

The *Crown of* **Rutile Quartz**

THE YOUNG KING'S PATH FORWARD

2

SURUME ENOKI
ILLUSTRATOR: TTL



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"MY LORD! ARE YOU HURT?!" EXCLAIMED MONICA, TURNING BACK TO INSPECT HER KING'S FACE, NECK, AND BODY FOR ANY INJURY.

STUNNED, SLAINE RESPONDED, "I'M ALL RIGHT."

MONICA ADRASHELM
SLAINE'S AIDE-DE-CAMP

SERGEY OF NORDENFELT
CHANCELLOR OF THE KINGDOM

"YOUR MAJESTY!" SHOUTED MONICA.

BY THE TIME SLAINE HEARD THE SOUND OF HER SWORD BEING DRAWN, MONICA HAD ALREADY LEAPED IN FRONT TO PROTECT HIM. VICTOR, TOO, ADVANCED TOWARD THE DUKE'S MESSENGER, BLADE AT THE READY.

THE DUCAL KNIGHT THRUST ONE HAND INTO THE JAR, EXTRACTED SOMETHING FROM INSIDE, AND THEN THREW THE GLASS TO THE FLOOR. BY THEN, VICTOR WAS ALREADY UPON HIM.

"DAMMIT!" THE MESSENGER SWORE.

HE ATTEMPTED TO FLING WHATEVER IT WAS HE HAD DRAWN FROM THE GLASS AT SLAINE, BUT VICTOR WAS TOO FAST.

SLAINE OF HASENVALIA
THE KING OF HASENVALIA. AS THE BASTARD SON OF THE LATE KING, SLAINE WAS RAISED AS A COMMONER. AFTER REPELLING GALED'S INVASION LAST YEAR, HE HAS BEEN SAFELY CROWNED KING OF HASENVALIA...BUT HAS HE FACED HIS LAST THREAT FROM THE EMPIRE?

VICTOR OF BEHRENDORF
COMMANDER OF THE ROYAL GUARD



JURGIS WEINREICH

THE CHIEF OF THE ULVHEZNAR MERCENARY GROUP AND A MEMBER OF THE MARGINALIZED GRUKHIAN PEOPLE. HIS ANCESTORS BELONGED TO THE NOBLE FAMILY THAT ONCE RULED OVER THE SCATTERED GRUKHIANS' FORMER HOMELAND.

GOSTAV OF RUSTREM

THE LIEUTENANT GENERAL OF THE HASENVALIAN ROYAL ARMY AND COMMANDER OF THE FIRST BATTALION. WELL-KNOWN AS A POLITICAL HAWK, HE'S STRICT WITH BOTH HIMSELF AND OTHERS.

GOSTAV SILENTLY READIED HIS BLADE. BESIDE HIM, JURGIS GRIPPED HIS OWN IN HIS SIGNATURE ONE-HANDED STANCE.

IT WAS CERTAINLY A SIGHT: A NOBLE GENERAL OF THE KINGDOM AND A STATELESS GRUKHIAN MERCENARY CHIEF FIGHTING SHOULDER TO SHOULDER.

THOUGH THE TWO MEN HAD THEIR DIFFERENCES, THEY JOINED FORCES TO FEND OFF THE ENEMY SOLDIERS' LAST-DITCH ATTACKS.

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THE GREAT EMPIRE OF GALED



THE KINGDOM OF HASENVALLA

THE DUCHY OF WAHLENHEIT



UZELHEIM, THE ROYAL CAPITAL

THE ELDECIO MOUNTAIN RANGE



TORIET, THE CAPITAL OF CRONHEIM COUNTY

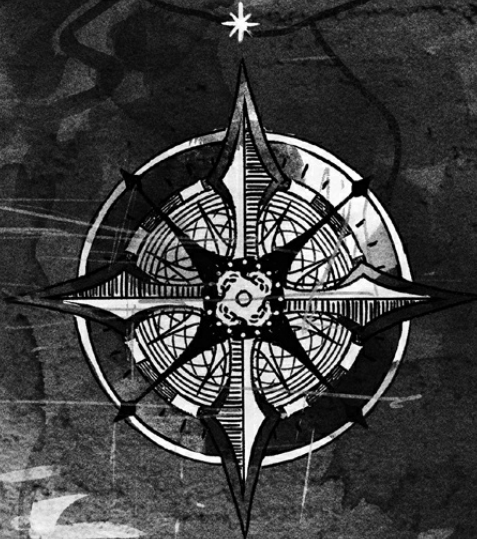
THE SAUERLAND FORTRESS



LEUSCHNER HIGHWAY

THE ROYAL DOMAIN

CRONHEIM COUNTY



THE KINGDOM OF IGNATOV

Chapter 1: Winter's Repose

Winter was the season of rest and endurance.

Although the western kingdoms seldom experienced snow even at the height of winter, it was nonetheless taxing to spend long periods outdoors in the bitter cold. Attempting a long journey at such a time of year could expose one to mortal peril.

As a consequence, most in the region reduced their activities during the winter months. Apart from the odd sunny day, people spent much of their time indoors, either engaging in domestic labor or—if they could afford it—indulging in leisure.

It was the twelfth month of the seventy-seventh year of the royal calendar, and the Kingdom of Hasenvalia was in the midst of such a season.

The number of people coming to and from the royal capital of Uzelheim had dramatically decreased, with only farmers, the regional patrol, and the occasional visitor with urgent business passing through the gates.

Many of the stores in the capital had closed or shortened their hours. Only those shops that worked with fire, unaffected by the cold weather, operated as usual.

And with the pace of society as slowed as it was, naturally the figures that maintained and managed this society had less work to do as well. The Nobles of the Robe, civil officials, and soldiers alike found themselves with an abundance of free time on their hands.

Even as monarch, Slaine was no exception. After weathering the turbulence of the past year—including the fierce invasion by the Great Empire of Galed—the boy king had finally won a bit of respite: he got to sleep in.

On one such restful day, Slaine rose a bit after the already late sunrise. He yawned and twisted around in his clean, comfortable bed, turning toward the window to find the morning light shining through the expensive plate glass.

Then Slaine heard a gentle voice at his side.

“Good morning, Slaine,” said Monica Adrashelm, his aide-turned-lover. She lay in the same bed as he, already awake.

“Good morning, Monica,” Slaine replied.

Monica answered with a loving smile. As she sat up to pour a cup of water from the jug on the bedside table, the sheets slipped away to reveal the upper half of her beautiful nude body. “Here you are,” she said, offering him the cup. (Slaine had requested that Monica forgo proper royal address when the two of them were alone.)

“Thank you,” he said, accepting the cup. His throat had been quite dry from sleep.

When he was finished, he handed the cup back to her and quickly crawled back under the covers. Though a magical device heated his room, it was still rather chilly in the nude.

Monica placed the cup back on the bedside table and joined him beneath the sheets, sidling up close beside him. They smiled at one another.

“You look lovely today, Monica,” said Slaine.

“R-Really?”

“Yeah. Very lovely,” he said. “You’re the loveliest girl in the world.”

Slaine watched as her face turned pink.

Monica excelled at everything, but she’d had no experience with men before Slaine—and so she was completely defenseless when it came to love. He had come to know this side of her not long after their relationship had changed.

And he adored it—this blushing face that no one else knew and only he could see. He seized every opportunity he could to let her know it: in the morning, at night, even during breaks in his office...

Monica’s eyes were glassy as she held her hands out toward him. “Slaine,” she breathed.

The two of them slept together every night, so Slaine knew full well what she

wanted. He let her draw him into her arms and press his face into her ample breasts.

“Ahhh, Slaine,” she exhaled. “Now you are mine and mine alone.”

Hearing her blissful voice in his ear, Slaine could not have felt more happy or safe.



After a while longer of such nonsense, and the occasional bit of “morning fun,” Slaine rose from bed together with Monica.

Monica was now the one tasked with Slaine’s morning preparations, rather than the palace maids. The couple washed their faces, fixed their hair, and dressed. And after Monica added a light touch of makeup to her face, they left the bedroom together.

And as Monica looked after Slaine at night as well, the servants’ workload was reduced quite a bit. The maids tasked with minding the royal baths were now limited to preparing hot water and cleaning the bathrooms.

The servants at the royal palace were completely devoted to Slaine, and they neither made comment nor showed any sign of disgust when Slaine brought Monica into his bed or bath each night—though he was sure they were gossiping quite a bit behind the scenes.

Such was Slaine’s typical late morning in the winter.

Though he took his official duties very seriously, his workload was reduced in the winter, so it was no burden to the state for him to go about his day at such a leisurely pace. Although he continued to study and train to maintain his mental and physical fitness, this did not require many hours out of the day.

But even in the midst of these peaceful days with plenty of time to spare, the occasional task still demanded his attention. Today, Slaine had an audience with Sergey, the Marquess of Nordenfelt and chancellor of the kingdom—they were scheduled to discuss some trivial matters that did not merit inclusion in the regular meetings.

“Therefore, there is nothing of significance scheduled outside of the royal

palace for the next several weeks. Your final official duty of the year shall be to attend the services in the Grand Cathedral at noon on the thirty-first of December,” said Sergey.

“Ahh, I see,” said Slaine. “I’d heard they hold end-of-year celebrations in the capital, but living in Rutware, I’d never had a chance to see one.”

“This custom was established by Frederick I in order to foster unity between the king and his subjects,” the chancellor explained. “You shall pray together with the ordinary people and offer a brief address to the assembly. Your predecessors’ speeches are transcribed in the official records, so you may refer to their comments as you prepare for the day of the event. But I may help you compose your remarks if you wish.”

“No, my subjects are precious to me. I’ll think it over myself.”

“I see. Then I shall provide you with a record of your predecessors’ comments at a later date.”

With this matter settled, Slaine retired for a cup of tea. But as he was about to take a sip, he realized that not only was there not much tea left, what remained was completely cold.

“Shall I prepare another cup of tea, my liege?” asked Monica from his side.

“Yes, please,” Slaine answered, nodding. “And one for Sergey as well.”

“Yes, sire. Right away,” said Monica, departing the room.

Slaine settled for sipping his cold tea for now.

Sergey spoke up the moment Monica had closed the door behind her. “My lord, I’ve a question, if you will.”

“Hm? What is it?”

“Are you and Miss Adrashelm using contraception?” asked the chancellor.

Slaine choked on his tea.



Coughing, he turned his head away so that he would not spray liquid all over the documents on the table. “Y-You know about...us?” he feebly asked.

Sergey answered with a rather exasperated expression. “With all due respect, my lord, I think the question ought to be how I *wouldn’t* know,” he said. “The tales about Miss Adrashelm spending the night in your bedchambers arrived at my doorstep upon the most cursory of inquiries—and besides, Lord Adrashelm had divulged to me this development in your relationship some time ago.”

Both of Monica’s parents, the Baron of Adrashelm and his wife, had noticed that something had changed between their daughter and Slaine after they had returned from the night of the great battle earlier that year—and the older couple tacitly approved of the relationship. Monica’s partner was the king, after all.

And as chancellor of the kingdom, Sergey naturally had ample opportunity to meet with Monica’s father, the minister of agriculture. Indeed, the chancellor had likely happened upon the news with ease.

“And even had I heard nothing of the matter, I can tell well enough from the closeness between you,” said Sergey. “Surely you do not think me so blind that the blatant air of young love you exude toward one another would escape my notice.”

“Was it that obvious?” Slaine asked, feeling a bit sheepish. “We’ve been trying to maintain an appropriate distance while working, but, well...”

“I believe you hide it well, but from my perspective, it is easy to see,” said Sergey. “Watching you reminds me of the late king and Lady Alma—though that pair *truly* wore their hearts on their sleeves.”

“It’s strange, isn’t it? I’ve never met my father in person, but I’m carrying on the same way, two generations in a row,” Slaine replied. “Like father, like son.”

“Parent and child are naturally alike—and not only in your deeds,” Sergey agreed. “This is merely my opinion, but ever since you returned from the battle with the empire, I feel that you resemble your predecessor more and more with each passing day. It’s apparent in how you carry yourself and even in the nonchalance of your speech.”

Slaine felt a little shy hearing Sergey compare him to his father—but it made him strangely happy too.

Then Sergey's expression hardened to one of deathly solemnity. "If I may return the subject to my initial question, I would like to make certain you are using protection whilst you engage in intercourse. This is a very serious matter."

It was crucial that Slaine eventually produce an heir, but birthing a child out of wedlock would naturally pose a complicated—if not unsolvable—dilemma for the crown. Slaine knew full well why the chancellor felt the need to ask; after all, Slaine himself had been taken from the royal palace and raised oblivious to his own parentage as the consequence of one such unsanctioned union.

Only after Slaine had safely acceded to the throne had the courtly society of the Kingdom of Hasenvalia finally begun to settle. It would be incredibly troublesome were such a predicament to arise again. Naturally, the chancellor of the kingdom wished to ensure that the king was not engaging in rash behavior.

Slaine smiled faintly and replied, "Don't worry—we've been careful to drink the honey of calomere. We have that much sense, at least."

The "honey of calomere" was a contraceptive derived from the titular calomere, a magical plant. Although it was not readily available to commoners on account of its price, the ruler of a kingdom had no trouble procuring it. When imbibed by either man or woman, it would prevent conception for several hours following use.

"Then all is well," said Sergey. "I cannot imagine that Lord Adrashelm would have any complaints about his daughter receiving the favor of a king. Nevertheless, please do not leave her with child until after you have been properly wedded. I beseech you to take great care, my lord."

Sergey's words left Slaine shocked.

"Is something the matter, my lord?" said Sergey.

"Could I really marry Monica?" Slaine asked.

Slaine and Monica loved one another. Of course he wished to marry her.

However, Monica was the daughter of a baron. Although her father's position among the Nobles of the Robe brought her close to the royal family, in terms of aristocratic rank she was close to the bottom of the hierarchy. Slaine had assumed that it would be quite difficult to win approval to marry her from Sergey and his other advisors.

"If you are worried about the prestige of Monica's house, I do not expect that to be much of a problem," said Sergey. "There is no law that decrees the daughter of a baroness cannot be queen. And to be frank, it would in fact be a rather convenient arrangement for the present royal family."

Slaine was the only living member of the Hasenvalian royal family. The selection of his queen consort would naturally be a careful political balancing act.

Considered purely in terms of rank, the queen consort was typically chosen from a noble house with the title of count or higher. However, were Slaine to choose a bride from either House Akerlof in the west or House Cronheim in the east, the family he did not choose would naturally be left dissatisfied. And should he take a wife from Houses Nordenfelt, Vogel, or Estergren, he ran the risk of angering the aristocratic cliques in both the east and the west.

Slaine's predecessor, the late king Frederick IV, had spent the last several years of his reign strengthening the kingdom's army and improving its production of iron and salt. It was possible that if the royal family were joined to a high-ranking family from among the Nobles of the Robe, this would provoke the other feudal lords. At a time when domestic unity was of utmost importance, it was critical to avoid unnecessary internecine discord.

And taking a bride from a foreign kingdom's royalty was out of the question. No country would risk marrying off a princess to the Kingdom of Hasenvalia in the midst of its war with the empire—even though the kingdom had fought off the initial invasion. It was also not advantageous to the crown to invite foreign interference in its internal affairs by establishing kinship ties with the royal family of another state.

Under these circumstances, a marriage to a minor family—like Monica's—could prove to be expedient. The Adrashelm family had a long aristocratic

history but no power to speak of; they were not a threat.

The barony of Adrashelm, headed by the minister of agriculture, Walter Adrashelm, had little political influence and few financial resources. Even were such a barony to become “the queen’s family,” this alone would not be sufficient to significantly alter the family’s standing at court.

And by daring to take a bride from a low-ranking family, Slaine could demonstrate to the nobles that he had no designs to upset the balance of power in aristocratic society.

Naturally, politics was a breeding ground for grudges and resentment. The most harmonious outcome would be one in which no single faction was unfairly advantaged by Slaine’s union.

“And so, provided that you do not show Lord Adrashelm undue favor following your marriage, and continue to demonstrate that you value the counts of Cronheim and Akerlof, I believe Monica ought to be a politically suitable prospect for queen consort,” Sergey explained.

His words came as a great relief to Slaine—it seemed there were not, in fact, any meaningful obstacles to his marriage to Monica. He was incredibly happy to know that he could continue to protect and nurture his love for her. But he did his best to contain his excitement in front of the chancellor, allowing himself only a faint smile.

“However,” continued Sergey, “you have only just been crowned as king, in a ceremony with many guests from surrounding countries. Please allow us to take some time to explain the arrangement to the noble factions in the east and west before planning the wedding. And, in due time, it will be important to establish ties with the other noble houses through your own sons and daughters. It would be best for you to birth a minimum of four children, preferably more, for the peace and stability of our kingdom.”

Slaine smiled faintly at the thought. Monica had no special need to worry about the physical hardship of birthing a large number of children—the royal family had skilled doctors and healing sorcerers at its disposal as well as expensive magical potions to ease the pain of childbirth.

And when the time came to raise those children, they would be able to

choose from among the best nannies, wet nurses, and tutors in the kingdom. Neither Slaine nor Monica would be overburdened by the time commitment of raising the children. But the task of birthing and seeing to the proper royal education of many children was sure to be hard work nevertheless.

“I am sure Monica understands what will be expected of us if she wishes to marry me,” Slaine answered. “We shall endeavor to build a large family, once we are wed.”

As if on cue, Monica returned with a fresh pot of herbal tea.



“Seven! Eight! Nine! Two hundred! One! Two!”

It was early January, and Sieghardt, Count of Vogel and general of the royal army, was training with his blade outdoors. Although the midwinter winds carried a biting chill, Sieghardt was nude from the belt up. Sweat covered his muscular body.

Born into an aristocratic military family, Sieghardt had followed in his ancestors’ footsteps to become a soldier and had served for more than twenty years. Even as the highest-ranking officer in the Hasenvalian royal army, he maintained a rigorous training regimen, keeping fit and able as a knight in his own right.

Hasenvalia was a small kingdom, and its royal army comprised a mere three hundred men—a force small enough that one could know the name and face of every soldier in the service. In such an organization, it was not only a general’s ability as a commander but his individual strength that set him apart from the other soldiers.

And in order for the army to continue to serve as the blade of the royal family, it was imperative that its tip remain strong and sharp. Sieghardt had inherited this philosophy from his father and grandfather before him.

Sieghardt was training behind the commanders’ tent on the eastern edge of the Hasenvalian territory—a region once considered a buffer zone between the kingdom and the Great Empire of Galed to the east. Now, it served as a defensive field position under the direct control of the royal family.

After witnessing the coronation of King Slaine of Hasenvalia in the royal capital of Uzelheim, Sieghardt had arrived at this post to relieve Gostav, Viscount of Rustrem, of his command of the border defense.

In the dead of winter, when no country could mobilize an army, there was no need for Sieghardt to serve Slaine directly as an advisor—and as Gostav's superior officer, Sieghardt thought it unreasonable to saddle the man with a deployment at the border from autumn all the way through the wintry new year.

A knight approached and offered Sieghardt a salute. "My apologies for interrupting your training, General. I have arrived for our regular morning report."

"It's no trouble. I was just finishing up," Sieghardt replied, wiping sweat from his body.

The knight's report was no different from usual: the kingdom's patrol had scouted the mountains along the Leuschner Highway, but there were no signs that Galed was preparing significant military action as yet.

But even the greatest empire would not dare mobilize troops in the winter—this would result in little besides needless death. And besides, Prince Florenz presently lacked the resources for another invasion.

"Thank you for your report," said Sieghardt. "I do not think there is much chance the enemy will act, but all the same, please maintain vigilance."

"Yes, sir," the knight barked, saluting, and then returned to his post.

Sieghardt took a look around the field encampment.

As there was no present sign of enemy movement, more than half of the five hundred soldiers stationed at the border had been posted in a farming village within Cronheim County that had been abandoned during the empire's invasion. The bulk of the reinforcements provided by the Kingdom of Ignatov had relocated here as well.

The force was also in the process of constructing a fort at the entrance to the mountain pass in order to augment the hastily constructed moat and fences that presently reinforced the crossing.

Soldiers with no other tasks were eagerly engaged in digging holes or carrying timber—the physical work warmed up their frozen bodies well.

It looks so peaceful, Sieghardt thought.

This was the true nature of “border defense”—building, patrolling, and periodic training. More often than not, it amounted to little other than waiting on standby.

