that many times in the past.

“Hello!” Herscherik said enthusiastically, at which Louise’s husband set the box on his shoulder, holding it there with one hand, and used his free hand to pat Herscherik on the head. He then handed Herscherik a piece of fruit from the stand before turning his back to him. Herscherik thanked him, and the man simply lifted his hand and waved in response.

“Now then, are you helping us out today again, Ryoko?”

“I’d love to! Especially since you really should be sitting down, Louise.” Herscherik knew that she would be fine, but he still could not help worrying.

Herscherik then spent some time assisting at the store. He used his youthful, bright voice to attract customers; upon hearing him, some regular customers would show up to shop—and to spend some time talking to the tiny helper. The people of the castle town, having either heard his cheerful laughter themselves or heard about Herscherik from another regular, started gathering at the fruit shop just to see him. Louise's husband removed the fruit from their boxes and Louise handled the customers' money sitting down, while Herscherik entertained the customers. Nibbling on the fruit that Louise's husband had given him, Herscherik tirelessly chatted with the customers who stopped by. Before long the sun had started to set, coloring the sky red.

"Thanks for stopping by, Ryoko!"

"Of course! I had a lot of fun! Will you be working again tomorrow, Louise?" Wiping sweat from his brow with the back of his hand, Herscherik started to carry away the fruit boxes. Louise watched him work, stroking her stomach, before replying.

"The soldiers will be holding a parade tomorrow as part of the departure ceremony, so the market will be closed. But the day after that we'll be open as usual. Will you be coming by to help out again, Ryoko?"

Hearing Louise's question, Herscherik froze for a second, but then quickly replied as if nothing was amiss.

"I'm sorry, I'm actually traveling somewhere far away tomorrow..."

"Oh, really? Are you going on a trip with your family?" Louise had heard that Herscherik's father was often busy and that his mother had passed away. If he was going on a family trip, he would be able to spend some valuable time with his loved ones, and the thought thrilled Louise.

"Something like that," Herscherik responded, which made Louise immensely happy. After becoming pregnant, strong feelings of love toward her yet unborn child had started to well up inside her. The life she was carrying was so precious and dear to her. Perhaps that is why she worried so much over the sad face that she sometimes saw Herscherik making.

Thinking about children, Louise was reminded about the parade that was to occur the following day.

“Oh, yes—speaking of the departure ceremony, I believe one of the princes will be participating. The youngest prince, Prince Herscherik, if I’m not mistaken. I think he’s the same age as you?”

“Yes, that’s... that’s right.” Louise failed to notice the hesitation in his voice.

“I hear the youngest prince resolved some trouble just recently, together with his subordinates.”

A young prince, not even seven years of age, had gone with his subordinates to prevent a terrorist attack by an extremist faction of the Church. People in the castle town had started saying how this reminded them of the traveling Prince of Light—the main character of a tale that had been popular in the area lately—and Herscherik had seen his reputation skyrocket. And now, he was going to travel to the front lines to raise morale among the soldiers fighting in a border conflict.

However, as far as Louise was concerned, the Prince of Light was a mere fairy tale, and she disapproved of any country that would send a young child to the battlefield.

“Honestly, can you believe that they’re sending a little boy to war? Unbelievable.”

“But he *is* a prince,” Herscherik replied, his gaze wandering—unbeknownst to the upset Louise.

“I suppose the least I can do is see him off tomorrow...”

“You’re attending the parade in your condition?” It was expected that a large crowd would be gathering to see the soldiers off. The young noble boy cast Louise a worried look, but she simply laughed in response.

“I’ll be just fine! If anything, I need to keep active as much as I can!”

“Louise... Do you mind if I touch your stomach?” Herscherik said, hesitantly. Louise gestured at him to come closer, took his hand, and put it on her midsection.

“Oh, did you feel that kick?”

“I did.”

“Try listening.”

Herscherik put his ear to her stomach. Inside, he could hear the pulse of a small, new life.

“You see, it seems like the country has been improving lately. That’s why the two of us finally decided to have a child.”

It had happened a little at a time. Out of nowhere, the guild tax was decreased and the fees that the guild had to pay the constabulary disappeared. The constabulary had also more or less stopped throwing their weight around and bringing outrageous charges, making it much easier to conduct business. The nobles who used to harass their business rivals had grown quiet, and more smiles could be seen on the faces of the townspeople. It almost felt to Louise as if these changes had started ever since her young helper had first showed up in the castle town.

Of course, not everything was perfect. But everyone had to face some amount of hardship in life. When Louise found herself being able to think that way... that was when she finally found the resolve to raise a child.

This might all be thanks to Ryoko. He always smiled brightly, like the spring sunshine. People would naturally flock to him and when he smiled, so did everyone around him. That smile suddenly reminded Louise of something from her distant past—of a girl with shining golden hair and an unforgettable smile.

Wasn’t she...

“I swear I’ll protect you.” A faint whisper pulled Louise out of her sea of memories, but she was unable to make out what this so very quiet voice had said.

“Huh? Did you say something, Ryoko?”

“No, it was nothing!” the young noble boy replied, taking his ear off Louise’s stomach and smiling—but that smile seemed somehow different than usual. Just as Louise was about to call out to him again, though, someone else interrupted her.

“Ryoko, it’s time to leave.”

“We came to get you.”

It was a man with sunset-colored hair—a man she had seen many times before, along with a stunningly gorgeous woman, albeit one with an awfully deep voice. The woman, who seemed to possess the beauty of a goddess, had long, white, braided hair illuminated by the setting sun—a sun that was the same color as the man’s hair. However, she was wearing men’s clothes, and was missing a few of the curves one might normally expect to find on a woman. That is when Louise realized that she was actually looking at a man.

“Oh, this must be our first time meeting. Is that black-haired young fellow not with you today?”

“Yes, well... Anyway, I need to go home now. Thank you so much for today,” the young noble boy replied vaguely, before bowing deeply and walking off. The beautiful man followed, and the man with the sunset-colored hair quickly bowed in greeting to Louise before running after the others.

“Ryoko, take care!”

“I will!” he replied. After a moment’s hesitation, he added, “Farewell!”

He then waved to Louise and started walking again.

Louise watched the boy as he left, not noticing that the number of shadows surrounding him had increased at some point. Something felt off to her, but she couldn’t quite put her finger on what. It wasn’t until the next day that she would realize what it was.

The marching band commenced its performance, signaling the start of the departure ceremony parade. Flags emblazoned with a brightly shining sun fluttered in the wind as the soldiers marched down the town’s main thoroughfare. It was time for the central character of the day—the youngest prince, Herscherik—to make his first appearance before the public.

“Is that...?”

Louise, who was watching the parade near the castle and away from the crowd, her husband who watched over her, and indeed every inhabitant of the castle town that was in attendance—they were all struck speechless at the

appearance of the prince.

The first person to draw the crowd's attention was the beautiful woman who was riding alongside the prince, standing at the back of the roofless carriage. Had someone claimed that she was the reincarnation of the goddess of beauty, the crowd would have readily believed it. Her long-sleeved white and pale blue robe, akin to those worn by powerful Spellcasters, fluttered in the wind together with her showy white hair. She was wearing a number of brilliant ornaments, the sight of which was truly divine. The more devout believers of the crowd instinctively kneeled to pray.

Next was a knight on horseback. Wearing dark crimson armor, one could surmise from his attire that he was a knight of service. He was famous for having recently emerged completely unscathed and victorious from a battle against a hundred crazed templars. However, the crowd had not been expecting him to be quite this young. Even so, they did recognize him immediately. In fact, many of them knew him well, having spoken to him on many occasions before.

And it was not just the knight who left the crowd stunned. The butler serving as the coachman of the prince's carriage was also intimately familiar to the people of the castle town. He had a shadowy air about him, making him popular with the local girls—so much so that their boyfriends and fathers were starting to worry. However, he was now clad in a fine outfit with his hair combed back, giving off a very different impression than what they were used to.

Finally, the person who drew the most attention and attracted many a confused and emotional gaze was the prince, holding the grand marshal's staff. They could all picture his light golden hair swaying busily. Everyone recognized his emerald green eyes, smiling gently. It was the beautiful young boy who, despite being a noble, would often be found calling out to passersby at the fruit shop.

That same boy was now holding the grand marshal's staff, bestowed upon those serving as the king's proxy. His usually smiling mouth was now a thin, serious line as he stood, dignified, on the royal carriage.

How...

Then, Louise suddenly remembered something. Ryoko reminded him of *that*

girl. The angelic young woman whom the king had brought to the castle, having fallen in love with her at first sight. She had become pregnant with the king's child, given birth, and then left for the Garden Above.

"Louise, I'd love one of those fruits!" the girl had said whenever she came running, waving at Louise. Back then, she had only recently married and opened a new shop. Times had been hard, with most people barely scraping by, yet that beautiful young woman would always be smiling unconditionally.

Her only child was now departing for battle.

It seemed to Louise that Herscherik looked her way for a split second. He then looked down for a moment before looking up again, his usual kind smile now on his face—the smile that reminded Louise of his dearly departed mother and had always cheered up the people around him.

"Is..." Louise mumbled, but the rest was lost in the noise of the crowd. Her husband supported her from behind as she staggered for a moment, but even his sturdy hand was trembling ever so slightly.

Is that why Ryoko said "farewell" yesterday? That was the first time Ryoko had ever said "farewell" when leaving for the day; normally he would bid them goodbye with a cheerful "see you later." He knew that we would learn his true identity today. And he didn't know whether he would even return safely.

Louis did not believe in gods. She figured that instead of relying on something you couldn't even be sure existed, she would rather trust in her own hard work. Today, however, she found herself praying instinctively.

"Please... Please, protect Ryoko—no, Prince Herscherik!"

Clasping her trembling hands together, that was the first time in her life that she prayed to the gods in earnest.

The day before the departure ceremony, Shiro saw Herscherik to his room before having dinner and going to visit a certain room in the department of Magic. Receiving no response upon knocking, he put his hand on the knob and opened the door. As he entered, the smell of chemicals assaulted Shiro's nose, making him grimace as he searched the room for the person he was looking for.

The room was not particularly large, so he quickly found his mark by a desk near the window, making notes with a chemical-filled test tube in his other hand.

“Master Sigel,” Shiro called out to the man, whose back was turned to him, but he continued writing without pausing, seemingly unaware of Shiro’s presence. Shiro sighed and stepped closer.

“*Master Sigel.*” He repeated the man’s name, louder this time. This time he seemed to finally take note of Shiro, stopped writing, and turned to face him.

“Oh, Weiss. I’m sorry—I didn’t notice you there. Also, as I’ve told you many times already, you don’t need to call me ‘Master’” While ostensibly apologizing, the man did not seem apologetic in the slightest. Shiro frowned at this bespectacled man—Sigel—who seemed to be in his early twenties. Sigel placed the test tube he was holding onto a rack, careful not to spill its contents, and then looked back at Shiro while readjusting his glasses.

Shiro then handed Sigel some documents.

“Master Sigel, have this.”

“Have you managed to decode it...?” Sigel responded, surprised, accepting the documents Shiro had handed him and poring over the writing with his ultramarine eyes. There, he found a magic formula that he had been needing. This was a formula that would normally take multiple Spellcasters over half a year to unravel, yet Shiro had—by himself, no less—decoded it in almost no time at all. Sigel was flabbergasted.

I guess this is what a true genius is like... Sigel himself belonged to the category of people who were often referred to as geniuses. As a child, he was considered a prodigy, possessing knowledge of magic that often surpassed that of people many times his age. However, the gorgeous man in front of him was on a completely different level, and not just with regard to the matter at hand. Ever since Sigel had first met Shiro, they had engaged in extensive discussions on the topic of magic, and every time Sigel was left astonished at just how gifted Shiro truly was.

What had surprised him the most was learning that the magic formulas that Shiro used were of his own devising, and thus were truly unique to him. Most

Spellcasters only used previously discovered formulas. Very experienced and powerful Spellcasters might adapt existing formulas to their own purposes, but the fundamental formula still remained the same.

Shiro, however, had entirely invented his own formulas. Even if the resulting magic was the same, the formulas themselves were still different. In addition, his formulas were efficient and economical, yet just as effective as more traditional ones, if not more so. Shiro himself claimed that he *was* able to use standard formulas, but they were very costly due to the nature of his power, so he'd decided to invent his own instead. "It's not particularly difficult with some imagination and creativity," he had said, but if the average Spellcaster was capable of this, they wouldn't be relying on existing formulas to begin with.

However, as his formulas were designed with his own special ability in mind, it was difficult for other Spellcasters to use them effectively. Shiro, on the other hand, was able to use any magic formula without a problem, and would even find issues with existing formulas and improve on them effortlessly.

This is why Sigel considered him to be a true genius.

"You amaze me, as always. This will be tremendously helpful for our research."

"I won't be around starting tomorrow. I'm counting on you to finish it," Shiro responded and turned to leave the room, but Sigel stopped him

"Weiss, are you really leaving? Will you be all right?" Despite having no experience with it himself, Sigel understood that the battlefield was a dangerous place to be. Some of his own colleagues had set out for battle in the past, never to return.

Spellcasters were extremely valuable in battle. A high-level Spellcaster could very well equal a whole company in power. At the same time they had very little physical strength compared to soldiers and knights; and in close combat, for all their offensive capabilities, they might as well have been made of glass. The enemy soldiers would always target Spellcasters first, and if their Magic Within ran out, they would be totally immobilized, nothing but a burden to anyone around them. Not to mention, Spellcasters had to recite incantations before activating their spells. Shiro was no different, and during an incantation

he would be a sitting duck. If the enemy seized the opportunity, even Shiro would not remain unscathed. To a Spellcaster, standing on a battlefield was courting death.

However, Shiro paid no heed to Sigel's concern, replying matter-of-factly, "Well, I am Hersch's Spellcaster of service."

"But, that's only because..."

Shiro had only become the prince's Spellcaster of service to protect himself. He had no interest in political power himself, nor had anyone compelled him to take the position.

Sigel had also been involved in the investigations surrounding the Church's attempted terrorist attack and knew that Shiro, as a result of human experimentation, had undergone a unique transformation. If not for his status as a prince's Spellcaster of service, he might have become the subject of many further experiments. Having both rescued him during the terrorist attack and prevented any further harm from coming to him, Herscherik had saved his life in more than one sense.

However, at the same time, Shiro was a victim of this government, as it had turned out that the drug that had altered him was originally developed at a royal research laboratory. If not for that drug, Shiro might have been able to lead a normal life.

Sigel wondered if Shiro really had to risk his life in battle for the sake of an empty title like that. Seemingly sensing what Sigel was thinking, Shiro answered his unspoken question.

"Hersch saved me."

"But..."

Shiro shook his head in response to Sigel's hesitation.

"Hersch saved me from myself."

When Shiro was overcome with despair, prepared to even cast away his humanity, Herscherik had stopped him. He had told him to never call himself a monster. Herscherik had been the first person to truly accept him.

“That’s why I belong by his side. If Hersch is departing for battle, then it would be unthinkable not to join him,” Shiro declared, with a smile beautiful enough to shake the foundations of a country.

Sigel nodded in response. As a Spellcaster of service himself, he would gladly go to war if it was for Marx’s sake—not because Marx was a prince, but because he was his junior from the academy, someone he got along with well and thought of as a younger brother. If not for that, he would never have entered his service, as tempting as the guaranteed room and board may have been.

“I understand. Please, take care. I will pray for your success,” he said, letting out a deep sigh. Holding up the documents, he continued, “You can leave this to me. I promise to bring this research to fruition.”

Shiro nodded in response, then left the room.

An exhausted Oran dragged himself through the gate to his house. These past two weeks, Oran had also been busy as Herscherik’s knight of service, dealing with matters concerning national defense, overseeing staffing, meeting with the accompanying royal guardsmen and other various leaders, looking over data from past encounters with the empire, gathering information on their current commanders, and more. He had only been able to go home once every three days, and after everyone else was already sleeping at that. In the morning he would fit in some quick sword practice, hurriedly stuff breakfast into his mouth, and then head off to the castle once again.

Having finally finished all preparations for the departure ceremony the day before, today he had been able to go home earlier than usual. Of course, it was still almost midnight when he finally headed out. He assumed that his family were already sleeping, only to find his brothers waiting for him by the door.

“What’s up, guys?”

“What do you *think* is up? We were waiting for our younger brother who’s nervous about his first military expedition tomorrow.” The brother closest to Oran in age—Krehl, the second son of the Aldis family—teased his confused younger brother with an endearing smile on his face. Next to him stood the eldest son Georges, as well-built as his father, who shrugged his shoulders with

a resigned expression on his chiseled face.

“Well, not that I could see Octa ever being nervous.”

Oran answered his two brothers with a vague smile.

I can't really claim that I'm completely calm... he thought, but kept it to himself. He was indeed a bit nervous; but it was just the right amount of nervousness, the kind that would help you focus just before a match.

“Mother and Father are waiting for you,” his eldest brother said, showing him inside. Oran stepped into the house and headed for the living room, where he found his father Roland and his mother Anne, as well as his little sister Lillianne looking a little sleepy.

But that was not all that was waiting for him. In front of the hearth had been placed a brand new suit of armor. The breastplate, pauldrons, and gauntlets were designed to completely cover the upper body, while knee-guards, greaves, and sturdy sabbatons protected the legs. The entire suit of armor was colored a dark, bloody crimson.

“Is this...”

“We had this made for tomorrow,” his mother replied to the stunned Oran with a gentle smile. “Octavian, compared to your father and your older brothers, you still lack physical strength. However, your dexterity more than compensates for that, and that will be your greatest weapon on the battlefield. Keeping that in mind, we had the armor made from sturdy but light material, so as not to hamper your speed. I’m so glad it was finished in time for your departure.”

Oran was surprised and confused at hearing all this from his mother, who until then had never ventured a single opinion on sword fighting or battle.

“What’s this color?” It was a deep crimson, very much like blood. He was reminded of his own white outfit, stained a dark red after the battle at the church.

“This is the color of your resolve, isn’t it?” Anne smiled knowingly—just as she had on that day.

The day they had prevented the Church's act of terrorism, his siblings had all been speechless at the sight of him drenched in blood. Even his battle-hardened father seemed to be at a loss for words. However, his mother simply took his blood-stained uniform and directed him to the bathroom, smiling as usual all the while.

"That's my son," she had said just as she closed the bathroom door. At the time, Oran had assumed she was referring to his prevention of the terrorist attack. However, he now understood what she really meant. No matter how it was dressed up, in the end murder was still murder. Oran had accepted his crimes and continued on despite all of it, and this was what Anne had praised her son for.

Anne saw the look on Oran's face and, still smiling, continued speaking.

"You have resolved to tread a thorny path with Prince Herscherik. The only thing I can do as your mother is to see you off. Continue down that path, in a manner befitting a member of the Aldis family."

Oran nodded in response and stood before the suit of armor, which brilliantly reflected the light back in shades of red. As long as he stayed by Herscherik's side, as long as he stood on the battlefield, this armor would probably never lose its color, he thought.

"Octavian, take this," his father Roland said, handing him a sword. As Oran picked it up, his eyes widened in amazement. Despite this being his first time holding the weapon, it felt as natural to him as a sword that had been with him for many years. He unsheathed it to find himself reflected in the laboriously polished silver blade.

He stepped away from his family and practiced a few swings with the sword; just as he'd thought, it did not at all feel like this was his first time holding it. Oran stopped his practice swings and carefully studied the weapon as Roland started speaking again.

"This is the legendary sword that was given to the Aldis family when the title of marquis was bestowed upon us."

"What? Really?" Oran replied, confused at hearing the words "legendary sword." He was already aware that the Aldis family had received some kind of

phenomenal weapon instead of being granted territory when they received the title of marquis. However, Oran had envisioned something very extravagant, and this sword was a far cry from that. While it was indeed beautiful, it was wholly undecorated, a practical sword made for combat. The sheath, too, was adorned with no gems or gold. It was a simple sword that would not have looked out of place in the stock of your average weapons merchant.

“This is one of the Divine Arms blessed by the goddess of war herself. It’s said this sword will never dull or break no matter how many you slay with it, and the more blood it drinks, the brighter the silver blade will shine and the sharper its edge will become.”

Oran once again fixed his gaze on the sword after hearing his father speak. The Divine Arms were, just as the name implied, weapons that had received the blessing of the goddess of war, and only ten existed in the entire world. They were said to house a mystical power distinct from Magic. Legends regarding these weapons ranged from fanciful tales of their wielder always emerging victorious from battle and enjoying endless good fortune, to horror stories of being cursed to keep fighting until you died or being forced to kill one person every day lest your soul be forfeit. There were even stories of one kingdom becoming so obsessed with the Divine Arms that they waged war on any country that possessed one.

Oran would never have guessed that one of those weapons could be found in his own house.

“Is this... real...?”

“I couldn’t tell you. But what I can tell you is that I have never polished or sharpened this sword even once in my life.” No matter how stained with blood it became, a single swing of the sword and it would always regain its luster, and its surface had never been so much as scratched.

Oran stood silent, stunned.

“Octavian, do you understand why the Aldis family was given not territory, not wealth, but this sword alone?” his father asked, turning a sharp gaze toward Oran, who did not know how to answer.

The sword was indeed a legendary treasure; however, it was not suitable as a

reward. If this really was one of the Divine Arms blessed by the goddess, as his father claimed, then it was too great of a responsibility for a simple noble family.

Roland continued.

“This sword is proof of the faith this country has in the Aldis family. We protect the kingdom, the people, and our own masters as well. That’s what the Aldis family is.” The king at the time had requested the loyalty and the power of the Aldis family, and had trusted the family enough to bestow this legendary sword upon them.

“I... was unable to protect my own master,” Roland said bitterly, narrowing his eyes as he dug up old memories. He had lost the man he served to some intrigue, and in order to fulfill his master’s last wish, Roland had devoted his life to protecting the country. However, he had been unable to wield this sword since. “Don’t end up like me. Make sure to protect your master, your country, and your convictions. And come home in one piece.”

Oran closed his eyes for a moment and took a deep breath. He then sheathed his sword, and took a knee.

“I swear.” It was a short statement, but one steeped in his resolve.

After explaining the schedule starting the following day, Oran retreated to his room, where he walked up to a desk by the window without putting on a light. He then picked up a wooden box from the top of the desk, opened it, and removed a ribbon. It was the very same ribbon, the color of his own hair, that he had been unable to give his fiancée in the past.

“This time, I swear I won’t fail.”

He held the ribbon to his chest as he spoke the name of the woman he had loved.

Kuro was preparing for the following day in his room. He was not wearing his butler’s uniform, instead being clad in simple attire. Even so, the outfit he was wearing was the same shade as his hair, proof that just as the name he had been granted by his master suggested, he did indeed like the color black.

On the top of his desk, a number of assassination tools were laid out. There were, of course, bladed weapons like knives and daggers; chemicals like gunpowder, poison, and antidotes; and finally a long, thin wire like a steel thread. He scrupulously tended each of the items in front of him.

With the wire in particular he took meticulous care. This wire looked like a single thread at a glance, but in reality it consisted of many very fine steel strands spun together to make a single wire. Each of these strands additionally had a magic formula engraved into it, causing it to extend when Magic was poured into it. This made it possible to manipulate the wire, down to its durability and sharpness, at will. It was the product of state-of-the-art research from his home country.

After finishing up by winding the wire around a special spool, Kuro let out a sigh as he massaged his own shoulders. He was always careful when it came to weapon maintenance, but today he had been especially so. Looking at the clock, he saw that it was already past midnight.

Already this late, huh... Two hours had passed since he started, and he had been so absorbed in his work that he hadn't noticed the passage of time.

Suddenly, he heard a faint noise, and he turned his eyes toward the door the sound had come from. This was not the door that led to the corridor, but one that was connected directly to Herscherik's room. Being Herscherik's butler, he had been given a room adjacent to Herscherik's to allow him to reach his master without having to go through the hallway.

Is he still awake? Herscherik had sent his men of service home, claiming that he was going to bed to ensure that he would make it in time for the ceremony that started early the next day. Kuro sighed, stood up, and walked toward Herscherik's room. As he reached out for the door knob, however, he suddenly stopped in his tracks, turned around, and left through the door leading to the corridor instead.

In a dark room lit by nothing but the moonlight, Herscherik was sitting on a sofa by the window, hugging his knees as he absentmindedly gazed up at the night sky. In his hand was the silver pocket watch, which he would occasionally

stroke with his thumb. He would then look down to observe it for a moment, only to return his gaze to the sky shortly after.

I know I have to sleep, but... Herscherik muttered in his head. The next day was the departure ceremony. After the initial ceremony, a large procession would march through the castle town, to then head straight for the border fort. As the ceremony started first thing in the morning, he had sent his men of service away early and climbed into bed.

However, despite lying in his bed with his eyes closed, and no matter how many sheep he counted, he had been unable to sleep. And so, having given up on sleeping, he was now gazing at the night sky.

“Takes you back to four years ago, doesn’t it, Klaus?” Herscherik spoke to an empty room. He had never forgotten what happened during his third birthday party—the day he had learned about the dark side of his country. Herscherik pondered what he would be doing now had he never picked up the pocket watch, and had he never met that man. Perhaps he would have enjoyed a blissful life as a royal, without a care in the world, ignorant of how he was being sheltered.

“It took four years. Four long years...” Herscherik whispered, subconsciously tightening his grip on the pocket watch.

“Hersch.” A voice could be heard in the darkness. Herscherik turned in the direction of the voice, where a shadow seemed to be moving. He knew right away who it was.

“Kuro, are you still up?”

“That’s my line,” Kuro replied, disgruntled, as he appeared from the shadows holding two mugs. “You’re the one who told us to go to bed early tonight, you know.”

Herscherik could do nothing but smile awkwardly in response.

“Here, drink this. And go to sleep already.”

Herscherik took one of Kuro’s mugs to find that it contained warm milk.

“Thank you,” he said, but just as he was about to take a sip from the mug, he

froze. He was reminded of a previous time when he'd drank something offered to him. "Kuro, don't tell me..."

"I haven't added anything this time." Kuro shrugged at the sight of his master glaring at him and took a sip from his own mug. Herscherik let out a small sigh in response and took a drink. He could detect a faint taste of honey as his face relaxed and he could feel tension he hadn't even been aware of slowly dissipating.

"Seriously, what butler would drug his master?" the now relaxed Herscherik jokingly reproached Kuro.

After having stopped the Church's terrorist attack and having said farewell to Marquis Barbosse's daughter at her funeral, Herscherik had spent every waking moment investigating the injustices that were rampant in the country.

"I can't rest. I have to do this. Otherwise she would have died in my stead for nothing," Herscherik had said desperately, worrying both his siblings and his men of service. Yet he had continued, without sparing them a thought, playing an innocent and gentle prince by day and ravaging the archives of each department at night. Pushing himself to the limit in his investigation, he started sleeping so little that it looked more like he was only passing out for a moment.

Herscherik had a tendency to fall ill if he didn't get enough sleep over a given period. Knowing this, his butler had attempted to warn him many times, but his master had refused to take heed. In the end, Kuro had taken extreme measures to force his master to get some rest—he'd spiked his tea with sleeping pills. Now, these were not the same poor-quality pills that Herscherik had been given on the occasion of his kidnapping some years ago—with the right dosage there were no side effects, and they relieved stress as they gently put you to sleep. Kuro had made good use of his contacts in order to procure only the highest quality goods.

The first day, Herscherik had simply assumed he was tired. The second day, he'd become puzzled, and on the third day he had noticed that something was wrong and started questioning his butler.

"But you refused to listen, Hersch," Kuro quietly and coldly reprimanded Herscherik, to which the prince had no choice but to admit his mistake.

By then, he had slowly started to realize that he was pushing himself too much. He was unable to focus during morning classes, his attacks were deflected even more easily than normal during his sword training, and during horse riding practice he nearly fell right out of the saddle. So he understood why Kuro had tried to force him to rest, and regretted having made him worry.

“I’d say I’m a good fit for a master who doesn’t even even reprimand his butler for drugging him,” Kuro said with a sly smile on his face, at which Herscherik started laughing.

“It’s been three years, almost four, since we first met...” Those four years felt like they had passed by quickly in some ways, but slowly in others. If not for Kuro, Herscherik would have remained nothing more than a powerless child. The same was true of Oran, Shiro, his siblings, and everyone else who had supported him over the years. With no skills or magic or any other abilities to speak of, he would never have come this far on his own.

“Thank y—”

“Hersch, it’s too early to thank me. We’re only just getting started,” Kuro interrupted Herscherik, who nodded in response.

That’s right. We can’t forget the purpose of all the preparations we’ve made. The real fight is only just beginning.

As if to fire himself up, Herscherik gulped down the rest of his milk in one go.

An enormous number of servants decorated both sides of the throne room, giving it the appearance of a valley with a red carpet running down the center—one end by the entrance, the other by the throne. Sitting on that throne was the king, Solye, and by his side stood the minister, Barbosse. Amidst the murmuring of the servants, a voice announced the entrance of the central figure of the day, and all eyes turned toward the doors.

The doors opened slowly, almost as if to prolong the moment, and a small figure appeared. Wearing a dark violet military uniform with gold embroidery, a royal red mantle fluttering behind him, the kingdom’s youngest prince, Herscherik, majestically made his way down the carpet. His men of service followed behind him, his light golden hair swaying as he walked; he fixed his

eyes, the same emerald color as his father's, straight ahead.

Herscherik's face was devoid of his usually sunny smile, and his mouth was now set in a line. He stepped firmly as he walked down the red carpet, stopping as he reached the throne; there he kneeled, one hand on his chest, as he bowed his head before his father. His men of service followed their master's example.

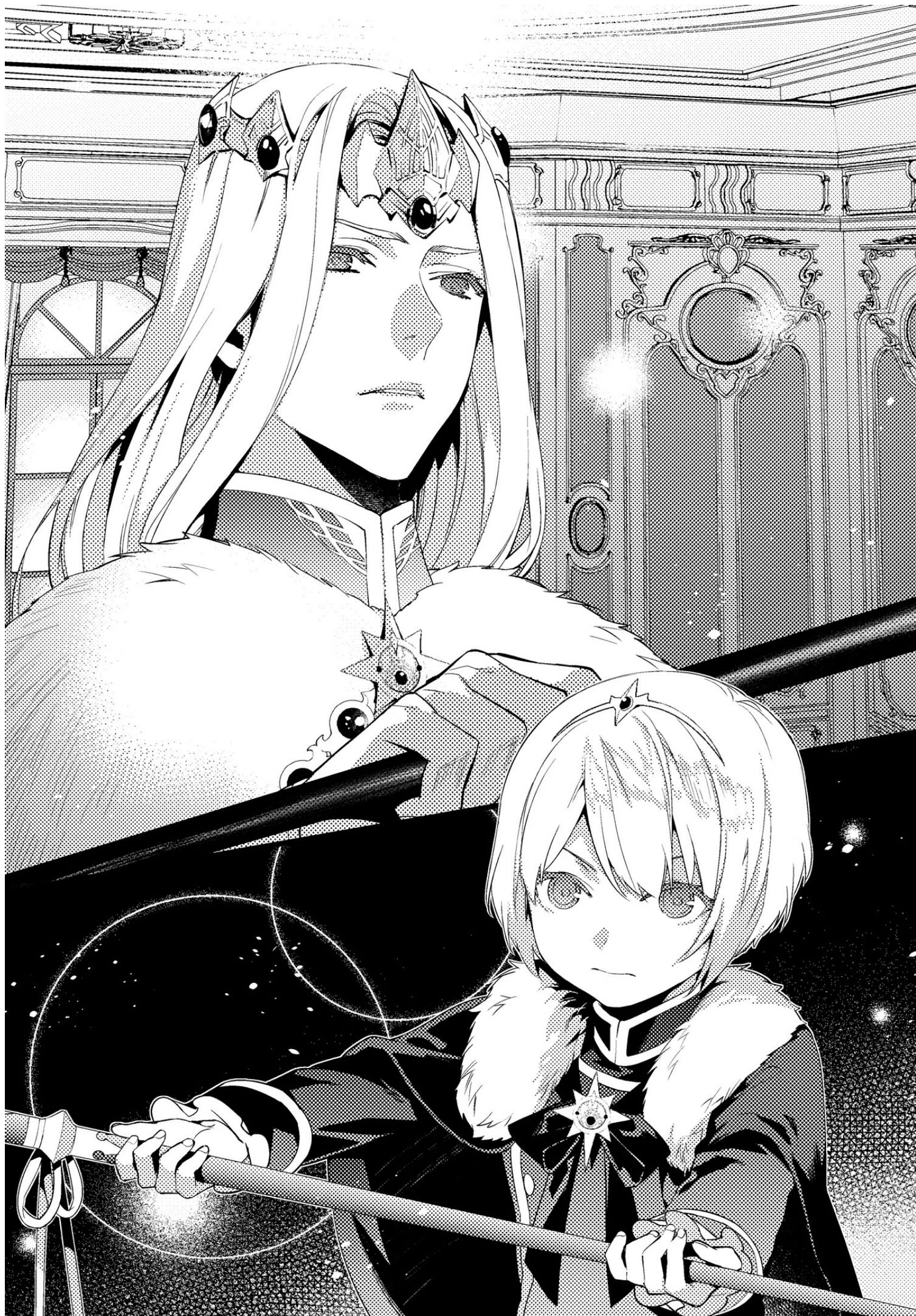
Solye stood up and nodded, took from the minister a golden grand marshal's staff, made to match Herscherik's height, and handed it to his son.

"Herscherik Gracis. I hereby declare thee my proxy, and bestow upon thee this staff. Thou shalt command an army, twenty thousand strong, to drive away the forces that threaten our land."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Herscherik looked up in response to his father's ceremonious voice. He then stood, accepted the grand marshal's staff, and looked at Solye. He smiled for a moment, attempting to offer some comfort to his pale and distraught father, before once again putting a solemn expression on his face.

"For the sake of Your Majesty, for the sake of the people, and above all for the sake of Gracis, my fatherland, I swear to ward off the enemy without fail."



After he finished speaking, Herscherik bowed once, his mantle fluttering, before turning around and leaving the way he came. His men of service followed after him. With them in tow, he then headed straight from the throne room to the front gate. He walked through a pair of open doors, and an army of soldiers waiting in formation came into view.

At the very front stood two generals, the commanding officers of this expedition. One was Teodor Seghin, a noble with the rank of viscount. The other was Heath Blaydes, a mercenary-turned-general. Both men took a deep bow as Herscherik appeared, at which all other soldiers and knights also bowed in perfect unison.

Herscherik raised the grand marshal's staff, and raised his voice.

"Soldiers, march!"

The moment he spoke, the band commenced its performance, the two generals mounted their horses, and the procession of soldiers started moving. Herscherik himself boarded a carriage prepared for the departure ceremony. The carriage had no roof nor sides and was higher off the ground than a normal carriage. If an adult man were to ride it, only his knees and above would be visible to the people on the streets. Herscherik, being a child—and shorter than average at that—stood atop a riser that had been placed on the carriage for him. Shiro boarded the carriage along with him, taking his place behind Herscherik. Kuro was to serve as the coachman, while Oran rode a horse of his own.

With the preparations in place, all that was left was to wait for the carriage to begin moving. Herscherik took a deep breath.

It finally begins... The day had finally come. He had known it would come sooner or later. It was the day when the people of the castle town, whom he had grown so close to, would learn the truth.

The carriage started moving, and Herscherik stood firmly on his riser, trying to avoid an unsightly fall. As they advanced, the voices of the townspeople could be heard, and the end of Herscherik's days in the castle town as Ryoko came nearer.

Herscherik closed his eyes as the carriage proceeded, opening them again just as they passed through the castle gate into town. He saw a clear blue sky, fluttering flags showing a brightly colored sunburst, the marching soldiers, as well as the waving townspeople. In the crowd of citizens who had come to see the soldiers off, Herscherik spotted the couple from the candy store who would always share some of their wares with him. They had opened their eyes wide in shock at the sight. And they weren't the only ones—as the prince advanced down the street, the voices of the townspeople turned from excited cheering to confusion as they recognized him.

Keeping his face turned straight ahead while still letting his gaze wander, he noticed Louise being held up by her husband. Among the children from the orphanage who had come to watch, he also saw Vivi, Colette, as well as an angry-looking Rick. Everyone who knew Ryoko had a bewildered look on their faces.

No, this won't do. Herscherik couldn't make them worry. A royal must *never* be responsible for making the people worry. To the people, the royal family was the face of their country.

Herscherik lifted his head and put on his usual sunny smile. Even if they came to hate him for deceiving them or abandoned him in disgust, as a prince of this country, he still wanted to protect them. That was his own wish, as well as his duty.

So smile. Smile. Smile.

Smile so that their worry will vanish. Smile so that they know everything is all right. Smile so that they have hope for the future.

After all, that is what he himself wished for.

Thus began Herscherik's first military campaign, one which would one day come to be referred to as the first chapter of the Kingdom in Turmoil.

Chapter Three: The Expedition, the New Recruit, and the Midnight Practice

Three days had passed since the expedition left the capital, and the royal army was steadily advancing toward the border fort. Occasionally they would encounter monsters on the way, but each time the army of twenty thousand defeated them as effortlessly as brushing dirt off their clothes. The horses and carriages would follow the paved roads during the day and set up camp at night, all the while advancing on schedule.

Herscherik had prior experience with carriages from his visit to what was now Count Grim's territory. Back then they had traveled slowly out of consideration for Herscherik, though he had still come down with a rather serious case of motion sickness. This time, however, as the goal of the expedition was to reinforce the border fort as soon as possible, they had spared no thought for Herscherik and proceeded at a normal pace. As a result, Herscherik was now suffering through an even worse nightmare than last time.

"Are you still alive...?" Shiro, picturesque even when doing nothing but simply sitting still, said to Herscherik—currently buried in a pile of pillows.

Herscherik only waved his hand in response, his face so pale that he looked as though his soul might exit his body at any moment. No trace remained of the dignified aura he had exuded during the departure ceremony. Shiro frowned, unable to tell whether his waving meant that he was fine or not.

Herscherik and Shiro were currently riding in a carriage reserved for the royal family. Kuro served as its coachman, while Oran was riding his own horse right next to them.