However, even amidst the calm, the soldiers of the royal army had a critical mission—their presence at the border provided peace of mind to the ordinary subjects of the kingdom, maintaining stability and order.

Sieghardt re-equipped his military uniform and stepped out in front of his men.

“It’s a beautiful, sunny morning! Keep up the good work, men!” he boomed.

The soldiers replied in unison, “Yes, sir!”



Approximately five thousand people resided in the royal capital of Uzelheim. The royal palace was situated to the north, while the urban area home to the bulk of the area’s subjects lay to the south.

The residences of the Nobles of the Robe were concentrated in a district between the palace and the city center. And in one corner of this aristocratic neighborhood was the residence of House Estergren.

Although House Estergren possessed the title of county, it had no claim to a fiefdom. Its manse was a small, two-story building—the family employed about a dozen private guards and servants to see to their daily needs.

Elena’s father, the late Count of Estergren, had passed away before his time—she had succeeded him as head of the household several years ago. Since her position as minister of foreign affairs demanded she spend much of her time traveling throughout the kingdom’s neighboring countries, the slow winter months were a welcome respite from the pressures of her work.

As she whiled away the idle hours at work on a painting in her manse, her husband approached. “Back here again, Elena?”

Elena had wed the man, the son of a noble family from the west, ten years ago. He had a gentle temperament, maintaining the residence in his wife's stead while she was away on official duty—which was most of the time.

The pair had a wonderful marriage. Although Elena often affixed a fake grin to her face in the midst of her duties, her husband was one of the few people with whom she could smile sincerely.

"Indeed. I hope to finish this painting before the end of the year," she said, turning to face her husband.

As she visited many faraway locales in the course of her work, she'd made it her modest hobby to capture the most memorable scenes she could recall on canvas.

"Skillful as ever," said her husband. "But another painting of the battle against the empire? How many have you made already?"

Elena laughed. "This is the fourth," she said. "It is a scene of the cavalry of Hasenvalia and Ignatov about to charge. The last in the series, perhaps."

"Four paintings on the same subject matter," he said. "This is one of the greatest works you've produced thus far. If you were to present your paintings to His Majesty the King—"

"Never mind that," Elena said, laughing and shaking her head. Her husband was merely flattering her. "I cannot call this a proper war painting."

Although even skilled painters had praised Elena's skill as an amateur artist, her work was merely for her own personal entertainment. A renowned painter who had accompanied the royal army would complete the task of documenting the war against the empire, so the kingdom had no need of Elena's paintings. It was, after all, just a hobby.

"I see. Rather unfortunate you see it that way, but..."

"Anyway, did you come to ask something?"

"Indeed. I baked your favorite walnut cake," her husband said. "Would you care for a cup of tea with the kids?"

When Elena glanced out the window, she was surprised to see how high the

sun had climbed into the sky. She'd lost track of time in the midst of her work, it seemed.

"Yes, let's," she said.

She rose, stretched, and followed her husband from the room.

Being able to spend more time at home meant more time with her family as well—another pleasant part of the winter season.



Sergey remained hard at work in his post as the chancellor of the kingdom, with no respite in the early new year. Although the winter months were not quite so busy as the rest, his position demanded more labor than did others' roles.

Today he met with the minister of agriculture, Walter, Baron Adrashelm, to review the year's plans for plantings and harvests.

"I see," said Walter. "Certainly, with this approach, we will be able to convince the farmers to accept potato cultivation sooner."

"This, too, was the king's suggestion. According to His Majesty, it is still 'only an idea,' and he will consider the specifics of how to engage the farmers further. Once the details have been finalized, I shall arrange a meeting with the king so that he may explain them to you in person," said Sergey.

"Understood."

After settling a few more minor matters, their business discussions came to a close. Sergey, however, spoke up with another inquiry. "As for the matter of His Majesty the King and your lady daughter..."

"Yes, I've already been made aware," said Walter, smiling faintly. "I'd meant to casually broach the subject when she returned to visit the family manse the other day, but she seemed to sense my intentions immediately and openly declared her desire to marry the king. She understood what would be expected of her as queen consort without need of my explanation."

"I see. Yes, a girl as capable and bright as she ought not need such exposition. I'm glad she's been clear about her intentions," said Sergey. "I suppose we can

consider it a blessing for the matter to be settled so quickly—though there are political considerations yet. An official marriage can be scheduled in the latter half of the year, perhaps.”

Slaine’s case was an especially unusual one, given his upbringing and the circumstances surrounding his accession to the throne. Taking into account the emotions of the various lords and nobles affected by this tumultuous sequence of events, it was unwise to attempt to cram a state funeral for the entire royal family, a coronation, and a wedding into such a short period.

The king’s advisors would need time to explain their intentions, the events leading to Monica’s selection as queen consort, and the plan to marry Slaine’s children into the noble families in both the east and the west—and those noble factions themselves would need time to accept it.

And although a king’s wedding was not so important an occasion as a state funeral or coronation, the advisors would need to invite representatives from the neighboring states to attend. It was only proper to provide them with sufficient time to prepare.

Nevertheless, the king would need to take a bride and produce heirs before long. This was essential to the stability of the royal family. Taking all of that into account, Sergey thought it appropriate to aim for a wedding sometime in the latter half of the year.

“Then House Adrashelm shall prepare as well,” said Walter.

“Please do,” said Sergey. “I imagine the king shall ask your permission to have Monica’s hand in marriage before long. In person, perhaps.”

Walter laughed. “His Majesty himself?”

“Indeed. The king is such a man,” said Sergey. “And one more thing—should Monica become the king’s wife, then House Adrashelm shall become the queen’s family.”

Walter inferred the chancellor’s implied meaning and replied straightaway, “Of course, we are well aware. I shall not take advantage of my position as the king’s father-in-law—nor shall my son abuse his.”

“I see. Well, I was never particularly worried about that—but I must be

thorough all the same, on account of my position. You understand.”

“Of course. It is no matter.”

With that, the ministers called it a day. Sergey departed the room ahead of Walter.

The chancellor’s aide greeted him outside. “Your Excellency.”

Sergey’s aide was not just an assistant—he was the marquess’s nephew as well as the heir apparent to both the Marquessate of Nordenfelt and the seat of chancellor. Sergey exchanged words with the man as he briskly traversed the corridors of the palace.

“I’ve no meetings for the rest of the day, correct?” Sergey asked.

The aide nodded. “After the midday recess, you’ve nothing but financial paperwork to manage. Shall you take lunch in your office?”

“I shall. You are free to take the rest of the afternoon off,” said Sergey.

The aide shook his head. “If you will be returning to work, then I will accompany you.”

“Do as you please.”

Although Sergey would be sixty-six this year, he remained energetically engaged in the duties of his office—he entertained no thoughts of leisure even in the winter months. The chancellor of the kingdom could not afford such indulgences.

His body would be able to withstand the rigors of office for another five years, perhaps less—and so he resolved to dedicate that time to his country, the royal family, and the new king, Slaine.



When Victor, Viscount of Behrendorf, had been a child, he had secretly wished that he could rear horses when he came of age.

However, Victor hailed from an aristocratic military family, so he hadn’t been able to focus merely on training in riding and horse husbandry—much of his time had been spent in extensive study of the martial arts, along a breadth of

other academic subjects. As a matter of course, he had become a soldier.

At the age of twenty-eight, he had become the youngest battalion commander in the history of the royal army; in his early thirties, he had ascended to the post of commander of the royal guard upon the retirement of his predecessor, the Viscount of Rustrem. And after his father had abdicated as head of their household, he had assumed the title of Viscount of Behrendorf.

The course of his life was predetermined. There had never been any hope that he would realize his secret childhood dream.

However, that did not mean Victor had any complaints or regrets. He felt fulfilled in his work protecting the royal family and serving as head of his house. He did not wish to work with horses so badly that he would sacrifice everything to do so.

But he still took a small pleasure in fantasizing about living a different life—when the day came for him to step away from the military, perhaps he would use his savings to retire to a small farm. The winter season allowed him to imagine the ambience of such a peaceful existence.

As Victor approached the stables, dressed in civilian attire so as not to soil his military uniform, a stable hand greeted him. “Ah, Your Excellency. Back again?”

“As I was yesterday, I am off duty today as well,” said Victor. “Apologies for my intrusion, but may I lend you a hand?”

Although Victor was charged with managing the king’s outings and the security of the royal family most of the year, he was afforded a brief holiday in the winter. Of course, he still wore his sword on his belt in case of an emergency.

During his break, Victor devoted the bulk of the time he spent outside the home to caring for the horses.

“Of course,” said the stableman, laughing. He kept Victor company during his vacations each winter. “It is no trouble at all—I enjoy your visits, in fact. It’s a rare treat to presume upon a viscount for odd jobs.”

Victor laughed as well.

“Well, then, could I trouble you to brush the horses, starting from the ones in the back?” said the stable hand.

“All right, I will see to it,” said Victor.

As the viscount came to help every year, he already knew his way around the stables. He retrieved the horse brush from its usual spot and headed to the rear of the barn.

Stabled at the very back was King Slaine’s favorite horse, Freesia, a docile, clever filly. Victor approached the horse, lightly stroked her nose and neck, and then went to work brushing the hair on her body. Freesia snorted contentedly, relaxed.

The stables were quiet apart from the occasional snort or stamping of hooves. Victor felt at peace there.

Horses really are wonderful creatures, he thought.



Blanca, Life Baroness and archimage of the royal court, spent most of the winter season in her home on the outskirts of the noble district. As her magical abilities relied upon her familiars (Axe the bear and Veronica the hawk) who were quite susceptible to the cold, she could not play much of an active role in the winter.

But this was just as well, as there was little chance in the winter of a battle or situation in which emergency reconnaissance would be required. It was a nice chance to rest.

“Good morning, kids. Have you two been good?” said Blanca, approaching the small building attached to her rented residence.

Although the project had been called an “animal pen” when she’d received royal funding to build it, the structure was spacious enough to fit a massive bear, with ceilings high enough that a hawk would not feel suffocated.

Blanca entered the little house. Upon noticing their master’s arrival, Axe rose from his bedding, and Veronica swooped down from her perch. Blanca patted the bear as the hawk landed on her shoulder.

Veronica's breakfast was a live mouse. For Axe, Blanca set out a portion of acorns that had been gathered in the fall as well as a small serving of boiled chicken. As her bear familiar's physiology was much the same as that of an ordinary wild bear, he did not need much to eat in the winter. He spent most of the day asleep.

Blanca watched as the animals happily ate their food. It was nice and warm inside, thanks to the magical device installed to heat it. As it didn't cost that many magic stones to power the device, the royal family provided Blanca a special allowance in consideration for her familiars' needs.

Suddenly, she heard a voice call out to her. "Oh, so this is where you've gone off to."

Blanca turned to find her partner standing behind her. "Oh, you're awake, Daria," she said.

"I only got up just a minute ago. Ahhh, it's always so nice and toasty in here," Daria said as she stepped over the threshold. She went over to give the bear and the hawk a pat each—the animals turned their heads for a moment in greeting, then returned to eating their breakfast.

Axe and Veronica both recognized Daria as Blanca's companion—or as they might put it, a fellow "pack mate."

"Good morning, Blanca," said Daria.

"Good morning, Daria," replied Blanca, stepping forward to exchange a kiss with her partner.

Although by law only a man and a woman could marry each other in Hasenvalia, Blanca and Daria considered themselves to be spouses.

The pair had met about four years ago. Blanca considered herself very fortunate to have found an attractive woman who was interested in other women *and* had no qualms with Axe's or Veronica's place in their lives.

They had begun seeing each other not long after first meeting and had been living together for about three years now. Blanca felt very happy with this little family she'd built together with her wife and two animal children.

Magic was not a heritable gift, and so her title of baroness was not one she could leave to her descendants. With nothing to pass on, Blanca saw no need to adopt a human child.

“We should have breakfast as well,” said Daria. “Shall we have the leftover bread and soup from last night?”

“Ahh, that sounds good. Maybe some eggs as well.”

Daria laughed. “Sure.”

Blanca curled an arm around her partner’s shoulders, and the pair returned to the main residence together.

Behind, Axe finished up his meal, yawned, and returned to his bedding, while Veronica stretched her wings and swooped up to her perch.



The winter days passed peacefully by, and before long, the day of the traditional Eynthian new year’s celebration was upon the people of Hasenvalia once more.

Though it was called a “celebration,” it was not nearly so lively an event as the autumn nativity festival—the biggest of the year, celebrating the birth of the Eynthian prophet—or the harvest festival observed in the rural areas of the kingdom during the summer.

At noon on a day in mid-January, each church across the kingdom would hold a service, and the king would make a speech in the square of the capital to petition God for a blessed new year. In the evening, each family would pray over dinner. This was a strongly rooted religious tradition.

Following this custom, Slaine had attended the service at the Grand Cathedral and had spoken amidst his people in the city square. Now, it was evening—time for the king to take dinner in the prayer room of the palace and offer thanks to God.

As Slaine donned his religious vestments and prepared to enter the prayer room, the chancellor of the kingdom pressed him with words of advice. “My lord, please be mindful of the sleeves and hem of your ceremonial garments.

Leave the door unlocked and ajar, and should anything happen, be sure to call out in a loud voice so that a royal guardsman or servant will be alerted at once,” said Sergey.

Slaine answered with a strained laugh. “I know, I know, I’ll be very careful. Don’t worry. I won’t let anything like what happened last year come to pass again.”

One year ago, the entire royal family of the Kingdom of Hasenvalia had died in a fire in the very prayer room Slaine was about to enter. Sergey’s concern was not unfounded.

But this year would be different. Slaine was not of particularly devout faith, so he had decorated the room with much less straw than the late king Frederick had the previous year. He had also arranged for the room to be partially illuminated by magical light and had placed the candles up high enough that there would be no risk of a sleeve or hem catching their flames.

Most importantly, Slaine had taken care to add another door connecting the prayer chambers to the adjacent room as an emergency exit. He had expanded the windows as well, allowing for more thorough ventilation.

With all of these safety measures, the chance of anything going awry had been substantially reduced. Not all of these alterations were in keeping with a strict doctrinal interpretation of the tradition, but safety was paramount.

“You may return to your manse and have dinner with your own family,” said Slaine. “When we’ve finished up safely, I’ll send a messenger to report to your residence.”

But Sergey seemed stubbornly unwilling to leave until he’d ascertained for himself that Slaine was safe. “No,” he said. “I will stay at the palace until you’ve finished your prayer supper, my lord. My brother and his family will understand why I’ve kept them waiting.”

Slaine’s weary smile grew even wearier. “All right. Then I’ll see you soon.”

“Yes, my lord. Please take care.”

Slaine bid the chancellor farewell for now and stepped into the prayer room. Monica followed him inside.

While it was the custom for the king to take his prayer dinner with his family, Slaine did not have one. So rather than eat alone, Monica joined him as an attendant—partly to have someone who could help him call for help in the event of an emergency and partly so that Slaine would not be lonely.

Slaine took a look about the room. The straw bundles decorating the walls were placed a healthy distance from the doors and spaced far apart from one another. There were only a few candles arranged on the table—and each was set upon a tall candlestick, on top of a wide plate to catch the wax beneath.

“The chance of anything catching fire in here really is next to nothing,” said Slaine.

“You are right, Slaine,” said Monica. “But even should the improbable come to pass, I will save you.”

Monica and Slaine sat at the table together as they conversed, dinner set out before them. The menu was a symbol of honorable austerity: black bread, pickled cabbage, beans, salt soup, and white wine.

“All right, then, Monica.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Sitting side by side at the table, Slaine and Monica clasped their fingers together and began to pray.

“God is our father and our mother,” Slaine began. “And as children of God, we thank Him for His grace and beg for His love and blessings in the new year.”

Monica recited the same verses, and then the couple began to eat.

Although it was called a prayer dinner, so long as one did not yell or otherwise disturb the air of religious reverence, conversation was not explicitly forbidden.

“It feels rather strange,” Slaine muttered as he chewed his way through his bread. “This is where my father and his family ate their meal last year.”

Slaine hadn’t meant his comment to sound sad, but when Monica’s brows knit in concern, he laughed and hurried to clarify. “Ah, it’s all right. I was just thinking aloud. I’ve come to terms with my feelings about my mother and father. It’s been almost an entire year already.”

Slaine believed that his parents, who had both died on the same day, were watching over him together from God's side. What reason had he to feel sad?

"I see," Monica replied, laying a gentle hand over his on the table. "Slaine, know that I will always be at your side."

Slaine smiled. "Thank you," he said. "You hold my heart together, Monica. I love you."

"And you hold mine together as well," Monica replied, not with her usual calm smile but with the earnest grin of an innocent young girl. "I adore you with all my heart. I love you."

This is what it means to be happy, Slaine thought.

The past year had been a turbulent one, for both Slaine and the kingdom itself. They had suffered, fought, and weathered great hardship.

But sure enough, they had overcome all of those obstacles, and Slaine was certainly happy now. Had he served his kingdom well enough to deserve such joy?

"I wonder if my mother and father would say I've been a good son, could they see me now," he said. His voice sounded terribly childish, even to his own ears.

"Of course," Monica said. "I am sure your mother and the late king Frederick both would be very proud of you, Slaine."

He smiled softly at her words. "Do you think so? That's good," he said, tearing off another piece of bread.

Of course, in the end, there was no fire. The festivities of the new year drew to a close without incident.

Chapter 2: The Coup

December and January were the coldest months in the western kingdoms. By February, the air had already begun to show signs of warming. Snowfall tapered off, and little by little, travel between cities and villages resumed.

At this time of year, the lords who presided over the fiefdoms throughout Hasenvalia journeyed to the capital to extend their new year's greetings and offer tribute to the royal family.

Although the feudal lords had no codified obligation to the crown other than military service, these tributes served as *de facto* tax payments. There was an expectation that each house, in accordance with its noble standing, would furnish the royal family with goods of appropriate value and quantity.

Tradition established the definition of “appropriate,” and any deviation from this norm would be considered a deliberate slight against the crown.

For example, in the 78th year of the royal calendar, House Akerlof—head of the county guarding the western border of the kingdom—paid a tribute of twenty swords, twenty spears, and a supply of fine wine produced in its territory. Other lords offered weapons, earthenware, cloth, livestock, or luxury goods.

The eastern nobles, who had witnessed Slaine's martial brilliance firsthand in the battle against the empire, presented rather lavish tributes. While the western nobles' offerings were not quite as extravagant, neither were they objectionable. There were no issues of note among the gifts.

Cronheim County, which had sustained heavy losses in the course of the war, was exempt from paying tribute—instead, the crown had pledged significant subsidies to the county's reconstruction efforts.

The new year's greetings proceeded smoothly into the midst of February. The last fief to offer salutation to the crown was the Duchy of Wahlenheit—delivered not by the duke himself but by a messenger.

Slaine sat on the throne, flanked by his aide-de-camp Monica, his advisor Sergey, and Victor, the commander of the royal guard, as the duke's envoy knelt before the crown.

"Your Majesty, His Grace the Duke of Wahlenheit extends his best wishes," said the messenger. "As we enter a new year, His Grace prays that God will bless our kingdom and its royal family with even greater prosperity."

"Lift your gaze," said Slaine.

The messenger did as instructed.

"I offer my thanks to you for your visit," Slaine continued, "and to His Grace the Duke of Wahlenheit for his greetings. It is a shame the duke could not attend in person. Is he still unwell?"

Typically, the head of a noble house was expected to present himself in person to the crown—but if said lord was elderly or ill, it was acceptable to send an heir or vassal in his stead. As the unmarried duke, Julius, was in poor health, he had sent a knight as his envoy.

The duke's messenger, still on one knee, answered with a blank expression. "Lord Wahlenheit's condition has improved. The fever and abdominal pain he began experiencing at the start of this month have subsided, and the doctor believes he should recover well with rest. The duke strongly wished to attend in person, but it would have taken far too long for him to regain strength enough to travel. He had no choice but to send a representative on his behalf."

"I see. I wish Lord Wahlenheit a speedy recovery. I hope that we have a chance to speak face-to-face soon," said Slaine—but, in truth, he was a bit relieved. He expected that Julius felt the same way.

"I will convey your sentiments to the duke, sire," said the knight.

Though Julius and Slaine were distantly related by marriage—Julius was the brother-in-law of the late king Frederick's sister—their direct blood ties were as thin as those of a pair of strangers. Until the previous year, neither of them had been aware of the other's existence. They felt a mutual discomfort with one another, on account of their disparate upbringings.