"Ugh... If only it was possible to teleport there instantly..." Herscherik groaned feebly. He had been prone to motion sickness even in his previous life, a disposition that inexplicably had stayed with him even after reincarnating into a new body. Complaining internally about how unfair life was, he thought about how if he could have access to but one of the items belonging to a certain blue

cat robot from the future from a certain cartoon, he would, without hesitation, choose the door that let you go anywhere instantly.

“Well, it’s not necessarily *impossible*...”

“What? Is that true, Shiro?!” Herscherik suddenly sprung up and closed in on Shiro. This was a fantasy world where magic existed, after all. Perhaps there was some incredible artifact that could do just that, Herscherik mused, as the very thought made his heart race. With a disappointed look on his face, Shiro replied to the expectant Herscherik.

“Space linking... It’s an Ancient form of magic that has been lost to time.”

“Space linking?” a confused Herscherik asked, as Shiro continued explaining, now totally in professor mode.

“Yes, it’s just what it sounds like. Magic that links together two spaces, or rather, two locations. Remember how I explained that there are three branches of magic?”

Herscherik nodded.

“Elemental magic, Divine magic, and Manipulation magic, right?”

“Correct. However, that is simply how we humans categorize the magic that we’re able to use. The various peoples of the world have different names for them, and the types of magic they can use differ as well. There is magic that only beastmen and demihumans can wield, as well as magic that cannot be easily categorized.”

Herscherik corrected his posture, as if he was listening to one of Shiro’s lessons. He was so absorbed in what Shiro had to say that he completely forgot everything about the motion sickness that had been tormenting him until now.

“Currently, we collectively refer to all the magic of the Ancient era—magic straight out of fairy tales, whose principles and formulas are yet to be understood—as ‘Ancient Magic.’”

“Huh, is that so?”

“That went right out the other ear, didn’t it?” Shiro chastised Herscherik, who replied awkwardly.

“I mean, I can’t use magic to begin with, so I don’t really understand *any* kind of magic...”

“Well, I suppose that’s true...” Shiro understood where Herscherik was coming from. To Herscherik, who possessed no Magic Within, even Shiro himself must have seemed like a being out of a fairy tale. “Elemental magic converts Magic from one form to another. Manipulation magic manipulates Magic itself. However, the process of linking two locations neither converts Magic nor does it manipulate it. Instead, it interferes with space itself *using* Magic.”

“I... see...?” Herscherik replied, still confused. However, Shiro was now in nerd mode, paying no heed to the fact that he had already lost Herscherik, as he continued speaking.

“It’s a kind of spellcasting that affects space, something that has no physical form and cannot be seen. The fact that they were able to wield this kind of magic speaks volumes as to how powerful the people of the Ancient era were, and how advanced their magical research was.”

“Well, I don’t really get what you’re saying, but I do get that it’s incredible enough to get you excited,” Herscherik said, perfectly serious, causing Shiro to deliver a swift chop to the top of his head.

“Violence is bad!”

“I don’t care.”

Herscherik rubbed his head where Shiro had hit him, dejected from having his remark brushed aside so casually, when he suddenly realized something.

“But wait, Shiro—there are magical items that can transmit voices, right? How do they work, then?” The objects Herscherik had mentioned were magical items that served a similar purpose to the cell phones of Herscherik’s previous life, although their actual function was more akin to walkie-talkies. You could only communicate with another item that you had paired it with in advance, and you needed to be a relatively competent Spellcaster to use it in the first place. But if you could communicate with someone using an item like that, it meant the two of you were linked somehow, Herscherik thought. How exactly did it transmit the voices, then?

Shiro smiled knowingly at Herscherik's question.

"Yes, those items are made by imitating Ancient relics. They do indeed interfere with space to transmit the voices."

"What? So, that interference magic you mentioned—it's not impossible after all?"

Shiro nodded in response to Herscherik's excitement, but sighed as he continued with a disappointed tone in his voice.

"However, even simply transmitting voices requires a great deal of Magic. In addition, the formulas to specify the coordinates and direction are rather complicated. If you wanted to transport a whole body using that kind of space linking magic, I can't even imagine how many magical formulas you would have to devise. You'd probably need something on the scale of a Magic circle, at least."

"I see... That's too bad." If even a prodigy like Shiro thought it too difficult, it truly must be so. Herscherik gave up on the idea.

However, Shiro then asked Herscherik a question.

"Would you like it if space linking magic existed, Hersch?"

"Well... I'd be pretty happy if it did, considering how easily I get sick in carriages," Herscherik replied sincerely. In response, Shiro nodded, picked up some paper, and started scribbling with his fountain pen.

"Shiro?" Herscherik asked, wondering what Shiro was doing

"I've had an interest in this topic for a while," Shiro responded. "And if I can get some practical use out of the attempt, there's no harm in trying," he added with a frown, as if trying to hide his embarrassment. Herscherik smiled, secretly both surprised and happy at Shiro's rare display of awkward affection.

"Thank you, Shiro."

"It's not like... I just *said* I was interested in it myself, didn't I?"

Herscherik worried that Shiro, now blushing slightly, might get motion sick from all the writing as he turned his gaze toward the window and observed the view outside. He saw Oran riding on his horse beside them and waved his hand.

Noticing Herscherik, Oran waved back.

Herscherik then moved his gaze toward the front, where he saw a large number of soldiers riding carriages and knights mounted on their horses. The view behind him was much the same. Herscherik was located in the center of the procession; the army was divided into two divisions, with Herscherik right in between them. The front division was led by General Teodor Seghin and the back division by General Heath Blaydes.

Herscherik, being royalty and the king's proxy, held supreme command of the army on paper. However, in practice, the supreme commander in battle was Viscount Seghin. The reason it was Teodor and not Heath, who was also a general, was that Heath was a commoner and a former mercenary.

While grappling with his slowly returning motion sickness, Herscherik thought back to the meeting he'd attended prior to their departure. The two generals he had met there could not have been more different from each other.

There were two ways to become a general. One was through skill and experience—as proven through battle, defeating monsters, or doing well in the Games of Contest. The other was, to put it bluntly, networking. While you still needed some amount of skill and military expertise, your rank as a noble and your connections meant much more. With the right connections, you could make it to general through the support of the higher-ups at National Defense.

Teodor Seghin belonged to the latter category; he had an air about him that seemed to scream nobility, and belonged to the latter category. He was neither terrible nor exemplary as a general, but he had a tendency to prioritize himself over others. He cared little for the lives of his soldiers if it meant he could distinguish himself by winning a battle, and would sacrifice towns and villages for the sake of victory. However, those sacrifices had indeed gotten results. Incidentally, he held the rank of viscount and was thirty-nine years of age.

Heath Blaydes, on the other hand, was a former mercenary who had risen through the ranks almost purely through his own skill and achievements, before ending up as a general, for better or worse. He always tried to minimize casualties during battle and cared little for his own prestige. He always seemed listless and unmotivated, but his soldiers placed great faith in him, and there

were even many who would request to be reassigned to his command specifically. He was also excellent at predicting the enemy's movements and making decisions—or so Oran had heard from Roland.

“Heath is one of Father's victims—I mean, former subordinates, so they know each other,” Oran had said in a slightly vexed tone. Apparently Heath had usually been the one to clean up after Oran's father. While Roland was busy rampaging, Heath would manage the soldiers and command them during operations.

Of course, Roland was more than capable of commanding the soldiers himself. However, ever since acquiring Heath as a subordinate, Roland had more or less left him in charge of the whole army as a welcoming gift—though Heath himself had considered that an outrageous request. While the whole situation was a travesty as far as Heath was concerned, to those around him it had been a stroke of good luck, as he actually possessed the skill needed to pull off the general's outrageous requests. And not only was he good at making quick decisions, he was also more than a match for Roland himself in combat. The ax he wielded mowed down enemies in equal numbers to the Blazing General.

“While he's not very pleased about it, he was the only worthy successor to my father,” Oran added. He himself had been trained in the sword by Heath.

Herscherik quietly wondered if it really made sense for a general like Roland to go rampaging by himself like that as he thought back to the first time he'd met Heath. The general was almost the same age as Herscherik had been in his previous life. His first impression of him had been less that of an officer and more of a common mercenary.

“Well, good to have you with us, I suppose,” he had greeted Herscherik casually, immediately drawing a blow from his adjutant—which took Herscherik by surprise. Watching Heath as his adjutant ruffled his evenly cut, blue-gray hair, it was difficult to tell who was actually in charge.

Suddenly, the carriage stopped. Herscherik removed his pocket watch from his breast pocket to find that it was already past four in the afternoon.

“I guess that's it for today's marching.”

The march was expected to take a total of two weeks. Assuming nothing unexpected happened, they would arrive at the fort right on schedule.

If all goes according to plan, that is... Herscherik muttered internally.

Having finished setting up camp, the soldiers who weren't currently on patrol were enjoying some leisure time. One of them—a nervous young man with chestnut-colored hair carrying a tray holding vegetable soup, hard bread, and a red fruit—came up to Herscherik and bowed.

"I-I have brought Y-Your Highness's meal for the e-eveding!" he said, his cheeks burning red out of embarrassment after fumbling the last word. Even after straightening his back again, he was unable to look the prince in the eye, instead staring down at the ground as he presented the tray.

This particular soldier's name was Roy Bildt, the eldest son of a poor merchant, a boy soldier who had just enlisted in the army this spring. Young boys who had not yet come of age were still allowed to enlist in the army as boy soldiers, in order to learn the ways of the military. Their main duties consisted of training and maintaining weapons and armor, as well as looking after the older knights. Once they came of age, they would become ordinary soldiers.

Roy had decided to join the army instead of taking over the family business for one simple reason—money. It's said children are a poor man's riches, and Roy had four younger siblings. However, his poor merchant father struggled to improve his revenue, while his expenses only increased with rising taxes and costs of goods. His parents worked as hard as they could, but they still struggled to feed a family of seven.

And so, Roy enlisted. As a soldier, he received a regular salary, and he was also exempt from paying certain taxes. Living in the barracks, he himself had all the food he needed, and his daily necessities were provided for as well. Thus, he could afford to support his family, who would be able to lead a modest life on Roy's salary and his parents' income.

Work as a boy soldier was tough, but there were some good things that came with it too. Roy was fond of reading books, but as a boy soldier he did not have permission to enter the royal library. Even regular soldiers had to request

permission, and as he was sending his entire salary back home, he had given up on the idea of buying books, too.

However, by pure coincidence he became friends with a librarian who worked at the royal library. When Roy mentioned that he enjoyed books but was too poor to buy any, the librarian volunteered to borrow books from the library under his own name and lend them to Roy.

As Roy bowed repeatedly in gratitude, the librarian smiled and said, “Don’t worry about it. I’ve been a bookworm ever since I was a boy, so I understand what you’re going through. Oh, but since they’re borrowed in my name, do make sure not to get them dirty.”

Roy only learned later that the man was himself a commoner who had joined the academy on a scholarship and graduated at the top of his class. He was now working as a librarian—and was famous for being uptight about the handling of books.

After a long day of training and work, a bit of reading before bed was the one thing that the exhausted Roy had to look forward to.

Roy had a dream—he wanted to become an author. Though poor, he was still the son of a merchant, and he had learned how to read and write when he was very young. He wished to one day travel the world and compile his experiences into a book—that was his grand and idealistic dream.

However, reality had not been not so kind to Roy. Money was more important than his vision, and food more important than books. So Roy let that dream remain a dream and enlisted in the army, which ultimately resulted in his participation in the expedition at hand. His job during the march was not very different from his work in the capital: weapon maintenance, caring for the horses, preparing the meals, and other menial tasks. However, one particularly important item was suddenly added to his list of duties.

“Vegetable soup?” The Seventh Prince’s butler took the tray from Roy, muttering in a somewhat grumpy voice. His eyes, a dark ruby color like that of blood, examined the soup suspiciously—though Roy was unable to tell that, with his glance still fixed on the ground. That moment quickly passed, however, as Kuro soon thanked Roy and turned around. “Thank you. You are excused.”

Roy raised his head and looked in the direction the butler was walking, where a small child sat by a campfire. The little boy reached out to take a tray from the butler.

So that's Prince Herscherik... He really is just a child. I think he might be thinner than my brother. He had only ever watched the prince from a distance, but he looked even smaller than one of Roy's younger brothers, despite being ostensibly the same age. He was clad in first-class clothing, but he seemed so delicate that Roy wondered if he might not break if touched.

Roy's heart ached at the thought of a prince the same age as one of his brothers having to march off to battle. Roy had chosen to become a soldier, but the little prince had never even been given a choice about any of this.

"What is it?"

Roy jumped at hearing a sudden voice behind him. When he turned around, there stood a knight with sunset-colored hair who was looking curiously at him. Roy knew who this man was, with his distinctive hair color and his somewhat downturned blue eyes. On the march he wore deep crimson armor, making him stand out amongst the other soldiers, but now he was wearing a simple outfit made from black cloth.

This is the Vanquisher of a Hundred Zealots?! He was the third son of the so-called "Blazing General" Roland Aldis, and he had recently become famous for having prevented an uprising by the Church—slaying a hundred maddened templars without suffering so much as a single scratch in the process. He was also well-known among the army and the constabulary for having been the youngest person to take first place in a fighting competition, and for taking on many a soldier and knight with ease during his later training sessions. Not a single person his age in the entire kingdom could stand up to him, or so Roy had heard the soldiers say. Based on these stories, Roy had envisioned someone large and bulky, but to his astonishment the young man before him could very well be described as slender. Standing beside the prince during the departure ceremony, he had seemed like a young hero straight out of a fairy tale.

Roy hurriedly bowed to the knight.

"I-I'm sorry! I was delivering food to His Highness..."

“Oh, I see. Hersch—Uh, Prince Herscherik did insist on having the same food as everyone else. Sorry for the trouble.” Oran accidentally called Herscherik by his usual nickname, but quickly corrected himself.

It had all started when Herscherik had refused to be the only one eating luxurious meals. “We’re all marching together, so it makes no sense that I’m the only one eating like this.”

On the march, meals tended to be modest out of necessity. On a *good* day soup might be served; most meals consisted of a slice of bread and some dried meat. However, royals and nobles would generally be served different food. Herscherik would not stand for this, and while Kuro would complain about Herscherik not getting the nutrition he needed, in the end the butler gave up and let Herscherik eat the same food as the soldiers. As an unintended side effect, the higher-ups had said to at least include soup with every meal since the prince would be eating it, which made the soldiers happy.

“Did you do this so they’d be forced to improve the food they serve to soldiers?” Oran had asked before they departed, to which Herscherik had smiled like a mischievous child.

Oran looked toward his master, who noticed his gaze and waved in response. Beside him, his Spellcaster was reading a book; his butler was the only one on the move, elegantly preparing drinks, peeling fruits, and otherwise tending to his master.

“Well, I’ll be heading back. Are you one of the boy soldiers? Let me know if you ever need anything.”

“S-Sir Aldis!” Roy shouted, his voice cracking, as Oran was attempting to leave. He knew that Oran’s offer was simply common courtesy. However, at the sight of Oran’s gentle expression, Roy could not help but want to rely on him.

“Hm?”

“If you would listen to one of my requests, please teach me how to fight!”

Oran looked puzzled in response to Roy’s request. “How to fight? You’re already learning how to handle weapons in the army, aren’t you? And I may have the fundamentals down, but a lot of my fighting style I cobbled together

myself, so I don't think I'll be of much help to you."

Roy had once heard something similar from an instructor so tough that "tough" didn't come close to describing him. "He can use both the methodical fighting style of a knight and the crude tactics of a mercenary. It's not just hard work—he's an absolute natural. Ordinary people couldn't hope to imitate him," the instructor had said. Oran himself worked more on instinct than anything else when fighting, so he couldn't teach anyone even if he wanted.

However, Roy refused to back down. He couldn't waste this opportunity.

"I know I'm weak... But I can't die here!" Roy had had a nagging feeling that perhaps he wasn't cut out to be a soldier. He couldn't handle weapons well, and was always getting berated by the instructor during training. Even among the boy soldiers who enlisted at the same time as him, he was by far the least impressive.

"So why did you join the army, then?" Oran asked with a voice somewhat quieter than before, making Roy tremble for a moment. "If you join the army, you'll inevitably be putting your life at risk."

"That's..." Roy suppressed the urge to turn his gaze downward, straightened his back and looked Oran right in the eyes. "I wanted to help my family. That's why I have to make it back home alive."

Boy soldiers had little risk of being sent to the front lines, but it was not completely out of the question. Were he to be sent there, he needed to make sure that he would make it back alive. And while his family would receive some compensation in the event that he died, it would be nothing in comparison to the salary and tax exemptions that Roy had enjoyed so far. His family would starve.

His eyes filled with determination, Roy held Oran's gaze. In response, Oran softened his stern expression and sighed.

"All right, fine. But just remember, all I can teach you is the fundamentals, so don't get your hopes up too high."

"Thank you so much!" Roy bowed deeply in gratitude.

Once all his work was finished, Roy headed for the location Oran had designated, leaving the camp and entering the nearby forest. As he walked, he heard a wolf howl somewhere far away, momentarily paralyzing him with fear—but even so, he walked on resolutely. After all, the man of the hour, the Seventh Prince’s knight of service, was waiting to instruct him.

He exited the forest into a clearing. There he found a small hill, covered in nearly knee-high grass that danced in the wind. Roy had never seen the real thing himself, but the sight reminded him of the sea waves he had seen in a picture book he had been forced to sell long ago.

As he climbed the hill, he found a small child sitting on a boulder. His pale golden hair swayed in the night wind, lit up by the moonlight, and his features were so delicate that he could have been mistaken for a girl. His emerald eyes gazed up at the stars peeking out from between the clouds. He looked like a fairy out of a folktale, but at the same time his beauty was yet immature. Roy was left speechless by the sight.

So this is Prince Herscherik... He was the young prince who had accompanied the expedition as the king’s proxy. Roy had heard that every member of the royal family was beautiful, but as an underling who had never even seen the National Defense-affiliated crown prince up close, he’d assumed the rumors were exaggerated. However, faced with the truth, Roy suddenly felt an urge to punch his past self.

“Who are you?” a curious Herscherik asked Roy, who was still at a loss for words. Roy quickly returned to his senses, but started to panic at the same time. He could never admit to having been captivated by the prince’s appearance, and he would have had nothing to say in his defense if he was accused of disrespecting royalty with his open staring.

As Roy tried his hardest to figure out what to do next, he was saved by a sudden voice.

“Your Highness, this is Roy. I told you about him.”

“Oh, he’s the one!” Herscherik nodded at his knight of service who had just appeared from the top of the hill, jumped down from the boulder, and walked up to Roy.

“Hello! I am Herscherik Gracis.” Herscherik greeted Roy with a smile. Roy was captivated once again for a moment before hurriedly attempting to kneel before the prince, but in his nervousness he stumbled and ended up falling forward instead. He quickly threw his hands out to catch himself, but it ended up looking more like he was grovelling. Roy could feel his face turned red from embarrassment.

“Are you okay?” Roy heard a voice above his head say, but he was unable to look up. Suddenly, he felt someone grab hold of his arm and drag him to his feet. It was of course none other than Oran.

“You didn’t hurt yourself, did you?” Oran asked, inspecting Roy from head to toe. After confirming that nothing seemed wrong with him, he let out a sigh of relief and released his grip. “Yeah, you look fine.”

“I-I-I-I-I’m really sorry!” Roy frantically tried to apologize, bowing so deeply that he was bent in a right angle at the waist, staring down at the ground.

“Prince Herscherik, I sincerely apologize for what just happened!”

In response, an awkward-sounding voice could be heard, but Roy was too nervous to make it out.

“It’s fine. I’m sorry for scaring you. And I’m also sorry for barging in on your meeting with Oran. Please, raise your head.”

Roy slowly and timidly raised his head as instructed, and once he had done so, Herscherik continued apologetically.

“Roy, would you mind if I joined you for your practice session?”

Roy had neither the reason nor the will to turn him down. Looking around, he caught sight of a beautiful girl devoting herself to reading while conjuring a light in one hand. Noticing where Roy was looking, Herscherik explained that this person was in fact Herscherik’s Spellcaster of service.

“He has put up a barrier around this area. No beasts or monsters will be able to approach, so it’s safe here.”

Herscherik and Roy then lined up and commenced their training. Oran gave each of them personalized advice. The two of them would listen closely, swing their swords, and then receive further instruction. However...

“Your Highness, your stance is awful.” Oran avoided his usual nickname for Herscherik around Roy, but as his instructor he also showed no restraint in pointing out Herscherik’s flaws. Roy was taken aback at just how blunt Oran was being, but Herscherik himself seemed unfazed and simply nodded.

“Got it,” Herscherik responded. He adjusted his posture and swung his sword again, only to once again receive a warning from Oran, who put his hands on Herscherik’s arm and hip to correct him.

“No, you’re not getting it. See, your stance is poor because you’re hunched over, and that’s why your attacks are unsteady.”

“Hmm, hmm... Mhm?” Herscherik groaned as he swung his sword again, but it was no better than before. Oran was reminded of something that Herscherik’s current and his own former sword instructor—famous as a real “hard-ass” of a teacher—had once said.

“Prince Herscherik is certainly determined enough, and I can’t say he doesn’t put in the work. But he’s just...” Even this legendarily hard-ass instructor, said to be able to turn even the most timid foot soldier into a real man, was unable to finish his sentence, and let out a sad, feeble laugh. Oran himself had started to feel sorry for Herscherik when he first saw him practice in person.

He just has no talent whatsoever. All the hard work in the world couldn’t make up for that lack. Herscherik himself seemed to realize this, but he still stubbornly continued his training, insisting that it was better than doing nothing. However, lately—starting sometime around spring—he had been putting even more effort than before into his sword practice, even to the point of recklessness. Oran had an idea as to why.

Herscherik had almost lost his life in a brief moment of carelessness during the incident at the church. If not for *her*, the prince would not have been here today. And so, Herscherik had started to put even more effort into his swordsmanship, practicing every spare moment he had. Oran had chosen to simply watch over the prince as he desperately flailed about with his blade.

Oran could tell what was going through Herscherik’s mind as he devoted himself to his training. If only he had the power to protect himself, then *she* wouldn’t have had to lose her life. Oran saw his past self in the prince’s feeling

of powerlessness, a feeling that even now nagged at him deep within his chest.

The butler had not been very enthusiastic about it, but Oran saw no problem with Herscherik holding a sword. He believed that a sword could grant you not only physical strength, but mental strength as well. Thus, he hardened his heart as he instructed Herscherik.

“Just look at Roy. His posture has improved significantly compared to what it was like earlier, and as a result his swings are a lot more stable,” Oran explained to Herscherik, who turned to observe Roy. Feeling Herscherik’s gaze on him, Roy grew nervous.

“That’s not true!” However, Roy’s words failed to reach Herscherik, who was intently staring at his own practice sword as he let out a frustrated groan.

The two of them continued their practice, switching from working on their form to sparring, and just when the two of them were barely able to hold their swords anymore, a man silently emerged from the darkness of the forest. This man was none other than Herscherik’s butler, Kuro, who was carrying a number of canteens.

“Well, with the black dog here, I guess now’s as good a time for a break as any.”

As Roy sat down on a nearby boulder, he could feel both his arms and legs trembling from the effort of holding the sword and maintaining his posture.

“Do you mind if I sit next to you?” Herscherik asked Roy, who was staring down at his trembling hands. Looking up at the prince, who had a few drops of sweat visible on his forehead, Roy hesitated for a moment. His legs, however, were trembling far too much for him to even think of making an escape, so he simply nodded and made room for the prince.

“Here you are, Prince Hersch. And you too, young man.” Kuro had sneaked up on them without so much as a sound, and smiled pleasantly as he handed the two of them canteens. Herscherik thanked Kuro, and Roy did the same as he hesitantly accepted the canteen.

“Hey, black dog, could you give me one of tho—Hey, don’t throw it!”

“Shut up,” the butler said, still smiling, at which the knight voiced his

discontent.

With the arguing of his two men of service as background noise, Herscherik removed the lid of the canteen, held it up to his mouth, and poured its contents down his throat. He closed his eyes as a pleasant breeze caressed his cheeks, when Roy started speaking to him.

“Um... How come Your Highness is practicing the sword?” Roy asked, unaware that members of the royal family received an extensive education from a very young age, with private tutors covering subjects as varied as science, combat, dancing, and music. Herscherik was still too young to even attend the academy. Roy could not understand why a child of Herscherik’s age would be practicing the sword with such fervor.

Herscherik replied dejectedly.

“I want to at least get to the point where I can protect myself... But even though I’ve been practicing my whole life, I still haven’t gotten much better. What about you?”

“I... want to return home alive, as pathetic as that might seem,” Roy responded after a moment’s hesitation, scratching his cheek. It was a spineless reason for someone in the army. If the older soldiers had heard his words, they would surely have either ridiculed him or gotten angry.

However, Herscherik did no such thing.

“I don’t think that’s pathetic at all,” he said earnestly. “It’s important to stay alive. I think it’s great that you’re working hard to do so.”

“Great? Me? Not at all...” Roy replied, blushing. That was the first time someone had ever complimented him like that.

“Besides, if you die, it’s all over,” Herscherik whispered, looking down with a pained expression. He seemed as if he would start crying at any moment.

“Your Highness?” Roy was bewildered at the prince’s sudden change of mood, but before he could say anything further, Oran approached them.

“Okay then, let’s give it one more go from the top before calling it a day.”

Roy was unable to utter the question that was stuck in his throat.

This was the first meeting between the Seventh Prince and the author Roy Bildt, who would go on to pen many a book featuring tales of Herscherik and his accomplishments.

Roy Bildt would later write about their first encounter.

I now believe that it was the god of fate who brought the prince and myself together, in order to record his feats for later generations. That is why I met him, and the reason for which I was born.

— *From the opening chapter of The Life of Herscherik Gracis, by Roy Bildt.*

Chapter Four: The Drizzle, the Gut Feeling, and the Ambush

The army of twenty thousand, led by Herscherik, had so far proceeded on schedule, and only a few days remained until they were expected to arrive at the border fort.

I feel kind of... queasy. Herscherik sighed as he rode in his carriage. However, it wasn't just the shaky carriage that was making him feel sick. *Everything so far is going so well that I feel queasy.*

Herscherik had been forced to take part in the expedition by one of Minister Barbosse's schemes, under the pretext of raising morale and inspiring the soldiers. Herscherik had assumed that Barbosse would attempt something during the march. However, they were now three-fourths of the way from the capital to the border fort, and nothing had occurred yet. Herscherik felt uncomfortable, the absence of trouble needling at him like a small fish bone stuck in his throat.

The outside of the carriage was rather dreary despite it being the middle of the day, with a thick fog limiting Herscherik's view and a light drizzle reducing the temperature. The weather had slowly gotten worse as they approached the border fort, with the occasional shower of heavy rain. This kind of weather was common enough for the region and the time of year, and they'd been expecting it even before they left the capital; as they had planned the expedition with the weather in mind, they were still on schedule. However...

"It's raining all the time, there's a fog, we still have a few days until we arrive... Not to mention the location..." Herscherik mumbled as he sometimes had a habit of doing ever since his previous life, where he would subconsciously talk to himself whenever he was thinking hard about something.

Herscherik analyzed the situation while visualizing the layout of the surrounding area. The road they were traveling was narrow, with tree-covered inclines on both sides. In order to pass through here, the soldiers had

reorganized themselves into a long, thin procession.

Herscherik had a bad feeling about all of this, stemming from his long experience as an *otaku* in his previous life. Horror excepted, he had enjoyed a wide variety of games, books, manga, anime, and movies of almost every genre. He had been particularly fond of war stories. Many of these went into detail not only about battles, but also strategies and tactics. They covered everything from staffing and logistics to march planning and the impact of the terrain and climate on the battlefield.

Had Herscherik been an enemy officer, he would have chosen this location to launch an attack. When he'd first seen a map of this area while planning for the expedition, alarm bells went off in his head. However, with only his intuition to go on, with no proof or grounds for an argument, he could not hope to convince anyone of deviating from the fastest route to the border fort. On top of that, there was one other thing that was worrying him.

Herscherik let out a deep sigh.

"Hersch?" Shiro, who was riding along with him as usual, asked as he lifted his gaze from his book. Herscherik furrowed his brow and groaned in response.

"I've just got this sort of... bad feeling in my gut."

A long, thin line of soldiers; the forested inclines on both sides; cold, miserable weather with limited visibility; soldiers who have let their guard down after a week of marching without any issues... All these facts came together to lend credence to Herscherik's premonition of doom.

Suddenly, there was a commotion outside. Herscherik heard the sound of multiple objects hitting the roof of the carriage and the roars of soldiers. He threw his arms up to shield his face as he fell backwards onto the pile of pillows stacked on his seat. Dust danced in the air inside the carriage, and Shiro grimaced—though Herscherik, his face currently buried in his arms, failed to notice.

"Dammit, my gut feeling was right in the worst possible way," Herscherik mumbled, dejected.

“Fire!”

The voice of an officer who did not belong to the royal army reverberated through the fog. Immediately after, the sound of many objects slicing through the air could be heard from the slopes on both sides, as a rain of arrows showered down upon the procession.

The sudden assault halted the army in its tracks, as the rain of arrows mercilessly dragged knights from their saddles, horses neighed, and the screams of soldiers could be heard as the arrows pierced the cloth roofs of their carriages.

“We’re under attack!”

It was unclear who had shouted, but the voice served as a signal. As if a dam had burst, enemy soldiers flooded down from the inclines by the road, dividing the long line of soldiers. Those who had survived the rain of arrows leaped from their carriages and attempted to pick up their weapons, but they were pierced from behind by swords and spears and dropped to the ground, wide-eyed. Reflected in the eyes of the soldiers, lying in the mud powerless to do anything but await their own death, was a flag emblazoned with a lion holding a crown—the imperial flag of Atrad.

“Why... Why...” the soldiers moaned as they perished. Countless screams and shouts could be heard across the battlefield as the twenty thousand soldiers were suddenly thrust into an abyss of despair and confusion.

Witnessing this sight was Teodor Seghin, who was frozen to the spot.

“General Seghin! We are under attack! We’ve suffered major losses! Please, give us your command!”

“What... did you say?” Teodor floundered at the report of his screaming subordinate. The subordinate noted how even a general could not help but flounder in an ambush. However, that was not the reason for Teodor’s reaction.

This is not what I was told! As the army was about to set off, Teodor had received a secret order from the minister. He was to hand over the Seventh Prince, whom the minister considered dangerous, to the enemy.

This was how Teodor expected it to play out: The prince would arrive at the

border fort, only to find himself faced with an imperial army a hundred thousand strong. The royal army, consisting of a mere twenty thousand soldiers, would have no chance against the enemy in battle, so after negotiating with the imperial army, they would hand over the prince as hostage. In the face of such a force, the prince would have no choice but to accept if he did not want to send his own soldiers to their deaths.

And the minister had already struck a deal with the empire, allowing him to do away with this dangerous prince and forge a ceasefire with the empire in one stroke. The blame for the entire ordeal would fall upon the mercenary-turned-general who accompanied him.

However, things were turning out very differently from what the minister had described.

“At this rate, we—*argh!*” As the subordinate tried to continue his report, an arrow struck the back of his head, and he collapsed. Teodor let out a shriek as he just barely managed to avoid falling from his horse.

Teodor was a general, but he was not the type to stand on the front lines wielding a weapon himself. One would generally find him at headquarters giving out orders. In an unexpected situation where he truly feared for his life, he was greatly disoriented.

Another subordinate approached Seghin.

“General Seghin! Your orders, please!”

“...at...”

“General Seghin?” Due to the commotion and how softly Teodor had spoken, the subordinate failed to make out what the general was saying, and asked for his command one more time. However, as he had to raise his shield to protect himself from incoming arrows, he failed once more to hear Teodor’s reply.

The subordinate lowered his shield and again looked at the general, only to find that he was turning his horse around.

“Retreat! Cavalry, follow me! Protect me!” Teodor screamed in a shrill voice, at which his subordinates, shields raised against the arrow rain, widened their eyes in disbelief. The subordinates ran up to Teodor, who seemed ready to take

off at any moment.

“B-But, General, what about the other soldiers?” A subordinate asked what to do about the remaining foot soldiers.

Teodor turned his bloodshot eyes toward the soldier and screamed, “Why should I care?!” He then set off on his horse, and the cavalry followed after a moment’s hesitation. None of them wanted to die there.

There was one boy soldier who had witnessed the scene that just unfolded.

No way... Roy couldn’t believe what he had just seen.

By sheer luck, Roy had avoided being struck by an arrow when the ambush first commenced. He had hid behind a carriage, and had been unable to do anything but watch as the friends he’d spoken to as recently as the day before all fell one by one. He had been asked by an armed soldier to go and receive orders from their captain, whom he set off to search for while dodging the enemy soldiers. By pure chance, he had happened upon the general. However, the general had simply fled before his very eyes, prioritizing his own life above those of his soldiers.

As he fled, the general had also said something unbelievable.

“This isn’t what His Excellency promised... He said that we would simply hand over the prince to the empire!”

Not what His Excellency promised? What does that mean? Roy failed to grasp exactly what was going on. However, he did manage to piece together that their general had abandoned them and the prince was in danger.

“Kill them all!” the enemy screamed. Roy heard a shriek from right next to him, and the smell of blood filled the air. His heart was racing and his armor, drenched from the rain, felt heavy and cold.

“Die!”

Roy turned toward the voice to find an enemy soldier raising his sword.

A battle ax slashed through the air as the heads of enemy soldiers separated from their bodies and their blood mixed with the falling rain. An arrow was

released in the direction of the man who wielded the ax.

“Whoopsie.”

However, along with this comment completely devoid of tension, the ax quickly knocked the arrow to the ground—and then cut the soldier who’d fired the arrow clean in half. The wielder of the ax—Heath—rested the haft against his shoulder, took a deep breath, and had a look around the area.

The attack had been sudden, but the confusion only lasted for a short while before Heath, together with the captains directly under him, had got his division under control.

“General Blaydes!” Heath’s adjutant came running toward him, and the general looked down at him from his horse. The adjutant had no hint of panic on his face, holding his blood-stained sword and a small shield in which a number of arrows were lodged, as he spoke to Heath without ever losing sight of his surroundings.

“General Blaydes, I have a report to make!”

“I’m not really in the mood. What is it?” Heath nodded as he readjusted his grip on his ax.

“We’re under attack by an enemy force. Their banner depicts a lion holding a crown—it’s the Atrad Empire. We still don’t know their exact numbers, but it seems to be on the order of fifty thousand. More of them might still be hiding nearby, however. Additionally, General Seghin’s division is still in disorder and has yet to establish a chain of command.” The adjutant was capable both in the castle and on the battlefield, matter-of-factly briefing Heath on the most important points.

“And General Seghin’s whereabouts?”

“Unknown, sir.”

Heath sighed at the adjutant’s curt response.

First of all, being ambushed by the empire within the kingdom’s borders simply didn’t make any sense. The border was supposed to be protected by the soldiers stationed at the fort. So how had the imperial army even made it into

the country?

Heath only saw one explanation. They had passed through the Principality of Parche, which bordered both Gracis and Atrad. The principality was the home country of the First Queen and had always been on good terms with Gracis. They must have betrayed the kingdom and sided with the empire.

No, I suppose the probability of that is pretty low. Heath immediately gave up on that line of thinking. If that was true, the Foreign Relations department should have been aware of it already. And as much as the empire may have increased its forces lately, Gracis was still the stronger power. Under these circumstances, it was hard to believe that the principality, which normally excelled at evaluating political situations, would betray Gracis.

Just then, a soldier approached the adjutant. After listening to the soldier's report, he turned to Heath to relay the information.

"General Blaydes, it appears that the enemy soldiers are looking for someone in particular."

"Who?" Heath asked, while casually knocking aside any arrows that came his way. The adjutant similarly protected himself from an arrow with his shield before continuing.

"Prince Herscherik."

Heath froze up for a moment upon hearing the prince's name before sighing deeply, as if he had completely forgotten about the ambush they were currently defending themselves from.

"So that's it, huh." With the help of some speculation, everything came together in Heath's mind.

So it's basically the worst-case scenario. Sheesh, why do I have to deal with this?

Heath was always getting dragged into one problem after another, and he was usually the one who had to clean up afterward. However, he certainly didn't care to be dragged into something just to die. His peaceful farm life was waiting for him after retirement.

“Goddammit. Well then—instruct each battalion to prepare for retreat. You take charge of the first battalion, make toward the first division, and confirm whether General Seghin is alive. If he is, then we’re all good. Tell them to retreat and come back here. However, if he’s dead or missing, take control of the first division’s chain of command and carefully fall back as you fight. Once you’ve joined up with the second division, we will begin the retreat. If anyone complains, tell them it’s on my orders. Threaten them with a court-martial if they don’t obey.” He dished out orders in rapid succession, his demeanor having changed completely from how it was only a moment ago. His adjutant turned to start carrying out the orders at once before remembering one important detail.

“What about Prince Herscherik?” The general made no mention of the prince in his orders; the adjutant wondered what he was to do about the most important figure of the expedition.

“It’s fine. Don’t worry about him right now,” Heath flatly brushed aside the adjutant’s concern. “Everyone’s on edge from the ambush. At this rate the army will slowly collapse. Getting the army in order is more important than the prince right now.”

“But...” The adjutant continued to argue, at which Heath raised an eyebrow.

“You know, I remember you said you weren’t interested in women. Is the prince more your type or something?”

“Of course not! Do you have a death wish, sir?” The adjutant immediately refuted his superior with a menacing tone. Heath shrugged his shoulders as if to say that it was just a joke. Despite the predicament they were in, Heath was the same as ever—but this was also why the adjutant placed so much faith in his general, as flippant as he may have been.

“I’ll take all responsibility if anything happens to him. Hurry up,” Heath commanded. The expression on his face was no longer that of the usual listless superior officer, but the man they called the Undefeated General.

As for why he was called “undefeated” rather than “invincible,” it was because, even though he often suffered setbacks and losses, he always claimed victory in the end. The adjutant, at least, had never seen him lose a battle even

once since joining his command. He may not always *win*, but he never lost. Even in the most desperate of situations, he did his best to turn things around without worrying about victory, and he always brought the conflict to an end. That was why he was referred to as the “Undefeated General.”

“Understood...” The adjutant obeyed the Undefeated General’s command.

“Your Highness! Prince Herscherik, Your Highness, are you all right?!” A voice calling Herscherik’s name could be heard coming from outside the carriage. Herscherik, who was wrapped in an overcoat and ready to go outside at any moment, looked toward the door. He quickly glanced at Shiro, who was also already wearing his overcoat. Shiro turned an annoyed glance toward the source of the voice and slowly stood up from his seat.

“Prince, are you okay?” he heard his knight of service say shortly after, so he simply responded with a knock on the door. The door immediately opened to reveal Oran, his armor drenched in rain and blood, with a serious look on his face.

“Step out,” Oran continued, and Herscherik nodded. He obeyed, led by Oran, and was struck speechless as he emerged from the carriage and saw the view outside.

Around the carriage, two types of bodies were lying on the ground, with the only distinguishing feature being their armor—either belonging to his own army or to the empire. Regardless of their armor, every corpse shed the same red blood, staining the ground a dirty black. As Herscherik had witnessed once before, the relentless flow of blood claimed one life after another, and the air was filled with a metallic stench. He replayed the events of that day in the back of his head as he clenched his teeth.

“The enemies numbered fifty thousand at the start of the ambush, followed by a reinforcement of thirty thousand. The total number is probably less than a hundred thousand.”

Motionless at the sight of the corpses, Herscherik came to his senses at the sound of the voice behind him. He moved only his eyes to find that Kuro was standing there. He was wearing not his usual butler uniform, but a well-tailored

black outfit reminiscent of an ordinary traveler, and he seemed to be on high alert. Just as Herscherik was about to ask Kuro about the current situation, he heard another voice call out to him.

“Your Highness, you’re safe!”

Herscherik turned his gaze away from Kuro toward the source of the voice. A man, the same person who must have been yelling outside the carriage only a moment ago, was kneeling there with his head bowed. Herscherik recognized him as the captain of the thirty royal guards that had been assigned to protect him during the expedition.

“What’s the situation?” asked Oran, who was standing next to Herscherik, while keeping an eye on his surroundings. The man nodded and looked up at Herscherik.

“We have been ambushed by what appears to be the Atrad imperial army.”

“How severe are our losses?” Herscherik asked, at which the man’s face took on a deep frown.

“On account of the surprise attack, the army is currently in a state of confusion, and it is difficult to get a clear picture of the situation. The first division is particularly disordered...”

Herscherik clenched his fist, which the captain made no note of and continued.

“I advise Your Highness to retreat immediately.” Herscherik became wide-eyed at the captain’s suggestion. “It appears that the enemy is searching for Your Highness specifically. The best means of ensuring your safety is to flee the site of the battle as quickly as possible.”

“Are you telling me to leave everyone behind and run away?” Herscherik replied in a quiet, but very angry, voice. In response, the man lowered his head further.

“Your Highness’s safety is of the utmost importance. While few in number, I am confident your men of service will be able to repel any enemy soldiers that come your way. Please, Your Highness—make the decision.”

Herscherik closed his eyes. *I won't be of much help even if I stay behind here.* That was the unshakable truth. Herscherik was well aware of how weak he was. If he stayed behind, he might only get in the way. And so, he made up his mind.

“Very well.”

The royal guard seemed relieved. However, the next words out of the prince's mouth left him stunned.

“Oránge and Weiss, you two stay behind and get our forces back in order, and annihilate the enemy army. Schwarz will be enough to protect me.”

“Your Highness?!” The captain, who was not expecting the prince to leave most of his convoy behind, started to fret. However, Oran took no notice of the captain and simply nodded, as did Weiss, who had exited the carriage and was now surveying the surroundings, albeit reluctantly. After confirming their responses—and before the captain could get a word in—Herscherik addressed the soldiers and guards who were currently fighting to protect him.

“Herscherik, the Seventh Prince of Gracis, commands you!” His dignified voice echoed across the battlefield. “I shall now make a temporary retreat! You are to join Oránge's command as you escape from here, after which you will join with General Blaydes!”

Herscherik took a deep breath before continuing.

“My most important order is only this: *Survive!*”

The soldiers roared in response to Herscherik's command, and the confusion on the battlefield started to dissipate. The prince had said that he would leave his very own Vanquisher of a Hundred Zealots behind. And not only that, he had ordered them not to protect him nor to die for their country, but merely to survive. The minds of the previously terrified soldiers were now fixed on one thing—staying alive. With a single order, Herscherik had breathed new life into the army.

However, that was not the only consequence of his speech. His voice had taken control of the soldiers' confusion and raised their morale, but at the same time he had also informed the enemy of his whereabouts.

A shrill whistle sounded, and a voice screaming “The prince is over there!”

quickly followed. The nearby enemy soldiers immediately started to gather together. Oran readied his sword as he called out to Kuro.

“Black dog, hurry up and get out of here. Weiss, you stay. I’ll be right back.” After seeing Kuro pick up Herscherik with one arm and Shiro nod listlessly, Oran continued. “I’ll open a path for you. Hurry!”

With that, Oran started running. The enemies took note of his assault and attempted to intercept him, but Oran cut them in half at the waist—armor and all—chopped off their heads, and severed their limbs. Without so much as breaking a sweat—and without anyone even crossing swords with him—Oran took the life of one soldier after another.

Kuro ran after him, carrying Herscherik under his arm. Outrunning both the enemy soldiers and Oran, he leaped into the nearby forest. The enemy attempted to pursue the pair, but they were blocked by a glowing, transparent wall that had appeared seemingly out of nowhere. Oran looked toward Shiro to find his hair shining in a sky-blue color and understood that he had erected a magical barrier. Oran turned around and headed straight for the thick of battle, stopping next to Shiro.

“Weiss, thanks for the barrier,” Oran said to Shiro. Even Oran would have found it difficult to prevent every enemy soldier from escaping. However, no ordinary soldier would be able to make it through a barrier, and circumnavigating it would cost them time. With that extra time to escape, Kuro could avoid being captured by the enemy.

Next on the agenda was figuring out what to do about their current situation.

All right, so what do I do now, then? Oran racked his brain as he cut down the opponents that launched themselves at him. The ambush had divided the long, thin line of soldiers, and being stationed in the middle of the procession, they could not escape to the front or the back. Evading the enemy encirclement by climbing the surrounding slopes would result in significant losses, but at the same time, simply staying where they were would only add to the pile of bodies on the ground.

If only we could meet up with Heath, we’d probably figure something out... Oran had no practical experience on the battlefield; any knowledge he had was

purely theoretical. Heath, on the other hand, possessed a wealth of experience, and knew how to handle situations like these.

The best option is probably to fall back in search of Heath, Oran decided, and just as he was about to instruct those nearby to do so, he heard a small sneeze. He looked to his side to find Shiro holding his nose, looking disgruntled.

“It’s cold.”

Oran sighed at Shiro’s complete lack of tension. Shiro’s next utterance, however, sent chills down his spine.

“So... do you just need me to wipe these guys out, or what?”

“What?”

“If they’re in the way, I can just wipe them out, right?” Shiro asked in an apathetic tone, ignoring the dumbfounded Oran. “Hersch told us to annihilate them... If I can just kill them all indiscriminately, it won’t take long.”

A vicious smile surfaced on Shiro’s beautiful face.

Hearing the magic maniac utter something so frightening with a straight face, Oran almost forgot that he was in the middle of battle.

“How can you say something like that so gleefully? You can’t seriously be planning to take out our own soldiers while you’re at it! Hey, why are you looking so disappointed?!”



Shiro's vicious smile from a moment before had been replaced with a pout. Oran knocked down an arrow with his sword as he argued with him.

"Well, jokes aside..."

No, no way that was a joke, Oran thought, but he kept it to himself.

"I *can* eliminate just the enemy soldiers, but I'll need some time."

"Got it." Oran did not doubt that he could pull it off. Shiro was not so overconfident that he would claim to do something that he couldn't. Oran nodded and readied his sword. "How long do you need?"

"Ten... No, eight minutes should be enough."

"All right. Everyone, the Spellcaster is about to prepare a spell that will allow us to get out of here alive. Don't let anyone near him!" Oran instructed the nearby royal guards and soldiers. In response, an enemy soldier broke from the royal guards and launched himself at Shiro, but Oran stepped between the two in the blink of an eye and cut the enemy soldier in half.

"Weiss, don't worry about the enemy."

"Right." Shiro nodded, and without taking any note of the enemy soldiers falling around him, he started gathering Magic from the surroundings using his own special ability. As rain contained Floating Magic, he was able to collect even more than usual.

A large-scale spell will be a bit of a pain, he complained internally as he started to compose his magical formulas. His waving white hair began to glow a pale green. As Shiro started to recite an incantation, pale green bands of light inscribed with the spell started to circle him. At the same time that he finished his incantation, he cut the air horizontally with his arm. A wind burst forth, slicing through the fog.

Area of effect set. Targets set. Commence construction of large-scale offensive magic, defensive barrier magic, and parallel incantations. Activate... Countless bands of light danced around Shiro, and his hair began to glow in a rainbow of colors.

As he activated multiple spells and constructed complicated magical formulas,

Shiro quickly glanced toward Oran. He was just in the middle of cutting down an enemy soldier. Even Shiro, who had no experience fighting with swords, could tell just how much Oran outclassed the guards and soldiers around him—even though he fought with the fog limiting visibility, the ground muddy from the rain, and while protecting a completely defenseless Shiro.

Spellcasters could not defend themselves while reciting incantations. Shiro, despite being more powerful than most and possessing immeasurable amounts of Magic Within as a result of his own natural ability and the events of the Church's terrorist attack, was no exception.

When Herscherik first introduced Shiro to his other men of service, he had been very wary of them—a wariness brought about by Shiro's innate distrust in others. He had been called a monster ever since he was young, and even after being taken in by the Church, people would look at him strangely. And as a man with the appearance of a woman, he had come close to suffering a number of unspeakable experiences. Shiro had only ever trusted two people in his life—in the past, that had been his adoptive father, and after Hoenir betrayed him, Shiro had come to trust Herscherik instead. He considered anyone who threatened to get close to him a potential enemy.

However, his fellow men of service were different from the others. The knight had done his best to look after Shiro, while the butler had seemed utterly indifferent to him. Even so, Shiro would constantly be on his guard, keeping others at arm's length like a wounded cat. Then, one day, Oran had spoken to him with a saddened look on his face.

"Come on, you don't have to be on your guard like that all the time." Shiro gave him a dubious look, but Oran continued. "Everyone needs some time before they can really trust a person—though I suppose Herscherik is an exception. But I trust you, and I rely on you too. I do that because Hersch trusts you. I'm sure the black dog feels the same. The fact that he's himself around you, even though he's usually always putting up a façade, is proof in and of itself."

In front of others, Kuro would always act exceedingly sociable. In front of Shiro, however, he was exactly the opposite and made no effort to appeal to anyone. This was a sign that Kuro trusted Shiro, Oran thought.

“So why don’t you try having some faith in us—the people Herscherik puts his trust in—even just a little bit?”

Upon hearing this, it felt like all of his anxiety had simply dissipated. He felt as though he might be able to let his guard down around them, just a little. If he didn’t like something they did, he could just ignore it, he told himself. However, nothing unpleasant happened when he was with them. Eventually being with them started to feel natural, even comfortable. It wasn’t long before that turned to real trust.

Of course they also had their differences of opinion. However, that too was rooted in a mutual respect for each other—not that Shiro would ever think to tell the other two this. So Shiro could entrust Oran with his life as he constructed his magical formulas completely defenseless.

As Shiro continued to build up his spell, he remembered something that happened before they had departed. Oran had asked Shiro the same thing as Sigel—if he really was going to the battlefield. Shiro told him the same thing he had told Sigel, but Oran had shook his head.

“That’s not what I mean. When you stand on the battlefield, will you really be able to take someone else’s life?”

Seeing that Oran looked unusually serious, Shiro fell silent for a moment before replying, “Yes. Yes, I will.”

Hearing this Oran had nothing else to say.

I’ll kill anyone that gets in our way—be it human, god, or Djinn. This was how Shiro, having come to accept the “monster” that he was, expressed his gratitude and resolve.

Shiro’s hair flashed between purple, signifying lightning magic, and sky blue, signifying barrier magic, as the bands of light around him started to shine even brighter. The magical formulas were almost complete. The high-density Magic caused the air to pulsate and blew the drizzle away. He then drew even more Floating Magic from his surroundings, converting it to his own Magic Within, further amplifying the spell.

Eight minutes had almost passed since he’d begun his spellcasting.

“Weiss!”

Oran’s distressed voice shot across the battlefield as an enemy soldier approached Shiro from right in front of him, sword drawn. If he didn’t stop his incantation and flee, he would almost certainly be killed. However, Shiro remained motionless.

Oran threw his sword at the enemy, which embedded itself into the soldier’s chest, but he remained standing with his sword held high.

What kind of idiot throws his weapon? Shiro thought as he spread his arms, almost as if to welcome the enemy soldier’s blow.

That gesture signified the release of his large-scale spell. Right before the sword could strike Shiro, a roar akin to thunder could be heard, reverberating across the battlefield.

Still carrying Herscherik under his arm, Kuro ran past the trees of the forest, concealing himself in the fog. At times they would come across imperial soldiers hiding in the forest, but Kuro would simply launch a dagger into their foreheads or use his wire to decapitate them, leaving a trail of bodies as he ran. However, Kuro considered that the enemy might use that very trail to track them down, and it was only a matter of time before they would be caught.

But that wasn’t their only problem.

“Are we surrounded?”

“Are those imperial soldiers?” Herscherik asked, pale—not from fear, but because of the motion sickness from being carried. Kuro shook his head in response.

“No, they’re too fast to be pursuers from the imperial army.” They were already quite some distance away from the site of the initial ambush, and it was unlikely that the empire would have soldiers stationed here.

If they’re not imperial soldiers... Kuro arrived at a certain conclusion, and furrowed his brow even more.

“Kuro.” Herscherik, still being carried, gently tapped Kuro on the arm. “Kuro,

you can put me down now. If a fight breaks out, I'll only get in your way. Even for someone as skilled as you, protecting me with one arm while carrying me with the other wouldn't exactly be easy, right?"

Herscherik could feel Kuro jerk in surprise, but he ignored it and continued to speak in a calm tone.

"I'll go on by myself from here. You'll have no issue taking care of them on your own."

But Kuro's mouth remained closed. Herscherik sighed quietly as he gave Kuro's arm another tap and spoke as if admonishing him.

"Kuro, put me down." He spoke calmly, but it was an order.

In response, Kuro slowly lowered Herscherik to the ground. He then kneeled down to Herscherik's eye level, but kept his eyes on the ground, opening his mouth and then closing it again without saying anything. After repeating this action a few times, he finally started speaking.

"If..."

"I won't die." Herscherik interrupted him before he could finish. Kuro quickly looked up, to find Herscherik smiling as usual.

Kuro sometimes seemed like a small child to Herscherik, with eyes that looked as if he might start crying at any moment from all the worry bottled up inside him. Herscherik theorized that something must have happened in his past that made him this way. However, unless Kuro brought it up first, Herscherik had no plans to ask him about it. Everyone had things they didn't want to mention and pasts they couldn't discuss.

So instead, Herscherik smiled.

You will not die before me. When you die, I die too. That was the first promise they ever made. The promise he made with Kuro that day, in that shaking carriage. "Just like we promised—as long as you don't die, I won't either."

In addition to the promise, Herscherik had also decided on something on his own—to keep trusting in Kuro, no matter what. And that went for his other two men who would always help him, Oran and Shiro, too. No matter what. Even if

they were to betray him.

And he had also vowed to trust in himself, whom his men trusted, and to keep walking forward.

“So,” Herscherik continued, “believe in me, Kuro. Just like I believe in you—in all of you.”

Kuro closed his eyes for a moment, letting Herscherik’s words sink in. He then opened them again, looked straight at his master with his blood-red eyes, and nodded. His gaze was no longer that of a frightened child.

Herscherik nodded too, swung around, and started running. Seeing his tiny master off, Kuro stood up, and disappeared into the fog.

The man who had been watching them was unsure what he had just witnessed. But the next moment, he let out a scream of intense pain, as though a hot iron had been pressed to his back. However, before the scream could leave his mouth, a hand covered his face from behind as he collapsed to the ground and died. Looking down on the unmoving corpse was the dead man’s target—Kuro. His cold eyes only observed the man for a moment before disappearing into the fog again. One after one, he took the figures hiding in the forest by surprise, ending their lives with a quick strike from behind. They only noticed their fallen comrades after they had lost almost half of them.

Herscherik ran up a hill then down another, his feet sometimes getting stuck in mud as he ran through the trees as fast as he could muster. He had tripped a number of times and his clothes, his light gold hair, and his fair skin were all covered in mud, but Herscherik had no time to worry about that. Overexerting his delicate body, he finally made it out of the forest into a clearing. The sky was overcast with thick, dark clouds, and a drizzle continued to fall. Before him was a wide plain which stretched all the way to the Principality of Parche.

However, Herscherik stopped, as separating him from the plain was a violent, flooded river, and Herscherik himself was standing on top of a precipitous cliff. He bent over slightly, placing his hands on his thighs, taking deep breath after deep breath. If he could have, he would have collapsed onto the ground to rest right there and then, but he stopped himself, realizing what a bad idea that

would have been.

This much running sure takes its toll on a child's body... Herscherik thought, though he soon realized that he would have fared no better in his previous life and chuckled sadly to himself. Even to thirty-something Ryoko, a full sprint would have been difficult, since she'd had no muscle mass to speak of. Not to mention, she would have been sore the whole day—or even two days—after.

Herscherik suddenly heard a quiet noise behind him. He straightened his back again, took another deep breath, and tightened his grip around the silver pocket watch in his pocket. He then steeled himself and looked behind him.

He found himself looking at a group of men, no more than he could count on one hand. The men were from neither the imperial nor the royal army. Their faces were hidden by hoods and cloth, only their eyes visible. They were all dressed in dark outfits, reminiscent of Kuro's spy gear. Herscherik surmised that they must be in the same general line of work. However, he still called out to them.

"And who might you be?" Herscherik secretly complimented himself for keeping his voice from trembling.

Right now, Herscherik was all alone. Steel himself as he might, he could not erase his fear. With neither Kuro, Oran, nor Shiro here, even if he attempted to fight back, he would be dead in the blink of an eye. Even so, Herscherik faked a confident expression and once again addressed the men who were slowly making their way toward him.

"You don't even know how to introduce yourselves properly? Do you not have mouths under there or what?"

"We have no reason to respond."

"My, aren't you cold." Herscherik shrugged his shoulders. "I'll bet Barbosse sent you here, didn't he?"

The fact that the men froze for a second at the mention of Barbosse's name did not escape Herscherik. He gripped his pocket watch even harder. Still, he did not let his emotions show on his face as he continued speaking.

"What's he after, then? My life?" Herscherik did his best puppy dog eyes as if

pleading to them for an answer, and what seemed to be the leader of the group responded in a muttering voice.

“It does not matter. You’ll be dead soon either way.” The man quickly realized his mistake. His answer was in practice a confirmation of Herscherik’s question. He hadn’t planned on answering him, but Herscherik’s dignified, captivating emerald eyes had gotten the better of him. Realizing this seemed to bother the man.

Paying him no heed, Herscherik let out a deep, theatrical sigh.

“I can’t believe a group of adult men are ganging up on a little boy,” Herscherik continued, shrugging his shoulders.

“Your life is forfeit.” Doing his best not to be affected by Herscherik’s transparent performance, the man pulled out a knife beneath his cloak. The other men also drew their weapons as they encircled Herscherik, preventing him from fleeing. As their encirclement closed up on him, Herscherik took one step back, then another.

“I’m not really fond of pain, you know,” Herscherik mumbled as he backed away even further. Looking behind him, he was already at the edge of the cliff.

Turning back to the men, all holding daggers and knives in their hands, they seemed moments away from attacking Herscherik.

“Ah...” A pitiful voice said. That was the last thing Herscherik uttered.

Herscherik disappeared from their view, and a violent splash could be heard from the waters below. The men hurriedly ran to the edge of the cliff and looked down, but could see nothing but the murky, flooded river. There was no sign of the prince.

“I guess he fell...”

“I don’t see him surviving a river as violent as this.”

The other men nodded in agreement with their leader. An adult man might still have had some chance, but a small child like the prince had no hope of surviving.

“Let’s head back,” the leader said, and they all disappeared back into the

forest.

Chapter Five: The Urgent Report, the Scheme, and the King's Madness

In Barbosse's office, the minister and a number of nobles were chuckling to themselves.

"Everything is proceeding without a hitch, Your Excellency."

Barbosse calmly nodded in response. The castle was currently in turmoil after losing all communication with the expedition that had been dispatched to the border. However, Barbosse was already aware that the expedition had been ambushed, the army was in disarray, and the Seventh Prince had gone missing. He had learned this from his privately employed troops, who had informed him of Herscherik's plummet into the flooded river—and the fact that the little prince had no chance of making it out alive.

I'm finally rid of him... Barbosse smirked. Because of that pesky youngest prince, Barbosse had been at risk of losing all of the power he'd spent so long obtaining. At the beginning of spring, he had employed the Church in an attempt to assassinate the prince, but it had ended in failure at the very last minute. He had also failed at using his own daughter to bring the prince to heel.

So Barbosse had fallen back on a somewhat more aggressive strategy—forcing Herscherik out of the capital and having him killed somewhere that could not be directly connected to the minister himself. He had recently learned that the imperial army was conveniently planning an attack along the border, so Barbosse had decided to exploit the empire's plot. He struck a deal with imperial nobles who wished to curry favor with the emperor, leaking information on Gracis's army. He had also secretly threatened the Principality of Parche to ensure that they did not interfere with his plans. Barbosse had made full use of any and all connections he had to ensure that Herscherik was eliminated cleanly.

The empire had then launched their invasion as planned, forcing Gracis to dispatch an expedition to ward them off. All Barbosse needed at that point was

to force Herscherik to join the expedition as the king's proxy, under the pretext of raising morale. He had already made preparations to quell any opposition to his plan. To ensure that the expedition did not stray from its planned route, he had also planted a general loyal to him in the vanguard—and to make matters as foolproof as possible, he had even sent his own private troops along.

The only real issue with the plan was the possibility of losing territory along the imperial border. However, if that were to happen, that territory could be easily regained—be it through battle or brokering a political marriage with the emperor. The Gracis family were all of unparalleled beauty. It would be a waste not to make use of them for diplomacy.

I can deal with the territory problem later, Barbosse had decided, sparing no thought for the citizens living in the area. To Barbosse, the royal family, the nobles, and the commoners—everyone other than himself—were nothing but pawns, and there were only three kinds: exploitable pawns, disposable pawns, and those that needed to be removed from the board.

Everything had gone according to plan. However, the office door was flung open with great force, interrupting the minister's thoughts.

"Minister Barbosse!"

"What is the meaning of this?!"

The person responsible for the noise was the castle's head of security, a member of the constabulary.

"I-I'm terribly sorry, Your Excellency, but..." The head of security faltered at the sound of Barbosse's angry voice, but still he continued. "Your Excellency, the situation is getting out of hand! Please, tell us what to do! The people of the town are protesting by the castle gate!"

"The masses?" Barbosse answered after a short pause; he had not prepared for such an incident. While it was not unheard of for people outside the capital to swarm the house of a local lord with some petition, Barbosse had never in his entire career seen the people attempt to storm the castle itself.

"They're all shouting about the safety of Prince Herscherik and the expedition... We don't know what to do... Please, give us an order!" As soon as

the soldier had uttered his request, the room fell silent.

The guard on duty that day cursed his bad luck.

Every day since the expedition had set off, a few townspeople had stopped by to ask about them and the prince in particular, he had been informed. The superiors' orders were to shoo them off as inoffensively as possible. He had not foreseen anything like this happening while he was on duty.

"Calm down! Please calm down, everyone!" He was as polite as he could be, careful not to anger anyone, raising his voice as much as he could to address everyone present. However, the people took no note of his efforts, as they continued to shout at the unfortunate guard blocking their way.

"How can you ask us to be calm?!"

"Is it true that the expedition was wiped out?!"

"Where is Ryoko? Where is Prince Herscherik?!"

"Tell us what became of the prince!"

Everyone from elders with hunched backs all the way down to small children could be seen in the crowd. Even though it was still working hours, the people of the town, men and women alike, were charging the main gate of the castle.

"We're, uh... We're currently trying to assess the situation, and..." The guard would normally simply wave his lance about to disperse the crowd, but this time around there were so many people that he had started to fear for his own safety, so he'd decided to act humble instead. However, this attitude of his only served to irritate the people further.

"Send soldiers to confirm right away! Hurry, before it's too late!"

"Exactly! Besides, Prince Herscherik is still just a child! What are you thinking, sending a little boy like him to the battlefield?!"

"Yeah, exactly!"

The children in the crowd started shouting in agreement, and the situation grew even more chaotic. Just as the guard started to fear that the crowd would force themselves through the gate, someone came to his rescue.

“Silence!”

The crowd fell speechless as their gazes turned toward the source of the roar. Sitting upon his horse, his flaming hair fluttering together with the horse’s mane, was a former general who even now looked as muscular and mighty as the day he retired. Known as the Blazing General on the battlefield and feared by his enemies, this man was Marquis Roland Aldis.

“Sir Aldis!”

“Citizens, what is all this commotion?” Roland asked, gallantly dismounting his horse as the crowd desperately flung themselves toward him.

“Sir Aldis, is it true that you have lost contact with the expedition—that they’ve been defeated?!”

“Where exactly did you hear that?” Roland asked the crowd. He himself had learned from his sons that they had lost contact with the expedition, but there was supposed to be a gag order in place to prevent panic.

The people responded to Roland’s firm question without hesitation.

“I heard a rumor that some soldiers were talking about it at a pub...” It appeared that someone from the army had gotten drunk and let it slip that they couldn’t get in touch with the expedition, and the information had then spread like a wildfire until practically everyone in the capital had heard about it. The people had then rushed to the castle in order to verify the rumor.

I’ll have to go clean up my old home later, Roland thought as a desperate woman approached him.

“I... I heard everyone who took part in the expedition died... My son is among them!”

“And apparently Prince Herscherik is missing too?!”

“I have family near the border!”

As everyone tried to shout over each other, Roland raised both hands and waited for the crowd to go quiet. After hearing their shouting calm down, he opened his mouth again.

“First, I ask you to understand that I cannot at present share any details

concerning this matter, as we do not wish to invite unnecessary confusion based on uncertain information,” he said to a now silent crowd. Being the head of a reputable house that had produced a long line of knights, no one dared object to his words, especially as the people were aware of his achievements as a general. “As the head of the Aldis family, I ask you all to withdraw for the day.”

Concerned expressions still showing on their faces, the people of the crowd reluctantly nodded their heads.

“However, I can say this much,” Roland continued in a confident voice. “My son is the prince’s knight of service. There is no chance whatsoever of any harm coming to the prince while he is with him. I cannot imagine an army led by such a prince losing, either.”

The people looked at each other after hearing the Blazing General speak. However, even in the face of Roland’s confidence, the crowd was still unable to wipe their concern off their faces.

Barbosse watched Roland pacify the crowd from a nearby window. While he could not hear anything from outside, he could more or less imagine what the crowd was saying from the look of the situation, as well as visualize Roland’s replies. He furrowed his brow.

“Why...” He did not complete his sentence out loud.

He couldn’t understand why the prince was so beloved by the people. To Barbosse, everything could be understood in terms of advantage or disadvantage. Was the prince really such an advantage to them? Was it because he was royalty? But the people wouldn’t have known that the boy they knew from town was a royal prior to the departure ceremony. Of all the royal family, the king and the crown prince Marx should have been far more familiar to the masses.

Normally there was an invisible but impenetrable wall between the royal family and the people. You could see them, but you could not touch them—that was the nature of the relationship between royalty and the people they ruled. But that prince was different. To him, there was no difference between him and

the people—and if he did encounter any kind of barrier between them, he would destroy it himself as he walked among the masses.

When Barbosse had first heard the report of Herscherik's movements, he could not believe his own ears. The young prince had been sneaking into the castle town, he was told, with the citizens accepting him as though he was one of their own children.

It didn't make any sense. The young prince possessed a personality, intelligence, courage, and above all a strange ability to charm the people around him that belied his age. Why had the people taken so strongly to him?

"Your Excellency..." A single noble spoke up in the quiet room, but he received no answer.

A grim mood permeated the king's office. The only sounds that could be heard in the room were the king's fountain pen scratching across paper and an occasional sigh. His face was pale, and he was evidently distressed. The officials assisting him would regularly glance his way, fearing that the king might collapse sooner or later. However, the king simply continued to go over the paperwork in front of him, paying the others no heed. Every so often he would stop writing and freeze for a moment, only to suddenly come to his senses again and resume his task.

After having let out more sighs than one could count, Solye Gracis put his fountain pen down and rubbed his forehead. He had a terrible headache after being unable to sleep properly for the past two nights. The reason for his insomnia was that they had lost contact with the military expedition led by Herscherik.

Before then, they'd had regular contact with the army through the use of magical communication items. But two days ago the army had suddenly stopped responding. Solye had requested that soldiers be dispatched from the border fort, which was still contactable, to the location where the expedition was expected to be three days prior to arriving, but the request had been denied by an official high up in National Defense.

"It would be a terrible idea to divide the army stationed at the border fort

now,” the official had claimed. “As the weather is usually poor this time of year, perhaps the unusually large amounts of Floating Magic in the air is simply interfering with communication. Alternatively, the items could have broken down in some way.”

Unlike the magical items installed in forts and the like, those used for communication while on the march were portable and lightweight, but at the same time sensitive to the weather and surrounding Floating Magic. In addition, they were delicate machines, and if one were to break down during a march, it would be impossible for a Spellcaster to repair it on site.

“We might hear from them tomorrow. At the very least we should hear something from the fort in three days,” the official persuaded Solye, who had nothing to say in response.

However, there was no word from the expedition on the day after, or the day after that. According to schedule they ought to be arriving at the border fort the next day, where they would be able to use the communication items installed there to contact the castle, Solye told himself in an attempt to banish his feelings of worry. However, crushing any hopes Solye still had, an official from National Defense entered his office.

As the official finished giving his report, a pile of paperwork fell to the floor. The officials of the room quickly glanced toward the papers on the ground, but then turned their attention to the master of the room, Solye. The king was staring at the official who had just given the report, unmoving. His heart raced, a chill ran down his spine, and he broke out in a cold sweat.

“Is... Is that true?” he spoke in a hoarse voice. Solye put his hands on his desk and slowly stood up, his long, silver hair falling around his shoulders. The official gulped in response before continuing.

“The expedition of twenty thousand has fallen prey to an ambush and command has broken down. We have been informed that Prince Herscherik is missing.” Those were the contents of the report that they had received from the border fort moments ago.

The official continued to explain the current situation, but Solye felt as though the man’s voice was somehow distant. He could hear him speaking, but he was

unable to process the meaning. Solye's mouth opened slightly and he seemed to say something, but the official was unable to hear him.

"Your Majesty?"

"...get..."

However, still unable to make out what he was saying, the official asked him again.

"Your Majesty, I'm terribly sorry, but could you repeat—"

"Get out. All of you." Solye's voice was cold, unimaginable coming from the king, usually so warm and smiling. He stared the official down with eyes seemingly devoid of emotion, causing him and the other officials to flee the office immediately.

As he heard the sound of the door shutting in the now otherwise empty room, Solye repeated the report he had just received in his head. After falling prey to an ambush, General Seghin had taken his two thousand cavalymen and rushed through the night to the border fortress. The general had initially been bewildered, unable to clearly articulate what had happened, but after being calmed down somewhat he had explained that the expedition had been ambushed by the Atrad empire.

They had immediately attempted to dispatch soldiers to verify the state of the expedition when, as if they had waited for this moment, the empire's reinforcements had appeared along the border, a hundred thousand strong. They had received no prior word of the reinforcements from their spy stationed within the empire. Coming face-to-face with a large imperial army, the fort had been unable to dispatch any soldiers to the site of the ambush.

An ambush within the kingdom's own borders, the unforeseen reinforcements, movements that seemed to suggest they knew Gracis's plans... Solye could not imagine that these were mere coincidences.

Could it be that information about us was being leaked the entire time, while our intelligence about the empire was false? Was this all a set-up? That was the only possible conclusion Solye could arrive at. Everything had all been planned somehow from the very start.

Solye's mind went to one, and only one, person.

Barbosse... He must have...! The minister had been aiming for Herscherik's life from the start. Unable to make his move within the castle, he engineered a situation that not even a member of the royal family could escape and sent Herscherik along with the army.

The disputed territory along the border constantly saw conflicts with the empire. Barbosse must have leaked information on his own country's army and promised the imperials territory in return for having them assassinate Herscherik... No, this was Barbosse, after all. To ensure that Herscherik was eliminated, he had likely also sent his own men to do the job.

Herscherik... Solye could picture the youngest prince's smile clearly. It reminded him of his favorite queen that he had loved so well.

"He'll be with you, even when I'm gone," she had said, before entrusting him with her child as she departed for the Garden Above.

"I was wrong..." Solye muttered in a tone bereft of his usual warmth. "I've been wrong all along..."

Why had he decided to stay a king? He had lost his daughter, his pride, and the woman he loved more than anything else in the world... And now, he had suffered yet another loss.

Why had he tried to endure it all? The grief, the frustration, the anger, the loss...

"It's not too late..." Solye's emerald eyes gleamed with madness as he turned them to a sword resting in the corner of the room. Almost as if being drawn in by the blade, Solye walked toward it with unsteady steps, trampling over the documents on the floor. He slowly reached out toward the sword and unsheathed it.

The blade was silvery and narrow. He kept it for his own protection, but he had never once used it. As he swung the sword he could hear the sound of the blade slicing through the air, and, satisfied that it was still in good condition, he sheathed it again. Then, he started reciting an incantation, converting his Magic to the element of wind, and constructed an investigation spell.

But before Solye had a chance to release his spell, the door leading to the hallway was flung open. The noise distracted him, and his spell failed, releasing a burst of wind into the room which whirled all the discarded papers up into the air.

The person who opened the door must have been running. Short of breath, he watched the documents dance in the wind with a bewildered look on his face as he searched for the room's owner.

"Father, where are... Father?!" The person—none other than Marx—finally found the man he was looking for amidst the dancing paperwork, but quickly grew wide-eyed at the sight of what he was holding. In his father's hand was a sword.

Even since Marx was born, it had been exceedingly rare for him to spot his father holding a weapon. At most, he might hold a ceremonial sword for ceremonies, but Marx had never seen him actually unsheath one.

"Is that you, Marx?" His father's words sounded unimaginably cold.

Solye usually spoke kindly, even to his servants. When speaking to his family, his voice would turn even softer. Now, however, he sounded like a completely different person. Marx could feel the air in the room grow tense.

"Father, what are you..." Marx was unable to complete his sentence. Solye's gaze, even colder than his voice, had left him stunned.

Marx reflexively moved his hand toward the hilt of his sword, but caught himself just before he touched it and clenched his fist. He realized that he had actually felt intimidated by his father.

I can't believe I was intimidated... That I was afraid of my own father...



Marx then remembered a comment he had once heard. Compared to his deceased older brother, his father was less skilled both with the sword and with magic. However, that was only in comparison to his brother. From what Marx had heard, his father was an equal match for royal guards with the sword and for powerful Spellcasters with magic. To possess one skill or the other was hardly unheard of, but possessing both at once was exceptional.

“I will take care of the problem at its root,” Solye quietly spoke to Marx, who still stood silent. His expression was a far cry from the usual gentle and kind king.

“Father, please calm down.” Marx pushed himself to speak as calmly as possible.

The “root of the problem” could only refer to Volf Barbosse, Marx thought, before quickly reevaluating his assumption. To his father, the root of the problem included not only Barbosse, but also everyone in the castle loyal to the minister.

“I have had enough of having people taken from me, leaving nothing but regret. If I have to suffer through this, I might as well just...”

“Father!”

Madness gleaming in his eyes, Solye spoke to Marx. Why had he endured all this regret? When he first lost his daughter, instead of caving in to the minister’s threats, he should simply have killed him right there and then. He should have cut down anyone that stood in his way. Then he would never have had to spend every day of his life in fear. And he would never have lost Herscherik.

Marx was paralyzed before his father, who was still holding his sword. Marx himself detested Barbosse just as much as Solye. When he’d heard about the ambush and the fate of the expedition, the first person to come to mind was that man—the one who had planned it all. He was also filled with a deep sense of regret.

I’m always the last to know... Both when he had lost his friendship with Octavian and when he had found out the truth about his country, he always

seemed to be a step behind everyone around him. And this time, if only he had refused to let Herscherik go, maybe this whole ordeal could have been prevented.

I can't afford to remain ignorant any longer. If Father is to brandish his sword, then I too shall share in his dishonor. Marx steeled his resolve.

Fortunately, he had a number of brilliant younger brothers. They would be fine without him, he concluded.

"Father..." Filled with resolve, Marx spoke his father's name.

Suddenly, Marx felt a hand come to rest on his tense shoulder. He turned behind to find the king's own butler of service, Rook, who stepped into the office and stopped in front of the prince.

"Your Majesty... No, Solye."

"Rook..." Solye hesitated for a moment before replying to his friend, his gaze averted. "Don't stop me, Rook. I..."

"As a butler of service, I would never betray my master, no matter what," Rook spoke, interrupting Solye. "However, I was entrusted with your safety by a close friend."

This was a promise Rook had made with the woman who had been the king's favorite queen. The very thing she'd feared had finally happened.

"Solye is a gentle king. However, the moment he truly experiences fear and despair, he will no longer be able to remain a king."

Just as she had said, Solye was on his way to losing his place as a king.

"Protect Solye for me... Stop him, if it comes to that."

Rook closed his eyes for a moment. He then opened them again and looked straight into his friend's eyes.

"If the man she loved is about to stray from his path, I needed to stop him. Remember—why did you endure it all this time? You wanted to protect everyone, didn't you? Do you want everything you've done until now to go to waste?"

However, Solye remained motionless as the air between the king and his best friend grew even tenser. Then, as if to shatter that tension, yet another person appeared.

“Excuse me.”

“Will...?” Marx spoke the name of the man who had just appeared. It was the Second Prince, William.

William shut his lips tight for a moment at the sight of the messy scene that was the king’s office, before muttering, “I see...” He then looked at the three motionless figures in the office in turn and let out a heavy sigh.