Far in the future, Slaine and Julius would need to revitalize the bond between

their houses through the marriage of their children. But for now, they maintained a perfunctory, superficial relationship.

Honestly, Slaine had his doubts that the duke was even sick at all, but he dared not push the matter.

“Next, I shall present the tribute of House Wahlenheit,” said the knight.

“Very well, proceed,” Slaine answered.

At the king’s assent, the messenger turned to gesture toward the unarmed retinue of ducal soldiers standing at the ready behind him.

The four soldiers stepped forward, carrying a large box inscribed with the ducal crest. The duke’s envoy opened the lid of the box to reveal jars of dried cooking herbs—a renowned specialty of the duchy’s domain.

The messenger reached to extract a glass jar of herbs from the box—and then the situation suddenly shifted.

“Your Majesty!” shouted Monica.

By the time Slaine heard the sound of her sword being drawn, Monica had already leapt in front to protect him. Victor, too, advanced toward the duke’s messenger, blade at the ready.

The ducal knight thrust one hand into the jar, extracted something from inside, and then threw the glass to the floor. By then, Victor was already upon him.

“Dammit!” the messenger swore.

He attempted to fling whatever it was he had drawn from the glass at Slaine, but Victor was too fast. The commander’s sword moved so swiftly Slaine hardly saw it—he cut down the duke’s envoy nigh instantaneously.

The dagger in the would-be assassin’s hand clattered to the ground, unthrown.

By then, the royal guard had already fallen upon the duke’s men.

Curses rang through the air as the soldiers clashed. The other attackers had drawn daggers from the jars piled in the tribute box as well, attempting to rush

the king—but it was a futile effort. Within seconds, two of the duke’s men were dead.

“Do not kill them!” Victor bellowed.

The royal guardsmen adjusted their tactics accordingly. They disarmed and stunned the remaining two men, seizing them alive—if a bit bloodied.

With that, the sudden battle in the audience chamber ended as quickly as it had begun.

“My lord! Are you hurt?!” exclaimed Monica, turning back to inspect her king’s face, neck, and body for any injury.

Slaine responded, stunned, “I’m all right.”

It wasn’t that he was afraid—as king, he understood that an attempt upon his life could come at any moment. He had not feared death since the day he had resolved to fight against the Great Empire of Galed.

And he had excellent protection, with Monica, Victor, and the royal guard at his side. Thanks to their quick action, the incident had not become a crisis.

However, he was certainly shocked. Although he had not established strong ties with the duke, he had never imagined that the man would attempt to kill him. Even the cunning and steely Chancellor Sergey wore a look of surprise.

“Um,” Slaine mumbled as he looked over the two captured soldiers, who’d had rags stuffed in their mouths so that they could not bite off their own tongues. “What exactly am I meant to do next, in a situation like this?”

Sergey answered, “First, we should move to a new location; discussing how to deal with the duke can come later. And we should summon Lady Estergren and Lord Vogel.”

“Let us move these men to the dungeon for the time being and arrange for their interrogation by a royal court psychomancer,” said Victor. “We should also summon the reserve guard to secure the palace, and dispatch scouts to ascertain whether the duke has taken any further action.”

Slaine listened to his advisors, nodding thoughtfully. “Understood. Let us relocate to the conference room and call in Sieghardt and Elena,” he said. “We

can enlist Blanca to send her hawk to survey the duke's territory for any sign of activity. Victor, you can handle the interrogation and security measures at the palace."

After handing out his orders, Slaine departed for the conference room. Monica, Sergey, and three royal guardsmen surrounded him on all sides, protecting him from attack as he traversed the palace.

Not long after, Sieghardt and Elena joined the urgent discussion in the meeting chambers.

"I never imagined that the duke's emissary would attempt to assassinate His Majesty the King," Sieghardt muttered, his arms folded. "Civility has taken its toll, I see."

In principle, armed individuals were not allowed an audience with the king. All prospective visitors were thoroughly checked for concealed weapons as well.

But when a lord nobleman or his envoy was granted an audience, there was typically no need to rummage through his clothing or closely inspect all of his belongings for weapons—especially in the case of the Duke of Wahlenheit, the lord of a house whose close ties to the royal family went back to the founding of the kingdom.

So, as a matter of course, his emissary had been cleared for an audience with just a perfunctory examination. Although the royal guard had taken a look at the tribute boxes in advance, they had not gone so far as to inspect the contents of the herb jars for concealed weaponry.

This trust was a courtesy to the ducal house and a sign of the royal family's intent to forge closer ties in the future.

And yet they had been betrayed for their goodwill.

"That civility ends today. The ties between Royal House Hasenvalia and the Duchy of Wahlenheit shall be severed henceforth," proclaimed Sergey. "My lord, as chancellor of the kingdom, I take responsibility for this attempt on your life. I had advised you to maintain a relationship with the duke, but I should have taken a position of greater caution in light of the thinning ties of blood

between your houses. No apology is sufficient to ameliorate this lapse of judgment.”

But Slaine shook his head. “No, I do not hold you responsible, Sergey,” he said. “No one could have imagined the duke capable of such an outrageous act. I certainly had not.”

The ducal family of Wahlenheit descended from the brother of the first king of Hasenvalia. In the time of Frederick IV, Slaine’s father, another marriage between the late king’s sister and the late Duke of Wahlenheit had further strengthened the ties between the houses. The previous year’s fire had severed that relationship, but the crown had planned to unite the families once more through a union of their children.

The foremost of the noble families had committed a heinous, unforgivable act. It was not anyone’s fault that no one had predicted such an unforeseeable contingency.

“Let us put aside talks of responsibility and focus on the future,” said Slaine. “First, the duke’s intentions.”

“An attempt on your life can evidence nothing but a desire to usurp the throne,” said Sergey.

Slaine smiled faintly at the chancellor’s grave tone. “Well, of course.” A nobleman of the next highest rank beneath the king attempting to kill the king could have only one purpose—that much was obvious. “However, even had the duke’s envoy successfully taken my life, would that alone have been enough to secure the throne? With our ties of blood as thin as they are, would the other lords and nobles of the land have been eager to follow the Duke of Wahlenheit, had he seized the crown in such a manner?”

The lords and nobles of the kingdom had pledged unwavering loyalty to Slaine during his reign as crown prince—despite his common background and lack of experience—because of his undeniable pedigree as the son of the late king. But he could not imagine that a noble without a direct blood claim could assassinate the rightful king and enjoy the same fealty.

Sergey shook his head. “No, certainly not. And I am sure Lord Wahlenheit is fully aware of that fact.”

Elena spoke up with her perspective as minister of foreign affairs. “Perhaps Lord Wahlenheit intended to undermine Hasenvalia from within *and* without. What if—allow me to speculate—he orchestrated the extinction of the royal bloodline in order to prime the kingdom for invasion and occupation by a foreign state? Could he have entered into a secret pact with Galed to secure his position within the empire as a semiautonomous ruler?”

Sergey’s expression grew increasingly grim as Elena spoke. “That is certainly a possibility,” he said. “The Kingdom of Hasenvalia is united because of His Majesty the King, the undeniable direct descendant of King Frederick IV. But if his life were to be tragically cut short... A repulsive strategy, but a theoretically feasible path to power.”

“It is fortunate that we were able to capture two of the assassins alive,” said Sieghardt. “Our interrogations will soon provide us with the answers we need.”

A knock sounded at the door right as Sieghardt finished speaking.

“Excuse me, Your Majesty,” said Victor.

At Slaine’s assent, Victor entered the conference room to provide his report.

“We have finished our interrogations of the two captured ducal soldiers,” Victor said, joining the circle of ministers to explain his findings. “After employing the service of a royal court psychomancer, the prisoners divulged what they knew with candor. I believe we have procured enough information to establish a grasp of the circumstances.”

“Thank you for your efforts,” said Slaine. “Please sit and explain in detail.”

Victor joined the group of advisors and began to explicate the information he had obtained during the interrogations. Elena’s conjectures had been essentially correct.

Florenz Meichelbeck, the third prince of Galed, had been the mastermind of the previous year’s imperial invasion. For several years prior to the incursion, he had served as the empire’s representative in the western part of the continent, maintaining relations with the smaller states bordering Galed. He had made acquaintances with the royal and noble families of several kingdoms—including Julius, the Duke of Wahlenheit.

After the failed invasion last fall, Florenz had set his sights on Julius. He'd sent a messenger—a bird familiar controlled by an imperial sorcerer—to carry a letter to the duke and had proposed a secret agreement: if the duke could succeed in assassinating King Slaine of Hasenvalia, Julius would be rewarded with administrative control of the region, which would be turned into a dependency following annexation by the empire.

This pact would have allowed Julius to survive, his house protected under the Galed occupation—while the other noble families would be executed to the last. Although his status would be reduced to that of a prefectural governor, he would be allowed to maintain his standard of living as a nobleman and to rule over all the lands of the former kingdom. He would thus be afforded even greater access to wealth than he had now.

Julius had accepted the imperial prince's offer without much thought.

Slaine was aware that he and Julius harbored a mutual dislike, but according to the ducal soldiers, Julius's feelings were quite a bit more intense.

Julius had never before played an active role in court, so little had been known regarding the duke's personal philosophy—but apparently he held strong convictions about blood purity. "A noble bloodline makes a noble man, and a lowly bloodline makes a lowly man," the duke would opine. All aristocrats valued lineage to varying extents, but few held positions as extreme as his.

In Julius's view, it was impossible that Slaine—half a commoner—could have the ability to rule a kingdom. His earlier victory against the empire had to have been a fluke.

And should Slaine continue to sit on the throne with his inferior blood, there was no way that the Kingdom of Hasenvalia could resist the empire forever. And if such ruin were to come to pass, then the Duchy of Wahlenheit would not escape destruction either.

So the duke had concluded that his best choice was to take advantage of the empire's offer and eliminate Slaine. The ducal knights, soldiers, and civil officials had followed their lord's orders obediently.

House Wahlenheit's very existence depended on its status. Consequently, the ducal family's ideology had deeply influenced its vassals' worldviews as well;

they were loyal to the duchy to the end. Either they had agreed with the duke's plan to protect the ducal family's status under imperial rule, or they had stopped thinking entirely in favor of blindly following their lord's command.

The assassins were not sacrificial pawns—they had intended to kidnap Slaine, escape from the royal domain using him as a human shield, and, once safely returned to the duchy, execute him.

When Victor finished his explanation, Sieghardt clenched his fists in a rare display of anger. "Preposterous," he spat.

Sergey remained silent, but fury emanated from every line of his body. Elena and Monica radiated cold anger in their expressions.

Julius was a member of the Hasenvalian nobility himself. His betrayal had struck a deep, personal nerve that the empire's invasion had not.

Slaine, however, felt surprisingly little anger—if anything, he felt remorse. Had he not taken such pains to avoid Julius—had he spoken to the man more earnestly—perhaps Slaine would have realized that the duke harbored such an ideology, and then the king would have been better placed to handle this contingency.

Cooler than his assembled advisors, Slaine pressed the conversation forward. "If nothing else, we've acquired a decent grasp of the duke's intentions. So, how shall we respond?"

Sergey took a moment to collect his thoughts. "From the duke's perspective, this was the sole opportunity for an assassination. Now that he has failed, he has no recourse. I cannot imagine the empire will accept his defection, given that he's failed to accomplish the killing."

"He may flee the kingdom, or he may make a desperate attempt to do battle against us. Those are the two immediately apparent options," said Victor.

"Perhaps we can prevent his escape by monitoring the ducal capital," said Elena. "The duke will probably not attempt to flee on his own, as it will be hard to miss a whole party of fugitives slinking away from the seat of power."

"For now, let us dispatch a number of royal army knights to spy out the duchy," suggested Sieghardt. A plan was quickly taking shape. "In order to

escape detection, we may disguise the knights as commoners and command them to investigate the ducal capital.”

Sergey spoke up with an additional strategy. “There still remains time until the duke learns that his assassination attempt has failed. Let us use this period to establish a surveillance system to ensure that the duke does not raise an army or flee the country, and to fortify the castle against further attack,” said the chancellor. “My lord, do you consent to these measures?”

Slaine nodded immediately. “Yes, let us do so. We can wait to see how the duke moves next before we consider further action.”

Shortly thereafter, Blanca confirmed that her hawk had not seen evidence that the duke had made any more moves, such as raising an army.

Later that day, the crown dispatched several royal army knights, disguised as civilians, into the duchy.



The Duchy of Wahlenheit was located to the northwest of the royal domain, just south of the Eldecio Mountain Range. In the ducal residence at Kurnov, the regional capital, Julius of Wahlenheit received a briefing regarding his plot to assassinate the king.

A ducal army soldier who had infiltrated Uzelheim in the guise of a commoner reported his findings to the duke. “I remained in the royal capital streets until late in the evening, but the assassins never emerged from the palace with the king. I also observed that, approximately two hours after the strike team entered the palace, royal guardsmen began to rush into the royal residence. Presumably, the crown rallied off-duty personnel to reinforce security. In view of these facts, I believe that the assassination attempt was unsuccessful. I returned with haste to report my findings.”

“It failed? I see,” said Julius, sighing. “Then, the members of the strike team...”

“Some of them may have been captured alive, but they have most likely been killed,” said the soldier.

Julius sighed once more, scratching his head. “Of course. Ah, what a pity.”

As a noble aristocrat born into a superior ducal family, it was Julius's duty to guide the inferiors who served him and use them in meaningful ways. He regretted allowing his men to die in vain.

He turned to the civil official by his side. "Given that we failed to assassinate King Slaine, I imagine we can no longer count on the empire's support."

"Indeed," the official confirmed. "According to Wahlenheit's pact with Prince Florenz, the empire will take no action until King Slaine is dead and Hasenvalia has descended into chaos. Until we eliminate the king, we are on our own."

Julius slumped against the back of his chair and looked toward the ceiling. "A rather bothersome predicament."

The crown did not thoroughly screen the duchy's tributes, making this the only scheme that had had a decent chance of success. And since it had failed, and there was no longer any chance the duchy would see aid from the empire, Julius's only choices were to flee into exile or to attempt to take Slaine's head by force.

But it would be shameful for the noble Duke of Wahlenheit to turn tail and run away from a young of lowborn common blood—a dishonor upon his brother and ancestors who had bequeathed him his title. Julius had no way of knowing what life in exile would be like.

"Hmph. Well, I suppose there's no alternative—it'll be war," Julius said in a relaxed tone of voice.

Slaine was clearly an inferior man. Led by such a foolish king, even the royal army was a trivial obstacle. The fact that they had bested the empire was just a miraculous stroke of luck.

Perhaps the duchy would be outnumbered, but Julius was confident that they would prevail.

"Henrik, if you were to commence gathering men from within the duchy, how large an army could you build?" he asked.

Henrik was a knight and the commanding officer of the ducal army. He was so loyal that he would have died for the duke's family without hesitation—he served the most noble aristocratic family in the kingdom with great pride. He,

too, viewed the thought of a commoner rising above a duke to the throne as terribly unnatural, though not so stridently as Julius.

“The population of the duchy is approximately two thousand, and half of that men,” said the knight, calculating the extreme limits of the force they could gather without causing the total collapse of the duchy. “And should we exclude the young, the old, and the infirm... I doubt we could scrape together a force much larger than four hundred men. Perhaps if we hired some mercenaries, it would bolster the numbers a tad.”

“Hmm, I see. Passable numbers. With that many, will it be possible to win in battle against the royal family?” Julius wondered, not conflicted by the prospect of mobilizing such a recklessly large proportion of the populace.

“Yes. A duke of noble blood cannot be defeated by a lowly common king,” Henrik proclaimed. “We will seize victory and take his head.”

Julius laughed. “Hopeful, are you? Well, then, get to work gathering the troops,” he said. “Ahhh, yes. I’ll begin preparations to boost the morale of the conscripts.”



The royal palace remained on high alert, but no further attacks came.

Several days later, reports arrived from the spies who had infiltrated the Duchy of Wahlenheit. Veronica the hawk received a letter from the disguised knights and returned to the capital, spiriting word far faster than a human could have carried it.

According to the letter, Julius had resolved to fight the royal family head-on in battle and was in the process of calling up conscripts from throughout his territory. Furthermore, in order to boost morale, he had begun to spread a false rumor that the new King of Hasenvalia was planning to annex the duchy out of territorial ambition. And once the duchy was annexed, Slaine intended to steal away the citizenry’s property and take the young women of the duchy to do as he pleased. The only way to prevent Slaine’s tyranny was to fight!

Having swallowed this horrendous tall tale, the people of the duchy went along with the duke’s commands—confused by the sudden emergency though

they were.

“They really said ‘do as he pleased’? My goodness,” Slaine sighed at Blanca’s report, in the midst of another meeting with his chief ministers.

The vassals’ reactions were varied. Sergey looked grim and thoughtful, while Sieghardt bristled with anger toward Julius. Victor and Elena were not so dramatic as Sieghardt, but their displeasure with the duke was plain.

When Slaine looked Monica’s way, she was still wearing her usual smile—but she took Slaine’s hand in hers beneath the desk. This was the most encouragement she could offer to him in the moment.

“If the Duke of Wahlenheit wishes to fight, then there is no other path,” Slaine said. “Sieghardt.”

“Yes, sir!” Sieghardt responded, at once stifling his rage to assume the posture of an attentive soldier.

“What estimates can you make regarding the army the duke might field, were we to go to battle?”

Sieghardt put his hand to his chin and gave the question a moment of consideration. “Under normal circumstances, the duchy would be able to mobilize at most two hundred men. However, the Duke of Wahlenheit has his back to the wall—let’s assume he shall find a way to field twice that number,” said the general. “Winning the battle is not the issue—our problem is that our opponent is not a foreign army but the people of our very own kingdom.”

Strictly speaking, the subjects of a fiefdom belonged to the aristocratic family that ruled their land, but they were citizens of Hasenvalia as well. The soldiers that Julius would mobilize into battle were the very same people that Slaine was sworn to protect.

It was critical to avoid pitting fellow countrymen against one another. Such a tragedy would surely leave an indelible mark on all the kingdom’s subjects—and a stain upon the royal family. Slaine could not sanction the deaths of his own subjects.

Sergey spoke up next with a caveat. “However, my lord, about fifty years ago, when I was still a young man, there were occasional conflicts between the

noble lords of the kingdom. When the interests of rulers clash, it is inevitable that strife will arrive and that people will be mobilized in the service of these struggles. I am afraid that it will not be possible to completely avoid casualties in the course of a war against the duke.”

As the chancellor of the kingdom, it was Sergey’s duty to offer his pragmatic opinion—however much Slaine might have wished to avoid civil war.

“Of course I understand that,” said Slaine. “It may be impossible to contain the situation without causing any deaths at all, but we should nevertheless try our hardest to limit the casualties as much as we can. I’ll give it some thought.”

It was a king’s duty to strive to realize his ideals. Even if he could save only one person from a horrible fate, he needed to try. Slaine had vowed as much to himself after the lessons he’d learned in his battle with the empire.

“For now, let us continue to monitor the duke’s territory and watch for the ducal army’s next move. At the same time, we shall prepare to mobilize our own army,” Slaine continued. “Can we at the very least field a force larger than the duke’s army?”

“That will not be a problem,” Sieghardt answered immediately. “I will begin the preparations straightaway.”

“My lord, I think it will be necessary to take action against the malicious slander that the duke has begun to circulate throughout the kingdom,” said Sergey. “If it begins to spread to neighboring fiefs, it could have a severe impact on your reputation. Let us call upon Lady Estergren to formulate some counterpropaganda.”

Slaine nodded at the chancellor’s advice. “Yes, let’s. Elena, can you see to it?”

Elena smiled calmly. The minister of foreign affairs was tasked not only with diplomacy but also with gathering information at home and abroad—and, when need be, putting that information to use. “Of course. Wahlenheit’s attempts to manipulate the narrative will be no match for our ministry. Worry not.”

“Thank you,” said Slaine. “Now, then: Do you think we’ll have to worry about the empire moving in concert with the duke? Will they attack again?”

“I believe that to be unlikely,” answered Sergey. “Prince Florenz attempted to

use the duke to assassinate you because his frontal attack had failed, and now we've blocked the Leuschner Highway. With the duke's attempt thwarted and our king alive and well, Prince Florenz has nothing to gain by throwing in his lot with the duke again."

Sieghardt added, "According to our regular reports from the eastern border, there is no cause for concern at this time. There are no signs that the empire has begun to amass forces for another attack. And even if they were to swoop in with cavalry once more, now we have a fortress in place to hold off their assault. The empire must be aware of this, so they will not overextend themselves. Prince Florenz has no obligation to clean up the duke's mess."

Even if Julius were to raise an army, it would amount to little more than a last-ditch effort to save his own life—a vain struggle. Given that Julius had next to no chance of succeeding in battle, Prince Florenz would hardly risk his own position further by aiding the duke.

Slaine accepted his advisors' conjecture, relieved for the moment.

"All right. Then let us focus on the battle against the Duke of Wahlenheit," he said. "That will be all for today. Meeting adjourned."



After the meeting, Slaine returned to his office with Monica. The moment she closed the door behind them, he let out a deep sigh and slumped into his chair.

Monica quickly brewed a pot of tea and offered him a cup with a gentle expression. "Here you go, Slaine."

"Thank you," Slaine sighed, taking a sip from the cup with a bitter smile. "Goodness. It certainly hasn't gotten any easier since I became king."

Slaine had been crowned ruler of the land the previous year, but happily-ever-afters were the stuff of fairy tales. His coronation was only the beginning of what would prove to be a long, busy, heavily burdened, and often painful life as a monarch.

He had understood that. But he had truly never expected to find himself at war with his own kin—and so soon in the year.

“My heart aches when I think of how much you suffer, Slaine,” said Monica. Although she restrained her words in the course of her work as his aide, in private she spoke freely. “I will never forgive the Duke of Wahlenheit for causing you such misery.”

Slaine smiled softly. “Indeed, the duke has betrayed the royal family,” he said. “But I feel pity for the people of the duchy who have been forced to take up arms in the name of his lies. That’s what hurts the most.”

Julius had betrayed the royal family of his own volition—and if his advisors and vassals were satisfied with their lord’s choices, then so be it. A king yielded land and rights to noble families knowing he might be betrayed, and nobles who betrayed the king knew they might fail. The history of their relationship was founded on this tension.

Conversely, Slaine himself shouldered responsibility for Julius’s attempt on his life—it was his own fault for failing to keep the duke in line. He intended to deal with the duke’s betrayal accordingly, but Slaine did not harbor a personal grudge against the man for the assassination attempt.

What he found truly unforgivable was the way innocent civilians were being pulled into this fight between royals and nobility. Of course, there were many such disputes recorded in the annals of history, but Slaine was not content to allow innocent blood to be spilled in the country he ruled.

In order to preserve his own life and interests, Julius had schemed to surrender the Kingdom of Hasenvalia itself to the empire, conscripting the citizens of his domain to fight his battles—forcing the king to slaughter his own subjects. For this crime, Slaine would have no mercy.

Slaine let out a sigh and lifted his head. His eyes met Monica’s worried gaze, and he felt overcome by his desire to indulge in her comfort. His heart felt quite tired.

“Monica,” Slaine exhaled in a childish voice, extending his hand out toward her.

Monica answered his plea at once, making her way over to draw him into her arms and hold him tight.

“Ah, Slaine,” she sighed. “If holding you like this provides you any comfort, then I am glad to hold you forever.”

Slaine inhaled her sweet scent, lulled into peaceful bliss by her soft warmth. Just the feeling of resting in her arms, against her chest, calmed the tension throughout his body.

But you cannot simply whine and lament your lot in life, he reminded his tired heart. He needed to devise a strategy to seize victory while minimizing the casualties of war.

And he had already begun to think of a way to do it.



Just as when he had been preparing to face the imperial army last fall, inspiration struck Slaine like lightning once more.

A few days after the attempted coup, he summoned Sieghardt to his office to inquire about the feasibility of his strategy.

After listening to Slaine’s explanation, Sieghardt stroked his beard and muttered, “I see, I see.”

“What do you think?” Slaine asked expectantly. “Could it be effective?”

“I think it may well be. It is certainly a novel strategy, exploiting the enemy’s psychology. However...”

“There are no absolutes in battle?” Slaine supplied.

Sieghardt nodded with a smile. “It is certainly worth a shot,” he said. “If we succeed, the conflict will conclude with minimal bloodshed on either side. But if not, we will have no choice but to engage in battle head-on. Please understand.”

“Of course. Even if my enemy consists of my own people, combat is combat. We cannot invite greater casualties to our side out of hesitance. If necessary, I give you my blessing to exterminate the enemy without mercy,” Slaine said calmly, a small, conflicted smile on his face. “Do you think it naive of me to strive to minimize casualties even among the duke’s people?”

“No, I do not think it naive,” Sieghardt replied straightaway. “I believe that

your words at our recent meeting were quite appropriate and that the late king Frederick would have come to a similar conclusion. My lord, you truly resemble your father more and more with each passing day.”

Slaine muttered, “Sergey once said the same. And I’ve been hearing it from several other vassals and servants as of late.”

“The relationship between parent and child is a curious thing. Even without daily contact, they naturally come to resemble one another,” said Sieghardt, affection in his expression. “Lord Nordenfelt has remarked that I resemble my own father as well, though I have few memories of the man—he was a stern soldier, and we seldom spoke. This strong impression you give to the people around you is the clearest proof that you are truly your father’s son.”

“Indeed,” said Slaine, touching the pendant around his neck—the same one his father had once worn.

Although he had never met the late king, he felt a connection between them nevertheless. Because Slaine had grown up without his father, he was very glad to feel any tie between them at all. But at the same time, it made him feel lonely—he wished he could have had the chance to meet his father, even if only once. Would that he could have spent his life with his mother and father together, united as a proper family.



Over the next week or so, Elena and her ministry carried out propaganda operations to great effect.

The ministry of foreign affairs seeded rumors throughout the commons: The Duke of Wahlenheit was a rebel who had attempted to assassinate the king. He was the scum of the earth, a traitor who had invited the Galed Empire into the kingdom to save his own life. This shocking news circulated broadly and rapidly, not only within the royal domain but in the noble holdings to the east and west as well.

Elena and her ministry also targeted merchants who traveled between the royal domain and the Duchy of Wahlenheit, asking them to spread the rumors—with a bit of a bribe as additional motivation. Thanks to this measure, Julius was unable to unilaterally control the narrative in the ducal territory.

And once the rumors had spread far enough, Tobias, the Count of Akerlof and the leader of the western aristocratic faction, arrived at the palace with a small escort to request an audience with the king.

“Your Majesty,” said the count. Maintaining a greater distance than usual, he knelt respectfully before his king. “I am honored to be granted an audience. I understand my visit is quite sudden.”

Seated on his throne in the audience chamber, Slaine smiled wryly at the count. “Well met, Lord Akerlof. My apologies for the stringent treatment.”

Six royal guardsmen stood at the ready in the center of the chamber, prepared to protect Slaine at a moment’s notice. Victor and Monica were positioned at each of Slaine’s flanks as well, and Sergey kept a close watch upon Tobias for any sudden movement.

Normally, a person as important as the count of a prominent noble family would not necessitate such high alert—but, of course, Slaine had survived an assassination attempt from a ducal messenger not ten days before.

Tobias could not have been flattered by this treatment, but if he was disgruntled, it did not show in his expression or manner. “In light of recent events, I agree this is a necessary measure to ensure the safety of your person, my lord,” said the count. “I am grateful for the opportunity to meet, even in this manner.”

“I appreciate your understanding,” said Slaine. “Please, lift your chin and let me hear what you’ve come to say.”

With the king’s assent, Tobias raised his expressionless face and began to speak. “My lord, I have come today to swear my unwavering loyalty to Your Majesty the King and the royal family of Hasenvalia. House Akerlof shall remain faithful to the crown; we shall fight alongside the royal army to depose the traitorous Duke of Wahlenheit.”

Tobias’s voice carried a heavy weight—his tone, expression, and eyes exuded the spirit and determination of a truly noble man who shouldered the burden of history and the society in which he lived.

As he had brought with him only a small escort and displayed such stolid

resolve, it was hard to believe the man could be lying. Slaine looked toward Sergey, who nodded in return.

Slaine turned back to Tobias and said, “I thank you for your loyalty. The relationship between the royal family and House Akerlof has changed dramatically in the last year, but I am glad that you have come here in person to swear fealty.”

Tobias’s sister, Catalina, had married the late king Frederick IV, serving as queen consort until her death in the fire in the previous year. And with her death, Tobias had lost his position as the king’s brother-in-law and uncle to the future king. Naturally, this had somewhat strained the relationship between the crown and House Akerlof.

“Most humbly, my lord, from the day my sister married into the royal family, I pledged my fate to the crown; I sent my sister off with that commitment,” said Tobias, looking straight at Slaine as he spoke. “And although my direct ties to the royal family were severed upon my sister’s passing, that commitment has not wavered in the slightest.”

Tobias’s words brought a smile to Slaine’s face. “Then as king, I, too, must respond to your commitment,” said Slaine. “Tobias, Count of Akerlof, I accept your participation in this war. And I have need of your aid: lend the strength of Akerlof County to the crown.”

Slaine wished to avoid as many casualties as possible—not only among his own troops, but among the enemy army as well, which comprised his fellow countrymen. Toward that end, he had devised a plan.

Slaine would need to mobilize more troops than Julius could field if he hoped to realize it—and his soldiers would need to be well trained, capable of quickly assuming formations and acting in accordance with the officers’ commands.

Therefore, instead of relying upon conscripts for the main body of the army, Slaine needed to call up an army composed mainly of royal soldiers, royal guardsmen, and elite soldiers from among the territorial armies of the loyal noble domains. Instead of accompanying the territorial armies into battle, Slaine wished to commandeer their forces to serve directly beneath the crown.

Slaine explained as much to Tobias. “I request that you lend your men to the

main body of the royal forces and watch over the decisive battle between myself and the duke. You western nobles did not witness my victory over the empire last year—I will show you my power as king in this war,” he said. “Will you assent?”

Slaine had demonstrated his competency and resourcefulness to the eastern lords and nobles in the war against the empire, but Tobias and the rest of the western aristocrats knew of Slaine’s accomplishments through hearsay alone. Surely some of them imagined the stories of his total victory to be embellished—so Slaine wished to take this opportunity to show them firsthand the value of his wit, inviting the count to watch from the sidelines as he took command.

It was also possible that Prince Florenz had proposed deals of the kind he had offered Julius to other nobles in the kingdom. By taking soldiers from the other lords’ territorial armies and surrounding them with royal soldiers, Slaine would essentially make them hostages. He would be able to measure the value of the lords’ pledged fealty by whether they accepted these conditions.

Tobias seemed to understand the king’s unspoken intentions and answered without a hint of hesitation. “I shall,” said the count. “I entrust to you the entirety of the Akerlof County army, a force of seventy men, and I will stand by your side to witness your victory.”

Beginning with Tobias, the noble lords of the various fiefdoms throughout the west of the kingdom visited one after another to join the war effort.

Slaine requested that these lords pledge their territorial armies to him as well (or, from the barons who lacked a standing army, a handful of children and squires) and invited them as heads of their respective houses to witness the decisive battle from the war camp. Not a single lord displayed any difficulty in accepting Slaine’s demands.

The eastern nobles, who had already shown steadfast loyalty to their king by aiding in the previous year’s war and defending the eastern reaches of the kingdom, did not mobilize troops for the battle—their forces were already occupied manning the border, and so they could not afford to do so.

As a result, the royal army comprised the main royal soldiers, the royal guard,

the soldiers from the various noble domains to the west, and a handful of mercenaries. The entire force numbered just under five hundred men.

This count included only combatants; the army also recruited conscripts from among the royal subjects to handle miscellaneous tasks at the rear of the march and enlisted workers from the Eriksen Trading Company, the Goudsmit Trading Company, and other canteen merchants to arrange the transportation of supplies to the battlefield.

And at the same time that the crown was preparing, the Duchy of Wahlenheit was also beginning to act, carrying out recruitment efforts. The two armies would face off on a plain to the northwest of the royal domain, surrounded by a scattering of forests and hills.



By mid-March of year 78 of the royal calendar, the air had begun to warm with the arrival of spring.

“There is very little irregularity to the terrain,” said Sieghardt, standing alongside Monica and Victor. “Blanca and our scouts have confirmed that there are no soldiers lying in wait for an ambush. It will be a simple battle of strength.”

“So it seems,” muttered Slaine, looking toward Julius and his army. The enemy force comprised about four hundred men, mostly conscripts, dressed in casual clothing with crude weaponry. “But first: the tête-à-tête.”

It was not enough to emerge victorious from battle. With the western nobles watching from the war camp, Slaine could not simply slaughter the duke’s men—these were also subjects of the kingdom he was sworn to protect.

Although Slaine had considered a number of measures to minimize casualties, the most ideal outcome was to avoid a fight entirely. After consulting with his chief advisors, Slaine had decided to at least attempt to settle the matter with Julius through dialogue first.

“Then I shall convey your wishes to Lord Wahlenheit, my lord,” said Sieghardt.

“Please,” Slaine said. “Take care.”

Slaine's opponent was a traitor who planned to overthrow the royal family by taking his king's head—there was a chance that the duke would attempt to kill an unwisely chosen messenger. So Slaine had elected to send Sieghardt, a count and the general of the royal army, to serve as his emissary. Because Julius held his classist beliefs so deeply, he would be honor bound to pay due respect to Sieghardt, a man of noble birth. He would not attempt to slay the general on a whim.

However, Sieghardt did not advance directly to the enemy line. With several elite knights as his escort, he advanced across the plain to a point about halfway between the two armies and stopped.

Then he raised his voice.

"I am Sieghardt, Count of Vogel! I have come to deliver the word of His Majesty the King, Slaine of Hasenvalia! Send forward a man to receive it!"

A soldier advanced in response to the call.

Perhaps because there was little cavalry strength among the royal army, the lone knight rode forward confidently, halting before Sieghardt at a far enough distance that neither could take the other by surprise. After exchanging a few words with the knight, Sieghardt returned to Slaine's side.

"Your Majesty, the Duke of Wahlenheit is willing to parley. He suggested that a meeting be held in the center of the plain between the two armies, with ten guards unarmed with bows or crossbows," said the general.

"I will accept those terms," said Slaine. "Go and tell them."

"Yes, sire," said Sieghardt, turning back to convey his king's assent to the enemy army.

Shortly thereafter, Slaine and Julius met in the center of the battlefield. Each man directed his escort to stand a few paces away, and the two convened with a healthy distance between them. These measures prevented either force from immediately slaughtering the other.

"It's been a while, Lord Wahlenheit," said Slaine. "I believe we've not met in person since my coronation."

“My apologies for the long silence, Your Majesty. I am glad to see that you are faring well,” said the duke, no trace of agitation or mockery in his voice—as if he were greeting Slaine at any ordinary social function. But after a moment of consideration, he added, “I suppose such words are unnatural on my lips, given I attempted to assassinate you not long ago. I beg your pardon.”

“You’re still calling me ‘Your Majesty’ after all this?”

“I cannot claim to be faultlessly honorable, but neither shall I act the barbarian,” said Julius. “Irrespective of my personal feelings about it, you are indeed the sovereign ruler of this kingdom—until such a time comes as I succeed in my efforts to usurp the throne. Then I shall treat you as my subordinate.”

Slaine found himself smirking at the duke’s words.

“I see. Then let us speak,” said Slaine. “First, a question. Lord Wahlenheit, are you willing to recant your treason and surrender to the crown without a fight? I give you my word that we shall be magnanimous.”

Julius answered the king’s straightforward question without any hesitation.

“With all due respect, my lord, that is impossible. Do not misunderstand—I do not attempt to kill you out of personal hatred. Nevertheless, you are half of common blood, and such a person is simply unsuitable to sit on the throne,” he said. “There is no possibility that we can oppose Galed with you as our king. You would lead us down a path of ruin. I have no other choice but to pledge myself to the empire and eliminate you.”

“And yet, last year I met the Great Empire of Galed on the battlefield—seizing total victory. Even with this achievement, you will not recognize my aptitude as king?”

“My lord, you may indeed be proud of your luck in besting the empire once, but such miracles will not pave your way forever. And I know your claims of ‘total victory’ to be exaggerations meant to bolster your own majesty—given your pedigree, it is impossible for events to be as you claim. You may be able to fool the other lords and nobles, but I am not so easily deceived, I’m afraid.”

Hearing Julius espouse his radical ideology so calmly, Slaine couldn’t help but

sigh.

“So you’ve decided that it is not what one has accomplished but the lineage into which he was born that determines his human value,” said Slaine. “And with a commoner’s blood in my veins, I am now and forever a lowly creature, unworthy of the throne. That is your unshakable belief?”

“Humbly, my lord, it is so,” replied the duke. But then he continued, “No, I must proffer one correction—it is not merely my belief. It is a fact. People are born to rule or to be ruled, with clear lines drawn between the superior and inferior. This is the manner in which God created man; it is against His will and divine providence for one with the blood of a dog to hold a leash.”

“I see. There is nothing I can do to make you recognize my capability. However, why is it that you place your trust in that imperial prince? You are as insignificant a man to the empire as am I to you. What is it that makes you believe your property, your family, or even your life will be guaranteed?”

“Certainly, I have had such concerns as well,” said Julius. “However, I have allied myself with the mighty imperial family that rules over the vast Empire of Galed. Unlike you, Prince Florenz is a truly noble man of unsullied blood. Naturally, given a choice between yourself and a man of such unblemished pedigree, it is undoubtedly the third prince who is more worthy of my faith.”

“I see,” repeated Slaine.

Slaine almost found the duke’s unvarnished honesty refreshing—but this negotiation was clearly intractable. He abandoned his hopes of persuading Julius to see reason.

“My lord, I have my own request. Offer your life to me without a battle. If you agree, then no blood need be spilled,” said the duke, bold and direct. “The soldiers and subjects of a realm are the property of their ruler. A king has an obligation to use his subjects’ lives properly. Consider this path to prevent unnecessary death.”

Slaine answered without hesitation. “My apologies, but I cannot agree to such a request.”

“Well, then,” Julius replied, calm.

“Right. Talks have broken down, it seems,” said Slaine.

The two men looked at one another, each a bit sad. Then they turned back to their respective escorts, who led them back to their camps without bloodshed.

Sieghardt, whom Slaine had entrusted with his command in the event that the enemy moved during the duke and king’s parley, approached Slaine upon his return to camp.

“Sieghardt,” said Slaine. “Unfortunately, it seems Lord Wahlenheit has no intent to surrender. Are the men prepared?”

Sieghardt answered in a booming voice. “At Your Majesty’s command, I will direct the troops to assume formation in accordance with your plan.”

“Understood. We shall commence now,” said Slaine.

Sieghardt relayed the king’s orders to the army officers, who in turn directed their own subordinates. The royal army lurched to life in unison.

Although Slaine’s army had only a slight numerical advantage, all of its force was composed of professional soldiers. Their level of training and skill far outstripped the duke’s army, a ragtag militia of commoners with improvised weapons.

Just shy of five hundred men, it assumed formation in a matter of moments, prepared for the decisive battle.

In a corner of the main camp, Slaine turned to address the eleven western nobles who had lent their troops to the battle.

“My lords and ladies of the western nobility,” said Slaine. “Witness the clash between the crown and His Grace Julius, the Duke of Wahlenheit; see with your own eyes how I am prepared to fight for the lives of my people.”

The western nobles lined up unarmed to show their loyalty and obeisance to the crown, escorted—or rather, surveilled—by the royal guard, each guardsman armed with a sword and crossbow.

Tobias answered on their behalf, “Your Majesty, we stand in witness of your performance.”

“Thank you. I will not disappoint your expectations of me as king of this land,”

said Slaine. “Now, let us begin.”

“What in the world is that formation?” Julius muttered as he scanned the ranks of the enemy forces.

Among the royal army, there were about twenty soldiers guarding the king in the main camp, flanked by thirty cavalymen. The remaining four hundred-odd men had arranged themselves in an orderly formation, but the shape of it was terribly strange. The soldiers stood in four long, horizontal lines, about a hundred men to each row. The formation was unusually wide and unusually shallow.

“My lord, the enemy king appears a fool,” proclaimed Commander Henrik. “Perhaps they intend to maneuver their force to encircle our troops and rout us, but their formation is too shallow to accomplish it. If our army launches a united assault, we will pierce through their line and seize conclusive victory!”

“Quite so. Although I am no military man, even I can recognize a blunder. It seems common blood makes for an unsuitable king indeed,” Julius answered with a calm and elegant smile. “Then let us turn, my lords, to the decisive battle against the crown. We shall break the reign of His Foolishness the King and protect what is ours.”