“Father, Brother—and Master Rook as well—please calm down,” he spoke with an utterly exasperated tone. However, this was only a bad habit of William’s, and not at all an attempt to mock them. As the muscles on the beautiful face he had inherited from his parents never saw any use outside of his work, he always looked like he was in a bad mood, to the extent that people rarely noticed when he was actually in a *good* one.

“Hersch told me that if it ever came to this, I had to be sure to stop all of you.”

“What...?” Marx said, surprised, and William continued.

“Hersch gave me a message to relay to you all. ‘In the event that I go missing, don’t do anything rash until my body has been found,’ he said.”

“You mean to say Hersch saw all this coming? And why did he tell you, of all people?” Of the two of them, Marx had been close to Herscherik for longer than William had; feeling left out, Marx asked William to clarify the situation. William shrugged his shoulders as he answered.

“Hersch explained that too. He said, ‘If I tell Father, he’ll stop me from going, and Mark tends to become too emotional and easy to read. But you, Will—you seem like you’d be able to keep a level head no matter what.’ Therefore, until you’ve all calmed down, I’m not letting you take one step outside this room,” William declared, before turning to his unmoving father. “Father, if you do something rash now, you might get in the way of what Herscherik is trying to achieve. Please, be patient.”

“William... Do you actually know what Herscherik is trying to do?”

“No, he wouldn’t tell me.” Herscherik had remained tight-lipped. The only thing he would say was that William had to interfere if worse came to worst.

William looked straight at his father, who had fallen silent upon hearing what William had to say.

“If you still insist on taking drastic measures with your sword, you will have to cut me down first. I refuse to step aside.”

“William...”

“If Herscherik truly does not return, neither you nor Marx will have to worry about a thing, as I will take care of matters myself. I’ll ruthlessly cut them all down on your behalf,” William spoke, a quiet resolve visible deep within his blue eyes.

Solye looked down at his sword for a moment, before shaking his head. Rook moved closer, slowly taking the sword out of Solye’s hands; the king then collapsed into his chair like a puppet whose strings had been suddenly cut.

Suddenly, a woman’s voice could be heard in the room.

“Your Majesty...”

“Perla...?” Solye looked toward the source of the voice to find a woman he did not expect to see here. Just like Marx’s, her hair looked as if it had been formed by melting down the finest rubies, with eyes akin to polished gems of the same hue. Tall and with a well-proportioned figure, even though she was closer to forty, she was still as beautiful as she had been in her twenties. She was the First Queen of Gracis, Perla.

“Your Majesty, I must apologize,” Perla spoke after closing the door, hanging her head. “Barbosse forced me to do it. He said that if I did not include a secret message along with my letter to the principality, Your Majesty and Marx, along with the other queens and their children, would suffer the same fate as my daughter.”

Perla still remembered the grief she had felt as if it had happened yesterday. One day, her daughter had only just learned to stand while holding onto

something; the next, all that remained was a cold body. So Perla had included the minister's message along with her own. She had not known the contents, but after hearing about the empire's ambush, she had concluded that the message Barbosse had forced her to send had been the cause. The minister had talked with the empire and the principality in secret and invited the enemy into his own country.

Though Gracis and Parche may have had an amicable relationship, they were far from equals. Gracis was far more powerful. If the minister, the de facto leader of the country, threatened them, Parche had no choice but to comply.

Is he willing to sacrifice even his own country?! Solye was furious both with the minister and with himself for being unable to stop him. However, his first order of business was the queen in front of him, who was trembling in fear. She had been grief-stricken just like him, but he had been too preoccupied with himself to notice.

Solye walked up to Perla and embraced her.

"I have caused you pain. Forgive me, Perla," Solye whispered into her ear, apologizing from the bottom of his heart. Marx and William awkwardly averted their gazes at the sight.

Hearing Solye's apology, tears started to run down Perla's cheeks.

"No, not at all! You misunderstand, Your Majesty!"

No one had expected what came out of Perla's mouth next.

"I was planning to turn the minister down. I swore I would never help the monster who killed my daughter. And to take revenge for her!" But just as she had resolved to slice off that man's head, Herscherik's butler of service had shown up. Appearing outside her room with no forewarning, he had come with a message from Herscherik: "Please trust me."

"Because of that, I decided to do as the minister said. But I never expected that he would go missing!"

Solye supported Perla as she collapsed in tears, helping her to a chair before kneeling down in front of her, holding her hand. Meanwhile, the queen simply continued apologizing.

The two princes, hearing the queen's words, looked at each other and both sighed heavily.

"So that's why..." Marx muttered.

During the council where it had been decided that Herscherik would serve as the king's proxy, Marx had thought that something had seemed strange about Herscherik. He had shown off his men of service to everyone in the room, almost as if he had been emphasizing the strength he could bring to bear. Although, as the strength of men of service belongs to their master, it would hardly be wrong to call it the prince's own strength.

But normally, Herscherik never ordered his men to accompany him unless there was a need for it, never treating them as though he owned them. In other words, Herscherik must have had a reason for showing them off as he did. He had wanted to provoke the minister and draw his full attention. It had all been part of his plan.

"Well, he's getting a smack on the head when he gets back." The younger brother nodded in agreement to his older brother's proposition. The worry and uneasiness that had been building inside them had vanished.

An officer from the ambush unit was giving a report at the Atrad army's headquarters. Sitting in the middle was a man in his forties with eyes and hair the color of fallen leaves. He was a noble of the tenth rank and the supreme commander for the Gracis invasion—Dick Eol Lynx of the Atrad imperial army.

"We've received word from the ambush unit that they will be moving into their position by tomorrow morning, as planned!"

Dick nodded, seemingly satisfied with the awaited report.

"Great. Tell each unit to start preparing. We begin the siege tomorrow morning."

"Yes, sir!"

The soldiers exited the tent, followed by the staff members who were charged with relaying the orders to each unit. Dick, left behind in the tent, took a glass of liquor offered by his attendant and downed it in one gulp.

This has all gone even better than expected.

When the emperor commanded an attack on Gracis, a secret message had arrived. A particular Gracis noble had sent it by way of a merchant—the two countries may have been enemies, but it was not as if they had no relationship at all. You never knew when a contact in the enemy country might be of use, Dick thought.

The secret message was a request to assassinate, or possibly take prisoner, a member of the royal family. Dick had at first considered that it might be a trap, but a report from a spy he had stationed in the kingdom had lent credence to the message. The report said that Minister Barbosse viewed the Seventh Prince as a threat. Dick surmised that the secret letter had actually come from the minister himself.

Ultimately, he had decided to accept the offer. As the supreme commander of the army, he would use any means at his disposal to ensure their victory.

So this Gracis minister wants to rid himself of the Seventh Prince so badly that he would be willing to sacrifice territory for it... He had heard that the Seventh Prince was the king's favorite son. Selling his own country just to kill a single child... The kingdom won't last long at this rate.

However, that was of no concern to Dick. All he cared about was making use of the information he had been given to seize territory from the kingdom. There was no need for compassion on the battlefield.

With this, I should be able to gain His Imperial Majesty's trust, and in turn improve my standing in the country further.

The goal of this invasion was to demonstrate the new emperor's power to the neighboring countries. Defeat was not an option. If he emerged victorious from this battle, his social standing would be assured.

Meanwhile, in a council room in the fort located along the border with the Atrad empire, a badly wounded soldier appeared, supported on both sides, before the generals tasked with guarding the border. He was the only man who had managed to make it to the border fort on his own, all the way from the expedition that they had lost contact with three days prior.

“I have a report to make...” the man spoke feebly. His military-issue armor was missing pieces, and he had a bandage wrapped around his head that covered half of his face. “The army has been nearly wiped out... I...”

The man then fell to his knees; the only reason he did not collapse completely to the ground was the two soldiers supporting him. No wonder, as he was nearly at his limit. He’d only made it this far thanks to his skill as a horseman.

“That’s enough. You did well to get here. For now, just rest,” the veteran general in charge of the fort said as he gave the soldier a solemn nod. His name was Ivan Barthold, a count and a general. He had stood on many a battlefield, where his sturdy and steady style of fighting reflected his personality, and had driven away countless enemy assaults. If the Blazing General was a sword, Barthold was a shield that protected the country.

Barthold next directed his gaze at the pale man sitting on a chair in a corner of the room.

“General Seghin, do you have anything to add?”

“I-I...” Teodor was unable to muster another word.

Teodor had escaped to the border fort the day before. He had arrived along with two thousand cavalymen, having sprinted nonstop, day and night. Shortly after that, the imperial army’s reinforcements had arrived and taken up position on the plain outside the fort, along the border. The royal army stationed in the fort had been unable to make a single move.

“The leader of the first division abandons his army, flees to save his own hide, and now refuses to even speak... Have some shame,” Barthold said in disgust, as he let out a deep sigh. Currently, though, there was a more important matter to attend to than the pale-faced youngster in front of him. “I’ll leave holding you accountable for later. Right now we need to figure out how to deal with the imperial army.”

A war council began, and the wounded soldier exited the room together with the two men supporting him. No one in the room noticed that he was smiling.

Chapter Six: The Border, the Battle, and the Cunning Plan

Roy hid behind bushes, curled up as he wrapped his arms around himself and trembled. Only the day before he'd had no doubt that they would arrive at the fort without incident. However, his expectations had been shattered in one single moment, as he found himself running for dear life to escape an enemy soldier's sword.

I... I...

In his mind flashed images of his fellow soldiers, whom he had been laughing with just yesterday, bleeding profusely as they fell to the ground. Just thinking back to the sight he had witnessed made him tremble uncontrollably.

It... It was impossible for me. All the practice with the sword he had received from the prince's knight had been for naught. While he did want to survive, he lacked the resolve to do what was necessary to achieve that. When he'd nearly been killed by an enemy soldier, he had simply ran away as fast as he could instead of drawing his own sword. Feelings of fear and uselessness surged inside him, leaving him on the verge of tears.

Suddenly he heard someone coughing.

That's...

He peeked out from the bushes, looking toward the source of the sound. In that direction was a river that flowed down from the mountains of Gracis, to later split toward both Parche and Atrad. On the riverside he saw a small figure, sitting and coughing.

"Wow, I thought I was a goner. I seriously thought I was dead for real this time. And I feel sick from all that drifting in the river..."

For all their talk about dying, the person spoke rather nonchalantly. The voice sounded young. As Roy strained his eyes to make out the figure in the fog, he realized that he actually recognized them.

“Prince Herscherik?!” Roy completely forgot about hiding and rushed out from the bushes.

“Hwa?!” The small figure—Herscherik—jumped as Roy called out to him, letting out a strange yelp. He then turned around to find himself greeted by the unexpected sight of Roy running toward him. As Roy approached, a relieved expression surfaced on Herscherik’s face.

“I’m glad to see that you’re safe, Roy.”

“No, I...” Roy fell silent, unable to bring himself to admit that he’d run away. Herscherik, however, understood what Roy was trying to say and tapped him on his arm with one small hand.

“Right now, just be happy that you’re alive. You can worry about the rest later.”

Hearing that, Roy felt a little bit better. After seeing him smile awkwardly, Herscherik started to remove his coat.

“Now then, where could this be... *Ugh.*” As he tried to remove his coat, he felt a sharp pain in his left arm and grimaced.

I guess I couldn’t really hope to make it out completely unscathed. Herscherik chided himself internally.

When Herscherik had been surrounded by the assassins by the cliff, he had fallen into the raging river below. A normal child would never have survived the fall, but Herscherik had a convenient little gadget with him.

This pocket watch really is amazing, huh?

Herscherik had assumed that his pocket watch worked by simply absorbing Floating Magic and using that to invoke spells. However, the magic nerd Shiro discovered that it actually had more features than that. One of those features was the ability to remember multiple magic formulas—ordinary magical items could only hold one formula at a time. Another feature it had was the ability to not only convert Magic, but also store it.

Initiating a magical formula required a certain amount of Magic. Since the pocket watch could store Magic inside of it, you could simply use its stored

energy to invoke the associated spell. As someone who had no Magic Within, it was as if this magical item had been made specifically for Herscherik himself. What he had thought a simple flip phone had turned out to be a high-spec smartphone.

Shiro had asked him, astounded, “How did you not notice?” But as Herscherik had no Magic Within to speak of and understood almost nothing about the whole subject, he simply told Shiro that expecting someone like him to notice *anything* magical was asking too much.

In the end it had been the barrier magic that Shiro prepared for him that had saved him from being swallowed by the current. However, it had taken a moment for the magic to activate, and in the meantime he had managed to hit his arm.

I guess I should count myself lucky that it wasn't my dominant arm... I feel like I've used up enough luck for a lifetime. And it wasn't just the location of his injury that was lucky—he had washed ashore on land, at an advantageous location, and had found Roy there. Had he just continued to drift down the river, the pocket watch's Magic would have run out, and Herscherik would likely have drowned; had he ended up on the opposite shore, he would have had great difficulty making it back to this side of the river. And, if he'd encountered not Roy but Barbosse's troops, that would have been the end of everything. Herscherik thanked his lucky stars that his gamble had paid off.

“Your Highness? Are you hurt?” a worried Roy asked the quiet Herscherik.

“Yeah, it seems I managed to hit my arm. I hate to ask this, but would you mind helping me get my coat off?”

Herscherik fought the pain as he removed his coat with Roy's help, after which he had Roy tear off the lining of the back of it. Concealed in the lining was a cloth map of the surrounding area. It was, of course, a map that Herscherik had asked Rook to make before departing. It was waterproof to ensure that he could still read the map even if he ended up submerged in water.

“I had this prepared in advance.”

With Roy looking puzzled beside him, Herscherik ran the index finger of his dominant hand across the map.

“This must be where we were ambushed. Assuming this is where I fell into the river...” He mumbled to himself as he followed the river with his finger and got an idea of where he must have washed ashore. “Based on the terrain... Probably somewhere about here.”

“I believe so.” Roy confirmed Herscherik’s guess, starting to feel a little anxious again. He had fled for dear life, but considering the direction he had been running in, Herscherik seemed to be pointing at the right place.

The map was marked with several symbols in addition to the location of nearby villages, and Roy curiously wondered what they could mean.

“Okay, this would be the closest village. Roy, why don’t you come with me for now?”

“Y-Yes!” Roy responded, as Herscherik stood up before he had a chance to ask what the symbols meant.

Herscherik and Roy walked and walked, and by the time the fog started to clear up a small village came into view. However, it was nothing more than the traces of a village, if that.

“This is...” Roy was at a loss for words at the state of the settlement. There was not a single person in sight, and the buildings and fields all lay in ruins. The small village had been destroyed.

“It must have been attacked by the imperial army... *Ow!*” Herscherik had crouched down to pick up a stuffed toy on the ground, wincing as pain shot through in his left arm. Even so, he endured it as he reached out with his right hand for the toy rabbit, its stuffing spilling out onto the ground where it had been trampled underfoot.

“Your Highness, your injury really is worse than...”

“I’m fine.” Herscherik shook his head at Roy’s expression of concern. His pain was nothing compared to what the people of this village must have suffered, Herscherik thought with a frown.

The imperial army must have passed through this village on their way to the location of the ambush. After plundering the whole place, they must have

wrecked the buildings too.

“...y,” Herscherik mumbled as he hugged the toy rabbit.

“Your Highness?”

Roy kneeled down and looked at the prince, who was standing still and leaning forward. Herscherik paid him no notice, however, and only held the toy even tighter. His eyes were filled with rage and sorrow. Roy was unsure what to say to him at first, but after some thinking he finally made up his mind.

“Your Highness, I have something to tell you.” Roy described what General Seghin had blurted out when the expedition had first been ambushed, and the fact that the general had abandoned his army to save his own life.

Herscherik waited for Roy to finish, nodding in response.

“I see... So that’s how it is...” Herscherik mumbled and closed his mouth, silently going over the events in his head. However, Roy interpreted Herscherik’s actions in his own way. He feared that the prince might not believe a simple commoner who spoke ill of a noble, or that he might even punish him. The thought made him turn pale.

Giving the terrified boy soldier no attention, Herscherik collected his thoughts before turning to Roy.

“What are you planning on doing next?”

“Huh?” Roy replied, befuddled, as Herscherik continued.

“I’m going to the border fort.”

Roy turned pale again, this time for a different reason. The army that had been headed for the border fort had been thrown into disarray. Roy could easily imagine what that meant if the border fort had to face the imperial forces. It would only be a matter of time before the border fort, only a few thousand strong, fell before the imperial army of over a hundred thousand men. Going there could very well be considered suicide. General Seghin’s words still bothered Roy, as well.

“This isn’t what His Excellency promised... He said that we would simply hand over the prince to the empire!”

Roy didn't know exactly what the general had meant, but he found it difficult to believe that Herscherik would make it out unscathed if he went to the border fort.

"That's too dangerous, Your Highness! Returning to the capital would be much—"

"Yes, that probably would be safer," Herscherik agreed, but he then shook his head from side to side. "But I have to go."

A determined light gleamed in Herscherik's eyes.

"Roy, if you don't want to see battle again, we should split up here."

"But..." Roy grew hesitant at the sight of Herscherik looking directly at him. The prince smiled in response.

"Don't worry. Even if you leave the army because of this, I'll put in a good word for you so you won't be punished, as thanks for keeping me company all this way. If you can, though, I'd be happy if you could tell my father and brothers what you've seen and heard here." Herscherik tried to keep his tone as cheerful as possible in an attempt to calm Roy.

Leaving the army was normally strictly forbidden. Depending on the circumstances, it was even punishable by death. However, with just a word from Herscherik, his brothers would make sure everything ended well for Roy.

However, Roy was unable to accept Herscherik's proposal. As the young prince prepared to set off for the battlefield, Roy felt pathetic, as he seemed unable to do anything but tremble in fear. Even if he made it back home alive, he wouldn't be able to face his family. Seeing Herscherik, he felt that he had to do whatever he could to help him, no matter how insignificant.

"Your Highness, please let me accompany you."

In response, Herscherik simply said, "Thank you, Roy," and smiled.

Roy quickly took action. Figuring that they would need food and water for the trip, he searched the ravaged houses for provisions and canteens. He quietly promised that he would come back one day to pay for everything he took as he fetched water from the well and filled the canteens. On his way back he came

across a loose horse, which he managed to capture by approaching it very slowly so that it wouldn't run away. The beast seemed to be a carthorse, and it was used to people. Its owner must have released it just before the village was attacked—only for it to come straight back. Roy scrounged up some horse tack in a nearby house; he then equipped the horse with a bit, reins, and a saddle, and loaded it with the food and water. It took him a while, but he managed thanks to his experience as a boy soldier.

Having finished all the preparations, Roy felt his spirits rise a bit at the realization that he could be useful after all. He led the horse back to where Herscherik was waiting.

When he returned, he found the prince by a fence next to the ravaged field, where he was squirming curiously.

“Your Highness, what are you doing?”

“Well, nothing much...” Herscherik said and turned around. Behind him, a handkerchief was tied to the fence. “Oh, you found a horse? That's lucky. Do you know how to ride one?”

“No, I don't, but I can at least lead it. I brought it so *you* could ride it... Your Highness, what is that handkerchief?” Roy wondered with a puzzled look. The handkerchief was made from expensive silk, but it wasn't the fabric Roy was curious about. Rather, he wondered why such a fancy handkerchief was currently tied in a bow to a fence that looked as if it might collapse any moment.

Herscherik refrained from answering Roy's question, giving him only a vague smile as he approached the horse.

“Well then, we'll be heading here first. I'm counting on you.” Herscherik said, indicating a location on the map. Roy nodded with an unsatisfied look on his face.

Roy lifted Herscherik onto the horse, as he was unable to mount it himself due to his short stature and his injury.

After the two of them had left, a shadow appeared in the small village. The shadow found the handkerchief, noted how it had been tied, and let out a

heavy sigh before leaving the village again.

The border fort was supposed to have been lively with the voices of the expedition soldiers by now, but instead it was filled with the fear of a hundred thousand imperial soldiers ready to attack the fort at daybreak. In a tense council room, the general in charge of protecting the border was sitting together with his subordinates, exchanging quiet glances. Despite this ostensibly being a war council, no one so much as opened their mouth, and a heavy silence permeated the room. It was past three in the morning, and the council had been going for almost fifteen hours, with only short breaks.

“What can we do...?” mumbled the person in charge of the fort, General Barthold.

It had been many years since he had been put in charge of this fort, which had always been a point of conflict with the empire. He’d been entrusted with this position on account of his sturdy nature. However, even Barthold, who excelled at defensive battles, found their current situation grim indeed. Currently stationed at the fort were less than five thousand soldiers—the existing force of three thousand, along with the two thousand that arrived with Teodor. The Atrad army, meanwhile, was composed of over a hundred thousand soldiers. He had immediately contacted the capital and requested reinforcements, but even in the best-case scenario they would take at least three weeks to arrive.

If they settled in for a long siege, there was at least a slight chance that they could fend the empire off, though at the expense of many soldiers’ lives. However, they didn’t have enough provisions for that. And faced with a battle they saw no hope of winning, the soldiers’ morale was at an all-time low.

“Is there truly nothing we can do?” Barthold said what was on everyone’s mind.

Everyone present was well aware that if a hundred thousand soldiers were to lay siege on the fort, it would be overwhelmed like a small fishing boat swallowed by a gigantic wave. If that happened, what awaited the soldiers inside the fort—including the general himself—was being taken prisoner at best, and death at worst.

Breaking the mood of the room, a door was flung open loudly, and a soldier entered.

“E-Excuse me!”

“We are in the middle of a war council! What is it?!” one of the higher-ups who was sitting next to the door yelled. However, the soldier continued.

“I’m terribly sorry, but I have an urgent report.”

“What is it? Don’t tell me the empire has launched its attack?!” The room grew suddenly energetic, but the soldier quickly shook his head.

“No, it’s... The prince... Someone claiming to be Prince Herscherik has appeared!”

Within thirty minutes of the soldier’s report, the seat that had once belonged to the chief of the fort was now occupied by a young boy with blonde hair and green eyes—Herscherik himself. He had made it to the fort under the cover of darkness without being found by the imperial army. Some had suggested that he may have been an imperial spy, but quickly changed their minds at the sight of Herscherik’s face.

The royal family of Gracis was a family of unparalleled beauty. Even though he was overshadowed by his more attractive relatives and was currently clad in dirty clothes, Herscherik was still without question a member of that same beautiful royal family. Not to mention that since the incident at the church, Herscherik’s face had become well known to many, both high and low. Almost everyone in the room was aware of this young boy, with his light-blond hair and emerald eyes.

“Prince Herscherik, I am relieved to see you are safe.”

Herscherik silently nodded at Barthold’s words, with Roy behind him. The little prince looked unwell, with his apparently injured left arm wrapped in bandages. As the adults shot him sympathetic glances, the prince himself looked around the tense room.

“Don’t worry about me. General Barthold, update me on the situation.” With mannerisms and a general air about him that seemed far removed from a seven-year-old child, Herscherik left the others in the room—including the

general—stunned. But Herscherik simply made a cute face and tilted his head as he repeated himself. “General Barthold?”

“Y-Yes, Your Highness!”

As Barthold finished his report, Herscherik nodded and put his chin in his hand as he thought.

“I see,” Herscherik finally said, leaving the others without a clue as to what he was thinking. Then, a particular man opened his mouth, looking straight at the prince.

“Your Highness, I have something I wish to say.”

“*You* have something you want to say to *me*? An apology, perhaps?” Herscherik scoffed. “General Seghin, I have neither the time nor the state of mind to listen to your apology right now.”

Teodor found himself shot down immediately by a sarcastic Herscherik. However, such a reaction was only to be expected. He really should not even be here. After all, despite having been in charge of twenty thousand soldiers, he had abandoned them and fled to the border fort to save his own life.

Having been ridiculed by a child, albeit a royal one, Teodor clenched his teeth, but still continued speaking.

“As it stands, all that will happen is that our soldiers will be exhausted and lose their lives unnecessarily. However, with Your Highness here, we have an opportunity for negotiation.”

“And?” Herscherik recrossed his legs as he told the general to continue. It was as if he was trying to show how unfazed he was. Teodor felt irritation bubbling up within him, but he suppressed it.

“If we can negotiate a ceasefire, we can avoid unnecessary bloodshed.”

“And?” Herscherik sounded as if he was bored out of his mind, further prompting Teodor to continue.

Roy watched the scene play out from behind Herscherik and felt a chill run down his spine, as if someone had dropped ice down his back. He had accompanied Herscherik on the trip here, if only for a few days, and he had

never heard a voice this cold come from his mouth. He started wondering if the prince in front of him really was the same prince that he'd come to know.

"Please, Your Highness, do the right thing!" Teodor, unaware of the thoughts running through Roy's head, kneeled before Herscherik and pleaded with his head bowed. But Barthold cut him off, standing forcefully up from his chair.

"Are you out of your mind, General Seghin?! You cannot seriously be asking His Highness to sacrifice himself to the empire!"

"But General Barthold... General Seghin does have a point!" another man spoke, agreeing with Teodor.

"At this rate our soldiers will just die for nothing! We have no choice but to rely on the prince now!" yet another man quickly chimed in.

"And you call yourself an officer of Gracis?! You should be ashamed!"

Leaving Herscherik out of the discussion, the generals and higher-ups started arguing, with two opposing sides—one arguing for the prince to be handed over to the empire so that they might survive, the other steadfastly objecting. As derisive utterances flew back and forth, Herscherik sighed repeatedly. He then waved Roy over to him and whispered something into the boy's ear. Startled at what he had just been told, Roy stared back at Herscherik, but the prince simply nodded. Roy took a deep breath and then slammed his fist on the table in front of him as hard as he could.

The room fell silent at the sudden loud noise as all gazes turned to Roy. Rubbing his sore hand, Roy shrugged awkwardly—but before anyone could question him, Herscherik spoke up.

"Sorry for interrupting the party..." Herscherik let out a deep sigh before turning to Teodor. "Is that what Barbosse ordered you to do?"

"Wha—" Teodor was struck speechless. And it wasn't just him—all those who had agreed with him reacted exactly the same way, a fact that did not go unnoticed by Herscherik or those who had been on the opposing side.

Some in the room were aware of Gracis's current predicament. Barthold in particular had always been too honest and steadfast to get along with Barbosse. That is why he had been removed from the capital and relegated to the border

fort. Barbosse and those in his sphere of influence would distance anyone who might get in their way from politics and the capital.

Herscherik continued speaking with a mature expression, as if he had seen through everything.

“I knew it couldn’t have been just General Seghin. You there, and you... you jumped at the mention of Barbosse, didn’t you?” Herscherik grinned as he pointed with one tiny hand. “Also, you are all gravely mistaken. You think the imperial army would retreat if you handed me over? Why in the world would they throw away such a favorable opportunity just for the sake of one prince? Use your heads.”

“That’s...!” Teodor attempted to argue, but Herscherik simply shook his head as if he’d had enough.

“Come on—you’ve already realized it, haven’t you? Just accept the facts—Barbosse used you as disposable pawns.”

“That’s not true! If I just hand you over to the empire, I’ll come out of this safe and sound! That’s what His Excellency—” Teodor suddenly clapped his hand over his own mouth... But it was too late. Everyone in the room had already heard.

“Digging your own grave, huh? You really are hopeless,” Herscherik said, astonished. Of course, Herscherik had deliberately agitated Teodor past his limit, but he couldn’t help but feel a little bit of pity for the general, walking straight into his own demise this easily.

As if to disappoint Herscherik even further, Teodor began to dig himself even deeper into his grave.

“I will defect to the empire,” he said in what could only be described as an attempt to escape reality, leaving everyone in the room dumbfounded. Having lost any semblance of sanity, he continued with his voice rising to a shriek. “I refuse to die like this! I’ll take the prince and surrender to the empire! The rest of you want to live too, don’t you?!”

“Do you have any idea what you’re saying?” As Teodor threw a childish tantrum, the person who spoke up to criticize him was none other than Roy.

“And you call yourself a general of Gracis?!”

Meanwhile, His Highness came all this way in spite of the danger! Roy felt as though his own blood would start boiling in rage. He was so furious that he completely forgot that he was speaking to a general—and a noble at that—as he chastised him.

“Silence!” Red-faced, Teodor drew his sword. Roy and Barthold stood up, shielding Herscherik from Teodor.

But despite the tense situation, Herscherik simply let out a small sigh before he started speaking.

“Honestly, are you seriously trying to fight your own allies? Kuro.”

“Yes, my liege.”

Silently, a man clad in all black appeared behind Teodor. Had there been someone attentive in the room, who additionally excelled at observing people, they might have noticed that the man was the very survivor who had come to report the defeat of the Gracis army.

“Where did you come from?!” Teodor instinctively raised his sword, but with one fluid motion the man grabbed Teodor’s sword arm with one hand and punched him in his unprotected gut with the other.

“*Oof!*” Teodor groaned, dropping his sword and falling to his knees with his stomach clutched in both hands.

While everyone in the room was dumbfounded, unable to process what was happening, the man in black dashed toward each of the men who had agreed with the plan to hand over the prince and floored them with a single blow.

Everyone in the room was frozen at the sight; Herscherik was the only one to make any move. He simply stood up from his chair and approached the man.

“Kuro, what’s the situation?”

“I’ve seized all the evidence we need... Are you hurt?” It was difficult to see Kuro’s face under the hood, but Herscherik got a sense that he was furrowing his brow.

Herscherik tapped the arm wrapped in bandages in response.

“It’s nothing big, don’t worry. Now we just need to figure out what to do about the imperial army. Where’s Oran and the rest?”

“They’re hiding out in a forest close to where the imperial army is waiting.”

“Got it. Let’s go, then. You too—General Barthold, Roy, and the rest of you,” Herscherik said as he started walking, Kuro in tow. He opened the door, ordered a nearby soldier to arrest Teodor, and glanced down at the crouching general.

“General Seghin, let me say this much.” Herscherik’s expression was cold enough to make anyone shiver. “I’m a royal. I have no intention of running away from the duty that comes with that. If I could save a lot of people in exchange for my life, I would gladly sacrifice myself. However...”

Herscherik’s glance pierced Teodor who was looking up.

“I will not give up my life for the sake of your personal greed. When we return to the capital, I will reveal everything, and you will be judged before the law. You had better prepare yourself... I will *never* forgive you,” Herscherik said, but added internally, *That’s right. I won’t forgive you. Not you, not Barbosse—and not myself for being so powerless that it came to this.*

The eastern sky had begun to turn white as night gave way to day. Standing on an elevated part of the fortress, Herscherik looked up at the sky and then back down at the ground. To the west, a hundred thousand soldiers were stationed. Red lights that must have belonged to campfires could be seen here and there, and the enemy seemed to already have begun preparations for battle.

Herscherik turned his gaze from the large army below to Kuro, who stood beside him. Noticing his gaze, Kuro nodded as he began to recite an incantation, causing a sphere of light to appear in his hands. He threw the sphere of light up into the air, which continued soaring straight up toward the sky before bursting.

“Your Highness, what is...?” a confused Barthold asked, while Roy looked up at the bursting sphere with a puzzled expression.

Herscherik simply smiled meaningfully in response.

Everyone tried to stay as quiet as possible as they hid in the dark forest. When the sky finally started turning brighter, the adjutant approached Heath to give him a report.

“General Blaydes, we’ve received a signal from the border fortress. The army is ready to join battle at any time.”

“Finally our turn, huh?” Heath shrugged from atop his horse.

After they had been ambushed by the imperial army three days prior, Heath had taken his own division—along with the survivors of the other division—and temporarily retreated from the location of the ambush. They had then changed their course and hidden in this forest since the night before.

So everything went exactly as the prince predicted. This goes beyond praiseworthy and straight into frightening territory.

It had all started on the night of their departure day. Heath had been smoking in his tent when Herscherik’s butler of service had suddenly appeared out of nowhere. Heath had been surprised, but managed to maintain his composure. The battle-hardened Heath had been able to tell instinctively that the prince’s men were no ordinary people when they appeared in that room where Heath had first laid his eyes on the prince.

The Blazing General’s son, Octavian, was an old acquaintance of his, and he had heard the people of the department of Magic refer to the troublemaker Weiss as a genius. However, he had no information on the butler; at most, as a former mercenary, Heath had been able to sense the particular aura of someone who had spent some time in the underground.

As Heath followed the butler’s lead into the forest, he found himself face to face with Herscherik, with his knight and Spellcaster standing on each side of him.

“I’m terribly sorry for calling you here this late, General Blaydes. I have something I would like to discuss with you,” Herscherik opened.

“You can call me Heath, prince. Also, as I’m a former mercenary, I’m not very used to speaking politely, so I hope you’ll forgive me if I accidentally say

anything rude.”

“Very well, Heath it is. I don’t really like being spoken to humbly anyway, so please feel free to speak as you always do.”

Herscherik took a deep breath before getting to the main issue.

“During this expedition, there is a chance that we will suffer an ambush from the empire within our borders.”

“Are you serious? *Within* our borders?!” Heath forgot any semblance of politeness as he echoed Herscherik. Without seeming offended in the slightest, Herscherik nodded in response.

“That is the worst-case scenario.”

Herscherik explained three potential scenarios: the first was the prospect of an ambush within the borders of Gracis; the second was an error in their information on the imperial army that would lead them to encountering a much larger force than they were expecting; the third, that there was someone in the expedition and the border fortress who was colluding with the enemy.

“Prince... do you mind if I have a smoke?” After vigorously scratching his head as he finished listening to what Herscherik had to say, Heath lit a cigarette with magic upon receiving permission from the prince. As he exhaled the smoke, the smell of tobacco filled the air. However, that only lasted for a moment, as the Spellcaster next to the prince started to grimace and quickly recited an incantation which conjured a wind that carried the smell of tobacco away.

“To be perfectly honest with you, I’m not sure I actually believe you.”

“Heath...”

“I’m neither trusting or loyal enough to simply believe anything a prince says without any proof whatsoever.” Had his nagging adjutant been with him, he would without a doubt have jabbed him for this remark. Oran sighed as Heath brought the cigarette to his lips again.



Heath was the type to firmly and fearlessly state whatever was on his mind regardless of who he was speaking to, even if it was a superior or a noble. This was why Roland had taken a liking to him, and also why he was despised by the people in National Defense.

Heath exhaled some smoke as he continued speaking.

“Well, it’s not like I don’t have some idea where that proof might come from, though.”

Heath might have been a slacker, but he was no fool, and he had a pretty good idea of what exactly the prince was fearing—and what he was leaving out. Even so, it just wasn’t in his nature to simply nod and readily go along with something like this.

“We’re soldiers. Our job is risking our lives to take the enemy’s. So if the big shots tell us to fight, we’ll fight—and if they tell us to die, we’ll die. But you know, if they start treating hundreds or thousands of people like pawns, then even someone as lazy as me is going to start getting angry. We’re not toys for royals and nobles to play with. Do you understand that, and are you prepared for the consequences of suggesting something like this?” Heath spoke as if reproaching Herscherik. If he’d been accused of disrespecting the royal family, he would have nothing to say for himself.

Herscherik simply took to heart what Heath had to say, as he and his men of service remained silent. Heath once again placed his cigarette in his mouth and inhaled deeply before exhaling in a resigned manner.

“So, Prince Herscherik, what exactly do I need to do, and in preparation for what?”

“You actually believe me? Even though I don’t have any proof?” Herscherik asked, wide-eyed. The prince, who just a moment ago had seemed so mature, suddenly looked more like a boy his actual age. Heath couldn’t help but smile, defeated, at the sudden change in demeanor.

“Never defying the big shots... that’s the sad lot of a laborer. Besides, you’re clearly prepared. What more can one of your subjects do, other than respond in kind?”

Heath had already taken a liking to this boy. The general didn't have a patriotic bone in his body, but he thought that perhaps working for Herscherik wouldn't be so bad.

"And the soldiers seem to like you too. I don't want my subordinates to look at me coldly because I was mean to you or something."

Herscherik had a good reputation within the army. Part of it was a result of the Church incident, but this expedition had improved it significantly. First of all, when he'd requested to eat the same food as the regular soldiers, the food had improved for everyone. The food served to soldiers during an expedition was usually plain; nobles, however, were given expensive luxurious meals. But if a member of the royal family, the highest ranking person on the expedition, requested the same food as the soldiers, they would have to be more careful with what they served.

In order to serve higher quality food, they had been forced to increase the food budget. To do so, their only option was to take the extra funds from the ever-increasing food budget for the nobility. While the nobles accompanying the expedition could have simply paid out of their own pocket instead, it wouldn't have looked good for them to have more luxurious meals than the prince.

Additionally, the prince was equally friendly with everyone and did not look down on common soldiers like other nobles did. Despite having been swamped with work while preparing for the expedition, he had visited not only National Defense but also the barracks to ask the soldiers if there was anything they needed. To Herscherik, it was simply common sense to ask the people doing the actual work for their opinions, but it had only improved his reputation among the soldiers.

As a result, you would now hear the occasional shout of "We'll protect the prince at all costs!" from the soldiers on the expedition.

"Thank you, Heath," Herscherik said with a big smile. A normal prince would never lower himself to thank a mere commoner, and former mercenary at that. Heath responded to the unusual little prince with a confused smile.

And so the ambush came to pass, but as Heath had already hinted to his soldiers to prepare for such an event, the second division managed to avoid unnecessary disarray. Heath himself had already figured that the location in question would have been the best place for an ambush.

The prince's concern didn't just extend to the soldiers. He had predicted in advance what route the ambush unit was most likely to take and evacuated any nearby villages with the help of the mercenary guild. Heath had been surprised that the mercenary guild had decided to help him at all—as a former member himself, he knew that the guild usually tried to keep its distance from the state. They were a free group of people; they were not paid by the government, but in return they weren't tied to it. The only things they trusted were honor and contracts. Heath could not understand why the mercenary guild would even agree to help the prince.

“Well... We have some history,” Herscherik had responded vaguely when asked. Based on his response, Heath had surmised that the prince must have helped the mercenary guild out in some way in the past, and now the guild members—including the guildmaster—were indebted to him.

I can't believe a noble-hater like him would help a prince. Heath thought back to a man he had known from his mercenary days—a man who now served as the master of the mercenary guild. Heath found it fascinating that someone like that would end up assisting a member of the royal family, who were the loftiest nobility of all.

But man, we've got a lot of enemies here, Heath thought as he tried to get a read on the current situation.

The imperial army was a little less than a hundred thousand strong. That was ten times what their information had led them to believe. Heath, on the other hand, had a mere sixteen thousand soldiers at his command. This surprise attack had left them at an unrelenting disadvantage.

Now, what do we do...? The only thing we can do is... As Heath arrived at a conclusion and was about to give his orders, someone approached him.

“Mr. Blaydes.”

“What's up, third-born?” Heath turned around to find the son of his former

superior, clad in crimson armor.

Having visited the Aldis family for work on a number of occasions, Heath was also acquainted with the former general's family. The sons in particular would always pester him for a sparring match. Out of them, he'd seen the most potential in the third son.

"Would you please stop calling me that?"

Heath scratched his head at the sight of the third son—Oran—who looked strangely calm for someone preparing for his first ever battle.

"Sorry about that. So, Octavian, what do you need?"

Oran wiped the irritated look off his face.

"Would you be willing to put me in charge of an elite troop of one thousand cavalymen?"

"Are you planning on charging straight for their supreme commander...?" Heath changed his expression upon hearing Oran's proposal. He now had the face of a general in charge of ten thousand soldiers.

"Yes."

"I have no soldiers I'm willing to sacrifice like that."

"I'm aware."

Heath deflected Oran's suggestion, but Oran refused to yield.

"But the longer we hesitate, the more disadvantaged we become, even if this is an ambush. I want to end the battle as quickly as possible."

"Even if the supreme commander is camping out in the open, he's still a ways away. Even with an elite troop it would be difficult, if not impossible, to reach him. The safe play would be to ambush them, wait until we've reduced their numbers to some extent, then retreat back into the border fort and either hold out until reinforcements arrive or wait for the enemy to give up."

They had the supplies they needed. They would be able to endure the three weeks it would take for reinforcements to arrive, Heath thought. The imperial army, on the other hand, had limited provisions. If Heath's soldiers took

advantage of their ambush to burn and destroy their provisions, it would be difficult for the imperials to maintain an army of a hundred thousand soldiers, and they would have no choice but to retreat. Even if he didn't win, he wouldn't lose—that was the core of the Undefeated General's strategy.

However, Oran shook his head.

"That would take too long. We don't have that time."

"Why not?"

Oran remained silent as he looked straight into Heath's eyes.

"I swear to you—I *will* defeat the enemy general."

"All right, fine. I'll give you the royal guards as well as some of my best soldiers. Whatever you do, don't die." Heath yielded to Oran's ardent gaze, to which Oran showed a fearless smile.

"Of course. I'd also like some fast horses. Are you ready, Weiss?"

The person Oran had addressed nodded. However, this peerless beauty seemed to be in a rather foul mood. Looking at his mud-covered clothes and long white hair, it was easy to see why.

Heath observed the man as he thought back to when they had first been ambushed. He had been dealing out orders, trying to get the soldiers into formation, when he was blinded by a bright light accompanied by roaring thunder. Once the light had receded, he found himself looking at a pale blue barrier, surrounded by dumbfounded soldiers from his own army and the charred corpses of enemy soldiers. Heath initially had no idea what had just happened, but he later met up with Oran who explained that the Spellcaster of service had cast a large-scale spell which had annihilated the entire ambush unit down to the last man. Barriers had also been raised to ensure that the royal army suffered no losses whatsoever from the spell. As a result, they had managed to minimize their losses while also giving the impression that the royal army may have been annihilated in the blast, allowing them the chance to plan their counter-ambush.

That butler, the Aldis third-born, and now this Spellcaster... Just who is that prince? The three of them were all remarkable in their own way, with

exceedingly unique personalities to boot. Heath only grew more fascinated with the prince who had managed to tame them all. *Not bad... I'd love to have a drink with him sometime—wait, he's still just a kid.*

Heath chuckled to himself as he turned his attention back to the Spellcaster.

“All I need to do is open up a path to the enemy leader, right?” The unparalleled beauty who had just flaunted his terrifying Djinn-class magic said this as nonchalantly as if he was discussing the weather.

War cries roared across the field, and the royal cavalry raced across the rolling hills toward the enemy headquarters. The people of the border fort, with the exception of Herscherik and Kuro, gazed at the unfolding scene with amazement.

“Is that the expedition?”

“Yup, it sure is. Now that’s our Undefeated General—they’re in a perfect position,” Herscherik replied to the visibly confused Barthold.

“But I heard the army was routed!”

“That was a lie.”

“What?” Everyone in the room was left dumbfounded at Herscherik’s casual response.

“I knew there was someone who was conspiring with the enemy, you see. I had to make sure they didn’t get word of this. If you want to fool your enemies, you first need to fool your allies.”

“And they believed it straight away. Made my job a lot easier,” Kuro remarked. Barthold only now realized that he was the soldier from earlier.

“But the difference in strength...”

There was indeed an overwhelming difference in numbers. The situation was bad enough that even a layman could tell how disadvantaged they were.

“Yes, but you see, there’s a simple way to end the battle quickly, isn’t there, General Barthold?”

Barthold paused to think for a few seconds, after which he opened his eyes wide.

“Your Highness, you don’t mean to...?”

Herscherik grinned in response.

“Not even the strongest warrior can move without a head. An army is no different.”

Herscherik was reminded of a particular action game he’d played in a previous life where defeating the general meant victory. Of course, this was no game, so defeating the general would not prove quite as easy.

“But surely with an army of that size, defeating the enemy’s supreme commander would be next to impossible.”

“That’s true. If this was a normal battle, it would be pretty difficult,” Herscherik nodded. “But this isn’t a normal battle.”

The imperial army had no doubt in their minds that they would win. Their victory was assured by the overwhelming difference in numbers and their deal with Barbosse. This battlefield was nothing more than the site of a trade between the minister and the empire. The enemy fully believed that they had won the battle before it had even started. This invited carelessness. In addition, Gracis possessed an asset that the enemy was unaware of.

A careless enemy, a force that was thought to have been annihilated, a reverse ambush, an undefeated general, and then Herscherik’s own men of service. Herscherik had prepared for the worst as he drafted his strategy. It was a cunning plan that even made use of the initial ambush itself. Now it was time for that plan to prove itself.

All that’s left is... Herscherik had done all he could. Now all he could do was believe in his men of service.

“Everything will be fine. My knight and Spellcaster are out there,” Herscherik said with his usual smile.

The ambush succeeded initially. However, the enemy army was large, and the

longer they took the more time the enemy would have to tighten their formation and strengthen the defenses around their commander. But that was exactly what Oran was waiting for. Behind the densest throng of soldiers lay the enemy's supreme commander.

The moment they had ascertained his location, a wind cut through the enemy army in a straight line. It blew past a large number of enemy soldiers, flinging them into the air and scattering them like leaves, leaving a clear path to the headquarters where the supreme commander sat.

It wasn't until after the battle that they learned that it had been a spell cast by a single Spellcaster, the soldiers would later relate.

Spellcasters were a common sight on battlefields. They served various roles, from casting offensive magic to assisting with communication. A powerful Spellcaster might have been able to defeat a single small troop with one spell. However, there was no Spellcaster powerful enough to create a path all the way to the enemy's headquarters with a single blow—except for Weiss.

A man charged down the path created by this outlandish Spellcaster. He moved, wielding a sword said to grow sharper the more people it cut down, and mowed down one enemy soldier after the next as they leaped into his path without ever slowing his horse. His sunset-colored hair and crimson armor were stained an even deeper red.

A thousand cavalrymen followed behind him, but Oran spared them no thought as he pressed on through the enemy army. On the way he was interrupted by a strong-looking soldier who introduced himself by name—but he too was cut down by Oran's sword. The general he had killed had been one of the empire's foremost warriors, but Oran paid him no mind as he continued sprinting with his horse, leaving a trail of corpses behind him.

Oran soon arrived at the enemy headquarters, and while the elite troops kept the imperials at bay, he pointed his blood-drenched sword right at the supreme commander, who was frozen with fear.

“Choose. Captivity or death,” Oran asked curtly.

To Dick Eol Lynx, the answer was obvious.

The royal army shouted with joy. At the same time a ball of light signifying their victory was launched up, dispersing in the air like fireworks. The enemy army similarly launched a light into the air, perhaps to signal to the rest of its forces to cease fighting. Less than an hour had passed since the battle was initiated.

“Well... I *did* say to aim for a short battle. I sure did,” Herscherik mumbled to himself.

Even with a surprise attack, they had still been at an overwhelming disadvantage. As a result, they needed to win before the enemy had a chance to move into formation. When Herscherik asked Oran and Shiro whether they’d be able to accomplish this, they had both responded affirmatively.

But Herscherik did never imagine that it would be over *this* quickly. He had left the actual fighting up to Oran, so he hadn’t known in advance what exactly they would be doing on the battlefield, but it had been clear what they were doing even watching from afar.

Leaving one unit behind, the royal army had ambushed the imperial army. Heath must have been the one in charge of that. It was all executed flawlessly, as Heath had taken advantage of the confusion to inflict great losses on the enemy army. However, the enemy did not simply stand still and take the attack. The soldiers fell into formation and fortified their defenses around their headquarters—but ultimately that only served to mark the spot.

That’s when Shiro fired off a spell that ignored any physical defenses—and any magical barriers to boot—throwing the soldiers into the air and carving a path. The man who then led the reserve unit down that path, arriving at the enemy headquarters in the blink of an eye, could only have been Oran, Herscherik concluded.

Sheesh, just how strong are they? Talk about OP.

Herscherik chuckled dispassionately after witnessing the ridiculous feat that just played out before him. He did already have great faith in his men, and his plan had succeeded. But despite that, what he had witnessed seemed so unreal that he could do nothing but laugh.

“It was a short battle, just like you asked for, right?” his butler responded

matter-of-factly. Herscherik decided not to mention his butler's calm response to such an outlandish situation proved that he was quite eccentric himself. Of course, it did not occur to the prince that, as the master of the three, he might be the most eccentric of all.

Ceasing his chuckling, Herscherik took a deep breath, looked out at the battlefield which was slowly settling down, and breathed a sigh of relief.

"We really did win the battle," the prince said. Roy, who was standing beside him, thought that he would never forget what he had seen this day. The rising sun illuminated Herscherik's well-defined profile like a divine halo. Roy squinted as he gazed at Herscherik, who shone like a symbol of the age to come.

Chapter Seven: The Imperial Noble, the Deal, and the Urgent Report

A week had passed since the royal army of Gracis had defeated the Atrad empire. Ever since the battle had concluded, Herscherik had been confined to his bed—in that moment he had collapsed as if all the tension in his body had left him in one go. Due to a combination of fatigue and the injury to his left arm, Herscherik had come down with a high fever for three days, barely conscious the entire time.

However, this was already a thing of the past.

“Kuro, won’t you let me get out of bed already?” Herscherik sat up in his bed, leaning back against a pillow as he pleaded with his butler of service, who had kept close watch over him, almost like a guard—no, not just *like* a guard. His butler had in fact been *literally* on guard to ensure that his master never left the room. He had even moved his own desk and chair into the room so he could do paperwork in the meantime.

“Not a chance,” the butler replied without hesitation, and no wonder—the very next day after Herscherik’s fever had gone down, he had escaped to explore the fort the moment Kuro turned his back, only to be dragged back to bed by the furious butler.

“But I’m totally fine now! I don’t have a fever anymore, and my arm doesn’t hurt at all. See?” Herscherik brought out his childish charm, tilting his head in a cute manner as he put on his best puppy dog eyes. Most people would have fallen for his pleading, as he utilized his royal beauty to the fullest, but not Kuro.

“Not happening.” The butler rejected his every request without changing expression in the slightest, and without his fountain pen pausing as it moved across his paperwork.

“I’m bored... I’m so bored I could die!”

Herscherik liked to sleep, but when *told* to sleep he would instead get an urge

to move around. Kuro stared at his contrarian master.

“You’ll just get yourself in trouble. What were you even thinking, trying to escape to the fort all by yourself?”

“But the people from the mercenary guild escorted me part of the way, and Roy was with me too... How many times are you going to bring this up? Kuro, you’re being a bit...” Herscherik hurriedly stopped himself before he could finish the sentence with “annoying,” as he noticed Kuro glaring at him. He quietly sighed to himself.

The original plan had been to meet up with Kuro in the small village he had first discovered after drifting down the river, and then join the expedition that was pretending to have been annihilated. However, after hearing Roy’s story, Herscherik had concluded that someone in the fort must have been colluding with the enemy. As a result, he changed his plans and set off to the fort to smoke the traitor out. Fortunately, in case of an emergency he had previously requested that the mercenary guild station some of their members near the villages that were liable to be attacked by the empire. The mercenaries had escorted him to a location close to the fort, after which he and Roy had waited until dark to travel the rest of the way.

The handkerchief that Herscherik had tied to the fence before leaving the village had been a signal that he and Kuro had agreed upon beforehand. A bow meant “colluder in the fort.” In such an event, Kuro was to infiltrate the fort and prioritize seizing any evidence, while Herscherik would travel alone. It would be difficult to put into words just what emotions went through Kuro’s head when he saw the handkerchief. A master knows not the suffering of his servants.

Suppressing his surging frustration, the butler, often likened to a faithful dog by his knight comrade, quickly grasped his master’s intentions and set off to do his part. He reconvened with the expedition to explain the plan before setting off to the fort alone on horseback, infiltrating it disguised as a wounded soldier. He then leaked false information and collected any evidence he could find.

“Shut up and lie down.”

“Fine...”

Herscherik gave up on getting out of bed and buried himself under the pillow

behind him. Kuro frowned at the sound of his master's unsatisfied voice, but Herscherik ignored him.

“Oh yeah, where's Shiro?”

“He's cooped himself up in the library.”

Not only was Shiro as much of a bookworm as Herscherik himself, if not more, he had not been assigned any specific task, unlike Kuro and Oran, who was patrolling the area. As a result he had practically as much free time as he wanted, so it was no surprise that he would happily spend his days in the library. There was one problem, however.

“Is Shiro okay to be off on his own?”

Leaving Shiro alone was dangerous for multiple reasons. Blessed with the looks of a goddess of beauty, the soldiers, exuberant after their victory, might go after him. No one had approached him during the march, as Herscherik and Oran had always been with him, though any time he had stepped off the carriage he had been exposed to curious glances from all directions, putting him in a constant bad mood.

Incidentally, the biggest danger involved wasn't the soldiers, but Shiro himself. If he lost his temper and mercilessly fired off a spell like he had in the castle, the entire fort might be reduced to rubble, regardless of whether they had defeated the imperial forces or not. Herscherik was of course worried about Shiro too, but comparing any harm to Shiro with the potential harm Shiro could inflict on his surroundings, it was clear who was in more danger.

As Herscherik was worried about more than one thing, Kuro answered nonchalantly.

“He's already sent a few people flying in the days he's been here, so no one dares to approach him anymore. It's fine.”

Herscherik wondered if that could actually be considered fine, and why Kuro didn't do anything to stop him, as he glared back at the nonchalant butler.

After lunch, Shiro—who hadn't sent anyone flying today—returned to Herscherik's room. He handed a book he had borrowed from the library to the prince, who immediately went into bookworm mode just like Shiro. Soon after,

Oran came back from patrol, taking over from Kuro who'd gone to submit the finished paperwork.

"I'm back. Hersch, how are you feeling?"

Herscherik felt both ashamed of his weakness and glad of Oran's concern. He smiled awkwardly in an attempt to hide his embarrassment.

"Welcome back, Oran. As you can see, I'm doing well enough to be bored out of my mind. So, how was the patrol?"

"Nothing out of the ordinary. The imperial army is laying low, and there were no deserters. We might get some opportunistic night raids, but we have mercenaries stationed in the villages for protection, so everything should be fine."

Herscherik breathed a sigh of relief. His biggest fear had been something happening to the surrounding area. He had been worried that perhaps deserters from the imperial army or burglars would attack the nearby villages. They'd been unable to send soldiers out on patrol, as the army of ten thousand including Heath were preoccupied with keeping an eye on the nearly one hundred thousand imperial soldiers that had been taken captive. Instead, Herscherik had sent out his own royal guards to scout the area. In addition, the mercenaries had volunteered as bodyguards until the imperial army had left, allowing the nearby villagers to go about their lives in peace.

They had also issued a stern warning to the imperial army—delivered by Oran, whom the imperial soldiers were terrified of after he'd killed a renowned general in the blink of an eye. Oran himself, though, had simply swung his sword reflexively. He barely even remembered the man he killed.

"How are the negotiations going?" Herscherik asked. Normally he would have participated in the negotiations too, but as he was currently recuperating, he had been forced to leave it all to General Barthold.

"General Barthold is handling it. I'm sure he will do just fine. My father told me all about how dependable he is. He'll handle it all securely without getting greedy." Oran praised the general, to which Herscherik nodded.

Kuro then returned and announced that the general they'd just been speaking

of had stopped by.

“Hersch, General Barthold wants to meet you. Should I let him in?”

“Huh? Yeah, sure. Oh, but shouldn’t I get changed first?”

He had been changing into a fresh set of clothes every day, but the outfits were all very plain. Herscherik wondered if it really was a good idea for a prince to meet with a general wearing such simple clothes, but Kuro removed a coat from the closet and put it on Herscherik’s shoulders.

“Just drape this coat over yourself. I’m sure your wound still hurts, so you don’t need to put your arms into the sleeves.”

As Herscherik’s arm would hurt a little whenever he moved it, he obediently did as Kuro said.

“Prince Herscherik, I’m sorry for disturbing you during your rest. How are you feeling?”

“I’m fine, General Barthold. I’m sorry for making you take care of all the post-battle cleanup,” Herscherik regretfully responded to Barthold, who had just entered the room.

“That *is* my job. However, I’ll need your assistance with the supreme commander of the imperial army that we captured...”

“Is there a problem? Are the negotiations going badly?” Herscherik asked, curious about the hesitation he heard in Barthold’s voice. The royal army had defeated the empire and was now in an overwhelmingly advantageous position. The empire shouldn’t have been able to make any strong demands.

“No, no, the agreements regarding reparations and a ceasefire are coming along smoothly with the help of the department of Foreign Affairs. We are also preparing to send the captive soldiers back.”

As it had been a tremendously short battle, the empire had only lost one tenth of its main force along with its assault unit. The royal army had lost about two tenths of their own. Gracis’s demands were for the empire to pay consolation money to injured soldiers and the families of fallen soldiers, the cost of restoring the villages that had been burnt down during the ambush, and

reparations to the kingdom itself. On top of that, they had also demanded that the Atrad empire sign a five-year non-aggression pact.

“Is there some other problem, then?” Herscherik asked, at which Barthold frowned and hesitantly opened his mouth.

“The imperial commanding officer wishes to meet with you... He claims that he is in possession of information that Your Highness would want.”

Herscherik narrowed his eyes and debated the matter in his head for a moment before nodding.

“Very well. I shall hear what he has to say. Schwarz, make the arrangements.”

“Understood.”

Seeming slightly discontent, Kuro nodded and picked out a change of clothes, helping Herscherik change into them. Normally Herscherik would do it himself, but he was currently inconvenienced by the wound in his left arm, making it difficult to get dressed. Herscherik then exited the room with Kuro and Oran in tow, meeting up with Barthold who had been waiting outside. Shiro remained in the room, busy reading.

Upon seeing Herscherik, Barthold once again hesitantly opened his mouth.

“The enemy commanding officer says he wishes to see you alone...”

Upon hearing this, the temperature of the air around his men of service seemed to drop drastically—around his butler in particular.

Herscherik was shown to the room where the commanding officer was being kept prisoner. The room was minimally furnished, only outfitted with a bed, desk, and chair, but it was still much better than a stone cell. Inside this room, Herscherik came face to face with the enemy commanding officer for the first time.

“You are the commander-in-chief of the Atrad army, correct?”

In front of Herscherik was a man with an air of nobility to him. His hair and eyes were the color of fallen leaves, and he seemed to be in his forties. He greeted Herscherik without standing up from his chair, keeping his legs crossed.

“Now this is a surprise. I never thought it would be someone this young,” the man said in a shocked tone, but his gaze was alertly appraising Herscherik. “You can’t judge a book by its cover, they say, but I hardly expected to have my plans ruined by a child.”

The man spoke as though talking to himself, and Herscherik shrugged. This was far from the first time he’d received this kind of reaction.

“Hello. My name is Herscherik Gracis. So, what was it you wanted to discuss?” Herscherik attempted to get right to the point as the man observed Herscherik from head to toe. He had already discarded his façade of a quiet young prince.

“Oh, sorry about that. It’s just that I never expected that man to be so wary of a prince this young.”

“So you two were connected after all.” Herscherik didn’t need to ask who he was referring to—it was obvious “that man” referred to Barbosse. However, he had not been expecting the man to mention their connection outright, which made Herscherik wary.

Had the man simply been a shallow person who was frank about his desires—someone who had simply gone along with the minister’s plans—Herscherik wouldn’t have been this concerned. But the man in front of him did not seem shallow in the slightest.

The imperial noble smiled a cunning smile after hearing Herscherik’s answer.

“I hear a lot of rumors about the kingdom. Things seem quite chaotic over there.”

Herscherik read between the lines.

So not only is this man connected to Barbosse, he also has some amount of information on the internal workings of Gracis.

Information was a treasure as well as a weapon. If you knew the internal state of an enemy country, your own country could gain the upper hand. Gracis had lost the information war, as someone had freely leaked intelligence to the empire. And not just anyone—the minister himself had leaked information to the empire in order to compel them to act according to his wishes, Herscherik surmised. And this imperial noble had been fully aware of that fact as he went

along with the plan.

“Is that why you accepted the deal?”

“Of course. I’m no fool—I’ll take anything I can get,” the man spoke, as Herscherik furrowed his brow. He really had gone along with everything deliberately.

However, that in itself was not a problem. The problem here was why he had decided to mention that now. He was a noble who had secretly been colluding with the minister. Why had he sought contact with the prince, knowing that he was antagonistic toward the minister?

“So, what do you want, exactly?”

Herscherik cut to the chase, tired of beating around the bush. He was already fed up with all of this insinuation and probing. Not to mention, he had always been bad with people like this man—the kind who quietly observe people while smiling, who enjoy seeing how people react.

“I’m sorry. Whatever do you mean by that?” the man replied with a vague smile.

Herscherik shrugged his shoulders and let out a small sigh.

“You called me here because you had some information to share, right? So I’m asking you what you want in return. Or are you trying to provoke me in some kind of attempt to plunge the kingdom further into chaos?”

That seemed quite possible, Herscherik thought. If he and the minister started feuding openly with each other, that would turn into a fight between the royal family and the nobles who supported Barbosse. If a civil war were to break out, it would provide the empire ample opportunity to take advantage of the resulting disorder and attack, leading to losses far beyond anything they’d experienced this time around.

But I won’t let that happen. That was exactly why Herscherik had always acted with the utmost precaution.

The man in front of him was attempting to instigate a war. He was holding a sword made of words to Herscherik’s throat in order to rile him up.

“If that’s your aim, I’d recommend you stop, as it’s a terrible waste of your time.”

Herscherik spoke as if stopping the sword in its path with his bare hands, his gaze fixed straight at the imperial noble. In response to his gaze, the man stopped smiling as if he was just playing with Herscherik, his face turning serious instead.

“I see... You really *are* clever. No wonder that man has his eyes set on you.”

Herscherik did not need to ask to know that the man in question was Barbosse.

“Have you met him?” Herscherik asked, as the man spoke as if he had met Barbosse in person before. The noble, however, shook his head.

“No, not in person. However, I get word of what he’s up to.”

The minister that infested the country. His influence extended beyond the borders of the kingdom, to the various neighboring countries as well. One example is the very ambush they had just fought off—while the ambush unit had partially been able to traverse the Principality of Parche due to the empire’s power, the influence of the minister couldn’t be discounted. If not for him, Parche would have been unable to simply turn a blind eye. Such was the extent of Barbosse’s influence, and this was the prince that he loathed—nay, feared.

The man gave a dejected smile. There were two reasons that he had wanted to meet with the prince. One was exactly what the prince had just suggested. The empire had lost the battle, but he couldn’t simply return empty handed. He had hoped to instead agitate the prince enough to incite a civil war in Gracis, but the prince refused to play along so easily—he had even seen right through him. This had spelled the man’s utter defeat.

In that case, he might as well fulfill his second reason.

“I am a noble of the tenth rank within the Atrad empire. Had I prevailed in battle, I would have been able to curry favor with His Majesty the Emperor and been rewarded with a higher rank. But I lost. If I return now, all that awaits me is the shame of defeat.”

The emperor was at the top of the imperial hierarchy, and he had a say in all

matters. This battle had been declared a guaranteed victory, yet in spite of having brought a large army with him, this nobleman had lost. Were he to return, he certainly wouldn't rise in the ranks—in fact, he faced a real chance of losing what rank he had. He may even find himself beheaded for incurring the emperor's wrath or killed in his sleep by a rival noble.

"Knowing that, I wanted to at least get a glimpse of this 'Prince of Light' who managed to win in the face of an overwhelmingly hopeless situation."

"Prince of Light...?" Herscherik looked puzzled, and the man started laughing as if something was terribly amusing.

"The tale of the Prince of Light is popular in Atrad too, you see. The brave and gallant prince featured in the story—he's none other than you, isn't he?"

The performances put on by traveling troupes were not confined by borders like other people were. Even if the performance was based on real events, all they had to do was change the names of the locations and characters and they could continue to put on their festive plays wherever they went.

Among these performances, The Prince of Light was particularly popular. The man had suspected that the prince in the tale was none other than the prince in front of him—a feeling that had only turned to conviction as the battle had ended.

But Herscherik denied his conjecture, shaking his head as if to shake off his words.

"I only won because I was lucky."

Because the imperial army ambushed them exactly as Herscherik had predicted, they had been able to turn the table on them. Because the battle-hardened Heath was there, they'd been able to deploy their troops smoothly. Because word of Shiro hadn't yet reached neighboring countries, they'd been able to force their way through. Because the enemy had been careless and established their headquarters close to the front lines, they had been able to take the supreme commander alive. Had their luck run out at any one of these points, they would most certainly have lost.

Had there been no ambush, they would have had to face an imperial army of

a hundred thousand men head-on with only twenty thousand. Had the second general not been Heath, a trusted commander and Roland's former subordinate, but instead some incompetent aristocrat, a general in name only, it would have been difficult to fight off the ambush. Had Shiro's abilities been widely known, the enemy could have prepared many layers of barriers to obstruct his magic. Had the headquarters been further to the back, there's no guarantee that Oran would have been able to reach it.

What if the empire had realized that the ambush unit had been annihilated? What if they had erected defensive barriers at night? What if a patrol unit had discovered the army hiding in the forest? What if there had been someone in the imperial army who was an equal match for Oran? What if Herscherik's signal had been too late? If even one of these had happened, things would likely have turned out for the worse.

Herscherik had long ago noticed that the minister's henchmen had been acting suspiciously; when the minister had made contact with First Queen Perla, Herscherik had finally made his move. He tried to foresee every possible scenario to ensure that nothing slipped by him, worked with the assumption of a worst-case scenario, used every connection at his disposal, devised a large number of diverse plans, and worked to ensure that any losses were kept to a minimum. All to be sure that he could deal with anything that came his way. And with a great deal of luck on his side, he'd managed to come out on top.

Herscherik closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He then opened his eyes again and looked straight at the man.

"Would you mind sharing your name?"

"My name is Dick Eol Lynx," the imperial noble—Dick—responded. He continued to observe Herscherik, who now had a different air about him.

"Mr... Eolynx?"

"Nobles in Atrad include their title between their given name and their family name. Eol is the tenth rank of the imperial nobility."

"I see," Herscherik nodded. His eyes lit up with a daring gleam. "Mr. Lynx, why don't we make a deal?"

“A deal?” Dick grew suspicious at this sudden proposition, but Herscherik continued with a charming smile.

“I hate war. I can’t stand people killing or being killed. If possible I’d prefer to prevent the shedding of any unnecessary blood, be it the blood of my own people or those of the enemy.”

In Herscherik’s past life, Ryoko Hayakawa had lived a life completely sheltered from war. She had known about wars and how horrifying they were from history books, but she had never experienced one first hand. Ryoko had also been fond of games, novels, and manga, and had in particular enjoyed war stories, where characters put their own convictions at stake as they boldly fought against fate.

However, having been born into a world much like that of the stories Ryoko had enjoyed, Herscherik was now unable to approach the subject in the same lighthearted way.

“Now that’s idealism if I’ve ever heard it,” Dick scoffed. “As long as there are two countries with two different rulers left in this world, war will break out. It’s unavoidable that countries with differing views will clash. War is but a means for a country to solidify its own existence.”

“I’m well aware that it’s idealistic.”

While Herscherik wanted to dispute what Dick had said, he also understood his point. He had grappled with the very same problem himself many times in the past. There were indeed times when war was necessary. Not all conflict could be avoided, and Herscherik understood that sometimes you even had to kill to protect. Nothing was that simple—neither the world nor the people who lived in it.

“But even if you can’t eliminate all war, it must be possible to reduce it. We can discuss, come to understand each other, and compromise. After all, we have been blessed with the mouths and minds needed for dialogue.”

Herscherik understood how naïve he was being. But he had made up his mind. He had to at least make an attempt at his ideal world—even if he would have to travel endlessly far to get there, even if a multitude of hardships stood in his way. That is the path he had decided upon.

I see... He might very well be a “hero” after all, Dick thought as he heard Herscherik explain his ideals without hesitation.

Dick believed there to be two different kinds of heroes. The first were heroes manufactured by people. These individuals were built up to heroic status by people to serve as their hope in times of distress, and were forced to shoulder unreasonable amounts of expectation—little more than jesters to bolster the feelings of others. Sometimes they would be manufactured deliberately, and left to the currents of time they would continue to dance upon the stage of history as false idols, despite being little more than pitiable puppets.

The other kind were true heroes. They held convictions of their own, answered the hopes of the people, shouldered countless lives, and accepted both cheers and slander as they tread down their thorny path. They were an unwavering source of hope.

A dancing jester or an unwavering hero—Dick couldn’t tell which the prince in front of him was. The answer would not reveal itself until long after he was dead.

“Mr. Lynx?” Herscherik called out to Dick, who had fallen silent. Hearing his name spoken, Dick took a deep breath before responding.

“So you want me to serve as a mediator between the empire and the kingdom?” Dick asked, having figured out the deal Herscherik wanted to make. “And in return, my status might increase. But will it really go as smoothly as all that? What if I’m instead accused of colluding with Gracis and charged with treason?”

“I’ll just have to trust you to handle everything well. But this is an official deal between two countries. Having the countries negotiate from an equal position would not be in conflict with national interests. I think our chances are good.”

If there was a possibility that they could come to understand each other, that they could join hands, then they had to seize it. That was Herscherik’s ideal. However, reality was too cruel and full of hardship for his ideal to be achieved so easily. Even so, there must be some chance of bridging the gap between ideal and reality, Herscherik thought.

“What if I use you to attack the kingdom?”

“But you failed this time, didn’t you? If you attack us again, we’ll simply turn the tables on you again.”

“What if I fail and get exiled from the empire?”

“I’ll try to find you a job to do in the kingdom. We could use more talented people.” Herscherik responded to each of Dick’s questions with a smile. “We have a whole five years to sort things out.”

As Herscherik attempted one final push, Dick started to laugh.

“You’re quite the bold one, Prince Herscherik.”

One moment the boy proposed a deal, the next he threatened to turn the tables on them. He lured him in with promises of protection in the event that he defected, complete with a deadline. He may have been a mere child, but to Dick he seemed like some kind of superior being as he slowly accepted his own utter defeat.

“You’re quite the actor yourself. Though that’s exactly why I sought to make a deal with you,” Herscherik grinned.

Seeing Herscherik’s expression, Dick realized that even though he’d been attempting to test the prince, really it had been the prince who was testing him. Perhaps Herscherik had even been waiting for him to attempt to strike a deal. Had Dick simply given up completely after losing the battle, the prince would have concluded that there was no room for negotiation. It was precisely because he had considered Dick worth dealing with that he had opened negotiations to begin with.

“Very well, Prince Herscherik. I can’t give you an immediate response, but I will report to the emperor and do everything in my power to bring this deal to fruition. This is worth much more than simple territory for both countries.”

“Yes, and I will be sure to receive the approval of my father—of His Majesty,” Herscherik said and held out his hand. Dick stood up from his chair and took Herscherik’s hand.

“Please forgive my disrespect of staying seated until now. But Prince Herscherik... You have a difficult road ahead of you,” Dick said, secretly surprised at how small Herscherik’s hand was when clasped in his own. “If

you're able to defeat that man, you'll become the hero of the kingdom. Even if you don't wish to be one, others will wish it of you. And your light will shine brightly both within and outside your borders."

Dick had a feeling that the boy before him would become someone who would illuminate the world.

"You're aware of it yourself, aren't you? The fact that you might end up being the cause of conflict someday soon, Prince of—no, *Hero* of Light."

Herscherik said nothing as he released his grip on Dick's hand, only smiling quietly.

A few days after his meeting with Dick, Herscherik's life had grown hectic—the exact opposite of how it was just a few days prior. As the king's proxy, he was given an office, where he found himself fighting with paperwork as he took care of cleaning up after the battle. He read through document after document, handing it back if something wasn't to his satisfaction, signing it if it met his exacting standards. He would sometimes flee to chat enthusiastically with the soldiers, only for Kuro or Oran to track him down and drag him back to the office. Even so, he would flee yet again to coop himself up in the library to read with Shiro, have tea with General Barthold... and get captured again. His days were hectic indeed.

Negotiations with the empire were also proceeding smoothly, as they arranged a date for the return of their captive imperial soldiers. However, Herscherik's days of grappling with paperwork came to an abrupt end when a soldier barged into his office.

"It's urgent!"

"What is it?" Herscherik looked at the soldier with slightly worn-out eyes, straightening his tiny body. He'd squeezed himself in between a desk and a chair far too large for him, with ink smeared on his cheek. While he at least didn't have to deal with the boredom of being confined to his bed anymore, he had grown slightly irritable after dealing with paperwork with no end in sight. He currently wore an expression completely unbecoming the usually sociable prince, but the soldier was far too frantic to notice.

“We just received an urgent report that His Majesty the King has fallen ill!”

“What...?”

Herscherik dropped his fountain pen, which rolled along on his desk before falling to the floor and leaving a black stain on the carpet, but no one could fault him for it.

The very same evening, Herscherik inspected the company that had already finished the preparations to return to the capital. He was to be accompanied only by his men of service and the royal guards, along with a handful of select others. They were to march on a strict schedule, traveling day and night with as little rest as possible, using more than twice as many horses as there were people.

“Your Highness...”

“General Barthold, I leave the rest to you,” Herscherik responded as he went over the documents one final time while standing, his eyes fixed on the paperwork.

“And General Heath, you’ll be in command for the expedition’s return to the capital.”

“You got it,” Heath, who was standing next to Barthold, said as he raised one hand in response. His adjutant warned him for being disrespectful yet again.

After the imperial army had withdrawn completely, Heath’s job was to ensure the triumphant return of the expedition to the capital. Originally Herscherik had been planning to take part in that march.

Seeing Herscherik’s grim expression, Barthold had hesitated at first, but then steeled himself and started speaking.

“Your Highness... That man is trying to repeat the same tragedy that...”

“I know,” Herscherik interrupted Barthold without waiting for him to finish. “I’m taking them back with me to the capital in order to ensure that doesn’t happen.”

Herscherik’s gaze was turned toward Teodor and his fellows who had colluded with the empire, whose wrists were currently tied, along with Roy who

was timidly preparing for their departure. Roy was to serve as a key witness.

I won't let Barbosse get away with doing whatever he pleases.

He clenched his fist and did not let up, even as he crumpled the documents he was holding. Barthold simply gazed at the prince, unable to say anything more.

"Prince Hersch, we are ready to leave."

"All right. We'll leave at once," Herscherik said to Kuro as he handed over the documents he was holding and started walking.

"Your Highness, please take care."

"You can leave the rest to me."

Herscherik stopped and responded to Barthold and Heath with a nod, his back turned toward them. He then boarded the carriage where Shiro was already sitting. The carriage immediately set off, moving even faster than it had on the march to the fort; under normal circumstances Herscherik would have been suffering from motion sickness, but right now he had no time to be sick.

He imagined his father's kind, yet sad face.

"Father..." Herscherik mumbled to himself, but his voice was lost in the noise of the carriage.

Chapter Eight: The Return, the Illness, and the Repeat of the Tragedy

Despite it being the afternoon, the castle town was dreary. The voices of the shop owners were lifeless as they tried to attract customers, and the people of the town would look at each other anxiously before glancing toward the castle. Just the other day they had received the surprising news that the Seventh Prince Herscherik had defeated the imperial army a hundred thousand strong with less than twenty thousand men of his own.

Before then, the townspeople had been in low spirits after hearing a rumor that the capital had lost contact with the expedition, and that the prince had gone missing, but upon receiving the uplifting news the mood had turned joyous as celebratory toasts were exchanged at the pubs. But out of nowhere, as if to mock the people eagerly awaiting the prince's return, they had received more terrible news: King Solye Gracis, 23rd king, had fallen ill.

Immediately upon hearing the news, the minds of the people had turned to the tragedy that had befallen the royal family over twenty years prior. The previous king, referred to as the Wise King, along with two princes, had fallen ill and ultimately passed away. Ever since then, life had become difficult for the people of Gracis. A foolish king, nobles and authorities that preyed upon the people, obsequious officials and rich folk... The people feared that those difficult days might be upon them once more.

"What's that?"

The owner of a shop noticed a cloud of dust in the distance, past the main thoroughfare. Straining his eyes, he could see a man with sunset-colored hair and a white knight's uniform fluttering as he spurred on his horse. Behind him followed a group of lightly equipped knights, similarly mounted. They yelled instructions to make way as they sprinted down the thoroughfare without slowing down. At the tail end of the procession ran a single carriage, adorned with the royal crest of a shining sun.

“Has the prince returned?!”

Prince Herscherik had indeed returned. The news spread throughout the town in the blink of an eye.

Paying the trembling castle town no heed, Herscherik’s carriage passed through the front gate as it headed toward the castle. It had been only ten days since they left the border fort. Herscherik had traveled home at a speed that far exceeded his speed when he set off.