The entire ducal army, with the exception of the ten or so soldiers who remained to guard the duke’s main camp, began to advance at its general’s command.

The duke’s precious few cavalry units were all dispatched to guard the main column, together with the four hundred infantry spearheading the assault. Ducal soldiers, conscripts, and a handful of mercenaries mixed together in the forward march.

The force arranged itself in twenty rows, each twenty men wide. The duke intended to push forward in a single mass, break through the enemy line, and close in upon the king’s position—a simple but effective strategy that did not unduly tax the unseasoned conscripted soldiers that made up the bulk of the army.

In concert with the ducal army’s advance, the royal army began to move as

well—in the same strange, unusually broad horizontal formation.

Seeing that the duke's men had begun to move, Sieghardt advised, "Your Majesty, we should act immediately."

"Indeed," Slaine said. "All troops advance."

Sieghardt echoed Slaine's command in a booming voice, and the army's officers conveyed their general's orders to their own men. The royal army, stretched out in a long line, began its advance.

Every member of the four hundred-strong army was regular military personnel and, as such, performed daily service and training. Their feet moved in tandem as they marched forward, maintaining formation.

The two armies crossed the plain, gradually building momentum as the distance between them closed. But about a third of the way across, the royal army suddenly changed direction.

"Now! All troops halt!" called out one battalion commander.

"Halt! Stop on the spot!" ordered another. The company commanders and captains echoed their orders.

Because of the royal army's thin formation and high level of skill, the four hundred troops came to a stop and stood still without colliding. Almost completely calm, the army rearranged itself, lining up in an orderly fashion once again.

Meanwhile, the duke's army was still advancing at a gallop, soldiers bellowing war cries.

Then one of the royal army's battalion commanders shouted, "Retreat!"

The royal army began to fall back, steadily retreating step by step without breaking ranks.

The ducal army was riding hard, intent upon clashing with enemy forces in the middle of the plain. But with the royal army's sudden retreat, they were forced to charge an unexpectedly long distance.

Since most of the duke's conscripts were poorly trained, they could not

suddenly halt their advance, nor could they change their strategy on a dime. Knowing that their only hope of victory was to break through the enemy line, the soldiers at the vanguard shouted to the conscripts, commanding them to continue their march. In response, the conscripts charged forward frantically.

But war was not won by will alone. The untrained soldiers flagged under the weight of their heavy weapons, fatigued by the sprint.

If they had known that the forward march would take so long, they would not have charged at full speed from the outset—but it was already too late for such what-ifs.

When the ducal army finally clashed with the front of the royal army, the heavily armed mercenaries were out of breath, and the duke's conscripts—who made up the bulk of the army—were especially exhausted from their sprint. They had been reduced to nothing more than a tired, plodding gaggle, no longer capable of breaching the enemy line by force.

Faced with such a pitiful enemy, the royal army moved on to their next course of action.

“Sorcerers, fire!” ordered a royal battalion commander.

“Make the enemy falter!” bellowed the other.

Mingled among the soldiers in the front lines, the fire sorcerers—a mixed force of royal court mages and sorcerers from among the western nobility—unleashed their magics.

But they did not intend to slay the enemy. What erupted from their hands was a brilliant display of roaring and sparking flames, meant to frighten the ducal soldiers.

Wind sorcerers cast sweeping gales toward the enemy line as well, upsetting their footing.

“That’s right! Go on, howl and scare them!” barked Blanca from the center of the formation. She gave her bear Axe a command with a smack to his flank.

“But don’t kill a living soul! Now, go!”

The bear burst into a gallop, shooting forward like a bolt from a crossbow.

The allied soldiers moved to the right and left to make way. He thundered into the midst of the enemy, reared up on his hind legs, and roared, “Grrrrrooooooaaaaaggghhhh!!!”



The bear's cry was so ferocious that even some of the soldiers on the royal side recoiled in fear. The enemy soldiers faced head-on with the terrible beast, however, were frozen in place—some even fainted and collapsed on the spot.

While the center of the formation was occupied with halting the enemy's advance, the left and right flanks sprang into action.

The soldiers positioned on either side of the column folded in and advanced under the command of their respective officers. "Hold the line and march! Advance and surround the enemy!"

The horizontal line took advantage of its length to completely encircle the duke's army. And when the enemy was completely trapped, the officers began to shout:

"Surrender!"

"Drop your weapons and kneel!"

"Surrender now and you will not be punished! His Majesty the King will not punish you!"

"Now you are without sin—but if you do not lay down your arms, you will be killed where you stand! There is no path to victory!"

Exhausted from being forced to run a long distance, robbed of the momentum for an assault, the enemy soldiers had already been at the verge of losing all their will to fight—and then they found themselves surrounded by royal soldiers in all directions, amidst dancing flames and gales of roaring wind, facing a ferocious bellowing beast. "Surrender, surrender, surrender" echoed all around them.

The conscripted soldiers with makeshift weapons were completely neutralized.

However much Julius might have preached about the threat of the royal family when he was recruiting, the common soldiers had always harbored doubts in their hearts about facing the royal army to kill the king. What was more, Elena and her officials had already thoroughly circulated rumors that any ducal soldiers who surrendered would not be charged with any crime—the

conscripts had no reason *not* to surrender.

And so the duke's soldiers forfeited: they threw down their weapons and knelt on the spot, or threw up their hands, or pleaded for their lives. Not even the few mercenaries among the duke's ranks were willing to fight on under such hopeless conditions. Choosing to protect their own lives, they capitulated as well.

A small number of the territorial soldiers fought on out of loyalty to the ducal family, but few as they were—barely ten in all—their efforts were of little use. Each enemy combatant who took up futile resistance was surrounded by several heavily armored royal soldiers and beaten into submission.

“Surrender! Stay where you are—not one more step!”

Thus the king's army neutralized the four hundred troops under the duke's command without a single death.



“My lord, I think it is about time,” Sieghardt said from his king's side.

Slaine was watching from the main camp of the army as his forces summarily neutralized the enemy soldiers. “Understood,” he answered. “Sieghardt, I'll leave the rest to you.”

“Please do,” said Sieghardt. “I will bring the enemy general before you, my lord.”

The general rode off toward a section of the main camp, where about thirty cavalymen stood at the ready.

This cavalry unit had served as a reserve force in the event that the encirclement of the enemy army had failed, but there was no longer any cause to worry about an assault upon the main camp. General Sieghardt had decided to dispatch this unit to capture the duke and bring the battle to its conclusion.

“Men!” he bellowed. “The enemy's camp is vulnerable! Take the traitor alive and drag him before His Majesty the King!”

The thirty mounted soldiers saluted in unison. Then, with Sieghardt at the forefront, they charged out across the plain at blinding speed—a terribly

destructive force.

The duke's army moved to respond. Three cavalrymen and six infantrymen began to flee with their general, the duke; only one horseman met Sieghardt's assault head-on, perhaps in a desperate, suicidal attempt to stall the royal army's approach.

That mounted soldier was none other than Henrik, the commander of the ducal army, who had also served as messenger in the parley ahead of the battle.

"General Sieghardt, Count of Vogel! I challenge you to a duel!" shouted the knight.

Sieghardt grunted in response, "I accept your challenge!"

The general broke with the mounted unit, advancing toward the enemy. The two combatants approached each other with their spears at the ready, riding hard—and as they passed one another, each struck with his weapon.

The match was over in an instant.

Was it a difference in training? A gap in experience? A disparity in martial talent? Was it simply the will of God, or all of these factors combined? Whatever the cause, Sieghardt dodged Henrik's spear as the tip of his own struck home.

Gored in the neck, Henrik fell from his horse. He lay motionless on the ground, gushing blood.

The enemy was no slouch himself, Sieghardt thought. Without slowing his charge, Sieghardt checked himself for damage—Henrik's spear had grazed Sieghardt's armor, leaving a gash in the metal—then switched his attention to the duke. He dashed toward the retreating enemy general with the royal cavalry unit in tow.

Julius and his escort hadn't made it far—due to the duke's lack of training in horseback riding, he risked slipping from his saddle if he rode at a full speed gallop.

"Spread out horizontally!" commanded Sieghardt, setting his sights upon

Julius. “Take the enemy general alive and slay the rest!”

The cavalrymen roared.

For some reason, Julius looked back and stopped in his tracks. He said something to his guards, and the nine men—puzzled though they were by the command—threw down their weapons.

Surprised by the sudden development, Sieghardt adjusted his order accordingly. “Surround them! Do not kill them!”

And so the thirty cavalrymen at his command rushed in to encircle the enemy general and his protectors.

Still calm and composed even in this disadvantaged situation, Julius turned to Sieghardt. “This is the end of the line—I surrender. I will go quietly,” he said. “Take me to your leader—His Majesty the King.”

A bit of an anticlimactic conclusion, Sieghardt thought. “Yes, sir,” he said, nevertheless—and then apprehended the duke with his own hands.



“Well, then, my lords and ladies—what did you think of my strategy?”

After watching from a distance as Sieghardt captured Julius and put a definitive end to the conflict, Slaine had turned to address the western nobles.

Tobias answered on behalf of the assembled lords with a look of genuine surprise on his face. “It was brilliant, my lord. You said that you would not demand unnecessary sacrifices of your people—but I had truly not expected that you would uphold that pledge so scrupulously. With all due respect, you have exceeded our every expectation to a degree we could not have imagined.”

“Thank you,” Slaine replied with a calm and composed smile. “As your king, I am glad to hear I have not disappointed you.”

First, Elena and her foreign affairs officials had engaged in a propaganda campaign, seeding in the minds of the duke’s men the possibility of surrender.

And in the decisive battle that had ensued, the main force of the royal army had halted in the midst of its advance, then fallen back in order to fatigue the enemy. This had blunted the momentum of the ducal army’s assault, allowing

the royal forces to encircle and further intimidate the enemy combatants.

It was a simple plan, but it had been no easy matter to coordinate hundreds of soldiers and get them to quickly stop and retreat without breaking ranks. This was not a maneuver that could be executed by conscripts. In order to ensure proper implementation of this measure, the royal army had dispatched only trained soldiers—knowing this would limit its manpower.

That had been the correct decision. The royal army had moved brilliantly in putting the plan into practice. And thanks to the judicious propaganda campaign, most of the enemy soldiers had surrendered without hesitation.

And no small contribution to their success was the simple fact that Sieghardt and his forces were stronger and more skilled at riding than their adversaries. Julius had given up his escape more easily than expected; Sieghardt had captured the enemy general without difficulty.

The sole death in the conflict was the single enemy knight felled by Sieghardt—a truly unusual outcome in a clash between nearly a thousand troops.

However, not even Slaine had anticipated the results that they had achieved; he would have considered their mission a success had they kept the death toll between both armies below thirty men. That the entire battle had produced but a single casualty—an enemy soldier who had thrown himself upon the sword of his own volition—was an incredibly fortunate outcome indeed.

But Slaine did not rejoice in that fortune. He faced the assembled western nobles as if he had planned everything from the beginning—that it had all been the result of his careful, skillful maneuvering.

“Well, then,” he said, “all that remains is to bring the duke to justice. If you wish, you may all accompany me back to Uzelheim—and stand witness to my judgment.”



The royal forces transported the defeated Julius, his captured vassals, and a number of civil servants arrested in the ducal capital of Kurnov directly to Uzelheim.

The rest—the duke’s conscripted soldiers and mercenaries—were released

without being charged.

On top of the chaos induced by the duke's forced conscription, the duchy had lost its lord, army, and officials, so the crown dispatched two companies of men, sixty in total, as a temporary measure to maintain public order in the region.

Slaine released the regional soldiers that the western nobles had pledged to the crown as well. Except for their own personal guards, the nobles dispatched their troops back to their respective territories and accompanied their king on his return to the royal capital.

After the full day's journey back to Uzelheim, Slaine held a small banquet with the nobles to celebrate their victory that night. Then, after another day to rest, Slaine visited the dungeons beneath the palace, accompanied by Victor and Monica.

"Good morning, Julius, Duke of Wahlenheit," said Slaine.

As Slaine came to stand before the duke's cell, Julius clambered up from his shabby bed and answered with a grunt. "The sun's already risen, has it?" he said. Although he must have recognized his hopeless position, he was as calm and composed as ever. "It's difficult to know day from night underground. Good morning, Your Majesty."

At a look from Slaine, Victor turned to the two royal guardsmen posted to the prison and commanded, "Restrain him."

The soldiers unlocked the cell, entered, and began to bind the duke's hands and feet with rope. Julius offered up no resistance at all.

"Thank you," said Slaine, nodding to the guardsmen. "You are dismissed."

The two guardsmen took leave of the dungeon at their king's command. Once Slaine, Victor, and Monica were alone with the duke, Slaine spoke up.

"Lord Wahlenheit," he said. "I have questions for you."

"I am defeated," the duke answered. "Ask of me what you will."

As if Julius had not incited a rebellion, and as if Slaine were not the king against which he had rebelled, the two began to calmly converse.

“I’ll begin with a simple question from curiosity,” said Slaine. “Why did you surrender so easily? You still had men—you could have ordered them to stall for time.”

Slaine had expected a more ignominious defeat of the duke, and it was odd that the prisoner remained so poised and relaxed in captivity, even knowing that he had been condemned to death.

Julius answered plainly, “It is because I am a poor rider and slow to retreat.”

Slaine raised an eyebrow. “Meaning?”

“Had my riding skills been better, and could I have pushed my horse to ride at full speed, I would not have surrendered so quickly,” said the duke. “Indeed, I could have ordered my men to dash themselves against you to buy myself time, but to my shame, I am not skilled in the saddle. I looked to my rear in the midst of my escape and thought, ‘Oh, there is no hope left for me.’”

Julius smiled as he spoke, almost sheepishly, as if he were relating an amusing anecdote about a minor blunder. “Commanding my guard to fall on your swords would have made no difference. A waste. I decided instead to submit to capture with grace, as would befit a man of noble birth.”

“So, in other words, you sacrificed yourself to protect your protectors?” Slaine said.

Julius quirked the corner of his mouth at the question. “I suppose you expect that I look down upon my subjects and vassals as insects, my lord,” he said. “But that is not so. A man of noble birth such as myself has the right to make use of inferior persons as he pleases, but at the same time, he shoulders an obligation to make use of such persons in a proper fashion.”

The duke expressed his thoughts with pride. “Most important is my blood—I must protect my body and my ducal house. Should the sacrifice of my subjects serve those ends, then I would be rid of them without hesitation; however, my pride as a nobleman cannot permit sacrifice in vain. So, I surrendered. Sir Henrik threw himself into battle against you of his own volition, without my command. Perhaps he was satisfied with such an end, but I view it as a complete and utter waste of life.”

The duke spoke of Henrik as one might speak of the unexpected death of livestock, but there was a touch of sympathy to his words.

Slaine was surprised. He responded with a slight smile. “I see. I understand your thinking, more or less.”

The king had suspected Julius of forging a secret pact with Florenz in order to spare his life, but it seemed that this had been a misunderstanding.

As the last direct heir of the Duchy of Wahlenheit, the duke’s top priority was his house and lineage. He had believed that joining together with the empire was the only way to fulfill that duty.

That was why he was willing to fight against the royal family at the expense of his subjects. However, when he realized there was no longer any hope for his plan, he had reevaluated his objectives. He had surrendered gracefully in order to protect the last thing that remained to his name—his pride as the head of his duchy.

Julius had steeped himself in an extreme ideology, but he held on to his pride as a nobleman. Slaine couldn’t agree with this way of thinking, but he felt like he understood the man well enough.

“Let me ask one more thing, not as your king but as your kin,” said Slaine. “Julius, my father was your brother-in-law. I carry the royal line, as you carry your ducal line. Although our ties of blood are thin, and our origins and upbringings put us at odds, we are still relatives.”

As Slaine addressed Julius in his capacity as an ordinary man, Julius answered in turn. “That is true, Slaine.”

“Had I not avoided you from the start and instead made the effort to interact and compromise with you, would the outcome have been different?” Slaine asked. “Could I have earned your trust and convinced you to walk alongside the royal family? Was there any chance we could have avoided war?”

Julius took a moment to think, then shook his head with a sigh. “I am afraid not,” he replied. “No matter what anyone may have said to me, I would never have wavered in my convictions. Even now they have not changed. You may believe that you have triumphed and restored peace to the land, but from my

perspective, your victory is the greatest tragedy to ever befall the Kingdom of Hasenvalia. A man with the blood of a commoner in his veins cannot protect a country as its king; while you and the nobles who follow you so foolishly have yet to see it, you have set our nation upon the path to perdition.”

Hearing this answer, Slaine also sighed. He had expected it, but he was disappointed nevertheless.

He would have preferred to regret his own mistakes rather than rue an unavoidable fate.

“I shudder to think myself kin to a man of such muddied blood, even if our relation is merely one of marriage. However,” Julius began, “as your relative, I will offer you advice only once—do not think this will end with my death, Slaine.”

When Slaine tilted his head quizzically, Julius smiled.

“Listen: the world, especially the realm of politics, is a chaotic place full of conflict and incompatibility. I often probed my peers in conversation for any sign that they shared my views—but to my surprise, I never found such a kindred spirit. Neither among the other noble families nor in my own; even my brother, the late duke, did not agree with me entirely. Though he had his pride as a titled aristocrat, he was yet naive, in my view.”

Julius laughed and shook his head with a sigh. “It was not merely a matter of my environment. Each of the nobles I observed held different views, different values; even as fellow members of the same nation’s aristocracy, they clashed among themselves. What would have become of them had they hailed from different nations? I wonder.”

Julius lifted his chin, fixing his gaze upon Slaine.

“Far longer than you have, I walked among these aristocratic and political circles. Even before I inherited my title, I experienced my share of hardships. And as king, you will be tasked with conducting diplomacy—your toil will far exceed mine. You will meet others like me, with views that are fundamentally incompatible with yours. You will not be able to persuade all of them to see the world as you do, so prepare yourself,” said Julius. “With your inferior blood, I have full confidence that you will swiftly succumb to your incompetence and

lead our kingdom to ruin.”

Slaine responded to Julius’s wry, daring smile with one of his own.

“I’ll take your advice into consideration,” said Slaine. “But I will disappoint your expectations, I’m afraid—I mean to defend this kingdom for the rest of my days.”

“I shall watch over you from God’s side, for however long it takes to witness your undoing as you collapse, weeping, beneath the weight of your burden,” said Julius. Then, he suddenly shifted his tone of voice, as if he were speaking of a stranger’s affairs. “At any rate, my lord, when will my execution take place?”

“Later today, I will issue a proclamation, and next week I will hold a public execution in the central square of the capital,” said Slaine. “Any last words?”

Before the day of Julius’s execution, Slaine would need to complete an array of complicated tasks, such as making preparations for the seizure of the ducal domain and distributing rewards among the western nobles who had lent the crown their troops. This was the last chance Slaine would have to speak to Julius in such a leisurely manner.

Julius hummed and said, “I would like to make one final request regarding the treatment of the knights, soldiers, and civil servants of my domain.”

“All right. I will hear your request,” Slaine said, though making no promises that his wishes would be granted.

“Thank you,” said the duke. “Now, then, it was I who decided upon rebellion, and it was I who issued the orders to carry it out. Whatever my subjects thought of my decision, I gave them no choice to defy me. Therefore, I ask that you grant my people clemency. If you cannot acquit them, then at least spare them from death.”

“You wish to die, such that you alone will shoulder the burden of your sins?”

“Indeed. It is the noble man’s right to decide what shall be; it is also his honor to take responsibility for those decisions.”

A bit surprised to hear Julius’s words, Slaine gave a small laugh.

It was precisely the weight of a nobleman’s burdens that conferred upon him

his nobility. The duke took pride in the absolute right of his noble bloodline and intended to carry that pride to the bitter end.

Julius had asked for clemency for his people not because he held any affection toward them but because he viewed it as his duty to protect them. Distorted though his thoughts might have been, his actions were noble nonetheless.

“I can promise you nothing at this moment, but I will take the matter under careful consideration,” said Slaine.

“I am deeply grateful, my lord,” said Julius, bowing his head low as would befit an exemplary aristocrat.



At the end of March came the day that the Duke of Wahlenheit and his conspirators would be sentenced for their crimes.

Slaine was in the midst of preparations to transport the criminals from the royal palace to the central square. As a unit of guardsmen bound the duke's hands and prepared to yoke him to the saddle of a horse, Slaine approached to exchange words with his prisoner.