The carriage stopped, and Herscherik immediately opened the doors himself and leaped outside. Herscherik, who would normally never run in the corridors, dashed at such speed that the officials who had been waiting for him were forced to jump out of the way. He heard footsteps behind him as he ran into the castle, but he did not need to turn around to know that they belonged to his men of service. He sprinted across a passageway and into the royal quarters, never even glancing to the side as he rushed toward his father’s room.

However, someone stopped him in his path. It was the royal family doctor.

“Please wait, Prince Herscherik!”

“Doctor?!”

As Herscherik typically came down with a fever a few times a year, he was well acquainted with the doctor. The old physician would usually speak with a gentle smile on his face, but now he had a stern expression as he tried to keep Herscherik out.

“Your Highness, you must not!”

“Please move out of the way!” Herscherik shouted in response, his voice almost unimaginably loud. Hearing his strained tone, the doctor almost stepped aside, but he stopped himself.

“His Majesty is currently suffering from an unknown illness. If something were to happen to Your Highness as well—”

But Herscherik did not wait to hear the end of the sentence; he swiftly ran past the doctor and threw open the door to his father’s room.

The smell of paper filled the room. There were piles of paperwork on a desk,

and it was clear that his father had been working day and night. As Herscherik looked around the room, the sofa by the fireplace came into view. He was reminded of the time he sat on that sofa as he pleaded with his father to save the count. His father's face from that day flashed into his mind, further fueling his worry. He shook his head from side to side in an attempt to shake off his dark thoughts as he entered the bedroom.

"Father!"

As Herscherik flung open the door, he could feel the air in the room trembling, and the smell of medicine tickled his nose. The bedroom was dark, and the air felt tense.

"Prince Herscherik..."

Herscherik heard his name and turned toward the source of the voice to find Rook holding a metal bucket and a towel. Rook looked at Herscherik for a moment, but quickly turned his gaze downward. Herscherik couldn't help but grow even more worried at the sight.

"Rook, how is Father...?"

Rook remained quiet, only looking across the room. Herscherik followed his gaze to an extravagant bed, seemingly occupied. He steeled himself and started toward the bed. Taking one step after another over the soft carpet, he could hear a faint breathing as he drew closer to the bed. He stopped next to the pillow and gasped as he looked down.

I can't believe how thin he's become...

His father had always been the slender type, but not underweight. He might have looked fragile at a glance, but he was actually more sturdy than he looked in clothing and could easily lift up his own weight—not to mention that Rook had always paid close attention to the king's health. Herscherik had never even seen his father sick before.

Now, however, he was lying in bed, his cheeks hollow and so pale that he was almost pure white.

"Father..." Herscherik called out to his father in a quiet voice and then shut his lips in a tight line.

He had last seen his father on the day of the departure ceremony, when he had received the grand marshal's staff as the king's proxy. Only about a month had passed since then, yet his father looked as if he had aged many years since they last met.

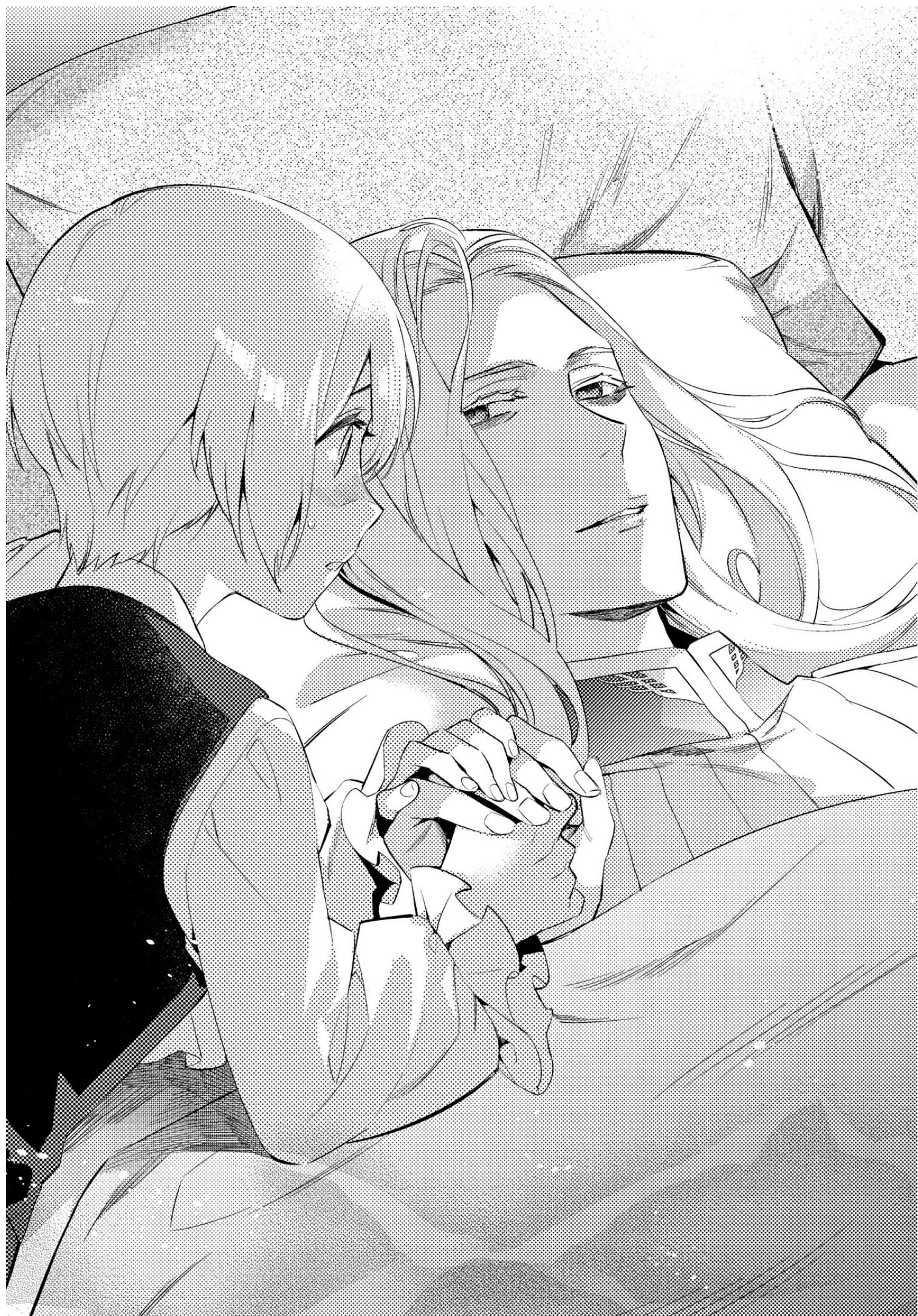
Seemingly sensing the paralyzed Herscherik, Solye opened his closed eyes, revealing eyes the same emerald color as his son, and looked at Herscherik.

"Hersch...?" His voice sounded weak, as if he was only half awake. He reached out with his hand, which Herscherik instinctively grabbed with both hands. Solye blinked a few times before realizing that he wasn't dreaming, and then gave a weak smile.

"Welcome back... It's a relief to see that you're safe..." His voice was weak, yet he was as kind as ever, showing concern for his son despite the amount of pain he must have been in. Herscherik felt his chest tightening, and he found it difficult to breathe as he grimaced in sadness.

"You shouldn't be here, Hersch..." Solye continued. "Didn't the doctor tell you?"

Herscherik shook his head as he held onto his father's hand.



"I have to be here."

"Hersch..." Solye gave a pained smile as Herscherik, who was usually very obedient for a child his age, dismissed his concerns.

Solye slowly sat up, as Rook immediately stepped in to help him, placing pillows behind him to make it more comfortable for him and laying a coat over his shoulders to prevent him from freezing. Solye turned to his butler and childhood friend and silently thanked him with his gaze, after which he patted his youngest son on his head using his free hand.

"I'm so, so happy to see that you're safe..."

Despite the pain he was in, emotionally he felt the exact opposite of what he'd experienced when he'd heard Herscherik had gone missing. Solye then said what he had sworn to tell him the next time they met.

"Listen to me, Hersch. You have to flee the castle."

"What?" Taken aback, Herscherik looked up at Solye. His expression was a mix of surprise and bewilderment.

"You can survive without being a prince."

"Father, what are you...?" Herscherik shook his head, unable to grasp what his father was saying. But Solye continued trying to persuade his son.

"I've already spoken to your mother's parents in the event of an emergency. They resent me, but they have promised to take care of you, their daughter's son."

Solye had stolen their beloved only daughter from them. In reality, she had married Solye of her own free will, but as far as her parents were concerned it was no different from having their daughter stolen away. Even after Herscherik was born, they had refused to respond to any invitations to come see him, and this was the first time that Solye had received a response to any of his communications with them.

"I've also spoken to Marquis Aldis, so you should be fine."

The head of the Aldis family, Roland, was fond of Herscherik. In addition, his son Octavian was none other than Herscherik's own knight of service. Thus, the

Aldis family had sworn to protect him, even if he were to relinquish his title of prince.

And I doubt Barbosse would want to make an enemy out of the Aldis family... For the sake of his own interests, Barbosse had entrapped and ruined any nobles that stood in his way. However, he could not lay his hands on someone like Roland Aldis, a former general whose reputation was not even bound by national borders. While no longer on active duty, his name still held tremendous influence. There was nothing to gain and everything to lose for Barbosse from attempting to harm the Aldis family, Solye thought.

Solye's father and brothers had not even lasted a month after they had fallen ill. His young daughter had died within days. The next time the king closed his eyes, he might not open them ever again.

Solye moved his hand from Herscherik's head to his cheek.

"Hersch, I love you. You don't need to sacrifice yourself for this country."

Solye knew that his son had been neglecting his own health as he devoted himself to his family and his country, yet all Solye had been able to do was to watch from afar, unable to protect him.

"Father!" Herscherik shouted, almost screamed. He put his hand on his father's, and shook his head to object.

"Your Highness, it's about time..." Rook spoke as he noticed Solye had started to look even worse than before. But Herscherik only shook his head back and forth like a pendulum, his eyes tearing up. Herscherik's men of service were unable to enter the king's private room, so they had waited outside the room; Rook himself did not have it in him to force the prince away from the room in his current state.

As Rook pondered what to do, he sensed someone approaching. The person noticed Rook looking at him and nodded once before walking up behind Herscherik and picking him up before he could notice. Surprised, Herscherik turned his gaze from his father to the person holding him and found himself looking at a familiar face.

"Hersch, we're leaving."

“Mark...” Hearing his brother’s stern voice, Herscherik finally resigned and agreed. “All right.”

Herscherik left the bedroom, still carried by his brother, and then exited his father’s private chambers. Once outside, his brother set him down again, and Herscherik remained silent as his men of service threw him concerned glances.

Marx suggested that they return to the outer quarters for now. Partway there, Oran left to handle the soldiers who had returned with them; Shiro left as well, saying he had something to take care of. Kuro then went to the kitchen to prepare some tea, so when Herscherik arrived at his room on the third floor, he found himself alone with his brother. Herscherik let out a deep sigh as he sank into the living room sofa; Marx entered the room and leaned against the wall right next to the door.

“Hersch, it’s good to see you’re back safe. If not for the current situation, we’d be holding a celebration right about now,” his brother said, attempting to sound as cheerful as possible, but this only served to inspire suspicion in Herscherik. He knew Marx the best out of all of his siblings, and his brother had a habit of smiling while furrowing his brow whenever he was trying to hide something.

“Mark, exactly what are you trying to hide? Where’s Will?” Herscherik realized that he hadn’t seen any of his siblings other than Marx. William should have been on the castle grounds, and Herscherik found it hard to believe that the triplets and Eutel would be attending the academy while their father was bedridden.

Marx looked away at first, but soon let out a small sigh of resignation.

“Will, Arya, Reinette, Cecily, and Eutel... they have fallen ill too. Eutel in particular was slow to show any symptoms, but he’s in a rather bad state now. My mother and the other queens are similarly ill, although their symptoms are slow compared to the others.”

“No...”

As Herscherik was at a loss for words, Marx continued.

“We haven’t informed Meno, who’s receiving treatment away from the

capital, and Tessily who's studying abroad. We need to preserve the bloodline if worst comes to worst, you see. We were planning on keeping you in the dark too, but then someone went and informed you... on the minister's order."

Herscherik remained quiet as his brother's frown deepened. He had been lured here as part of the minister's next scheme.

"Hersch, you need to leave the castle like Father said, before you fall sick too. No, before *he* makes his next..." Marx trailed off as his body started to sway back and forth. Still leaning against the wall, he slowly slid onto the floor.

"Mark?!" Herscherik leaped to his feet, but just as he was about to dash over to his brother, Marx held up a hand to tell him to stop.

"I'm... fine..."

However, Herscherik ignored his brother, ran up to him and took his hand. It was frighteningly cold. Next he placed his free hand on his brother's forehead, only to find that it was instead burning hot.

A fever!

Herscherik immediately ran out of his room to try to find someone to help. At the end of the corridor, he ran across Oran, who had just arrived.

"Oran! Hurry!"

Sensing that something was amiss, Oran started running, as Kuro—who must have heard Herscherik's voice—peeked out from around the corner of the corridor.

"Kuro! Get the doctor!"

Kuro nodded and started running in the opposite direction from Oran, down the stairs. Herscherik quickly returned to his room, where his brother was still sitting on the floor leaning against the wall, and he took his brother's hand again.

"Hersch..." Marx said to his youngest brother, feeling his hand wrap around his. "You have to survive, at least..."

Herscherik didn't respond, only clutching his brother's cold hand even tighter. Oran supported Marx on his shoulder as they headed to Marx's room and left

him in the care of his butler of service—who would later turn out to be a relative of Rook’s—after which Herscherik ran out of the room as soon as the doctor showed up. He wanted to stay with his brother, but not only would he not be any help in the examination, he would likely just get in the way. Instead he went back to his own room. An hour later, Kuro went to check up on Marx, and relayed his condition to Herscherik.

“Kuro, how was Mark?”

“He’s just taken some medicine and has calmed down a bit, but...” Kuro’s facial expression was more telling than his words. Oran gripped the hilt of his sword, and his expression tensed.

“I see,” Herscherik said from the sofa, his default position in his room, as he closed his eyes.

He recalled what his father and brother had said to him.

“I refuse to run,” he muttered as if trying to convince himself.

Three days after Marx fell ill, an eerie silence had fallen over the castle, and for good reason; the king, the crown prince—every member of the royal family was bedridden except for Herscherik, and it was difficult for anyone to feel optimistic. The people who were present during the previous king’s reign in particular remembered the previous tragedy of the royal family and shivered with fear.

After Marx fell ill, Herscherik was barred from seeing any of his family members. Not only was he the only remaining healthy member of the family in the capital, he was also very popular with the masses after having returned victorious from his expedition. If a prince like him were to succumb to illness as well, there was no telling what would become of the country. The officials would only bow apologetically to the much younger prince, and Herscherik was unable to do as he wished.

As the officials were in charge of government affairs while the king was out of commission, there was not much for Herscherik to do—nor did he have the willpower to do anything, as time simply passed. He sat on the sofa by the window, looking up at the beautiful sky, sometimes letting out a deep sigh. His

men of service observed him with worried looks on their faces, but not knowing what to say, the room remained quiet.

Breaking the silence, Kuro suddenly announced that an official in charge of the constabulary wished to see him.

“Excuse me, Your Highness.” The official greeted Herscherik humbly before hesitantly continuing. “You see... The townspeople have gathered together and are requesting to see you.”

“What?” Herscherik was left dumbfounded by the unexpected development. As Herscherik struggled to process this turn of events, the man continued.

“Earlier, the townspeople showed up at the castle, seemingly worried about you, the very day after you left for battle.”

He continued to explain how dozens of people had crowded the castle gates after Herscherik had gone missing, and how General Aldis, who by sheer luck had been present, had calmed them down.

“But now, word’s gotten out that the royal family has fallen ill, and ever since the day you returned there have been people showing up every day, asking about your safety.”

Having been cooped up in his room ever since he returned, Herscherik had been completely unaware of the situation outside, and was baffled. At the same time, he found the man’s report difficult to believe.

“Is that... true?”

“Yes. They have already become a hindrance to our work. Your Highness, I’m terribly sorry, but won’t you meet with the townspeople and calm them down?”

Herscherik nodded incredulously in response to the troubled man.

Less than an hour later, as Herscherik arrived at the front gate which led to the castle town, he saw that the man had spoken the truth.

Leading from the front gate to the castle doors was a cobblestone road where you could get on and off carriages, flanked by perfectly-maintained shrubs and flowerbeds as well as stone statues. It was a magnificent gate worthy of the

great kingdom of Gracis. It was usually a place that nobles, high officials, and diplomats from other countries passed through, but now it was overflowing with ordinary citizens from the castle town. Old and young, men and women, all sorts of people filled the plaza. Herscherik couldn't believe his eyes as he beheld the spectacle.

Oran placed a hand on the shoulder of the frozen Herscherik and pushed him forward. As he did, a man at the very front noticed Herscherik and raised his voice.

"Everyone! Prince Herscherik is here!"

In the space of a moment, the people flocked to Herscherik.

"You're not hurt, are you? Are you all right?" asked the lady from the general store. When he'd wandered the town as Ryoko, she would always carefully explain how to use the various tools in her shop.

"I'm glad to see you're okay! How's the king faring? Uh, I mean... Is His Majesty well, Your Highness?" the cheerful greengrocer asked as he awkwardly corrected himself to be more polite. He would always show Herscherik all kinds of unfamiliar and strange vegetables, and would even let him have a taste sometimes.

"Also, nothing bad happened while you were away, did it? We were so worried when we heard you went missing!" This charming voice belonged to the madam of the red-light district. Herscherik had first met her when he and Oran had saved her from an overly-persistent nobleman's attempts at seduction—and as a night worker, she would normally be catching a few precious winks of sleep at this time of day.

"Ryoko! Ryoko!"

"Are you okay? Feeling all right? Are you okay?"

Herscherik looked down as he felt someone tugging on his clothes, to find the children he often used to play with looking up at him. Their parents warned them, "That's Prince Herscherik, not Ryoko!" but the children only looked bewildered.

"Everyone..." Herscherik felt something welling up from inside him, but

suppressed it. “But why? I... I’ve been lying to you the whole time.”

He’d been afraid that they would abandon him if they knew he was royalty. While he’d known that he would have to come clean one day, he had also wanted to spend as much time as he could with them. As a result, he had kept his true identity hidden until it finally became impossible.

The people exchanged glances at the sight of the perplexed Herscherik.

“Well, that’s... you know?”

“Yeah, you know?”

The townspeople racked their brains, unable to find the right words. Suddenly a large-bellied woman appeared, squeezing through the crowd.

“Well, Ryoko—Prince Herscherik—that’s because we all love you.”

“Louise?! And your husband too? Are you sure you should be walking around like this?”

Louise gave her usual smile in response to Herscherik, whose first reaction had been to worry about her and her baby.

“I’m really sorry, Prince Herscherik, for all the things we’ve said, even if we didn’t know.”

The lively castle town had also been brimming with discontent toward the royal family and the nobility—yet in spite of that, Herscherik had always worn a smile as bright as the sun. As Louise thought about how he must have felt listening to all those dissatisfied voices, her heart ached.

“But that’s...”

Given how horribly the government had treated them, Herscherik understood full well why they felt the need to voice their dissatisfaction. He knew that they spent their days enduring terrible oppression. And while they suffered, the royals and nobility would look down upon the people from above, spending their time indulging in their lavish lifestyles.

“Besides, I let a lot of people die...”

Herscherik had had no means of stopping the war. His only remaining option

had been to outwit Barbosse and the empire by preparing for the worst and attempting to minimize the casualties as best he could. Even so, it had been impossible to prevent every death; although statistically he had been able to reduce them compared to previous battles, that was only looking at it from afar. After the ambush, Roy had lamented the loss of his comrades. Even if that was the duty of a soldier, an overwhelming sense of powerlessness assaulted Herscherik as he thought back to the people who had lost their lives and their families. He didn't want to sacrifice anyone, and he had no intention of doing so either. But in reality, people still died. Trapped between his ideals and reality, Herscherik's powerlessness tormented him.

"But you did everything you could, Prince Herscherik."

Louise kneeled in front of Herscherik, his gaze kept on the ground, despite how difficult it must have been for her with her large belly; she then laid her hands on Herscherik's cheeks and turned his face upwards.

"You're the reason that this country has become more bearable recently, aren't you?"

Louise smiled and removed her hands from Herscherik's face, as the people around them nodded in agreement.

"That's right! You've always been helping everyone, nobles and commoners alike!"

They knew that the young noble boy called Ryoko had been going around town, a black-haired man and an orange-haired knight in tow. He had seemed almost like the Prince of Light that the bards sang about—in fact, some even suspected that they were one and the same.

"It's very sad to think about the people who died. Some might resent you for that, but... You know, there are also many people who are only alive because of you."

Herscherik felt a large hand on his head. Looking up, he saw an imposing, bearlike figure—it was Louise's husband, the owner of the fruit shop.

"Everyone has to die someday. But there's no reason why you should shoulder every death. Just do your best not to forget them, and not to let them

have died in vain.”

“Owner...” Herscherik was surprised at hearing the usually quiet shop owner speak, but at the same time he felt the sense of powerlessness that had been gnawing at him soften slightly.

“Gotta say, everything fell into place when I learned Ryoko was a prince.”

“Yeah, he’s nothing like those haughty nobles!”

“I started feeling like maybe this country isn’t all that bad after all.”

“And like we need to do something to help too!”

As he listened to the townspeople speaking one after the other, a genuine smile surfaced on his face. He had come back to the place he’d thought he’d left behind forever. Not only that, but they had even comforted him.

Herscherik once again felt someone tugging on his clothes. He looked down to find the children from earlier looking worried.

“If you’re a prince, does that mean we won’t get to see you anymore?”

“No! I want to play with Ryoko!”

The children clung to Herscherik, teary-eyed. He hugged the children back.

“Thank you... Thank you so much...” Herscherik said from the bottom of his heart.

He had always wanted to protect these children, but in truth, perhaps they were the ones who had been protecting him and his heart. His desire to protect them grew even stronger.

I want to protect them. I want to be here... I want to be a true prince. This place, where he had been reborn, was his true home now. Herscherik smiled as he was surrounded by the townspeople. It was the same smile that the noble boy they had once known as Ryoko used to give.

Watching Herscherik from a distance, Vivi breathed a sigh of relief. When he’d visited the orphanage the day before the expedition had set off, there had been something strange about him. He’d had the look of someone who understood everything and steeled himself for something. But Vivi had been too

preoccupied with herself at the time and had missed the opportunity to question him.

After pressing Roland for an explanation, he confessed that Herscherik had sworn him to secrecy so as not to worry Vivi and the other orphans unnecessarily. Vivi had felt like crying over her own inadequacy, and when she heard that Herscherik had gone missing, she had been gripped by a deep sense of regret. Why was she always the one being protected, she'd wondered. For once, she wanted to protect him too.

This time around, she'd seen him come back alive. *But what about next time?*

The next time something happened to him, would she be by his side? Would she be able to save him? Would she be able to protect him? What must she do to stand beside him?

"Vivi, are you sure you don't want to say hello to him?" Colette, standing next to Vivi, asked curiously. "You were so restless about it until yesterday."

"Yeah. I'm happy just to have been able to confirm that he's all right."

She didn't need him to notice her. As long as he was alive, Vivi would be happy.

Not today, perhaps... But one day, I swear! She would fulfill the promise she made the day she gave up on her father, her home and her name. She had renewed her resolve.

"Rick, thanks for bringing me here," Vivi said to Rick, who also stood beside them. He had dragged Vivi out here by the hand after she had spent the whole morning fidgeting nervously.

Rick himself only cast Herscherik a quick glance before frowning and deliberately looking away.

"Let's head back then."

Vivi started walking, and Rick followed. Colette looked back and forth between the two children and Herscherik, before running after them herself. Herscherik did not notice Vivi leaving.

After the clinging children released him, Herscherik turned to address the

townspeople, but Louise suddenly held up one hand, her other hand on her belly.

“I’m really sorry to spoil the moment, but...”

“Louise?”

“Once I’d calmed down after seeing you safe... I felt a contraction. I think... I’m going into labor.”

The mood immediately froze over.

Once things had turned busy after Louise’s proclamation the day prior, she had soon after given birth to a healthy girl. Herscherik, who had ended up witnessing the birth by chance, had been as happy as the parents themselves upon seeing the baby.

Today, however, Herscherik was frowning as he looked at Kuro. His butler had just announced a visitor—it was the minister himself.

“Fine. Show him in,” Herscherik told Kuro as he squeezed the silver pocket watch in his hand.

Soon, Kuro led the minister inside, and Herscherik felt as though the air in the room had grown tense. He was now alone in the room with Barbosse. Kuro and Oran had asked to sit in on the meeting, but Herscherik had declined and was now confronting him one on one.

“Your Highness, my sincere condolences,” the minister said with a mournful expression as he bowed his head. However, anyone who understood the circumstances would know that this was nothing but a façade.

Herscherik found Barbosse’s conduct laughable, but refrained from clucking his tongue. Instead, he reached for the watch in his pocket.

“You can skip the pretenses,” Herscherik spoke in a cold voice, giving the minister a piercing glance. “That’s not why you’re here. I don’t need your idle chatter. Just tell me what you came for.”

The minister raised his head and narrowed his hazel eyes as he looked down on Herscherik.

“Hmph, you detestable brat.”

“I’m glad the feeling is mutual,” Herscherik snapped back. Barbosse scoffed disagreeably in response.

“Prince, if you do exactly as I say, I’ll spare that family of yours.”

“You’ll ‘spare’ them? You do realize that you’re basically admitting to being the one hurting them in the first place?”

“We *were* skipping the pretenses, were we not?” Barbosse smirked wily as Herscherik glared at him furiously.

He must be convinced that he has the upper hand and has decided to reveal himself. Holding the lives of Herscherik’s father and brothers in his hands, Barbosse was confident that he had an overwhelming advantage. So without even attempting to hide anything, he threatened the prince openly.

Herscherik clasped the pocket watch he was holding even tighter.

“What will it be?” the minister asked, smiling contently as he watched the prince’s anguished expression.

“Just tell me two things,” Herscherik spoke in a strained voice. “Did you frame Klaus?”

“Klaus?”

“Count Ruseria, the person you framed during my third birthday.”

“Oh, that fellow,” Barbosse recalled and nodded. “If he’d only learned his lesson after he lost his wife and child. A truly foolish man, he was. He simply refused to keep quiet, blathering on about the good of the country. I did manage to put him to good use, though. Since he was so kind as to round his own people up for me, he made cleaning up very easy. Thanks to him, there was no need to go to great lengths to find all the people who were in my way.”

Barbosse smiled scornfully.

Hearing the minister’s answer, Herscherik put even more force into the hand that was holding the pocket watch. He did not let it show on his face, however, as he asked his second question.

“Why.... Why did you kill Jeanne, your own daughter?”

“I killed Jeanne? I am told she died protecting you, Your Highness.”

Herscherik threw the minister a piercing glance, but the minister simply tilted his head in bemusement before speaking as nonchalantly as if he was discussing the weather.

“I simply rid myself of a pawn I no longer needed.”

“And you call yourself her father?!”

“She was the only one who claimed that. If she truly was my daughter, she’d never have acted so foolishly.”

He had never thought of her as his daughter to begin with. He had simply used her and then thrown her aside. Hearing this, Herscherik gritted his teeth, but Barbosse simply gave a gloating smirk.

“Are those all of your questions? Then it’s your turn to do what I tell you. First of all, yes... Why don’t you become king?”

He wanted to once again install a puppet that would do his bidding. Herscherik had the support of the people. If he were to become king, the people would stop voicing their discontent, if only for a while. Barbosse planned to have Solye step down, citing his illness, and have the other princes similarly remove themselves from the line of succession. If anyone voiced opposition, it was only a matter of stomping them out.

“But before that, how about you return the thing that girl gave you.”

“This is...” Herscherik reflexively touched his earring as he took a step back. Barbosse held out his hand.

“I know what she took with her. I’d hoped to just erase it along with you... The condition was that you would do my bidding, yes?”

With a frustrated grimace, Herscherik removed the earring and handed it to Barbosse, who hadn’t given him any other choice.

“Ah, yes, and then there’s the question of... Roy Bildt, I believe his name was? Where is he?”

“What do you want with him?”

“Isn’t that obvious?”

Roy was a key witness in exposing the minister’s misdeeds. Teodor and the other men who had received orders in secret from the minister were currently captive in the prison run by National Defense. Roy, however, was hiding along with his family in the Aldis residence. There was no place in the capital as safe as the Aldis household.

With his family hostage, Herscherik had no choice but to tell the minister the truth. As he finished explaining where Roy was, the minister nodded in satisfaction, and then took an exaggerated bow.

“I look forward to working with you, my future king.”

Barbosse turned his back to Herscherik and started walking toward the door. As he glanced behind him, he saw Herscherik with his head downturned, trembling with his arms wrapped around himself. Barbosse felt a keen sense of superiority in that moment.

In the end, the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree. That king had also chosen his own blood over his people. Regardless of how splendid your ideals were, in the end it was human nature to look out for yourself before others. *This prince is no different from his father. This country won’t change. It belongs to me.*

Barbosse scoffed internally as he reached out toward the door.

Chapter Nine: The Prince, the Minister, and the End of the Tragedy

Barbosse reached out for the door handle but found himself grasping air instead. He then widened his eyes at the sight of exactly who had appeared in the doorway.

“This is the end of the line for you, Barbosse.” Marx shook his head, red hair swirling, as he shot Barbosse a piercing gaze.

“Why... are you...?” Barbosse took a few steps back.

An unbelievable scene was unfolding before him. William entered the room after Marx, followed by Oran and Kuro in turn. At the sight of the final person, however, Barbosse’s eyes widened so much it looked like they might fall out of their sockets.

“Barbosse...”

The person spoke Barbosse’s name, and Barbosse knew that he was neither dreaming nor hallucinating. Before him, supported by his butler, stood the king who just the other day had been lying in his bed, at death’s door. He was still thin, but looked much healthier than before.

Once everyone had entered, William addressed the master of the room. “Hersch, you can drop the act.”

Upon hearing this, a sound like air escaping the mouth of a balloon was heard from Herscherik’s mouth. His light, golden hair shook violently as he burst into laughter, then started coughing, before finally opening and closing his mouth repeatedly like a fish having trouble breathing. Finally, he took a deep breath and calmed himself down.

“Wow, that was close. I thought I’d suffocate from having to hold back all that laughter.”

“Why...?”

Herscherik gave the dumbfounded minister an angelic smile.

“By the way, I recorded the whole conversation ever since you entered the room. It was actually funny how open you were about everything. Thank you for that,” Herscherik said, as he flashed him the pocket watch he had been holding.

“And I’ve recorded not just today’s conversation, but also the men who attacked me during the expedition, as well as General Seghin’s confession and Roy’s testimonial. Oh, and I’ve already made copies of everything other than the conversation we just had. Do you want proof?”

Herscherik silently issued a mental command to the pocket watch, as the artifact, already charged with Floating Magic, started to glow faintly before playing back the conversation.



The advantage of magical items was that there was no need to recite incantations. Magical devices only served to augment other spells and thus still required all the usual casting procedures, but with magical items you only needed to imbue them with power. As a result, Herscherik only needed to command the pocket watch in his mind as he held it to activate the recording spell without being noticed.

“How... is this possible...?”

Herscherik grinned as he noticed Barbosse’s gaze shift between him and his father and brothers.

“Oh, are you wondering why they’re up and about? That’s simple. We got hold of the antidote for the poison you’d been feeding them.”

“The antidote?! But I’m...!” Barbosse began to say, but before he could complete his sentence with “the only one who has that,” he was interrupted by the smiling prince in front of him, who knew exactly what he was about to say.

“Oh, let me be more specific. It’s not an antidote, but a neutralizer that we had made that counteracts the effect of the poison. It was obvious to us that you’d fall back on the poison as a last resort when cornered, you see.”

This method had already worked for Barbosse twice. Having failed at both winning Herscherik over and assassinating him, it was easy to predict what his next course of action would be. However, were he to be fed the poison, Herscherik too would have become incapacitated just like his father.

“You invariably turn to poison in the end. And after that, you’d come to strike a deal with me.”

Without an antidote to his poison, Barbosse would have nothing to offer. But there was no guarantee that such an antidote would result in a full recovery.

Herscherik had been combing through the castle for any information he could find on the poison since he was only three years old; however, there was no such information to be found. So instead he focused his efforts on finding an alternative method to combat it as he collected information during his castle town visits and his trips outside the capital to vanquish evil. Despite all this, he still turned up nothing about the poison itself.

“I thought I had no option but to give up on figuring that poison out. But then, Jeanne came to the rescue.”

It was the earring she had given him just before dying. The earring turned out to be a storage mechanism which had contained information on how to make Barbossé’s signature poison.

“Thanks to her, we managed to replicate it, and ultimately we were able to concoct something that would neutralize it.”

Sigel had been in charge of producing the neutralizer, and he had accepted the mission without a moment’s hesitation.

“I’m Mark’s Spellcaster of service. Of course I’ll help,” he’d said, although he’d been unable to keep his feelings of anticipation from showing on his face at the thought of new research.

In the process of creating the poison, it had been imbued with magical formulas. However, not only were those formulas difficult to decode, they were encrypted to boot, and Shiro had been forced to help out—although, “magic maniac” that he was, he had gleefully participated. Additionally, the poison made use of some rather rare herbs—but with the help of Kuro, who for some reason turned out to be quite well-read on the topic, that proved no hurdle.

Herscherik had been worried that someone would catch on to the research they were doing, but since Sigel already had a habit of locking himself up in his room and devoting himself to his research, no one suspected a thing. Even after Weiss had joined the project, the reaction from both normal people and the Spellcasters of the Department of Research had been, “I’m curious, but it seems like it would be dangerous to pry.” As a result, everyone else had avoided them, allowing them to secure time for their research. Even so, you can’t exactly produce a poison or a neutralizer overnight.

“We needed time to produce the neutralizer. That’s why I went along with your plan and left for the border in the first place.”

Herscherik’s goal had been twofold: to buy time, and to draw Barbossé’s attention. However, they couldn’t take *too* much time, or they would arouse suspicion and their research would be discovered. That’s why he needed to end the battle as quickly as possible. That way Herscherik could corner Barbossé

psychologically and force the minister to focus solely on him.

And just as predicted, Barbosse fell back on his last resort. However, it was still a gamble whether they would be able to make the neutralizer in time. When Herscherik arrived back at the capital, the neutralizer was still not complete, so Shiro had gone straight to Sigel's room to assist him. By the time Herscherik arrived home after having been present for Louise's childbirth, he had been informed that a prototype of the neutralizer was ready.

"We have no time to experiment. We don't know if this will work or not."

It was definitely a gamble. Still, Herscherik had nodded and taken the neutralizer to his suffering family, and after telling them everything, he had given it to them.

In the end, Herscherik's gamble had paid off.

Incidentally, having worked for three days straight without sleep, Shiro and Sigel had collapsed immediately after hearing about the neutralizer's effectiveness, and they were now sleeping like the dead. The fact that Kuro, who had similarly worked day and night, was still fine spoke volumes about his experience as a former spy.

"One thing always struck me as strange, though. Why didn't you use the poison on me?"

Herscherik had been unable to figure out why Barbosse would go to such elaborate lengths in his attempts to kill him. It would have been far simpler to make it seem as though he died from illness, just like his oldest sister—so why didn't the minister just do that?

But then, Herscherik had realized something. Perhaps he *couldn't* be killed in the same way. The reason lay in what separated him from the rest of his family.

"What separates me from the rest of my family... is my Magic Within."

The poison functioned by altering the nature of one's Magic Within. This resulted in the victim's Magic being artificially depleted in abnormal amounts; once their Magic ran out it would instead deplete their stamina, and finally their very life force. To an onlooker it would seem like the victim's health simply deteriorated for no apparent cause. But having no Magic Within of his own, the

poison would not work on Herscherik. Conversely, the more Magic one possessed, the worse the effects of the poison. The members of the royal family possessed more Magic than the average person—and Eutel, who had possessed so much Magic that it had overflowed his own vessel, had felt the effects even stronger than the rest, and had been in critical condition.

“This poison alters your Magic and makes it go wild. That is what drove the royal family to their deaths. Since I have no Magic Within to begin with, it doesn’t work on me. So since you couldn’t kill me and make it seem like an illness, you had no choice but to rely on more forceful means.”

He couldn’t dress it up as an illness, and any direct attempts at assassinating Herscherik would have been prevented by Kuro, a former spy, and Oran, who had effortlessly won the Games of Contest and taken on a hundred zealots without suffering so much as a scratch. After the magical genius Shiro had joined him, Herscherik had been left with practically no blind spots.

After he’d failed to win the prince over using his daughter, few options remained for Barbosse. And so, he had been forced to take advantage of the conflict with the empire. By sending him into that conflict, Barbosse could wear down Herscherik’s defenses before finally taking him out. Alternatively he could simply let the empire take him hostage, never allowing him to step on Gracis soil again. The odds had been in Barbosse’s favor—but not guaranteed.

“You’re the type who only acts when you know you can win. And yet, when you wanted to deal with me, you resorted to gambling.”

There was only one explanation.

“You *had* to get rid of me, because I possessed enough evidence to send you to your doom,” Herscherik said, with a glance toward Kuro.

In response, Kuro quickly left for the study, and then returned carrying documents. Herscherik took the documents from Kuro and held them up, as if to shove them into Barbosse’s face.

“These are the documents on the drug seized from the Church, as well as those on the poison I got from Jeanne. I was informed that some elements of their composition bear a striking resemblance.”

Once he'd heard that, Herscherik had finally understood how the incidents were connected—and it concerned the strength-increasing drug that they'd seized from the Church in the spring. The documents they had confiscated stated that the drug altered the user's Magic in order to enhance both their Magic and their vessel, and that enhanced Magic in turn served to bolster the user's physical strength. Unless they continued to take the drug, the user would be unable to maintain their enhanced body and vessel. The user's physical strength and immune system would then deteriorate, weakening them until finally resulting in their death.

This poison worked by altering the user's Magic, just like the drug. Sigel and Shiro's research had additionally shown that the ingredients and magical formulas required for the two were far too similar for it to be a simple coincidence.

"The obvious conclusion is that the drug and the poison was produced in the same place, and with the same method."

Herscherik conjectured that the Department of Research had accidentally stumbled upon this poison while researching the drug. Research into the drug had been stopped, but once he'd learned about the poison, Barbosse had procured it in secret and used it to assassinate the previous king and his sons while making it seem as though they had died from illness. All of the data on the substance had then been moved to a barrier-protected vault at the Department of Research, and its very existence had been forgotten. Everyone who had participated in the research subsequently died in accidents or illnesses, one after another. They must have been intentionally silenced. Thus, the truth had been buried—with the exception of the documents in the vault.

"Barbosse, you feared that the documents in the vault would come to light one day."

Research data was a vital asset to any country, as it could one day be put to good use no matter what it was. As such, data was never disposed of. Someone might one day take an interest in the canceled research and resume it. If that were to happen, they would learn of the drug and the poison, and there was a chance that the truth of the royal family's untimely death would be discovered.

“When you learned that the Church wanted that drug, it was the perfect opportunity for you. You removed any information on the poison from the data and handed the rest to the Church.”

Even if it was evident that some of the data had been stolen, with everyone involved out of the picture it would be nigh impossible to track it down. If worse came to worst, he could simply blame the Church.

“You then made the decision not to dispose of the data on the poison, on the off chance you needed it in the future.”

Barbosse was a cautious man. He would never have gotten rid of his own trump card.

Sigel mentioned that the poison deteriorated as it aged, causing it to lose effectiveness. That would make it impossible to store it for longer periods of time. At the same time, he couldn't simply leave the documents in someone else's care, as that would have meant giving them ample material for blackmail. Barbosse concluded that keeping it hidden in his own house would be the safest solution.

“And thus, all information on the drug and the poison was gone from the castle... or so you thought.”

Herscherik threw the documents concerning the drugs onto the floor at Barbosse's feet; then, he took out some documents he had kept in the inner pocket of his coat and held them up.

“To ensure that no one could connect you to the deed, you had someone else handle the negotiations—Count Grim. But he only served as a middleman. This here is proof that *you're* the one who ultimately sold those drugs to the Church.”

In Herscherik's hand was a secret communication dated five years prior, addressed to the Church.

“There's no name written on it. But if one were to analyze the handwriting, it would be clear who wrote it. I've gone over a great many documents these past three years.”

This world had nothing remotely like a computer, so all documents were

written by hand. There were magical items that could copy text, but the original document still needed to be written out. Having spent years sifting through documents in the castle, Herscherik had developed the ability to tell at a glance more or less who had written a document. His Father, for instance, wrote in a beautiful, flowing style, and he had a habit of marking the end of his sentences with a dot; Marx would always write the first character of a sentence slightly larger; and so on.

This secret communication, meanwhile, featured distinctive handwriting marked by strong brush pressure and an upwards slant. Herscherik had struggled with reading this handwriting early on.

“This is *your* handwriting, Minister Barbosse.”

“Just where did you find that?!”

Herscherik held up his pocket watch like an official’s badge in response.

“It was stored in Klaus’s pocket watch.”

Herscherik had thought back to something he had been told before: “I’ll give you a little bonus. Make sure you don’t lose that pocket watch of yours. It will help you along the way like nothing else will.” So the Oracle had told him. *This pocket watch certainly has helped me*, Herscherik thought.

It had stored magical formulas so that even the Magic-less Herscherik could use spells, it had protected him, and it had even recorded confessions from Barbosse and others, giving him access to irrefutable evidence. However, the most important thing it had provided was this secret communication. It would help avenge the previous king and his brothers, who would have been Herscherik’s uncles if they had lived.

“By itself, this document doesn’t serve as proof for anything beyond misappropriation. That’s a crime far less serious than colluding with an enemy nation. That’s why Klaus chose not to make use of it himself. However, he did make sure to leave it inside this pocket watch.” Herscherik stared intently at Barbosse. “You learned that this communication had unexpectedly made its way into Klaus’s hands. And so you framed him and had him executed before it had a chance of seeing the light of day.”

To Barbosse, Grim had been nothing but a pawn to cast aside when it suited him. However, Grim, who'd known nothing about the secret communication, had displayed his own ability to sense danger and chose not to destroy the communication. Even so, the fact that it ultimately ended up in Klaus's hands was proof that he wasn't the sharpest tool in the box.

"Everything finally came together."

The tragedy of the royal family, Klaus's death, the drug, the poison... Everything had come together.

Herscherik took a deep breath and stared the frozen Barbosse down as he exhaled.

"Give it up already, Barbosse."

Herscherik threw the copy of the secret communication onto the floor with the other documents.

"This... This country won't change so easily," Barbosse grumbled in a quiet voice as he stepped on the documents on the floor. A crunching noise echoed throughout the room. "This country is rotten to the core. Even if I hadn't done anything, it would have continued to rot all on its own. I am the only reason it has survived until now!"

Reflecting his own emotions, Barbosse's voice steadily grew louder and louder. Before Barbosse had become a marquis, before he had made his way up the ranks in the castle, the country had already started to rot from within. The nobles had disregarded the timid king two generations prior, strutting around the castle like they owned it and preying on the country and its people. Barbosse had simply followed their example in order to survive. And because he had done so, Gracis had survived.

The Wise King, however, did not approve of this, as he had attempted to purge the corrupt factions of the nobility. He had even tried to discard Barbosse—the very man who had maintained the country until then! So Barbosse had wiped him out, leaving only the timid Third Prince Solye behind. Solye had resisted at first, but after the birth of the crown prince, Barbosse had killed the newborn prince's older sister. Solye had always obeyed after that.

“Even if you get rid of me, this country won’t change! In fact, without me to control it, Gracis will only plummet even faster toward ruin!”

Just as Barbosse claimed, the nobles and officials who had exploited this country would not easily forget that sweet taste of money and power. Without Barbosse at the top, they might even lose what little remained of their restraint, which would lead to the further rotting of the country and eventually its final decline.

“You think I don’t understand that?” Herscherik concurred with the minister.

He walked up to the desk by the window, picked up the documents spread out on top of it, and threw them onto the floor as well.

“That’s why I’ve been collecting all of this. Nobles, higher-ups, officials, knights, soldiers, constables... Public and private figures alike. I’ve been gathering evidence of every wrongdoing in this country that I’ve been able to get my hands on.” Herscherik’s voice was cold as he suppressed his feelings.

Barbosse looked down at the documents to find a small part of Herscherik’s evidence of wrongdoings. Herscherik continued grabbing documents from the desk and throwing them onto the floor. Falsified tax revenues, made-up expenditures from colluding with merchants, misappropriated goods and military equipment, false charges, cover-ups of the crimes of public figures... One document after the other, the evidence piled up on the floor.

Finally, he picked up a large pile of papers on the desk with both hands and threw it, as if to express some indescribable emotion.

“I’ve been collecting it this whole time.”

Ever since I learned how to read, ever since I started my audits three years ago... This whole entire time!

Day after day, even as he’d struggled with his own sense of powerlessness, Herscherik had continued without fail. Even as he had taken Kuro and Oran with him to vanquish evil around the country like a certain shogun in the dramas Ryoko used to watch, far more evils still remained. Even with all his evidence gathering and vanquishing, what he’d accomplished was only a drop in the bucket. But still, he had refused to give up, and he steadfastly continued his

work.

It had all been for this day.

“I won’t let anyone get away with it.”

If he was to do this, he had to be thorough. Every single one of them had to be rounded up. After all, that is why he had been gathering the evidence all this time.

Herscherik continued speaking to Barbosse, who had fallen silent.

“Hey, did you know?” He spoke almost like a small child. “In one village, an old man starved to death in the winter. He had no money left after paying exorbitant taxes, and he chose not to eat anything, giving it to his son and daughter-in-law instead.”

Why hadn’t he come to save them sooner, the son, his wife, and their children had asked him that day.

“In the red-light district, a young woman is separated from her fiancé, working in order to support her family.”

He had been lost for words at the sight of her sad smile that day.

“A man was crying because he could no longer afford the medicine his little sister needed, and he had to turn to burglary. He had even killed someone in a desperate attempt to save his sister. And in the end... his sister died too.”

He had cared for that man as he regretted his crimes on his deathbed.

Herscherik had saved as many people as he could. At the same time, though, he had been too late for so many of them. He still remembered them vividly, as they were steeped in despair.

“And in this battle, too, many soldiers had to die.”

Even if they hadn’t been ambushed, the soldiers still might have died on the battlefield. But had they known that a conflict was going to break out in advance, there might have been a way to avoid it. At the same time, though, part of Herscherik wondered if he wasn’t looking away from his own powerlessness, placing all the blame on Barbosse instead.

“People who didn’t have to cry, cried. People who didn’t have to die, died. That’s unforgivable.”

Neither of them could be forgiven—not the minister who knew of the coming conflict but refused to stop it, nor Herscherik himself who was unable to. Even if others forgave him, he would never forgive himself.

“The royal family is just as guilty for not stopping me. The king is just as guilty!” Barbosse screamed, as though to shake off Herscherik’s words of condemnation.

“Just as guilty, you say?” Herscherik responded in a scoffing voice. “My father didn’t abandon his duty. He understood the circumstances and still chose to remain on the throne to protect me. And you used him.”

Barbosse had been aware of everything. All of this had been to secure a scapegoat, to ensure that he could survive in the event that the people revolted. That was why he had killed the previous king and Solye’s young daughter, and why he had threatened Solye.

“My father faced his crimes and endured without running away, while you averted your eyes in your lust for even more wealth and power. How could you ever claim that you are both as guilty?! I won’t stand for it!” Herscherik raised his voice.

Solye watched the scene unfold with a sorrowful expression.

“Herscherik...” He called Herscherik’s name, but the prince did not hear him.

Solye’s youngest son was as furious as if it had happened to himself. Herscherik had a tendency to prioritize others, and his empathy and kindness meant that he felt the pain of others as though it was his own. The suffering he must have endured over the years was unimaginable. The king was overcome by an urge to run over to his son and embrace him that very moment; however, though he may have taken the neutralizer, he’d been confined to his bed for so long that he was still only barely able to stand with Rook’s help.

Herscherik took a deep breath to calm himself down before continuing to speak.

“However, the crimes of our subjects are the crimes of the royal family. I

won't avert my eyes from those crimes."

Even if they had not committed the crimes themselves, that was how a royal family should be, Herscherik thought. His siblings probably thought the same. He saw Marx and William nod in his peripheral vision.

"So in order for this country to change, first you need to be tried," Herscherik declared, as Barbosse simply quietly let Herscherik's words wash over him.

Herscherik extended a hand.

"Give me back the earring. It's the last thing she left behind. It's important to me."

It was the only thing he had to remind himself of her.

Barbosse slowly walked up to Herscherik and placed the earring in his open hand. But just as the earring was about to touch Herscherik's hand, Barbosse grabbed his arm and pulled the prince toward him. As the earring hit the floor, Herscherik found himself held from behind by Barbosse, unable to escape.

"Don't move!" Barbosse shouted, as he wrapped his arm around Herscherik's delicate neck. Oran, with his hand on the hilt of his sword, as well as Kuro, had been about to move in to save him, but they froze upon hearing the minister shout. "If you move closer, I'll kill the prince!"

Barbosse tightened his grip around Herscherik's throat and Herscherik showed an anguished expression as he fought for breath. If Barbosse tightened his grip any further, he could easily have snapped Herscherik's neck in two.

Everyone in the room remained speechless, as they were prevented from rushing in to save Herscherik.

"Open the door. If you follow me, the prince's life is forfeit!"

The men of service, as well as Herscherik's family, had no choice but to make way for Barbosse. After the minister had left the room, dragging Herscherik with him, the people who remained in the room stood silent. The first person to open his mouth was Oran.

"You know what to do, don't you, Black Dog?"

Kuro nodded in response, disgruntled, and swiftly left the room without

making a noise.

“Herscherik...”

Still supported by Rook, the pale-faced Solye tried to chase after the minister, but Marx stopped him.

“Father, we should leave this to Hersch’s men of service. You were exposed to the poison for a long time. You need to rest. You should take it easy too, Will,” Marx said to his father and the similarly pale-faced William.

Marx himself was looking a bit unwell, but he had forced himself here in order to witness the conclusion of Herscherik’s plan. The triplets and Eutel who possessed the most Magic out of all the siblings, however, were still unable to move.

“But...”

“Everything will be fine, Father. Isn’t that right, Octa?” Marx declared, as he turned his gaze to Herscherik’s knight.

“Yeah. Hersch has it all under control,” Oran nodded firmly.

A man observed his surroundings from the shadows of a National Defense building. His once well-maintained hair was now a mess and his expensive clothes were torn. He was barely recognizable.

The man’s name was Teodor Seghin. He had been a general of Gracis during the recent battle, but after being ambushed by the empire he had fled by himself to the border fort. As a result, he had been arrested for desertion and abandoning his men, as well as attempting to sell a prince to an enemy country.

Luckily, the prison guard that day had been a former subordinate of his. Knowing that this former subordinate could be easily bribed, he promised him monetary compensation in return for letting him out of the jail. Now, he hid himself in the shadows as he waited for his former subordinate to make arrangements for his escape, trying to avoid being noticed.

“Where... Where did I go wrong...?” Teodor mumbled, stricken with despair.

According to the minister’s plan, all he had to do was hand over the prince to

the empire. But instead, he'd gone from being a general to a common criminal.

I thought I'd be able to ruin that man!

Teodor thought about the man who had become a general despite coming from a lowly mercenary background. That conceited man whom the Blazing General had taken a liking to, who had distinguished himself and ultimately come to be called the "Undefeated General." The negligent man who would spend his time off the battlefield smoking and yawning. The man who had been blessed by his superiors and was loved by his subordinates as well as the people—unlike Teodor who despite graduating the academy with outstanding grades, buttering up nobles and the top brass at National Defense, and buying his way to the rank of general, was still weighed down by burdens even after climbing to the top.

The responsibility for the events of the expedition was supposed to have fallen on that man. That's what the minister had said. Where had the plan gone wrong?

"Just accept the facts—Barbosse used you as disposable pawns." The words the prince has spoken at the fort resurfaced in his mind.

"It's all because of that man... Because of that prince... Because of him..."

Suddenly Teodor heard footsteps, and he hunched down to hide. He heard the voices of soldiers conversing frantically as they entered the building.

"Hey, they said the minister abducted Prince Herscherik..."

"His Excellency? I can't believe it..."

He waited for the soldiers to disappear into the building, and then stood up again.

"I'm not going to die just yet."

When his former subordinate came to get him, Teodor's eyes no longer showed a hint of despair, as they were steeped in the color of madness.

They found themselves in a back alley to the side of the castle town's main thoroughfare. It was dark even in the middle of the day, and, deserted as it was,

it might as well have been constructed specifically for hiding. Down the narrow passageway between the buildings squirmed two shadows—one big and one small. The small shadow belonged to Prince Herscherik of Gracis, while the large shadow belonged to Minister Volf Barbosse.

After leaving the royal quarters, Barbosse had pushed Herscherik into his own carriage as he ordered the confused coachman to leave the castle and drive the carriage to the minister's residence via the shortest possible route. However, everywhere the carriage went, royal guards blocked the way. With blockades on all sides, Barbosse was left with no escape route. Finally, he grabbed Herscherik by the arm and exited the carriage, heading into a back alley too narrow to traverse except on foot.

However, not only did Barbosse normally travel by carriage, he was also dragging a child with him; he was getting worn down by the minute. Herscherik did nothing to resist, leaving himself to Barbosse's mercy.

Barbosse released his grip on Herscherik and leaned against the wall of a building as he caught his breath and tried to figure out what to do next. It was clear that he could not stay in Gracis any longer. His only choice was to defect to another country.

Once I get back to the mansion, I need to gather up anything of value, and then...

"Barbosse, this is futile," Herscherik, who had been compliant until now, interrupted Barbosse's train of thought. "What exactly were you hoping for here?"

Barbosse could do nothing but frown at the all-too-abstract question, as he wiped sweat from his forehead. But Herscherik looked up and continued questioning him.

"Fortune? Fame? Or perhaps power? Just what did you want?"

"Quiet..." Barbosse spoke in an irritated tone. However, Herscherik did not close his mouth.

"You've hurt so many, you've made so many others cry... Were you able to satisfy whatever desire you had?"

“I told you to be quiet!” Barbosse yelled as he slammed his fist into the wall behind him. Dust fell down on him from above and landed on his expensive clothes, but he paid it no heed as he continued speaking, making no effort to hide his irritation. “I’m the one who steered this country! I’m the only reason the kingdom of Gracis was able to challenge other nations on equal footing!”

Nobles had a lot of influence in Gracis, and many of them had connections with other countries. Barbosse himself possessed a private network of connections that enveloped the continent like a spider web. That intelligence network could indeed be of great use to the country—however, here too he had only been concerned with his own gain. Barbosse would conceal anything he learned that didn’t benefit him, even if it would have served the country.

“Yet the royal family refused to recognize my worth! In fact, they belittled me and tried to rob me of everything I had! So I obtained it all with my own two hands! Wealth, fame, everything!”

The country had started to decay even before the previous king was crowned. The nobility grew more and more tyrannical by the day, and officials followed suit as they buttered up those above and oppressed those below. So in order to rein in the nobles who had gone mad with their own lust for power, the Wise King had attempted to punish the aristocracy and reform the country. However, tragedy had struck his reign, and the country had continued to decay unhindered.

“You know, I don’t think it’s bad that nobles lead more affluent lives than commoners,” Herscherik spoke in a calm voice, the very opposite of the minister’s wild-eyed shouting. “That’s because in return for their wealth, royals and nobles also have much greater responsibility.”

So Herscherik did not object to nobles wearing expensive clothes and dining on gourmet food. Just as everyone receives compensation for their work, nobles were allowed luxuries befitting their standing.

“But *you* are different.” Herscherik rejected Barbosse directly.

Barbosse viewed everyone but himself as mere tools for him to use and cast aside when he was done with them. He laid all blame for his actions on others, erased everything inconvenient to him, and would abandon all responsibility at

the earliest opportunity.

“Is that really all you wanted?”

It was a genuine question. Herscherik found it impossible to imagine that the minister had really desired nothing but wealth, power, and fame.

“If only you hadn’t taken a wrong turn in life, this country would have been more prosperous. Had you done so, you could have obtained all the wealth, fame, and power you wanted by honest means. So what made you stoop to this? What were you trying to achieve?”

Barbosse was exceedingly capable. Many times during his internal audits Herscherik had tried to catch him out, but each attempt had ended in failure. Instead, he’d found himself amazed by the minister’s talent. Barbosse had exploited the people exactly as much as he could without making them turn on the country. He had conducted all governmental affairs without a hitch while still ensuring that he stood to gain from it. Herscherik couldn’t help to wonder where he’d gone wrong.

“Why do you devalue yourself like that?” Barbosse had once been asked.

A golden princess, with blonde hair that shone bright like the sun and eyes of the same color. She had appeared like a messenger from the heavens, and she had loved the king, comforted the queens, cherished the young princes and princesses, and had been loved by the handmaidens and officials of the castle—the king’s favorite queen, the Sunshine of the Royal Quarters. Barbosse turned her words, which had been spoken with an expression that might have been either anger or sadness, over and over in his mind.

“You’re so talented, but why do you only do things that serve to make others unhappy? What do you want?”

The queen had observed him intently, as Barbosse was at a loss for words. Normally he was able to deflect questioning with ease, but for some reason her words in particular stuck with him. And now, her son was asking him the same question.

“Silence!”

Barbosse grabbed Herscherik by his chest and shoved him against the wall.

Herscherik grimaced at the impact.

“Then why didn’t you kill me?! That ‘Shadow Fang’ of yours could have done it with ease! You could have just given the order to that Aldis brat or that monster you’re keeping!”

Herscherik’s men had asked him the same thing in the past. Why did he not simply kill him?

Herscherik closed his eyes.

“I... wanted to kill you.” He spoke in a strained voice filled with dark emotions that would be unimaginable coming from the usual Herscherik. These emotions were reflected in his eyes as he opened them, staring straight at Barbosse. “You killed Klaus. Baron Armin and Oran’s fiancée might never have died if not for that drug you sold. Why did they have to die?”

Herscherik felt his emotions—a deep, dark rage—well up inside him, and he was unable to stop it.

“You also trapped Jeanne, making her think that she had no other way to survive. You used her, only to kill her once she got in your way... She died right before my very own eyes.”

Herscherik still remembered it as though it was yesterday—her body growing colder and colder. He couldn’t forget the feeling of his hands drenched with blood. Whenever Herscherik remembered Jeanne, his heart was overcome with love and fierce anger.

“I hated you so much that I wanted to kill you with my own hands,” Herscherik sneered, his eyes burning with such fiery hatred that anyone who saw him would be terrified.

Barbosse remained speechless. He then realized in shock that he’d actually backed away from the prince. But unable to admit that to himself, he slowly opened his mouth, his lips slightly trembling from rage—or perhaps fear.

“Then—”

“But if I sentenced you based on hate alone, I would be no different from you,” Herscherik interrupted Barbosse.

Herscherik's sneer was gone. He clenched his fist in an attempt to control himself. Then he continued speaking, as if to convince himself.

"If I did, they wouldn't... she wouldn't be happy. I'd only make them sad."

Hatred wasn't the only thing they'd left to Herscherik—they'd also entrusted him with their hope as they departed. So Herscherik had reined in his feelings of rage. A fierce resentment, the likes of which he had never once felt in his previous life—Herscherik took this feeling, which was directed at himself as much as at Barbosse, and hid it away inside himself.

I won't let go of these feelings, nor will I hand them over to anyone. They belong to me, and only me.

Perhaps they might fade with time, but they would never disappear fully. As long as he had those feelings, he felt that he would never forget about the people he'd lost.

"Barbosse, confess your crimes. Admit them, accept them, and atone for them."

Even if Barbosse was given the death penalty, Herscherik wouldn't let him die here. There was more to his atonement than death.

"Oh... That explains it." Barbosse spoke to the prince as if he'd finally comprehended something. He then gripped the prince's collar even harder and lifted him up into the air.

"Bar...bosse...?"

The minister lifted the delicate prince with ease, and Herscherik quickly found it difficult to breathe. Herscherik reflexively grabbed at the hand that was holding him, but it did not budge an inch.

"Prince Herscherik—you let me capture you on purpose so that you could try to convince me, didn't you?"

Barbosse had sensed something was strange about the prince's lack of resistance. And while the royal guards set up blockades, there was no indication of them actively searching for them. In other words, even now the situation was completely under the prince's control.

“How naïve. Oh, how naïve, prince!”

After all this time, trying to win him over with words was a fool’s errand. In the end, the prince didn’t have it in him to be truly ruthless, Barbosse scoffed.

“I’m going to make my escape. I *will* flee this country, just you see!”

Barbosse further tightened his grip. Herscherik couldn’t breathe, his vision blurred, and he could feel his consciousness start to fade.

In the very next moment, however, the pressure around his neck was gone, and Herscherik fell to the ground, as if thrown. While writhing in pain from being flung to the ground, he gasped for breath—and noticed the smell of iron. He straightened his back and looked for the source of the smell, and his eyes widened in shock.

“Barbosse...?”

The minister was lying face down on the ground, a red pool of blood spreading beneath him. Herscherik was once again reminded of what he had witnessed the day Jeanne died.

Barbosse groaned on the ground, his hand pressed to his chest. Above him stood a man, looking down on the fallen minister.

“General... Seghin...?”

What was this man, who was supposed to be in jail, doing here? Why was he holding a blood-drenched sword? Failing to process the situation, Herscherik continued breathing heavily, as the smell of blood and the rush of air into his lungs finally helped him make sense of what had happened. Teodor had escaped from jail, after which he had found Barbosse strangling Herscherik and impaled him from behind with his sword.

“Prince Herscherik, I have just saved your life,” Teodor spoke in an oddly calm voice for someone who had just now killed a man. In his eyes gleamed the light of madness. “I implore you to recognize this heroic deed, and to forgive my recent discourtesy. And if you would let me, it would be my pleasure to serve by your—”

Herscherik knew the words the man’s madness was driving him to seek. He

also knew that if he did not answer the way he wanted, his life would be in danger. However, Herscherik fixed his gaze right at Teodor and cut him off.

“What are you talking about?” Herscherik rejected the general’s plea, even as the man clutched at his bloody sword. “Your crime wasn’t your discourtesy toward me. It was being in a position where you had a duty to protect the country, but still going along with Barbosse’s plans, selling out your own army, before finally abandoning your men and deserting.”

Teodor’s crime against the royal family was by no means a minor one. However, he didn’t even seem to realize that he’d committed even worse crimes than that. Seeing this pushed Herscherik past the point of anger, into pure exasperation.

“Save me as many times as you like—it won’t change the facts. It will never erase the crimes you have already committed.”

Teodor went quiet for a moment before opening his mouth again.

“Very well. I suppose I have no choice.”

With a crazed expression, he turned his blood-drenched sword toward Herscherik.

“This is how it happened: The prince was murdered by Barbosse, his very own minister. When I came across the scene, the poor boy was already dead. In order to avenge the prince, I executed the minister.”

Teodor stepped over the minister’s body and closed in on Herscherik, one step at a time. His shoes wet from the minister’s blood, he left bloody footprints on the ground as he approached the prince with his sword raised. Once in front of the still sitting Herscherik, he raised his sword into the air.

“Die!”

As he shouted, he brought his sword down, and it sliced easily through Herscherik’s body.

Of course, that only happened in Teodor’s head.

In reality, his sword was stuck in what seemed to be empty space, and he was unable to bring it down or up. Actually, it wasn’t just his sword that was

affected—he himself was unable to move an inch.

Teodor moved his gaze around and observed his own body. He was wrapped in a thin steel wire, each end affixed to the nearby walls. Teodor had been captured like an insect stuck in a spider's web. He turned his gaze back to the prince and instead made eye contact with a man whose eyes were a dark, bloody red.

“Kuro.”

“Hersch, this guy won't change. It's too late for him.”

Some people were capable of change. There were those who had bettered themselves after meeting Herscherik. However, Kuro also knew that some could not—those who refused to admit their mistakes and those who had given in to madness. There was no returning from madness like this—only one path to salvation.

“Killing him is the compassionate choice.”

But Herscherik rejected his butler's suggestion.

“We can't, Kuro.”

“He will undoubtedly try to hurt you at some point.”

“Even so!” Herscherik said firmly. “This is not the place for him to be sentenced.”

That was the last thing Teodor heard before falling unconscious.

Ignoring Teodor, Kuro walked up to the minister and knelt down. He then flipped him over and inspected his condition.

“Hersch, the minister is already...” Kuro said, attempting to stop the bleeding from the Barbosse's chest wound. However, the sword had completely pierced his torso; the minister was already on the brink of death.

“Who knew that I'd be killed... by my own sacrificial pawn... in the end...” the minister whispered as he gasped for air. He had never expected to meet as ignoble a fate as being stabbed in a dark alley by one of his own puppets.

Herscherik walked up to him, went down on his knees next to Kuro, and

looked him in the eyes.

“Barbosse, were you able to obtain what you desired?”



Hearing Herscherik repeat his question, memories of his past flashed before his eyes as he searched for the answer.

At some point, a hole had opened up in his heart—a vast, hollow hole. He craved something that would fill that emptiness, but had no idea what that might be. So he made use of his position as a noble to seize anything he could get his hands on. But even after obtaining a fortune, commanding a great number of nobles, and even having control over the royal family itself, Barbosse still wasn't satisfied. The more he obtained, the more he craved, and the bigger the hole grew in want of something. But he still had no idea *what* it wanted.

Before his eyes flashed an image of the golden princess. When the king had first introduced her to him, despite not being a standout beauty in a court filled with stunning women, she somehow seemed to shine. As he exchanged words with her, he could feel his heart race.

But before he could understand the true nature of his feelings, she departed from this world, leaving behind only her one child with the king. That child was a peculiar one, just like she had been. He was reminded of the sight of the townspeople charging the castle after Herscherik had gone missing. He had felt a bitter emotion as he looked on. The sight of the dignified, unwavering prince, loved by the people, appeared vividly before his eyes even now as his view went dark, as if all the lights were being switched off one by one. Ugly emotions welled up from the bottom of his heart. He hated him. He envied him. The prince had nothing, yet he was loved and recognized by all. He was a light that illuminated the darkness.

Where had he gone wrong? When he was young, he'd still had ambitions of his own, but at some point they had been overwritten by his own self-interests. He had envied the prince, who unlike him had stayed true to his ideals. Herscherik's piercing gaze, just like hers, had terrified him.

Ah... I see... I envied him...and I was afraid of him, too.

He understood what had been hiding inside him for the first time. However, he had no reason to tell the prince any of this, Barbosse concluded.

“How ridiculous...”

No one could tell whether his words had been directed at the prince or himself. Without ever conveying his true feelings to Herscherik, Volf Barbosse's consciousness gave out.

Intermission: The Calm, the Steak, and...

A parliamentary session had just concluded in the Principality of Parche. Accompanied by the chairmen of the two houses, the grand duke returned to his office, sat down in his chair, and let out a deep sigh.

“Grand Duke, you did well to make it through all of that,” the chairman of the House of Representatives said to the visibly exhausted duke.

“Quite...” The grand duke nodded. The multi-hour session had been more than enough to make the man, who was over seventy years old, start considering finding a replacement.

The subject of the parliamentary session, for which every member of the House of Peers and the House of Representatives had been present, had been how to handle the matter of the kingdom of Gracis. The imperial army had traversed Parche territory and attacked Gracis. The kingdom had emerged victorious from the battle, but the fact still remained that the principality had allowed the empire to pass through their territory, straining the friendship between their countries that had taken many years to establish. Thus, they were now desperately trying to mend their relationship with Gracis by any means possible. During the parliamentary session they had agreed to issue a formal apology and lower tariffs for five years, along with a number of other proposals.

In truth, they had been threatened in secret and forced to turn a blind eye, but the only people who knew about that were the three people presently in the room, as well as the head of border security who had received the order. As a result, it had been a rather agonizing meeting for them. Meanwhile, the head of border security had received a disciplinary dismissal—which actually delighted the man himself, as he’d been wanting to retire for some time. After that, he’d happily withdrawn to the countryside.

“But I can’t believe that the minister has...” the only woman in the group, the chairwoman of the House of Peers, mumbled. Her mind went to a topic that

had also been brought up during the earlier parliamentary session.

Minister Barbosse, who had once controlled the kingdom that neighboring countries had privately referred to as the Kingdom in Woe, was dead, and all his misdeeds had come to light after that. The chairwoman couldn't possibly have seen this coming when Parche had first received Barbosse's secret correspondence. She had been taken utterly by surprise.

At the sight of the House of Peers chairman looking so bewildered, the man who headed the House of Representatives began to speak.

"I've got my own thoughts on that matter, by the way."

"Huh?" The woman furrowed her brow.

The man shrugged in response before continuing.

"The important element here isn't the fact that the minister lost—it's the prince who defeated him."

The prince had not defeated the minister by killing him. According to the official statement from Gracis, the Barbosse had been attacked on the street by some man and died of his wounds. At the same time, it had come to light that the so-called "Tragedy of the Royal Family" was actually an assassination attempt carried out on the orders of the minister himself, and he had committed a great deal of other misdeeds behind the scenes. These accusations had all been accompanied by solid evidence.

And apparently, all this had been the work of a prince a mere seven years old.

"Are you saying that you actually believe a seven-year-old prince could have outsmarted the minister?"

They had also been informed that this very same prince had been responsible for driving away the imperial army. However, the woman suspected that this was just a fabrication intended to garner the support of the people. Just like the Hero of Light, a performance currently popular with the masses, stories about small children getting the better of adults had a tendency to stir the hearts of the people.

"I think His Grace, whose gamble paid off, would be the better judge of that,

wouldn't you say?" the man responded as he turned his gaze to the grand duke.

The grand duke sat quietly for a few moments before solemnly opening his mouth to respond.

"I... think it's possible."

The grand duke thought back to the letters he'd received from Perla, who had gone off to Gracis to marry the king. In those letters, she would often write about "her son"—actually the son of the king's favorite queen, whom Perla had loved like her own little sister.

When Perla had been despondent after losing her first child to the minister's schemes, in her letters she would always blame herself for failing to protect her daughter and express concern over her ability to protect her son, even as she lamented the state of the kingdom. The grand duke had time and time again urged her to return to Parche, but he had always received the same response: "I can't leave His Majesty alone."

But at one point, her letters started to change. As word spread that the king had taken a new queen of his own choosing, a letter arrived from Perla saying that she felt as though she had gained a sister. After that, the contents of her letters became more cheerful and gentle than they were before. The grand duke surmised that her days together with the king's favorite queen must have healed her heart.

But then one day, the duke received a letter informing him that the queen had lost her life in childbirth. The duke had assumed that Perla would once again turn to despair. However, contrary to his expectations, Perla instead vowed to look after "her son," as if to take the late queen's place. Her letters contained detailed descriptions of the day he had taken his first steps, or how he would read books fervently—almost as if he was her own son.

That was why the grand duke had decided to comply with the demands of the secret communication that had been enclosed with Perla's letter. Part of it had, of course, been the fact that he had had no choice but to do as he was ordered, but he had also held out a faint sliver of hope. Perla would never have offered up the late queen's son if there was no hope that he would survive.

His gamble had paid off. The boy Perla thought of as her own son had

avenged the duke's late granddaughter.

"I see. Now then... I can't wait to see how things turn out." The man nodded once before giving a mischievous grin like that of a young boy up to no good.

"What? The minister is gone, and all the nobles and officials who supported him are currently being sentenced one after another. Surely, Gracis will only grow even more powerful now."

"Well... I do appreciate your straightforward way of thinking, but aren't you being a tad simplistic there? Must be nice to be young."

"Are you insulting me?" The woman raised an eyebrow.

It was true that she was young. While the House of Representatives chose their chairman by vote, the leader of the House of Peers was the head of the most influential noble family other than the grand duke's own. She was the oldest child of the head of that family. Her father had come down with an illness some years prior and the male heir had not yet come of age, resulting in the oldest daughter acting as interim chairwoman. Despite not yet having turned thirty, she was tremendously capable, with the ability to manage the many nobles of the House of Peers. To her, the man's words sounded like nothing short of an insult.

"Oh, pardon me," the man apologized. "I only meant to say that you still lack experience. As you said, with the minister gone, the general atmosphere of the country will probably improve."

The discontent of the Gracis people had grown significantly under the tyranny of their nobles and officials. With them out of the picture and control of the country once again back in the hands of the royal family, the country and the views of the people would change.

"However, what was once a monolith of a country under the rule of the minister is now seeing cracks form in the shape of this upheaval."

When the minister had controlled the country it may have been rotting from the inside, but it had protected itself from outside enemies as a cohesive entity, and the minister had also had significant influence outside the country. However, without the minister, that cohesion had started to crumble. It was

difficult to imagine anyone used to doing whatever they pleased simply obeying the royal family without resistance. And if the people who had been exiled to the outskirts of the country by the minister were to return, conflict was sure to arise.

In addition, the general who had spearheaded the defense against the empire was a former mercenary. If commoners continued to increase their prestige in the core of the country, which was formerly dominated by nobles, the two factions would surely end up clashing. Neighboring countries would also see an opportunity to take advantage of the confusion.

“We’re still just in the calm after the storm.”

The calm after the storm—it was nothing more than a short rest before the rest of the storm approached.

“I’d love to have a chance to meet this hero for myself.”

“Hero?” the woman asked in bewilderment, at which the man smirked.

“Yes, after defeating the empire and saving his country, and since he has golden hair like the Prince of Light, the people are referring to him as the Hero of Light in honor of his achievements.”

In the castle town was a tavern famous for its thick steaks covered with a secret sauce. In a corner of this tavern a man was enjoying his first day off in a long time, as he sat with the famous steak and a drink in front of him. With short, blue-gray hair, eyes of the same color, and an unshaven beard, his outward appearance did not stand out among the other townspeople. However, this man was actually none other than the Undefeated General Heath Blaydes, who only recently had managed to drive away the imperial forces.

Heath took a sip from his drink, thrust his fork into the steak, and brought it to his mouth. As he stuffed his cheeks with the meat, the fragrant sauce filled his mouth, and the taste of both danced upon his tongue with each bite. As he savored the meal, he was also enjoying a taste of happiness for the first time in a long while.

“Ah... This is bliss. I don’t think it’s possible to be happier than this,” he

muttered to himself as he took another sip of his drink. He was drunk on both alcohol and happiness.

And then, someone suddenly approached him.

“Heath, kept you waiting, huh?”

The man who addressed him was a mercenary. His muscular physique, large arms, and many scars indicated that he was a battle-hardened warrior. With his chiseled face and fierce appearance, the people of the tavern took great care not to look him in the eye.

Heath, however, simply held up his mug as he chuckled.

“Sorry, I got started without you!”

“So I see. I’ll have what he’s having!” the man yelled in the direction of the counter. After hearing the bartender reply, he sat down in the chair opposite from Heath.

A waiter soon came by the table with the man’s steak and drink, and the man started gulping it down.

“Gotta say, I never expected you to do something like that,” Heath muttered, observing the man. “I thought you hated nobles.”

So the man had always said back when they’d been mercenaries together. Since they had both started around the same time, they had ended up cooperating a fair amount when taking on requests. While Heath had changed careers to enlist with the army, the man had stayed a mercenary, eventually becoming the guildmaster. Though they had taken different paths in life, they were still close enough to go out and drink together whenever their days off aligned.

“Still hate ‘em,” the guildmaster replied.

“Huh? Then why’d you do it?” Heath asked in surprise, stopping as he was about to take a sip from his drink.

The fierce-looking guildmaster went quiet for a moment in a rare display of hesitation before averting his gaze.

“The young master helped me once. Don’t ask.”

“Young master, eh?” Heath said suggestively, but did as asked and did not pry further. Apparently, the man was close enough to the prince to call him “young master.”

The guildmaster seemingly took issue with Heath’s tone and shot him a sharp glance.

“What about you, then? You seem to have taken quite a liking to the young master yourself.”

The man knew that after he had returned from the expedition, the usually lazy Heath had actually been working on the prince’s orders.

“For how much you hate making any kind of effort, you’ve sure been taking on a lot of menial tasks lately.”

Heath shrugged his shoulders and took a gulp from his drink.