“Julius, Duke of Wahlenheit. I'll allow you a moment to speak with your subjects,” said Slaine.

Julius appeared skeptical. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” answered Slaine. “This is your final moment; use it to show the pride of your nobility to your subjects.”

Julius's eyes widened, and then his lips curled into a faint smile.

“From the bottom of my heart, I thank you for your kindness, Your Majesty,” said Julius.

With that, Slaine ordered for the royal guard to take Julius away so that the duke could meet with his fellow knights, soldiers, and civil servants.

These prisoners, bound as Julius was, all bowed their heads to their lord. “Your Grace,” they each said.

“You lot seem rather worn out,” said Julius. “I suppose you've had your own

hardships over these past few days.”

“Indeed,” answered a vassal. “We have heard that you have petitioned His Majesty the King for clemency on our behalf. We cannot thank you enough for the mercy you have shown us lowly servants—we regret that we cannot repay your compassion.”

Julius laughed. “Then heed my final order,” he said, looking over his subjects calmly. “Listen well, men—do not make the mistake of attempting to avenge me. Neither you nor your families are to harm His Majesty the King. I still believe my ideas to be righteous, but I have been defeated—I shall assume full responsibility and face my death with honor. The Duchy of Wahlenheit dies with me; I will go gracefully into history, as befits a man of noble stature. Tarnish not my name nor my line.”

After a protracted silence, the vassal nodded and said, “Yes, my lord. We swear upon our lives to protect your honor and ensure that the Duchy of Wahlenheit will rest in peace within the annals of history.”

“Very well,” said Julius. “I shall pray for your health and prosperity.”

Julius threw Slaine a glance to indicate that he was finished. Then, with a grace one would not expect of a man about to be led away bound by rope, he climbed back into the saddle.

The crown’s troops resumed their formation and departed the gates of the royal palace in an orderly procession.

The punishment of criminals was an important responsibility borne by the crown. The execution of the head of a ducal family had attracted a great deal of attention—though Slaine did not often wear his crown, he donned it now and rode the main street of the capital astride his favored horse, Freesia.

A group of vassals and guardsmen surrounded Slaine. Behind them followed Julius, bound and mounted upon his own horse—he was exposed to the gawking of the royal subjects gathered along the roadside.

The duke had his own heavy guard. The process of carrying the duke to the central square for public execution in the name of the crown was important—should harm come to the duke at the hands of ordinary subjects, it would bring

shame upon the royal family.

Farther behind Julius and his security detail, a group of ducal knights, soldiers, and civil servants followed on foot, bound together in a line by the hands.

Slaine maintained strong support among his subjects in the royal domain. Many of the people standing along the roadside looked upon the treasonous duke—who'd attempted to kill their beloved king—with contempt. Some even flung invectives. There were a number who attempted to hurl objects at the duke, but the royal soldiers kept them at bay.

The procession made its way down the main street, drawing the attention of the capital residents all the way. Before long, they arrived at the central square.

A large wooden platform stood at the center of the plaza. It was the podium from which Slaine addressed his subjects, and now it would serve as the site of the duke's execution.

The guards brought Julius to the front of the platform, with the other traitors behind him. Each was forced to his knees.

The first to ascend the platform from the crowd was Joachim, Viscount of Blomdahl, a Noble of the Robe—he served as the minister of liturgy. Originally responsible for the oversight of religious ceremonies, the minister of liturgy now administered a variety of events involving the crown.

“On this day, the 24th of March, year 78 of the royal calendar, the rebel Julius, the Duke of Wahlenheit, shall be sentenced alongside his conspirators,” proclaimed Joachim. “In order to maintain the peace and stability of our kingdom, justice shall be served in the name of His Majesty the King, Slaine of Hasenvalia. All those who are gathered here today shall bear witness to his judgment.”

Joachim presided over judgments at regular intervals of about once every two or three months—he provided a formulaic proclamation as minister of liturgy each time. Well accustomed to public speaking, his voice reached far and wide, amplified by a magical device.

Public sentencing also provided valuable entertainment to the subjects of the royal domain.

Ordinarily, the crown handed down a death sentence only a handful of times a year; robbery, assault, and other such crimes were typically punished with floggings, or amputations in extreme cases. Knowing they were about to witness the rare public execution, people crowded the square in droves.

Many of the western nobles, and even a few from the east, had come to witness Julius's demise. They lined up close to the platform, every eye trained intently upon the site of the execution.

"All due reverence to His Majesty the King, Slaine of Hasenvalia!" barked Joachim.

Ordinary subjects bowed in unison with nobles at the minister's declaration; the square, which before had been buzzing with energy, fell quiet all at once. Amidst the silence, Slaine stepped up onto the platform.

"All rise," he sternly commanded.

All those gathered lifted their heads.

"Today I shall pronounce judgment upon the rebels who threatened our kingdom," said Slaine, surveying his subjects. "The one and only God has vested in me the authority and duty to protect this land—my judgment is His judgment."

Though religious traditions no longer commanded great power throughout the lands of the western kingdoms, it was still customary to use religious language during formal ceremonies. Bishop Arthur, leader of the Eynthian Church of Hasenvalia, also stood among the nobles in witness of the sentencing.

"In spite of his noble position as head of a duchy and kin to the royal family, His Grace Julius, the Duke of Wahlenheit, attempted to assassinate his king and mobilized the people of his domain to usurp the crown," said Slaine. "His objective was to overthrow the royal family and invite the hostile Galed Empire into the royal domain—for which he would be rewarded with a landholding under imperial rule. An outrageous crime."

When Slaine paused, the subjects crowding around the platform began to shout abuse at the duke.

In the eyes of the people of the royal domain, who had battled against

Galed's invading forces the previous year, Julius was an unforgivable traitor who had irrevocably tied himself to the empire.

Once his soldiers had restored order to the citizenry, Slaine continued to speak.



“However,” Slaine went on, “when the duke realized his defeat, he surrendered so as not to bring further suffering upon his subjects. In private conversation with me, he took full responsibility for his crimes and offered his own life in order to atone for his sins—and he begged that his people be allowed to live in exchange. I have considered these points as mitigating factors in determining his sentence.”

Slaine turned his eye upon the duke. Julius wore not the crude clothes of a petty criminal but the proud raiments of a proper nobleman.

A noble had the right to challenge his lord if he believed himself to be just—if he believed himself capable of victory.

Julius had steeped himself in an extreme ideology and acted in accordance with such beliefs. He had challenged his king in his capacity as a nobleman and been defeated in battle. Accordingly, he had admitted his loss and offered to take responsibility in whatever manner he could.

“Therefore, I shall treat the duke as a nobleman,” said Slaine. “I hereby sentence Lord Wahlenheit to death. The manner of execution shall be beheading. The time of execution shall be here and now.”

Beheading by sword was a traditional method of execution for enemy commanders on the battlefield—and thus reserved for those of high rank. Slaine had addressed Julius with his formal title and allowed him to be executed in noble attire. It would be a dignified death.

“Additionally, in recognition of Lord Wahlenheit’s willingness to take responsibility for his crimes, I commute the sentences of the knights, soldiers, and civil officials who served him in his rebellion. All shall be exiled, but their families shall bear no responsibility for their sins.”

Under Hasenvalian law, exile was the second most severe sentence after capital punishment.

Those exiled were stripped of their property and abandoned to a foreign land in which they could claim no kin or community. It was not easy to continue one’s life under such conditions. Some would fall into a life of crime or be taken into slavery—some would even die from exposure to the elements.

Should an exile ever be discovered to have returned to the kingdom, he would be executed immediately. Never again would they see their families.

But there was still a chance they could survive. With hard work, an exile could start anew in a faraway land, where his past sins were known to none.

It was certain that the families of these exiles would be looked upon as kin to a traitor by their peers, perhaps even persecuted—but they would not suffer punishment under the law.

It was true that Julius's collaborators had been given no choice but to obey their lord and follow him into rebellion. But as rebels against the crown, Slaine could not let them go without any reprisal at all. After considering Julius's words and deeds, Slaine had concluded that this sentence was the most appropriate compromise.

"And so concludes judgment," said Slaine. "Sieghardt, Count of Vogel and general of the royal army, uphold Lord Wahlenheit's sentence."

Sieghardt barked his assent to his king's command with a salute and then approached the platform. In recognition of the duke's status, Slaine had called upon the general of the royal army to deal the killing blow.

Julius quietly hung his head, not the slightest fear of death apparent in his expression. Sieghardt drew his blade, aiming for the neck.

Slaine resolved not to look away. As he touched the pendant around his own neck, he kept his eyes fixed on the duke even at the moment of the man's death.

They had not understood one another, always fundamentally at odds. And as king, Slaine had ordered the man's execution. Even if he did not hold the blade, he was the duke's killer.

Sieghardt swung his sword in a sharp motion. The blade raced down, slicing through Julius's neck.

A moment later, his head rolled onto the platform.

Julius, the Duke of Wahlenheit, was dead—and with his demise ended the venerable Wahlenheit family line.



When all was finished, Slaine returned to the royal palace and sank into the sofa in his living quarters.

He let out a deep, deep sigh. Monica gently sat a cup of tea down in front of him and then joined him on the couch. She was a constant presence in his life, both in public and in private.

“Slaine,” Monica exhaled, shoulder to shoulder with her love. She took his hand in hers.

Slaine tried to smile, but it was a weak effort. “I’ll never forget what Julius said to me.”

In the world—especially the world of politics—there would always be those who could not see eye to eye. Slaine would live his entire life in such a world. And as the king of a country, he would face many circumstances in which he could not avoid association with those who harbored different beliefs and values.

It was nice when one could find common ground and a way to coexist with others, but of course, that was not always possible. There would be times when fighting was inevitable.

Slaine had triumphed over Julius. By seizing total victory at no cost to his people, he had been able to demonstrate to the lords and nobles of the western fiefdoms that he possessed the aptitude to rule as king in his own right. He had overcome this adversity, and for now, strife had subsided in his land.

However, there were twenty-one other states in the western kingdoms. And to the east, over the Eldecio Mountain Range, the Great Empire of Galed lay in wait. There were even more kingdoms and nations to the north as well as on the nearby islands surrounding the continent. All these disparate lands would not soon unite under a single banner.

No matter the determination of his efforts—no matter the strength of his accomplishments or the splendor of his brilliance—these basic facts would not change. Slaine had no choice but to continue moving forward through a world over which he held no control.

That was the life of a statesman—the life of a king.

“Of course, that doesn’t mean I hate this life. I don’t wish to cast aside my duty,” said Slaine, sighing. “But I still feel...a sense of hopelessness. There is a long, exhausting road ahead of me.”

Monica pulled Slaine into a gentle hug. “I am powerless, Slaine,” she said. “I cannot take away all your suffering. But, at the very least...” She leaned in close, her mouth close to his ear. “At the very least, I will always share your values. I will always affirm your beliefs. No matter what happens, no matter what anyone else says, I will always stand by your side.”

Her words were an indispensable comfort to Slaine in that moment.

In this world full of incompatible people, full of things he could not change, he still had one person who accepted him completely—a true ally.

“Monica,” Slaine said, rising from the couch.

Then he fell to one knee, gazing straight at her.

“Monica Adrashelm, I want to marry you,” he said. “I promise to return the devotion you’ve shown to me for the rest of my life. Please, be my companion—my life partner. I want to be with you.”

Although their marriage was already all but assured, Slaine still felt that he ought to express his feelings clearly in words. He didn’t wish to merely foist the burden of bearing his children onto her—he wanted to respond to her pledge of dedication with a demonstration of his sincerity.

Monica let his words wash over her, as if waiting for them to settle into her heart. She clasped her hands together over her own chest. A single tear rolled down her cheek as her face blossomed into a smile.

Slaine couldn’t help but grin. Although the proposal was merely a formality, it was still a special, emotional moment.

“Yes. Yes, Slaine of Hasenvalia—I will marry you,” Monica replied. “Please, allow me to walk beside you for the rest of our days.”

Monica slid to her knees to join Slaine on the floor, pulling him into her embrace. As he clung tightly to her, he resolved to show her that he would

make this happiness and comfort last forever.

Chapter 3: A Quiet Reign

On an April day, in the full bloom of spring, Slaine made a visit to the Adrashelm residence.

Although Adrashelm was an old name, as the house of a Noble of the Robe it possessed no landholdings. Its family manse was small and compact—smaller even than the house of a mere wealthy merchant.

A carriage bearing the royal coat of arms passed through the narrow gates of the modest mansion and pulled up alongside its unassuming front garden. As Slaine dismounted from the coach, the Adrashelm family—the baron, his wife, his eldest son, and Monica—approached to greet him.

“Your Majesty. Welcome to my humble abode,” said the baron, Walter. “I’m afraid I cannot offer much in the way of hospitality.”

“Thank you. However, I am visiting today not as king but as a private citizen. Please do not be concerned about my presence,” said Slaine, meeting Monica’s gaze for a moment.

Walter led Slaine to the reception room of the manse, where the two took seats opposite one another at the table.

“Lord Adrashelm, as a man, I ask this of you,” said Slaine, dispensing with idle chitchat to cut right to the crux of the matter. “I wish to marry your daughter, Monica Adrashelm. I swear upon my life that I will protect her and make her happy for as long as we live. I shall not disappoint you—or her.”

Then Slaine bowed his head deeply.

Royal and aristocratic marriages were often decided solely through political dealings brokered by the parents—in many cases, weddings would proceed as if they were administrative functions. But Slaine wished to take responsibility for arranging matters himself. Even if it were merely a formality for his own peace of mind, he wanted to do things properly—and so he had resolved himself to ask Monica’s father for her hand.

“Slaine of Hasenvalia, please lift your chin,” said Walter.

Somewhat stiffly, Slaine looked up.

“I accept your proposal,” Walter answered. “Please, treat my daughter Monica with care.”

Relieved, Slaine calmly replied, “I thank you from the bottom of my heart.”

Monica had already warned her father about Slaine’s intentions, and there had never been any chance that Walter would refuse—but what man wouldn’t be nervous when making such a request to the father of the woman he loved?

“It will take some time and preparation for a marriage to be arranged,” said Walter. “If there is anything that House Adrashelm may do to be of assistance, please let us know. I am at your service, my lord.”

“Thank you. Sergey will take the lead in the political preparations, and I will leave the bridal procession to your house. The royal family will furnish full financial support and, once she has moved into the palace, any amenities that Monica may need to live comfortably,” said Slaine. “Well, I suppose she practically lives there already, but...”

Walter chuckled as Slaine awkwardly trailed off.

Monica rested in Slaine’s bedroom almost every night and already stored clothes and cosmetics in his living quarters. But there were still further preparations to be made so that she could live properly as the king’s wife—noble marriages were a busy affair.

“The other lords and nobles may probe and pester you with questions, but as long as you conduct yourself toward the crown as you always have, you won’t encounter any trouble,” Slaine added.

“Understood,” replied Walter. “House Adrashelm will continue in leal service to the crown as we prepare Monica’s bridal procession.”

Afterward, the pair joined Walter’s wife, son, and daughter for a brief chat. Then Slaine departed the Adrashelm manse.



In order to facilitate the king’s marriage, Elena had arranged to meet with the

respective leaders of the eastern and western factions.

It was not difficult to convince the counts of the political expediency of choosing the daughter of House Adrashelm to be queen. However, the very act of “convincing” them was itself indispensable to the process.

That the crown took the time to carefully explain the matter was itself evidence of the esteem in which it held the counties. Had the two aristocrats not been made to feel valued in this way, the relationship of trust between the king and his vassals could have been damaged.

And as minister of foreign affairs, Elena was naturally the best candidate to serve as Slaine’s emissary. Not only was she skilled in the art of negotiation, she was an aristocrat of high status—her presence was further testament to the counties’ indispensability.

After listening to Elena’s explanation in the reception room of his mansion, Tobias—the Count of Akerlof, and the head of the western noble faction—crossed his arms and muttered to himself, “I see. So Lady Monica Adrashelm will be the next queen.”

The eastern and western cliques were equally important, but as the Count of Akerlof was the elder of the two factional heads, Elena had visited him first.

“If I recall, she has served as aide-de-camp to the king since his time as crown prince,” added Tobias as an aside.

“Indeed. The king was so moved by Lady Monica’s tireless devotion and support that he proposed,” said Elena, deftly indicating that the engagement had already been arranged. In other words, this was already a done deal.

“A royal wedding is an expensive affair indeed, but if it means becoming the queen’s family, then House Adrashelm stands to profit handsomely. They must be overjoyed with this arrangement,” said Tobias. Elena, of course, understood what the count really meant: *Does the Barony of Adrashelm intend to take advantage of the marriage to curry favor with the crown? Is the crown showing favor to the Nobles of the Robe?*

“Worry not. Lady Monica has requested that His Majesty the King treat her birth family no differently than he would treat any other noble house. Her

father, the baron, also wishes to continue to serve the crown and kingdom faithfully,” Elena answered. “And the king has made clear his intent to respect their wishes—he will not afford House Adrashelm any special consideration.”

Slaine would need a queen to produce an heir, but he wished to avoid generating political turmoil with the marriage. That was precisely why House Adrashelm, a barony of minimal prestige and influence, had been chosen. The crown need not afford such an inconsequential family special consideration.

Therefore, this marriage would do nothing to disturb the balance of aristocratic society. Tobias understood this well.

“I see. A stance befitting nobility,” said Tobias, providing the obligatory response. “Then I shall pay my due respects to the queen’s family, the Barony of Adrashelm.”

Of course, Tobias was not about to take Elena’s words literally—he could not simply treat House Adrashelm as the low-ranking family it might have been in the past. The queen’s family, though it lacked prestige, would need to be handled with the appropriate etiquette and courtesy. This was essential to maintaining the equilibrium of aristocratic society.

And so by responding as he did, Tobias had demonstrated his courtesy to House Adrashelm as well as his acceptance of the marriage—an important gesture, given that he was the leader of a major bloc of noblemen.

“I am sure His Majesty will be pleased with your response, Lord Akerlof,” said Elena. It was time to move on to the next order of business. “The king is already looking to the future in order to foster tranquility in our kingdom.”

“When you say the future, you speak of heirs,” Tobias inferred.

Elena nodded. “Yes. Although the tragic passing of the royal line has deeply unsettled the foundation of our society, the lords and nobles of our land have demonstrated unwavering loyalty to the crown. The king wishes to reward your leal fealty through ties of blood.”

“I see. May I inquire as to the specifics of your proposal, my lady?”

Elena answered, with a wry smile, “So long as you promise not to spread my answer about.”

“Of course,” Tobias replied. “You have my discretion.”

“Thank you for your understanding,” said Elena. “Now, then—the king is considering the prospect of offering a son or daughter’s hand in marriage to House Akerlof. After such a child has been born, of course.”

“That would be a great honor upon our house,” answered Tobias, not much surprise apparent in his features. The offer was reasonable, and a man of Tobias’s stature might well have considered it already.

The proposal was not only an honor—it was effectively an offer of a hostage to House Akerlof, and by extension the western faction. Such ties would ensure that the royal family could disregard neither Akerlof County nor the rest of the west. Naturally, Tobias voiced no complaint.

“Then I will convey your enthusiasm to His Majesty,” said Elena, smiling faintly.

“Please do,” said Tobias. “I must ask—has the crown had correspondence with the eastern faction?”

“I have instructions from the crown to make the same offer to Cronheim County,” answered Elena.

Tobias contemplated for a moment before he responded. “I understand. Akerlof County will not question the king’s decision.”



“I see. So the crown will marry a child off to House Cronheim in time,” muttered Richard, Count of Cronheim, his hands folded primly in his lap.

The young count listened to Elena’s explanation in the reception room of his manse. Though Richard had yet to reach thirty years of age, he was beginning to show the dignity of a proper lord; the harsh battles of the previous year had weathered his spirit.

“Yes,” said Elena. “Her Majesty Queen Catalina passed under such tragic circumstances. Were the crown to welcome a queen from Cronheim or Akerlof counties, it would bring disrepute upon the name of whichever family was not chosen. In light of this, the king has instructed me to bring this proposal to both

of your houses.”

Before the accident, Frederick IV had intended to marry his son, Michael, to a daughter of Cronheim County. However, due to the present royal family’s exceedingly complicated circumstances, the safe choice was to select a family of minimal political influence—and to return to bartering marriages among the prestigious noble families only in the following generation.