Ever since the minister had died, the country had started to change in various ways. One of the first steps had been to purge the corrupt nobles and officials that had so far gone overlooked. Those who had been surreptitiously lining their pockets until now were arrested one after another and made to face the full force of the law. Some had attempted to flee, but Heath and his men had captured them on the orders of the royal family.

As a result, Heath had been forced to work for three weeks straight, and today was his first day off after returning to the capital. Apparently there would also be large-scale personnel changes to fill the now-vacant spots, as well as radical changes to the way in which the country was governed overall. Heath was terrified of returning to work tomorrow.

“Well... It’s my job.”

“Yeah?” The guildmaster chuckled at Heath trying to avoid the subject, as he put a slice of steak into his mouth. He chewed carefully before swallowing, and then opened his mouth again. “Wonder what’s gonna become of this country.”

“Beats me.”

In response to Heath’s curt reply, the fierce-looking man furrowed his brow so deeply that any normal child would have started crying at the sight.

“Not interested, huh? I thought you were one of those fancy-schmancy generals.”

“I only ended up a general by accident. I just get all this annoying work forced on me. Well, the pay’s decent, at least. Pretty much the only good thing about becoming a general is that I get to buy more expensive cigarettes and liquor,” Heath added as he raised his mug.

“Well, as long as the prince is around, I guess things will probably turn out okay.”

The guildmaster picked up his own mug with a smirk, and they both emptied their mugs.

She found herself in the place people referred to as the Garden Above, a world of everlasting spring brimming with light and abundant greenery. With dark skin, eyes of two different colors, and straight hair the color of amethyst, she walked down the white stone path that led away from a great temple. Her mouth was covered by a thin veil, but even so it was clear that she was exceedingly beautiful. The woman was clad in a revealing dancer’s attire, and her impressive chest bounced with every step she took.

This woman was the djinn referred to as the Oracle—or alternatively the Eternal Witch. On both sides of the path heavenly flowers bloomed in all colors, upon which countless butterflies danced. She knew, however, that these were not mere insects, but souls that had simply taken on the form of butterflies.

Souls would rest here in this world to regain their strength while their memories were purified before being reincarnated in their next life. This was the purification system and the circulatory system of the world—as well as the home of the gods. As a djinn, she was able to visit this world as she pleased.

As she walked down the path, she arrived at a gazebo built from white stone. Inside, someone was sitting on a chair, similarly carved from white stone, while looking up at the blue, cloudless yet sunless sky.

“It’s been a while, Ferris,” the Eternal Witch said to the person sitting upon the stone chair.

Epilogue: The Reincarnated Prince and the Hero of Light

The sun shone brilliantly in the summer sky. About two months had passed since the battle at the border fort, and over one month since Barbosse's passing.

"Okay, I'm going now," Herscherik said as he shouldered the bag containing the canteen Kuro had prepared, put on his hat to prevent heat stroke, and walked up to the back gate. Beyond the gate lay the vast, luscious lands that only the king and those given his explicit permission could enter.

"Right. Be careful out there. Take frequent rests and make sure to drink lots of water."

"Yeah, yeah, I know," Herscherik nodded to Oran, who had come to see him off; then he waved, turned his back on them, and stepped through the gate.

The wind from the nearby mountains offset the summer heat, and Herscherik walked while enjoying the scenery around him. Taking the occasional break in the shadow of a tree to rehydrate himself, he observed the sky, the trees, the flowers, plants, insects, and even larger animals from a distance as he strolled along.

Today was Herscherik's first day off in a while, and he had left by himself to go on a picnic. He'd wanted to take a horse for a longer excursion, but mounting and dismounting a horse was difficult due to his small size, so his request had been rejected. Instead, he made the journey on foot. His men of service would be joining him later at noon to bring his lunch.

After about an hour of walking, he arrived at a grassy hill with a lovely view of the castle and the town. The view was just the same as when his father had brought him there four years ago.

"I'm finally here..." Herscherik muttered, exhausted, as he wiped the sweat from his cheeks, put down his bag in the shadow of a tree, and started strolling

around the hill.

That day, when he had learned the truth of his country, he had been unable to do anything but cry.

“It’s finally over, Klaus.” Herscherik clasped the pocket watch to his chest as he spoke to the long-dead count.

After the death of the minister, the country was thrown into confusion—or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that Herscherik had thrown it into confusion. With all the evidence Herscherik had gathered, along with the testimony of Roy, who had been sheltered by the Aldis family, Barbosse’s misdeeds were brought to light along with the crimes of the many nobles who had supported him. Over the course of a month, with the aid of Herscherik’s stubbornness that bordered on obsession, the nobles were sentenced in rapid succession. Some attempted to flee the country, but Herscherik had captured them all with the help of Heath, who had returned from the expedition.

“You know, at this rate, I’ll die from overwork. It wouldn’t hurt to get some time off. Spare a thought for my old age,” the man in his thirties pleaded with puppy dog eyes, which Herscherik answered with an angelic smile and similar puppy dog eyes.

“You’ll be fine! You’re still young, and I’ll be sure to give you time off when this is over. So get back to work already, would you?”

Incidentally, while Herscherik had assumed that the credit for driving away the imperial forces would go entirely to Heath and General Barthold, before he knew it he was the one who ended up with all the accolades. When Herscherik had tried to explain that the achievement really did belong to them instead, Heath had put on a radiant smile and spoken with the most humble tone he could muster.



“No, no, Your Highness, it is all thanks to the incredible feats performed by you and your men of service. If not for your strategizing, we would never have been able to defeat the empire. Besides, being in the spotlight like this is actually kind of annoy—*ahem*.”

Heath’s last word had not escaped Herscherik. General Barthold was one thing, being stationed so far away, but Heath here was attempting to shove everything he couldn’t be bothered with onto Herscherik’s shoulders. Herscherik, who had inadvertently found himself in the spotlight, had responded by working Heath so hard it had bordered on harassment—though he did, of course, give him his promised time off later.

Everyone who had been arrested was fairly judged by the Judicial department. As there was plenty of evidence to go around, they were sentenced one after another as if on a conveyor belt. However, not everyone received capital punishment. Depending on the extent of the crime, punishments included revocation of titles or government positions and confiscation of assets. Anyone who had bettered themselves during Herscherik’s travels throughout the country received lighter sentences.

Among those who had turned a new leaf, Count Grim in particular—the very man who had framed Count Ruseria—did something Herscherik had never even imagined. After the death of Barbosse, a written petition was sent to Grim, who had voluntarily turned himself over.

“I *did* explain everything to them in advance, you know...” Grim spoke as he rubbed his bald head and smiled, tears in his eyes, upon being informed of his sentence.

As a result of the petition, Grim’s punishment was lightened, and while some of his assets were confiscated, he was allowed to retain his territory. Grim, however, had objected. In light of his crimes, he had explained, he was not fit to govern. But his subjects had wished for him to remain their lord.

Thus, the following arrangement had been made: the state would take ownership of the land, but Grim would manage it as their agent. Further, the arrangement would only be valid while Grim remained in office. He had, for all practical purposes, been allowed to remain a lord.

“Do I really deserve something like this?” a baffled Grim asked Herscherik upon hearing the ruling.

“Count Grim, I don’t think losing everything is the only way to make amends.” Herscherik was sure that Klaus would have felt the same. “Over these past two years, you have worked tremendously hard to make up for your past misdeeds. The proof of that lies in the fact that even after confessing to your sins, your people still claim to need you.”

Grim, who had turned pale and trembled when his crimes had first come to light, was now trembling from a completely different set of emotions.

“Seeing what you’ve made of yourself makes me happy from the bottom of my heart,” Herscherik explained.

“Thank you, Your Highness... Thank you...”

As Grim knelt on the floor, tears pouring from his eyes, Herscherik gently patted him on the shoulder.

And so, Count Ruseria was exonerated and his name cleared. A large number of nobles and officials were dismissed, and with the lack of personnel, the situation in the castle became quite hectic. The people who worked there, however, were more cheerful than ever. They could all feel the country changing for the better.

From the neighboring Principality of Parche, a letter arrived formally apologizing for having allowed the Atrad army to pass through their territory despite being on friendly terms with Gracis. Those who knew the truth understood that this was only for show; however, diplomacy is complicated, and when one nation formally apologizes to another, the other party can’t exactly just say, “Don’t worry about it.” At Parche’s suggestion, they agreed to lessen the tariffs that would otherwise have been paid to Parche for a period of five years.

Herscherik also received a private letter from Grand Duke Parche containing an invitation to visit the principality. The end of the letter said, “My granddaughter must be smiling in the Garden Above,” which prompted Herscherik to finally realize that as the father of the First Queen, the grand duke was also the grandfather of the late princess.

Maybe Grand Duke Parche had been hoping things would turn out this way. Herscherik decided to be sure to see him whenever he happened to stop by Parche.

The night after one of the busy days at the castle, the royal siblings were all gathered in their father's private room.

Solye had always had a habit of working into the night, but lately he had been working even harder than before. While part of this was likely an attempt to atone for his previous failures, he now wore a bright expression as he worked, as if something had changed deep inside him. However, as a result he was getting even less rest than usual, so Rook had requested his family to gather together regularly to give Solye the opportunity to relax.

Having completely recovered from the poison, King Solye, Marx and William were all flooded with work, and the triplets were also balancing their studies with their royal duties. Eutel, who had been affected the worst out of all of them, had also recovered, though it had taken some time.

Solye sat on the sofa in front of the fireplace as he spoke to his youngest son, who was receiving a smack to his head from each of his siblings in turn.

"Hersch, do you have any requests?"

"Requests?" Herscherik replied with his hand on his head.

"Yes... After all, you are the one who saved both me and this country."

"I just did what I wanted to do..." Herscherik said with an embarrassed smile, but after a moment his expression turned serious. "But I do have two requests."

His first request was to let him move about freely just as before. His second request was to be allowed into the land that could only be entered by the king himself and those with the king's permission.

"Is that really all you want?"

For the occasion, they were rather mundane requests.

"Very well," Solye replied without hesitation. "Just promise me that you'll be careful."

Solye spoke as Herscherik's father, not as king. Herscherik's siblings all nodded in agreement with their father, and upon seeing this, Herscherik too nodded to reassure them.

"Is there anything else?"

Herscherik clenched his fist tight before replying to his father's question.

A sudden gust blew his hat away. His light golden hair swayed together with the grass in the wind.

"Jeanne..."

Still holding the pocket watch to his chest with his left hand, he touched his copper-colored earring with his right, as he spoke the name of the one he loved. Upon realizing a single tear was flowing down his cheek, he became unable to hold back as he started crying uncontrollably, his face becoming streaked with tears. A wind, much gentler than before, caressed his cheeks, as if trying to comfort him.

"Just today... Just for today..." Herscherik whispered, crouching down as if collapsing onto the ground.

He had finally fulfilled the promise he made that day—he had avenged Klaus and Jeanne. Yet the sorrow that weighed him down still remained.

He had gained so much. With Barbosse gone, his family was now safe. If this was this a game, a comic book, or a novel, this would have been the happy ending.

But at the same time, he had also lost so much. What he had lost would never return, and the people could never be replaced. This profound sense of loss refused to let Herscherik's tears stop flowing.

Ever since the bells had tolled that day, he had sworn not to cry. But if only for today, he wanted to be able to weep for those he had lost.

The sound of horses galloping could be heard from far away. Herscherik sat up on the grass and wiped his face as he turned his gaze in the direction of the

sound.

“Hersch!”

Herscherik searched for the source of the voice to find Oran in the lead, with Kuro behind and finally Shiro following him, all mounted on horses.

“Oh, is it noon already?”

He stood up, brushed the grass off his clothes, and started walking in the direction of his men.

“I made your favorite, Hersch.”

“Ooh!”

Herscherik threw up both hands in joy at the sight of the wooden basket in Kuro’s hand, and at the same time his stomach let out a loud growl. While his men laughed at him, they all dug in. Kuro had brought with him sandwiches. Not only were there ham and egg sandwiches, but he had also brought ones with meat dipped in a sauce reminiscent of teriyaki, as well as sandwiches with fruit and cream. There were scones and salad, too. As he dug into his lunch, Herscherik enjoyed a moment of pure bliss.

After his post-lunch tea and a short rest, Herscherik stood up and looked down upon the capital. The sky was clear, the wind was pleasant, and he felt peaceful.

“Thank you for everything.”

The words came out of his mouth spontaneously. His men all grew suspicious in their own distinct ways at his sudden statement.

“But... we’ve only just begun,” Herscherik said as he turned around.

This was not the end to all the troubles that the country would face. Just as Barbosse had said, his power was great, and without him to helm the country, there was no predicting what might become of it. But Herscherik had no intention of backing down. This was not the end—it was the beginning.

“Schwarz, Oránge, Weiss. I need you by my side. I need you to walk the same path I walk. I need your help.”

Upon hearing their names called, his men stood up and walked to their master.

“My life already belongs to you,” Kuro replied with a wry smile as he kneeled down before Herscherik.

“My duty is to stop you if you ever stray from your path. I can’t very well leave you, can I?” Oran said as he followed the butler’s example.

“What are you on about? I’m not exactly planning on going anywhere,” Shiro grouchily replied in a matter-of-fact tone as he knelt alongside the other two.

Herscherik smiled at the sight.

“Thank you, everyone.”

“Your wish is our command.”

The three men gave their young master a deep bow.

Herscherik Gracis.

The Seventh Prince of the 23rd King of Gracis, born to the king’s favorite queen. Known as the Prince of Light, he seemed to have appeared suddenly in the troubled Kingdom of Woe. It is said that his bright, golden hair shone upon all, illuminating both himself and the world.

He possessed neither the valor to strike down his enemies, nor immense quantities of Magic. At a glance he might have seemed inferior to the many heroes of other legends. However, his heroic tales have captivated the hearts of many, moved many more to tears, and been loved by almost all.

Though he might not have possessed strength, he had clear convictions, believed in his men, and forged ahead tirelessly, with his distinguished servants in tow.

People call him the “Hero of Light,” as they pass on his tales with reverence and awe.

That, however, is a story for later. This is still only the prologue of his tale.

The Reincarnated Prince and the Hero of Light — Fin.



Anecdote: The Life of the Marquis of Darkness

Volf had always been at the top of his class at the academy. He was the heir to the distinguished Barbosse marquis house, and was blessed with hazel hair and eyes and well-defined facial features. He also excelled at talking, knew his way around high society, and had already been promised a position in the castle after graduation. He was in many ways the perfect noble.

One day not long after his graduation, as he was walking down a corridor of the academy, he heard a voice coming through an open window.

“Ivan, let me borrow you for a bit!”

Volf stopped and turned his gaze outside, and a man with burning red hair came into view.

That’s...

It was the oldest son of the Aldis house who was currently studying to be a knight. He was one year younger than Volf. Volf was aware of him, and not just because they were both heirs to marquis houses—the man had a tendency to draw attention to himself.

For instance, right after advancing to secondary school, he had beaten some older students who had come to pick a fight with him during sword practice. He had even defeated a large monster during extracurricular activities. During the summer break, he had lied about his age and joined a mercenary guild, taking on requests along with the other mercenaries, and so on. He was a notorious problem child.

Even so, perhaps because he hailed from a famous house of knights, few could match him with the sword; he was also a skilled tactician and quite sociable, causing many a future knight candidate to look up to him. His red hair and eyes gave him a fierce appearance when coupled with his sturdy physique, and given his promising future, he was also popular among the girls. Many suggested that he would one day be a general or perhaps even the captain of

the royal guard.

The man was speaking to Ivan, the oldest son of the Barthold house. While his house only had the title of count, it had produced a number of royal guards.

“Roland, what about our assignment?”

“Come on, it’ll be fine!”

Roland placed his arm around the suspicious Ivan’s shoulder and forcibly pulled him closer. He then dragged Ivan along in the direction of the academy’s training grounds. Ivan was the only worthy opponent that Roland had left at the academy.

“Hey, Roland, let me in on that!”

“Me too!”

“Mr. Aldis, would you mind teaching me too?”

A number of students from the knight’s curriculum had taken notice of them and gathered around. Roland responded with a wide grin.

“Sure! As long as you help me out with the assignment afterward!”

“Don’t tell me you’re expecting *me* to help you too?” Ivan replied with a frown.

Roland took no notice of him as he disappeared into a corridor together with the other students.

“Carefree, aren’t we?” an annoyed Volf muttered as he saw them disappear from the other side of the window.

One year had passed since Volf’s graduation from the academy. After spending the day working at the castle, he had returned home, where he was summoned by his father. As soon as Volf stepped into his father’s study, an intense smell of alcohol stung his nose. He grimaced.

“Volf!”

In the same moment that he heard his father roar, Volf felt a sharp pain in his forehead. From his now wet face, an even stronger smell of alcohol, and the

empty cup rolling on the carpet below, he realized that his father must have thrown his glass of liquor at him.

Volf silently wiped the liquor off his face with his sleeve, as his father, seemingly upset at his son's behavior, raised his voice.

"I'm told that Aldis kid became the crown prince's knight of service! How long are you planning on staying an underling?! Prove yourself worthy of the Barbosse name!"

Volf was reminded of what he had heard about Roland at the castle. Roland Aldis had managed the spectacular feat of defeating the enemy supreme commander in his very first battle, which had caught the crown prince's eye; as a result, he had been named his knight of service.

A knight of service served an aristocrat directly. As the knight of service to a crown prince, his status was, if perhaps not on par with a general, at the very least equal to or above that of a royal guard. As a new knight who had only just graduated from the academy, his achievement in battle, along with the unexpected appointment to serve the competent crown prince, meant that his name was now on the lips of everyone in the capital. With his burning red hair, Roland had made a name for himself as the "Blazing Knight."

Volf concluded that his father was upset after hearing that rumor, and did his best to stop himself from letting out a sigh. If his father had heard him sigh like that, the bottle would have come flying next.

His father viewed the head of the Aldis family as his rival for a simple reason: the noble woman he had fallen for and grown fixated on had been in love with the Aldis head. When he had attempted to propose to her, she had turned him down and instead married into the Aldis house. That had hurt his pride, and from that point on he'd grown hostile toward the Aldis family and developed a habit of comparing their sons.

Volf was a civil official, while Roland was a military one. As far as Volf was concerned, the comparison was pointless. Volf turned a gaze of contempt toward his foolish father. His father, however, did not notice, as he gulped down his liquor straight from the bottle.

"Our house is one of the most prestigious and honorable in the kingdom. We

can't fall behind an unrefined family that doesn't even have its own territory... Why must all of you make me look bad...?" Volf's father mumbled to himself, before chasing Volf out of his study—despite having summoned him there in the first place.

The reason you look bad is because you're incompetent, Volf thought to himself after closing the door to the room.

His father possessed no particular skill and his talents were below average, yet he was prideful and haughty. He had nothing but his title, and other nobles would make fun of him behind his back—not that he himself noticed.

If only he could have recognized his own incompetence and stayed put, things might still have turned out for the better. Instead, he would spend his time gambling and trying his hand at new enterprises only to fail, wasting large quantities of money—and the job of making up for the lost money would always fall on his son. Volf's pay always went toward making up for his father's wasteful spending.

The management of the Barbosse house's territory, which had been forced on Volf when he was still in the academy, was also going poorly. Volf was the only reason that they had managed to come this far without having to take out loans. His father would not do his job, yet refused to give up his seat as the head of the house, as he made wild accusations and continued to waste money in an attempt to flaunt his power. What could you call that if not incompetence?

Volf could feel dark emotions boiling up inside him.

"Master Volf..."

Volf returned to his senses at the sound of someone hesitantly calling his name. He turned around to find the family butler offering him a towel. Volf accepted the towel as he let out a deep sigh.

"I haven't laid eyes on that document."

"What?"

Volf couldn't help but reply in astonishment at the words of his superior. He

had been informed that the document he had submitted in time for the deadline had not made it to the relevant department.

“But I’m certain that I submitted it yesterday...”

“Pardon? Are you trying to imply that I lost it?”

The official furrowed his brow as he banged his fist on his desk. Volf clucked his tongue internally at the sight of his superior’s childish tantrum as he uttered words of apology.

Volf had never gotten along with this superior. The man was just like his father—unable to recognize his own incompetence while throwing his weight around. After Volf had pointed out a few of his mistakes, the superior had become hostile toward him.

“I was wrong to expect anything from a failed marquis house.”

The Barbosse house was by now a marquis house in name only. Volf’s superior was a count, but his house was well-off, and he took any opportunity to act condescending toward Volf. All he could do was to quietly endure.

“Oh, you there.” The superior summoned a colleague of Volf’s who was just passing by.

This colleague was an official who, despite being two years Volf’s senior, had joined the department at the same time as Volf as a result of restructuring.

“The paperwork you submitted before was excellent,” the superior continued.

“Thank you very much!”

Volf was sickened by the farce that was playing out in front of him. His superior had a habit of trying to make Volf look worse by complimenting someone else. He was also astonished that his colleague just accepted the compliment so readily.

Being used to this treatment, Volf averted his eyes in an attempt to ignore it, when the document his colleague had submitted came into view. He widened his eyes at the sight of its contents.

“This document...”

“Is there an issue, Barbosse junior? I’ll have you know he submitted this document to make up for your mistake,” the superior said with a sneer.

Volf clenched his fist tight. He had to, or he would have ended up punching the man right in the face. The document that he had worked so hard on, only to be told that his superior had never received it, was now right in front of him—signed with his colleague’s name. Similar things had happened a number of times before, but could it be...

Volf furrowed his brow as he glared at his superior. His superior raised his eyebrows at the sight.

“And just what is that look supposed to mean? Don’t you take your work seriously?! I swear, these failed nobles...” the superior said as he loudly banged his fist into his desk. “Very well, I’ll just have him handle the rest of the paperwork! You can go work on something else! You have until tomorrow!”

The superior yelled while waving as if shooing away a dog, and Volf silently lowered his gaze and turned his back on him. Behind him, his superior was talking in a voice intentionally loud enough for Volf to hear.

“Oh, by the way, would you thank your father for me? The wine he gave me the other day was excellent.”

Volf then realized exactly what was going on. The superior had received a bribe from his colleague’s father, and given his colleague credit for Volf’s work in order to make him look better. He’d mentioned wine, but in reality it had probably been money. Volf thought back and remembered how, when he had first joined the department, the superior had said things alluding to wanting bribes, but Volf had ignored him since he was in no position to pay such a thing. It was not just pointing out his mistakes, but also refusing to bribe him that had gotten Volf on his superior’s bad side.

And they call this the backbone of the kingdom? Laughable.

Gracis was the largest and most powerful country on the continent of Grandinal. He hadn’t noticed as a student, but after taking up work in the castle, he had been made aware just how rotten it was to its very core. The current king was timid and at the mercy of the nobles. The nobility was divided into a number of factions, all vying for power and lusting for wealth.

Subordinates tried to curry favor with their superiors, offering bribes to ensure their own safety. The talented were hampered by the incompetent, while the cunning exploited the weak.

Boiling with rage, Volf exited the room. His anger was directed at not just his superior. Volf was driven by an ambition to improve the country, and he believed that he had the talent to do so. Even as it was being ruined by his father, he had taken pride in hailing from one of the country's most prestigious marquis houses.

But reality was different. His father had dragged the Barbosse name through the mud, and the government was more interested in money and factionalism than talent. Volf was so angry at the distance between reality and his ideals that he felt he might go mad.

As he proceeded down a passageway, Volf noticed someone coming the other way. When he realized who the person was, he quickly stepped to the side and lowered his head.

The person in question was the crown prince. The members of the royal family of Gracis all possessed extraordinary beauty, and the crown prince was no exception. As he walked gallantly down the passageway, an aide chased after him.

“Your Highness, where are you going?!”

“I will return soon. Follow me, Ro,” the prince replied curtly while instructing his knight of service.

Volf kept his head turned down as he looked up to see Roland walk off with the crown prince, an exasperated look on his face.

Why?

Why did they receive such different treatment, despite both being from marquis houses? Why was Roland recognized by the crown prince and guaranteed his status in society, while Volf was kept down by his superiors and colleagues?

What separates us? Why am I treated so unfairly? What did I ever do?!

Volf was overcome with dark emotions. These emotions had piled up over the course of many years, wearing down Volf's soul. It was as if a bottomless hole had opened up in his heart. Volf had tried to ignore the growing void. He mustn't come close to it. He mustn't look into it. He mustn't fall into it.

But the hole already swallowed him up.

Oh, I see... Volf came to a realization. *If I don't have power, I can simply take it.*

Just like the people who had kept him down. He had the skills to do it.

This was the moment that he took a wrong turn in life and fell into darkness.

As the sky burned a twilight red, Volf approached his superior, who was preparing to leave for the day. The room was empty except for the two of them.

"Section chief, I have something to discuss..."

"What is it now? Can't you tell that I'm busy? I swear—"

"Are you sure you should be speaking that way to me?" Volf interrupted the superior before he could complain about Volf's status as he usually did, throwing a document in front of him. "I came across this budget request you processed, and certain figures here don't seem to add up."

"Wh-Who gave you permission to go over past applications?!"

"I was going over the archive for my own reference when I happened to notice this. Say, you wouldn't happen to know what happened to the missing money?" Volf said, glaring down at the other man. He was taller than him, adding to the intimidation.

His superior's haughtiness withdrew at his subordinate's sudden change of demeanor—normally, Volf would only frown quietly. The superior grew paler and nervously looked around the room. Volf had him right where he wanted him.

"I-I have no idea what you're—"

"Oh, yes, I heard you managed to repay your debt."

The superior twitched at Volf's statement.

Volf had closely investigated his superior. The man had been deep in debt from supporting the women of the red-light district, and he'd borrowed money from crooked lenders who forced him to accept outrageous interest rates and threatened him to make him repay the debt. He was just like Volf's father—an incompetent person who only cared about outward appearances. No, perhaps he was better than his father; he was at least cunning enough to be able to exploit others and guarantee his own status.

To Volf, however, there was not much difference between the two. They were both incompetent and unnecessary. However, his superior still had his uses.

"Just what do you want?"

"Oh, you don't need to be so accusatory. All I want is to be fairly judged," Volf said as he raised the corners of his mouth into a smile—though his eyes remained just as cold. "Ah, yes, my father is rather fond of drinking. I believe you are too, section chief?"

Starting the following day, the superior's treatment of Volf changed radically. He gave him preferential treatment and even did his best to butter him up. Volf's colleagues were surprised at the sudden change and shot Volf questioning glances, but he ignored them.

That was only the start of it. Volf then went on to seize control of the nobility. He used every trick in his book—threatening the incompetent, ensnaring the competent, causing factions to fight among themselves, and eliminating those who opposed him. Before long, he had clawed his way up the ranks and landed at a post where he oversaw a large number of people despite his young age. By then he already had minions who would do everything they could to try to curry his favor, without Volf even having to say anything.

Volf continued to amass power. At some point his father started acting as though everything Volf had achieved belonged to him, but Volf eliminated him and became the head of the Barbosse house. He married the daughter of a noble family that was useful to him, but as one might expect from a noble woman, she was self-important and vain. She, too, got it into her head that

Volf's power belonged to her, and she began to behave arrogantly toward those around her. Volf quickly became fed up with her, but divorcing her would have looked bad, and he didn't have much interest in her to begin with. As soon she'd borne him a son, he ignored her and let her do as she pleased. He could easily get any woman he wanted anyway.

Time passed, and Volf became the leader of the most powerful faction in the castle. He would be in contact with other countries and use any information he could get to manipulate that country in his own favor. Naturally, unlike those other incompetent nobles, Volf would never do something as foolish as letting his misdeeds actually come to light. Even if one of his crimes was unearthed, he would simply frame one of his pawns instead. Burying the matter again was also trivial. With another five years or so, Volf was convinced he could make the country entirely his own.

Then, suddenly, the king fell ill, and it was decided that the crown prince would ascend to the throne in his stead. As soon as the new king was crowned, he set out to reform the government. That meant tearing down everything that Volf had built up over the years.

The nobles and officials rebelled as their profits were taken from them; meanwhile, the people praised the king's efforts, dubbing him the Wise King.

The more reckless nobles attempted to assassinate the king outright, but Roland, who had been promoted from Blazing Knight to Blazing General, would stop them in their tracks and force them to face the wrath of the law. As a result, the king was able to tighten his grip on the nobility, much to Volf's dismay.

"What does the king take us for?!"

"We have supported this country for generations! We don't deserve this treatment!"

"Sir Barbosse, at this rate..."

The nobles of Volf's faction talked over each other as they all crowded into one room. So far Volf had remained safe, but it was only a matter of time. Part of his faction had already been arrested and were currently awaiting their

sentences. If any of them were to mention Volf, he would not get away unscathed.

If anyone stands in my way, I can simply eliminate them.

He'd even eliminated his own father. Cutting down a royal was nothing.

However, dealing with royalty would prove somewhat difficult. He would need to be far more careful than he had been so far. He would also need to make plans for what to do afterward.

It seems this country will be mine even sooner than I expected.

Amidst the people of his faction quivering with rage and fear, Volf silently grinned to himself.

Volf was walking down a corridor. He had just received a report that the king had passed away from a mysterious illness. He now had to start preparing for the king's funeral, the coronation of the new king, and various other matters.

In addition, the new king was the sole survivor of the royal family—a child a mere ten years of age. He would not be able to actually govern the country. Thus, in place of the young king, Volf had been placed in charge of the country as regent. Everything had gone according to plan.

Suddenly, a man appeared to block Volf's way.

"Barbosse... How dare you..."

"Are you sure a mere general should be speaking that way to the regent of the country, General Aldis?" Volf spoke with a stern expression as he fought his urge to smile. "I'm about to become very busy. Move out of the way."

As Volf attempted to start walking again, Roland held out his hand to block the way. His other hand rested on the hilt of his sword.

"What exactly are you planning on doing to this country?" Roland's voice was strained and filled with spite. Any normal person would have started trembling in fear. Volf, however, remained unfazed.

"For the late king's sake, I will simply work my fingers to the bone as I devote myself to the good of his country."

“Devote yourself, eh... How absolutely shameless,” Roland spat.

“What about you, then? What will you do, General Aldis?” Volf asked him in return.

Roland was one of his most valuable pawns. His skill with the sword and as a tactician would prove important going forward. Volf would prefer not to have to get rid of him yet if possible. Roland paused for a moment before answering.

“As my liege wishes, I will protect this country,” Roland said, before turning around. Volf said nothing as Roland walked away.

“A knight who follows his orders even after his master is dead... How pitiful and comical,” Volf muttered after Roland had disappeared.

Volf became regent, and once the king came of age he became his minister, continuing to rule the country from the shadows. There was no one left who could defy him—he had already eliminated everyone or relegated them to somewhere far away from the capital. The king tried to resist him at first, but by making an example of his daughter and taking his wife and crown prince as hostages, Volf quickly forced him to obey his every command.

Volf’s wife, whom he had ignored until now, went mad from jealousy and tried to fake her own suicide; she actually did end up dying, however, but Volf made it seem as though she died from illness. For his second wife he took a young, quiet woman from a powerful noble house. She was always cowering in fear, but that was still preferable to his previous wife’s constant shouting.

Volf had obtained all the power he wanted, and even the very country itself. Yet for some reason he was still not satisfied.

Suddenly, he heard someone singing. It was a woman’s voice—a handmaiden perhaps? Normally Volf would have ignored the voice, but for some reason he was drawn to it. He began to search for its source.

The handmaid in question was busy cleaning a window. She was wearing a plain handmaiden’s outfit, consisting of a black dress long enough to hide her ankles and a white apron. Her long golden hair was tied back, swaying as she moved back and forth, shining in the sunlight. Anywhere else it would have

been nothing out of the ordinary. But in the solemn, oppressive castle, it was a bizarre sight.

Volf approached the handmaiden as if drawn in unconsciously. The woman failed to notice Volf as she continued polishing the window while humming an off-key tune. Once she had finished wiping the window, she turned around and let out a shrill scream upon seeing Volf right behind her, jumping back in surprise. She reminded Volf of a small rabbit.

“I’m sorry!” The handmaiden frantically apologized. As she did, Volf realized that he recognized her face.

“You’re...”

“Oh dear, I guess you found me out,” the woman said as she looked up and gave Volf an innocent smile like that of a mischievous child who doesn’t regret their latest antics even after getting caught.

She was the woman that the king had fallen in love with at first sight—his favorite queen.

“What are you doing here?”

“I’m cleaning!” the queen replied confidently, and Volf could feel a headache coming on at that. He couldn’t fathom what the king’s queen, who was supposed to be in the royal quarters, was doing in a place like this cleaning.

“You will get in the way of the other workers. Please go back to the royal quarters.”

Volf did his best to speak as logically and carefully as possible. The queen, however, simply gave him a perplexed look.

“But I’m just cleaning. I’m not doing anything bad.”

“Please go back,” Volf responded with an annoyed expression, shaking his head once before turning around to leave, as he had a feeling that he would be unable to keep his usual collected demeanor around her for some reason.

“Volf Barbosse,” the queen called out to Volf’s back using his full name.

Volf turned around to find that the queen’s innocent smile had been replaced by an expression that could be interpreted as anger, sadness, or even a

complete void of emotion.

“Why do you devalue yourself like that?”

Volf was left stunned at the queen’s question. It was the first time he had ever been accused of *devaluing* himself. In fact, as he now controlled the entire country, no one would even dare say something like that to his face.

“What are you...?” Volf was unable to come up with an answer on the spot, so the queen continued speaking.

“You’re so talented, so why do you only do things that serve to make others unhappy? What do you want?”

“Unhappy? What I want?”

Hearing Volf’s response, the queen gave him an expression of pity.

“You don’t even know what you truly want, do you? You poor man,” the queen spoke sadly.

The queen then picked up the bucket that she had placed on the floor.

“I’ll be going back now. If I don’t, Meria will start crying.”

As she started walking, this time Volf posed a question to her instead.

“Are you happy?”

“Yes, I am,” the queen replied without hesitation. “I have Sol by my side. He is my sweet, gentle king, who always prays for the happiness of others.”

The queen turned around and gave him a smile as radiant as the sun.

The king’s favorite queen, nicknamed the Sunshine of the Royal Quarters, gave birth to a prince before failing to recover after the delivery and passing away. Volf was in his office when he received word of this. He gave the official an order to arrange her funeral. Once the official had left, leaving Volf alone in the room, the late queen’s smile appeared vividly in Volf’s mind.

“Happy, huh...”

The late queen had once asked him a question about that, and he had asked her the same thing in return. For some reason, her question still remained in

the back of his mind.

He had obtained wealth, power, fame, and even the very country itself. Yet his heart was still not fulfilled. The empty hole inside him continued to eat away at him even now.

“Are you still happy now?” he asked the queen who had already departed for the Garden Above.

Alongside the Hero of Light, Herscherik Gracis, the tales also speak of the Marquis of Darkness, Volf Barbosse. He controlled Gracis Kingdom from the shadows for many years. His influence extended across the entire kingdom and even into other countries on the continent. He was a selfish and callous man who would harm anyone in his way—the royal family, commoners, young and old—if he stood to gain from it. At the same time, however, it is said that he also possessed impressive political prowess.

In his final years, Herscherik spoke of him as such: “If he had not taken a wrong turn in life, I would not have been dubbed a hero, and the kingdom would have been even more prosperous than it is now.”

The Life of the Marquis of Darkness — Fin.

Postscript

Hello, it's Nobiru Kusunoki with my fourth postscript. Thank you for reading *Herscherik Volume 4 - The Reincarnated Prince and the Hero of Light*. Just as with previous volumes, I won't be including spoilers here.

It's thanks to the support of all my readers that the Herscherik series has made it to its fourth volume. This might be strange for the author to be saying, but when I first received the offer to have my work published, I never thought I'd make it this far. At first I wondered if the offer might have been a scam using Futabasha's name... Now I'm able to look back at that and laugh.

That said, I always spend every meeting with my editor M terrified out of my mind, repeatedly asking, "Is it really going to be released? Are you sure?" I mean, it's not that I'm doubting the work of my editors and publishers. I'm just a bit of a timid person who only goes "Wow, it really *did* get released!" once I actually receive my complimentary copy.

This time around, my editor M, ever so kind even to someone hopeless like me, said, "There are over fifty possible places to include illustrations! It's really difficult to choose!"—an even greater compliment than last time. I thought I'd have another heart attack from the excitement. Between M complimenting me to death, dying over Arico's beautiful illustrations, and then dying yet again at the sight of my complimentary copy arriving... Just how many times am I supposed to die? But I shall live on! (Rhetorical question.)

By the way, while I was revising the draft, I thought I'd die in a different sense. I posted the web version with (an infinitesimal sliver of) confidence, but I lost count of the number of times I regretted writing something during the revision... This volume is not much longer than the previous one, but I'd like to think that I managed to flesh out the characters a bit better.


Finally, to all those who read *The Reincarnated Prince and the Hero of Light*, those who have followed me since the web version, Futabasha, my editor M who always replies to me at light speed, Arico who turned the world of *The*

Reincarnated Prince into such beautiful drawings, the designer of the wonderful cover, my proofreader (thank you so much for always pointing out typos and inconsistencies), everyone else involved in publishing this book, as well as my family who always support me and even provide inspiration: It's thanks to you that I've once again had the honor of publishing a sequel to *The Reincarnated Prince*. Thank you all so much!

The tale of Herscherik and his men of service is not over yet. I still have so much I want to write.

I hope I'll get to see you again at the end of the next volume. Rambling over.

— Nobiru Kusunoki



The Reincarnated Prince and the Hero of Light

The Epic Tale of the Reincarnated Prince Herscherik
NOBIRU KUSUNOKI **Illustrator ARICO**





Marx
First Prince of Gracis

Father, Brother—and Master Rook as well—please calm down.

Hersch told me that if it ever came to this, I had to be sure to stop all of you.

Rook
Butler of Service to Solye

Solye
King of Gracis

William
Second Prince of Gracis



*I... wanted
to kill you.*

*Then why didn't you kill me?!
That "Shadow Fang" of yours could have
done it with ease! You could have just
given the order to that Aldis brat or
that monster you're keeping!*

Marquis Barbosse
Minister of Gracis

Just today...
Just for today...















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Translated by afm Edited by Sarah Tilson

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Original Japanese edition published in 2017 by Futabasha Publishers Ltd.

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Ebook edition 1.0: March 2021