“I understand. As present head of Cronheim County, I offer my gratitude to the king for his consideration,” said Richard. “But I must inquire—have any decisions been made regarding the future spouse of His Majesty’s heir?”

“Those are undecided as yet,” said Elena. “Or rather, unknown. We cannot be sure of the gender of the king’s successor—and it is possible we may welcome a groom or bride from another kingdom.”

“It is as you say,” Richard said, nodding with a slight smile. It was too soon to ask such a question. “And you have Lord Akerlof’s understanding regarding this matter as well?”

“Indeed. He had no complaints.”

“I am glad to hear it,” said Richard. “I would like to reiterate my gratitude to His Majesty for granting equal consideration to the eastern and western factions.”

Though Richard’s expression did not change, inwardly he felt relieved. Cronheim County was in the midst of reconstruction, a critical bulwark against the Galed Empire to the east. They could not afford internecine squabbling in such delicate times.

“However,” Elena hedged, “I must disclaim that this is a discussion pertaining to matters that could take as many as twenty years to come to fruition. The crown can extend only tentative offers at this time.”

It was an offer that would be fulfilled provided nothing went wrong, but it was not an absolute contract. Should Cronheim County waver in its loyalty, then the crown could guarantee nothing. Elena’s words served as both a reminder and a warning.

But Richard took the statement as a matter of course. “Naturally. House

Cronheim will continue to demonstrate our unbreakable fealty to the crown, now and in the future.”

“I am sure His Majesty will be pleased with your lordship’s readiness,” said Elena. “Now, then, I will convey the particulars in due course, but the marriage between the king and Lady Monica Adrashelm is tentatively scheduled for the fall. Currently, we expect it will be held in September or thereabouts. May I request your assistance in informing the eastern nobility of this matter?”

“Of course,” answered Richard. “I will explain the circumstances to my faction.”



By mid-April, Slaine had left the matter of preparing for his marriage to his vassals so he could focus his full attention upon his domestic duties as king.

In addition to his daily tasks, Slaine was hard at work promoting the potato, a staple crop he’d discovered and introduced to the kingdom the previous year. The greatest obstacle to its widespread proliferation was public sentiment—the citizenry would not take to cultivation of a foreign, unfamiliar crop merely because their monarch demanded it.

And so Slaine had resolved to meet with the farmers of his domain in person in order to persuade them. The young king had earned his subjects’ favor by walking among them and defending them in battle; now came his chance to reap the profits of those efforts.

That day, a major landowner who served as a representative for the agricultural workers in the capital arrived upon the grounds of the palace for an audience with the king. “Your Majesty, it is a great honor to be invited to the royal palace,” said the man.

Behind the major landowner were many other farmers—some who owned land themselves, a number of small-scale subsistence farmers who rented land, and several dozen agricultural workers selected at random from among the populace as well.

The landowner wore a rather stiff expression on his face as he greeted Slaine.

As the leader of the Uzelheim peasantry, he possessed considerable influence and capital, but he nevertheless faced his king with an air of nervousness about him. It was only to be expected. Some of the less powerful farmers even seemed to quake at the sight of the crown.

“I thank you all for coming,” Slaine said with a gentle smile. “I hope you enjoy your time in the palace.”

Slaine had arranged for a banquet in the palace. The dozens of guests took their seats in the many chairs encircling the long table in the center of the hall. One of the farmers happened to make a loud noise when pulling out his chair to sit, and he froze, looking to the young king for a reaction—but Slaine merely laughed and told the farmer not to worry.

“Well, then,” said Slaine, “as you have been informed, I have invited the capital’s agricultural workers to the palace for a discussion. Please, relax and make yourselves at home. There is absolutely no need to concern yourselves with the fine particulars of royal etiquette or whatnot.”

The gathered farmers immediately looked quite relieved.

“First, we shall eat lunch—we will concern ourselves with business later,” Slaine continued. “Oh, and please rest assured I have no intent to use this feast to pressure you into doing what I say, or anything of the sort!”

The farmers smiled a bit in response to Slaine’s lighthearted tone.

Then the maids began to carry food out to the table. Considering the large number of guests—and their lack of education regarding matters of table etiquette—dishes were served on platters so that the diners could serve themselves whatever they wished to eat.

One of the farmers looked upon the food placed before him, tilted his head, and asked, “Lord King, what is this?”

Heaped on the platter was a mountain of rather firm yellow paste with various ingredients mixed into it.

“This is the staple of our lunch—that is to say, it will take the place of bread. The potato, as it’s called, is a crop imported from afar. We’ve boiled it, peeled it, mashed it, and mixed it with meat and vegetables to make it easier to eat,”

Slaine said. Then, he gestured to another platter with boiled potatoes chopped up and seasoned with salt and pepper. “This is what the potato looks like before it’s been mashed.”

The farmers began to speak amongst themselves.

“The...potato?”

“Ever heard of it?”

“Naw, this’s the first I ever seen it.”

“This ain’t no bean. Can’t call it a vegetable, neither, and it’s not like bread or porridge.”

“The way it looks, the color of its skin... ’S a bit gross, innit?” said a farmer, speaking his mind without thinking.

“Oi! Shut it, ya dunce!” exclaimed another.

Slaine laughed and waved it off. “Come on, let’s eat while it’s still warm. As I said before, there’s no need to worry about your table manners. Just relax and eat as you always would.”

With that said, Slaine served himself a small portion of the pasty potato dish. He placed a few more chunks of chopped potato next to it, and then some more grilled vegetables from another large platter.

Following Slaine’s lead, the other farmers also began to move with their plates in hand. They each took helpings of whatever they wished to try.

One farmer popped a spoonful of the mashed potato dish into his mouth. Moments later, an indescribable expression passed over his face. “That’s damn good!”

One spoonful became two, then three... He was practically shoveling mashed potato into his mouth.

Watching the sight with a smile, Slaine took a bite himself. The well-seasoned potatoes, fragrant slow-cooked bacon, and sweet vegetables melded together into a delicious result.

The other farmers made their way through the offerings, trying each dish. “It

weren't no lie—this *is* damn good!”

“Right. And filling, to boot.”

“The salt and pepper bring the flavor right outa this one, the chopped one here.”

“Sates the stomach. Seems a good substitute for bread, I'd say.”

“Your Majesty, are these thin, white things also potatoes?” asked one of the landowners, gesturing to a platter of grilled vegetables seasoned with spices.

“Yes. The potato can be prepared in a wide variety of ways,” Slaine answered. “There are other imported crops among the roasted vegetables as well. Interesting flavors, no?”

Three of the crops the crown had imported from the western regions of the continent had successfully taken root in Hasenvalian soil. While the potato was the main event, Slaine also intended to showcase these other vegetables to the peasantry.

“Every dish has been prepared by the most skilled chefs in the crown's employ. Please enjoy them to your heart's content,” said Slaine.

The palace kitchen made liberal use of its expensive spices, giving careful attention to every aspect of preparing the dishes. While the king enjoyed these meals every day, neither the wealthy landowners nor the ordinary subsistence farmers had access to such luxurious flavors—it was a spectacular experience for a peasant. They continued to eat, sharing their impressions with each other.



Excepting the few landowners in the group, the farmers' table manners left much to be desired. Many eschewed utensils entirely, stuffing chopped potatoes and grilled vegetables into their mouths with their hands. They spoke freely as they chewed.

Some of the maids and other waitstaff found themselves stiffening as they watched the peasants' undignified behavior, but Slaine did not mind. He had been raised as a commoner just like them, after all.

Thanks to his mother Alma's education, Slaine himself was rather well-behaved for a simple plebeian—but when entering establishments in town, he had often witnessed other patrons chewing loudly, belching openly, and spitting out bones and vegetables onto the floor. Given that this was the ordinary standard to which commoners were held, Slaine could see that they were making an effort—in their own way—to comport themselves properly.

It wasn't long before the peasants had all eaten their fill. When the largest of the bunch—a glutton with an appetite to match his hulking stature—placed his spoon down on his plate, lunch was finished.

“So, everyone,” said Slaine. “What do you think of the palace cuisine?”

The farmers answered enthusiastically. “Incredibly good!” exclaimed one. “S’pose that’s what makes it royal.”

“Never thought I’d get to eat like a king! I’m damn stuffed!” said another.

And a third declared, “Delicious! Especially the potato. I’d never even seen one before, but it was great.”

Slaine smiled, satisfied. “That’s wonderful!” he said. “Now, then, it’s time to get down to business. I’ve summoned you all to the palace today in order to introduce this crop, the potato.”

Slaine began to provide an overview of the potato: A staple crop originally native to the southern continent of Atuca, it was still largely unknown in Salestakia. It possessed many advantages over wheat, including yield rate, harvest speed, labor demands, and cultivation environment. Though there were a few ways in which the potato was inferior to wheat, of course...

The farmers listened with rapt attention to Slaine's detailed, mathematical explanation. Once Slaine had finished with his speech, he glanced at Monica beside him. She nodded and placed a potato on the table in front of them—this one had already turned green and sprouted, ready for planting.

"This is the potato after it's sprouted in the sun. It looks quite different from the edible variety, no?"

The farmers examined the rather grotesque spud with hesitant expressions. "This one looks a bit...er...unappetizing," one began.

"I confess I find its appearance rather odd as well," said another farmer.

However—perhaps because they were already well aware that the potato was not just edible but delicious—the farmers did not reject it outright.

"While the potato cannot completely replace wheat, it can greatly improve the kingdom's food supply when grown in conjunction with wheat," said Slaine. "And so as king, I wish to promote the cultivation of the potato in our kingdom—starting with the farmlands surrounding the royal capital."

The farmers seemed to understand the king's reasoning. Some of the landowners even appeared enthused by Slaine's talk of production and efficiency. As members of the upper echelon of the agricultural class, they were well aware of how important it was to the economy and military for a nation to have a stable supply of food.

"Of course, I do not expect to order a sudden explosion of wide-scale production," said Slaine. "In the end, all the crown can do is encourage cultivation. Those willing to collaborate toward this end will be offered tax subsidies. I will arrange for my officials to explain the particulars at a later date—but, to speak broadly, we intend to reduce your tax burdens in proportion to the amount of land you dedicate to potato cultivation."

Farmland belonged to the farmers that owned it, and societal stability could not be maintained without the cooperation of the agricultural class. Although Slaine was sovereign, it was not practical to make sweeping unilateral declarations without consideration of the farmers' positions. Slaine hoped to pave the way for them to cooperate voluntarily.

The key to his plan was this: Agricultural workers paid a land tax to the crown based on the amount of land they maintained. With a tax subsidy, the farmers could consume their surplus potatoes or sell them for greater profit. And that surplus, in turn, would improve the food self-sufficiency of the royal domain. This boost to the kingdom's economy would allow the crown to eventually recoup its losses from the tax subsidy.

"I expect that this plan has plenty of benefits for you farmers," said Slaine. "But what do you all think?"

The major landowner who served as the farmers' representative spoke up to answer, "We are very grateful to learn about this promising new crop, and we look forward to a healthy partnership with the royal family."

Slaine knew what the man meant: *So long as the crown does not make unreasonable requests, we will comply.* The young king considered the farmers' positive response a success.

"I appreciate your understanding. The agricultural class is the most critical pillar of our kingdom's society," said Slaine. "The minister of agriculture shall explain the tax subsidy, as well as how to cultivate the potato, in greater detail at another location."

Slaine ordered the royal guard to guide the peasants to the other room. The gaggle of farmers followed along, leaving the hall behind.

The crown had already prepared a systematic guide to the cultivation of potatoes—Sergey and Walter had deliberated on the minutiae of the tax relief the crown could provide to the farmers in order to promote it. The practical work from here on out was in the hands of Walter, the minister of agriculture—Slaine's role had concluded with the farmers' positive reception of the potato.

The king smiled and remarked to Monica, "It seems things are progressing smoothly, for the time being."

"You've done a great job winning the hearts and minds of the farmers, my liege," said Monica, looking pleased as well.

But convincing a few dozen farmers would not be enough to persuade the entire peasantry. Slaine expected that until the potato had truly taken root in

the capital, there would be many more lunches of this nature.



After Slaine had succeeded in bloodlessly vanquishing Lord Wahlenheit's rebellion, the western nobles had come to recognize his brilliance as king.

While the disturbance had ultimately proved to be a boon to Slaine's prestige, it had also created other regional concerns that would require resolution. One such problem was the administration of the former Duchy of Wahlenheit, which the crown had annexed upon the duke's defeat.

The royal army had been stationed there in order to maintain the basic order of society for the time being. Sergey, the chancellor of the kingdom, had been tasked with determining the future of the former duchy. By the end of April, he had finished formulating a concrete plan and brought his report before the king.

"If the former Duchy of Wahlenheit is to be treated as a part of the royal domain, then in light of its population, I believe that it would be expedient to appoint a governor with a certain amount of discretionary authority to manage it from its regional capital of Kurnov," said Sergey. "I personally nominate my nephew, Isaac Nordenfelt, for the role."

Isaac, who until that moment had been practically shrinking into the shadows, bowed his head at the sound of his name.

"Isaac, eh? I'm sure he would be perfectly capable in the role," said Slaine. "But he is your right-hand man, is he not? Are you sure you wish to send him off to the former duchy?"

"The job of aide is not a difficult one. There are others who can serve me in that capacity," said Sergey. "Isaac has learned enough about the office of chancellor in his time at my side. What he requires now is experience in a more active role—one in which he can take charge of the practical affairs of governance. I believe that a position as a governor would be most fitting for him."

Sergey would turn sixty-six that year—it was unlikely that he would remain at the forefront of national politics for another decade. He was priming his nephew to be his successor in a not-too-distant future. The aging chancellor

had always intended to position Isaac in a governorship as the final step in his training—and the Duke of Wahlenheit's demise had opened a conveniently timed seat.

"I see. Well, if that is all right with you, I will leave administration of the former duchy to Isaac," said Slaine.

"Then I shall make the necessary arrangements."

"I shall devote myself heart and soul to my duty, my lord," said Isaac. His voice was sharp and serious, just like his uncle's.

Then Sergey continued, "I have one further proposal concerning the management of the former duchy, my liege. It pertains to the agricultural holdings seized from the duke."

House Wahlenheit had derived the bulk of its income from the stones quarried from the Eldecio Mountain Range and from its vast swathes of arable land. The duke's family owned twenty percent of the duchy's farmland.

And now that farmland had reverted to the crown. Unlike other property, it could not be awarded to the nobles who had participated in the battle—other aristocratic families were like to bristle at such a significant gift being bestowed upon any one house—so the royal family had seized it in its entirety.

Sergey proposed that part of it be dedicated to potato cultivation. As the farmland belonged to the royal family, it was up to the crown how to make use of it. The peasants who tilled the land would heed the orders of their new lord. It was the perfect opportunity.

"That is a good idea. We shall do so," Slaine responded straightaway. There was no reason not to allow it.

"Yes, sire. In that case, we will require someone to manage this land as well," said Sergey. "The previous administrator, one of the duke's civil servants, has been exiled, and the local farmers have no knowledge about potato cultivation."

"Ah, I suppose that's true," Slaine responded. "I presume you have a nominee for this position as well?"

As expected, Sergey nodded. “Of course. I suggest Winfried Adrashelm for the role.”

Winfried was Walter’s son and Monica’s older brother. He was presently working for his father as a civil official.

Ministerial posts were not necessarily hereditary, but unless some special circumstances demanded otherwise, it was customary for a minister to be succeeded by an heir who had grown up closely observing the work of the current minister. Winfried was no exception—he was heir apparent to his father’s seat.

The experience of managing a large plot of farmland and presiding over the cultivation of such an important crop would be a beneficial experience for Winfried, Sergey explained.

“A reasonable view,” said Slaine. “I have no problem with this nomination either. I will follow your lead, Sergey.”

And so it was decided that the former duchy, which was just a tenth the size of the rest of the royal domain, would become a testing ground for the next generation of civil servants.



In early May, Slaine’s advisors convened in the conference room of the palace to report on the management of the state. This regular meeting was a forum for the crown’s officials to share information about various sectors of the kingdom’s bureaucracy.

Though Elena’s work often took her abroad, today she was present to provide an update on foreign affairs. In early spring, Elena had departed to tour the surrounding kingdoms and gather information about their peoples’ views toward Hasenvalia’s new common king.

“While the citizenry of our neighboring kingdoms has acknowledged His Majesty’s ability, it seems most harbor doubts about whether we will ultimately prevail in our war against the empire,” she said.

Slaine had achieved a complete victory against an imperial invasion force more than three times the size of his own army. Word had also begun to spread

about how Slaine had all but bloodlessly subdued Lord Wahlenheit's rebellion two months prior. The rulers of the surrounding states generally agreed that these were feats deserving of recognition.

Once might have been luck—twice was proof of true ability. Though he was of common birth, Slaine's wit and intellect had equipped him to devise outlandish schemes that could see him through harrowing conflicts.

However, that alone did not make the Kingdom of Hasenvalia secure.

Though Slaine had defeated an imperial army of five thousand men, most had been weak soldiers recruited from the peasantry; had he gone head-to-head with the empire's standing army, would his tiny kingdom have fared so well? Should Galed muster a serious force to assault Hasenvalia, would Slaine's resourceful plans truly suffice to protect them all from ruin?

Figuring the odds to be poor, the rulers throughout the other western kingdoms were opting to wait and see, keeping their distance.

"I understand," Slaine muttered. "Then I cannot imagine we may expect any assistance from our neighbors."

From the perspective of Hasenvalia's nearby states, there was nothing to be gained from interceding in the tiny kingdom's conflict with the Great Empire of Galed. Were the empire to invade in earnest, any country that came to Hasenvalia's aid could become the next target of attack.

"My lord, I do not believe this to be entirely unfortunate news," said Gostav, Viscount of Rustrem and lieutenant general of the royal army. He had returned to the capital after Sieghardt had relieved him of his post as commander of the defense of the eastern border. "Foreign aid provides certain advantages, but it carries with it disadvantages as well. Our forces will be more agile without the cooperation—or interference, as it were—of other state armies."

Sergey concurred. "Indeed, Lord Rustrem makes a fine point. Fortunately, the empire has yet to display any signs of further action—the emissary of Dubois County attributed the empire's apparent lack of strength to Prince Florenz's weak position, and that appears to be true. As there is currently no immediate crisis, inviting troops from neighboring countries without proper coordination would encumber us substantially and provide little advantage. Though the

western kingdoms share certain values, the others are not necessarily our allies,” said the chancellor. “Welcoming foreign soldiers could also antagonize local aristocrats and invite further civil strife. At this time, I believe we have no choice but to maintain the status quo as we search for a realistic framework of cooperation with our neighboring states.”

Slaine considered the matter for a while, then nodded. “Very well. There is no need to upset the current balance of things for the time being,” he said. “But hearing this report, I am all the more amazed that King Oswald of Ignatov immediately offered his aid.”

“Indeed,” Victor agreed. “Although many states have a history of conflict with the empire, taking a clear stance of opposition is no simple decision with things as they presently stand.”

“While the Kingdom of Ignatov has no love for the empire, the empire has surely grown tired of Ignatov’s constant protests against the bandit incursions from the empire’s side of the border as well. It is hard to imagine that Ignatov would be spared further war if Hasenvalia were to fall into the hands of the empire. I imagine that to be why they are so eager to take an early stand,” said Elena. Laughing softly, she added, “Though King Oswald’s temperament may be a factor as well.”

Oswald, the ruler of the neighboring kingdom of Ignatov, was well-known throughout the region as an exceptional martial warrior.

“We may count ourselves fortunate that his disposition is working to the benefit of our kingdom at this time,” Elena continued. “Nevertheless, if we are to hold the line alone, it is imperative that we strengthen our defensive systems.”

Sergey nodded and said, “Border fortifications are progressing steadily. In addition, we are training the population of the royal domain in preparation for future conscription, as well as expanding our capacity for production of defensive equipment. It will be some time until we observe tangible results, but the empire is not like to act in the foreseeable future. Now is the best time to compose ourselves and observe the situation.”

It had only been a little more than six months since the battle with the empire

—and less than three months since the end of winter. There were limits to what could be done by charging forward in a hurry, and nothing to be gained by it besides.

And so, with Sergey's remarks, the discussion on diplomacy and national defense came to a close.



At the end of May, about thirty of the kingdom's subjects gathered in the royal army's training grounds beside the palace.

"Men, assume formation!" bellowed Gostav, Viscount of Rustrem and lieutenant general of the royal army.

Following his order, the thirty men lined up in two rows. Though they were not exactly trained soldiers, they had practiced the maneuver several times, so their movements were fairly swift for amateur fighters.

"At the ready!" Gostav shouted.

The fifteen men in the front row answered the call, loading metal bolts into the crossbows in their hands.

"And—FIRE!"

The fifteen men each pulled the triggers on their weapons. The bows flashed, the strings twanged, and then fifteen bolts went whizzing through the air.

Half of the bolts struck the wooden targets that were lined up at the end of the range. The other half went astray, sticking into the mound of dirt beyond.

"Relay!"

At Gostav's command, the front and back rows alternated position. In this, too, the amateur soldiers moved quickly.

"At the ready!"

Just as had the previous row, the next round of soldiers readied their weapons. Meanwhile, the fifteen men to the rear worked to reload.

These thirty men were not the only ones undergoing training. A short distance away, royal army knights were drilling another group of the same size in

forming a spear line.

Slaine walked the grounds to observe the army's work. Beside him trailed Monica, Sergey, and Victor.

"These men are in pretty good shape," murmured Slaine as he looked over the crossbowmen.

Victor answered with a nod. "Indeed. For a group of conscripts, this is a good performance, I'd say. If you can move like this with a crossbow, then you've at least something to offer a defensive line."

"I trust your expertise. Increasing crossbow production was the right decision," remarked Slaine. The crown had been advocating for such a measure since the end of the previous year.

The crossbow had various advantages over the traditional bow, such as its strength and ease of handling. As the crossbow did not require its user to manually draw the bow or maintain a strenuous posture, it was potentially more powerful than a bow that relied on the strength of its wielder. A bolt fired from a crossbow could even pierce metal armor. And since aiming a crossbow required comparatively little skill, even an amateur marksman could reach competitive levels with minimal training.

It was for these reasons that the crossbow was commonly known as "the knight killer."

However, the weapon had its demerits as well. The string of a crossbow was very stiff, so it required a special device to reload; thus, its rate of fire was poor. And because its ammunition was short and thick, its effective range was rather short.

Furthermore, the crossbow was expensive and time-consuming to manufacture, with its complex structure and intricate metal parts. The ammunition was costly as well—even more so than longbow arrows, which were already hardly cheap.

However, the royal family's iron mines lessened this financial burden. As all ore from the mines was property of the crown, whatever of the yield was not sold could be deployed essentially at Slaine's sole discretion.

So Slaine had elected to increase the production of crossbows in order to transform the army's conscripted infantry into a more powerful force—by the end of the year, the royal family would increase the number of crossbows in its armory from forty to one hundred. Upon further discussion with Sergey and Sieghardt, the crown had decided to increase that number starting the following year.

Production had already quickened: the crown currently possessed sixty of the weapons. Half had been sent to the eastern front to equip the border, while the other half had been reserved for the defense of the capital—and to train the kingdom's subjects.

"We are already seeing results from our efforts to provide our subjects routine training," said Sergey. "While this program was established several decades ago, it seems to remain effective even now."

The crown had also implemented an initiative to draft adult male citizens into regular training earlier in the season. While the kingdom had enjoyed peace—apart from the odd skirmish with other small states—for most of its history, it was imperative that its subjects be prepared for full-scale war to erupt at any time now that friendly relations with the empire had collapsed.

In response to these evolving circumstances, the crown had thus reimplemented a policy discontinued several decades prior. Sergey was the only man among them who remembered such times; relying on the chancellor's testimony and archived documents, Sieghardt and his men had put the system back into practice.

However, with conscripts already in place to defend the eastern border, it was not practical to enlist even more of the realm's subjects for extended periods of service. If too many of the kingdom's ordinary citizens were to be mobilized into military service, it would affect the labor supply, leading to economic decline and a decrease in agricultural productivity.

So, for the time being, the crown limited the mandate to requiring that able adult males—those of sound mind and body, and without notably useful skills—attend one day of training every six months.

Even that conservative plan would bear fruit. A conscript army with some

military training was certainly better than an army with none.

The training efforts also affected the mood of the kingdom—with its people posted to the border defense and subject to regular military drills, the sense that a war could come at any time would gradually begin to spread throughout the land.

And so the crown's efforts to strengthen its defensive systems—not just at the border but also at the very root of its society—were making steady progress.

"Prince Florenz won't be able to move swiftly," Slaine began, "so we have time to—"

"Oi, you bastard! What are you waiting for?! It's already too late!"

Gostav's angry voice drowned out Slaine's quiet mutterings. The lieutenant general was reprimanding a young man—perhaps still in his late teens—who was struggling to reload his crossbow.

"S-Sorry!" the young man stammered.

"Will you apologize like that when you've got the enemy right in front of you?! Do you think they'll patiently wait for you to attack?! Don't make me laugh, boy!"

As the man paled and apologized again, Gostav mercilessly slugged him with a right hook. While the young soldier didn't appear to be injured, he crumpled to the ground on the verge of tears. The gathered men watched the scene in frozen terror.

Slaine's eyebrows lifted toward his hairline. "He has no mercy for the conscripts, it seems. They've got it tough."

"No, I think that was a bit much. This is their first military training—Lord Rustrem demands too much of their ability," Sergey replied, sighing.

Slaine glanced to Monica at his side, and she offered her opinion as well. "This manner of chastisement would not be unusual among the ranks of the royal army, but there's no reason to strike a conscript unless he is shirking his duties deliberately. You cannot expect too much of them."

Victor, who was close to Gostav in age, status, and position, spoke up to defend the man. “Lord Rustrem is strict—both with himself and with his soldiers. He demands the best of all men, even conscripts.”

“I see,” Slaine said, smiling faintly. “I am glad for his passion, but it’s important to be mindful not to overdo it.”

“Then let us convey that sentiment to the man himself,” said Sergey. He looked toward the lieutenant general and called out, “Lord Rustrem! This way, if you will.”

Gostav ordered his men to stand by, immediately turning to approach where Slaine stood among his vassals. He saluted respectfully and said, “You called, Your Excellency?”

“Indeed. His Majesty is displeased with your manner of disciplining the troops,” said Sergey, a rather bitter expression on his face. “While I am sure you are conducting drills as you ordinarily would, these men are all amateurs—conscripted soldiers. They are not made of the same stuff as the regular soldiers in the army’s ranks.”

Gostav stood at stiff attention as the chancellor dressed him down.

“At times you may find need to reprimand them, but you mustn’t strike them,” Sergey continued. “It would be contrary to our goals if our subjects began to avoid regular training—we are not attempting to hone these men into hardened warriors. This is merely an effort to prevent our conscripted ranks from devolving into a mob, should we ever have need to call a draft. You are to train them upon that premise.”

If the crown wished to build a complete armed force, then this periodic training effort needed only refine its amateur conscripts to a step above the ordinary civilian. It was preferable to allow the men some grace so that they would meet their responsibilities willingly, raising the overall average competency of the force to the highest degree possible. A training regimen that was too severe risked frightening the populace, encouraging the spread of rumors that could harm morale and hinder voluntary participation.

“This is the policy that our king has decreed, and I concur with His Majesty’s view,” said Sergey. “Lord Vogel would have reached the same conclusion, were

he here. Take heed, Lieutenant General.”

In the case of such minor admonishments, it was not advisable for Slaine, the king, to scold his subjects directly—and were a soldier of Victor’s social standing to speak out against Gostav’s conduct, it would have caused offense. While Sergey was not a military man, his high position made him the best choice for the task—and his mention of the name of Gostav’s superior officer added weight to his words.

Gostav was a hawk and a man of fiery disposition, but he was aware of his own temperament and shortcomings—and as an aristocrat himself, he understood his place in the hierarchy. He yielded to the chancellor’s rebuke obediently.

“Yes, sire. I shall keep these principles in mind. Forgive my misstep,” he said. “My incompetence has subjected His Majesty to a deplorable scene. I cannot apologize enough.”

Sergey had said what needed to be said—there was no need for Slaine to heap further admonishment upon the man. “Worry not—you are unquestionably an exemplary soldier, Lord Rustrem. I understand that you have acted solely out of your sense of responsibility as a military officer,” said the young king. “That will be all. You may return to your duties.”

“Yes, sire. I shall continue to serve,” said Gostav. He bowed respectfully, then returned to his soldiers—he approached the man he’d just beaten and offered him a hand. Once the young soldier had climbed back to his feet, the lieutenant general ordered the group to resume training.

“Lord Rustrem is a capable man,” said Sergey. “He does not need to be told more than once. All shall be well from here out—what remains is to train as many of our subjects as possible and wait for their skills to reach an acceptable level.”

Victor spoke up, “Ideally, these conscripts ought to have an opportunity to acquire real-world experience before they forget all of their training. Once one has weathered the travails of real combat, he is not like to forget it.”

“Real-world experience,” Slaine echoed. “Such as...hunting monsters?”

“That will do. Even in the royal army, it is common for fresh recruits to hunt monsters in order to build up grit and courage,” Victor replied. “Time is scarce to incorporate such endeavors into the regular training regimen, but should we ever encounter an opportunity to vanquish such beasts within the royal domain, it may be prudent to employ conscripts to do it.”

And just such an opportunity would arrive within weeks of the suggestion.

In the midst of June, a report arrived at the palace that an orc had appeared in the outskirts of Rutware—Slaine’s hometown.



Rutware was a city close to the southwestern border of the royal domain, with a population of about a thousand people.

While Rutware was the most significant settlement in its territory, its surrounding areas were fairly rural—fewer than three thousand people populated the entire region. As a simple agricultural city, Rutware had little influence in the domain.

And from a forest near a small farming village outside this city, an orc had emerged.

A “monster” was a creature with a magic stone embedded within its body—it possessed a life force stronger than an ordinary animal’s. And within that class, orcs were known to be particularly troublesome. It was the royal army’s responsibility to vanquish such powerful monsters when they arrived to sow chaos throughout the countryside.

However, this time the crown elected to mobilize conscripts to face the threat, with the royal army proper to remain as a reserve force.

The crown recruited a hunting party of sixty people, half of whom belonged to the royal army, including Blanca, the archimage of the royal court. The team departed the capital two days following the report of the orc’s appearance.

It was possible to reach Rutware from the capital in a day, if one hurried. But with inexperienced conscripts in tow, the southward march took about two days.

The morning after its arrival, the hunting party set up camp near the farming village in question, a few hours' walk from the city of Rutware.

An army scout knelt before Slaine and made his report. "Your Majesty, word has arrived that an orc has been sighted in the village. One adult male, with no sign of a mate or offspring."

Blanca, who had sent her hawk to surveil the village as well, added, "Veronica has confirmed that intelligence. This orc fellow, it seems, has filled his belly with livestock, snoring contentedly in the midst of town."

"My lord, if the orc is alone, it is probably a young male who was chased out of the forest following a territorial dispute," Victor opined. "But our large supply of crossbows should make quick work of such a beast."

Slaine nodded. "All right, then—let us proceed and give our conscripts the taste of battle they need," he said. "I've not seen an orc in the flesh before. I'll be watching over your exercise today."

The young king had already led his army into great battles; there was no need for him to concern himself with small-scale monster hunts. But as a commoner, Slaine had never witnessed a monster slaying—nor the living, breathing creature itself. It wasn't a particularly becoming activity for a king, but he had decided to come observe the hunt as part of his education.

The presence of the king bolstered the conscripted troops' morale. And even were the battle to become an earnest struggle, there was little risk that Slaine would come to harm with the army, the royal guard, and Blanca's horned bear familiar between him and the monster.

"Gostav, Viscount of Rustrem, I will entrust the command to you," said Slaine. "I await your success."

Gostav primly saluted. "Yes, sire! I pledge to vanquish the orc menace."

Ordinarily, a company commander would take charge of a monster-hunting strike force, but with the king in attendance and a unit composed primarily of conscripts, the lieutenant general himself took command.

"All right, you sorry bastards—ready yourselves for a fight! We've brought twenty expensive and powerful crossbows with us! With an advantage like this,

a single orc is nothing!” bellowed Gostav.

The sixty men saluted in unison.

The recruits for this hunt had been identified as prospects during regular training. If these men, the cream of the crop, were to bolster their courage through real combat, they would be better equipped to organize the other conscripted soldiers in the event of a war.

“Good, good!” Gostav barked. “Now, men, take up arms and assume formation! Let us march!”

The men—selected for their bravery, ability to respond quickly to orders, and unflinching performance during training—were especially swift for conscripts. They stood fifteen to a row in four columns. Twenty took their places in the vanguard, crossbows at the ready, while another forty who were equipped with spears stood in the middle and rear guard.

With this main force in the lead, Blanca and the royal army reserve force guarded their forward march. Bringing up the rear were Slaine and his guardsmen. Together, they set out for the farming village where the battle would take place.

The small settlement’s population of fifty people had already been relocated to Rutware ahead of the hunting party. Fortunately, there had been no human casualties—the village chief, a former knight of the royal army, had swiftly evacuated the villagers.

However, the village had one inhabitant remaining: the orc. Just as the scouts had reported, the creature was napping contentedly in the center square as the strike team approached. Beside the orc was the carcass of a single pig, stripped to the bone.

Orcs were among the most intelligent monsters. This one seemed to have concluded that the village, with its abundant crops and fenced-in livestock, was an ideal place to nest.

“Troops! All halt. Marksmen, take the center. Infantry, spread out to the left and right,” said Gostav, careful to control the volume of his voice.

The conscripts moved accordingly, leaving the sleeping orc yet unaware of the

hunting party's approach.

The monster itself looked exactly as Slaine had seen it described in the books he had read. Its face resembled that of a boar, and its hulking, muscular body was covered in a stiff pelt of hair. It was hard to judge its height now, lying down as it was, but a standard adult male orc could grow to more than two meters tall.

Orcs were also among the most powerful monsters—it could take as many as twenty men, or an exceptionally skilled sorcerer, to fell such a beast. But even though the main force of the strike team was conscripted soldiers, sixty men—equipped with twenty powerful crossbows—were more than enough for the job. Should push come to shove, the royal army, the royal guard, Axe, and Blanca were also positioned to intervene in the fray. Slaine had authorized the mobilization of the inexperienced conscripts with an abundance of caution. There was very little risk of human casualties.

After confirming the men had assumed proper formation, Gostav ordered, “March!”

The commander himself took the head of the charge, leading the men toward the battle.

“My lord, I believe we should remain in this vicinity,” Victor advised.

“Indeed. We shall stand back for the time being,” replied Slaine. “Victor and Blanca, should the situation turn dangerous, you may intercede at your own discretion.”

Blanca and Victor nodded.

“Certainly,” said Victor.

“Understood,” Blanca replied.

“Your Majesty, would you like to watch the hunt together?”

Slaine looked over at the source of the voice—it was the heir to the Goudsmit Trading Company, Erwin.

The king smiled. Erwin had been his childhood friend, back when Slaine had been but a common boy from the slums of Rutware. Now, the young man was a

merchant in faithful service to the crown.

“Of course,” said Slaine. “It is the privilege of him who supplies the army to watch the show from a special seat.”

As this operation took place on the outskirts of Rutware, the Goudsmit Trading Company was able to handle the transit of all provisions for the hunting party. It was a valuable opportunity for the small trading company to turn a profit and build a greater reputation for itself.

“The Eriksen Trading Company will have more opportunities for larger roles in the near future. As Benjamin grows more busy, I would be glad if you and your team could play a supporting role in these smaller military operations,” said Slaine, wearing the same amiable expression he’d worn when they were boys. “A trustworthy merchant is an invaluable asset to the crown. Thank you for your service.”

Erwin returned the same look. “I shall repay my debt of gratitude by standing steadfastly at your side, working in your service now and hereafter.”

As Slaine and Erwin spoke, Gostav led his force toward the village.

No matter how quietly they approached, they were faced with a powerful monster. When the creature eventually sensed the group of humans, it leapt to its feet and howled furiously, perhaps angered that its nap had been disturbed.

Even Slaine, watching from afar at the rear of the battlefield, startled at the sound of the giant monster’s ferocious cry. The air trembled with the force of the roar—he found himself flinching back in instinctive fear.

Sensing Slaine’s tension, Monica brought her horse up alongside him. “Your Majesty, are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” said Slaine, glancing back at her with a smile. Looking ahead once more, he steadied his expression. “I was just a bit surprised, is all.”

Compared to the battles Slaine had overcome already, what was a simple orc? It was nothing but an intimidating sound.

As if to concur with Slaine’s thoughts, Gostav bellowed, “Men, cower not! The foe we face is but an animal—it is no threat to us humans!”

The conscripts, who seemed rather intimidated indeed, calmed at the sound of their commander's reassurance and held their ground.

The orc began its forward charge with a great howl, wildly swinging about its weapon of choice—a thick wooden stick.

Normally, orcs dwelled deep in the forest—a young male like this had likely never encountered a human being before in its life. It did not understand that it was running headfirst into a line of men armed with projectile weapons.

“Marksmen at the ready! Infantry, stand by!”

At Gostav's command, the crossbow unit formed two rows, their weapons aimed at opposing angles, and their focus on the orc. The pikemen held their positions, clutching their spears.

These soldiers had little experience in combat, apart from a few who had participated in minor skirmishes with neighboring kingdoms or the slaughter of the previous year's battle with the empire. They were the first of the conscripts to take part in a standard military operation.

And for a group of amateurs, they weren't half bad. The men did not flee—nor did they break formation or disobey their commands. Gostav assessed their readiness as he waited for the right moment to give the order to fire.

“NOW!”

At the moment the lieutenant general cried out, twenty bolts flew from twenty crossbows.

A crossbow bolt traveled straight, even when the man behind the trigger was an inexperienced marksman—and a full-size adult orc was a difficult target to miss. More than half the shots struck home, digging into the flesh of its arms, legs, and torso.

Even a beast as powerful as an orc was no match for dozens of armor-piercing projectiles. Clearly frightened, the creature dropped its wooden stick, the momentum of its charge deadened by its fear.

“Marksmen, reload! Infantry, forward! Spears at the ready!”

To compensate for the conscripts' poor aim, Gostav had ordered the

crossbow squadron to fire all at once instead of in two rounds. The infantry was to guard the gap in their defenses as the marksmen reloaded their weapons; the pikemen marched to the fore, using their spears to form a defensive phalanx in front of the marksmen behind them.

The orc, its movements hindered by its injuries, had no hope of breaking through that defensive line. It roared with all its might, but it could not muster the strength to attack, merely swinging its arms about in a futile display of frustration.

By then, the marksmen had finished reloading.

“Infantry, on my mark, spear the beast all at once—then retreat to the sides!” shouted Gostav. “Now!”

The forty pikemen stepped forward, thrusting their long spears toward the monster. The orc lurched back a step at the synchronized attack.

The infantrymen broke to the left and the right immediately thereafter, escaping out of the orc’s range—and clearing the way for the marksmen’s next volley.

“FIRE!”

Another round of bolts flew from the crossbows. At point-blank range, most hit the orc straight on—the beast all but ceased moving.

Groaning, the monster crumpled to its knees, an agonized expression on its face.

“Finish the beast! Thrust your pikes! Aim for the chest, belly, and flanks!”

The infantrymen surrounded the orc, driving their spears into its body from all angles. After more than a hundred brutal stabs, the orc collapsed to the ground and went completely still.

“Oi! You and you! Aim your spears for the eyes—make sure you strike through the brain!”

Two of the infantrymen closest to the orc’s head did as their commander ordered, putting a definitive end to the monster’s life.

“Well done, men! Well done!” Gostav cheered.

And so the orc hunt ended without so much as a minor injury.

Slaine, who had witnessed the battle from the rear, remarked in satisfaction, “Truly well done. Gostav took the command with great skill, and the conscripts moved well.”

“The men did not break ranks and flee—that alone is a sufficient accomplishment for a group of conscripts,” Victor replied.

Following the success of this experiment, the crown formalized the inclusion of conscripted soldiers in future monster-hunting parties—a valuable source of practical training for men untried in battle.



The job of a king was broad. He was to lead the army as its commander in chief, maintain and manage domestic affairs of state, attend various ceremonies and events, and conduct diplomacy with neighboring kingdoms.

And in order to maintain a civilized and cultured society, one of the king’s most important duties was to foster its culture and the arts. For this reason, the crown had established a ministerial position to oversee these matters, reporting directly to the king.

In early July of the 78th year of the royal calendar, Slaine arrived in the audience chamber of the palace with the current minister of culture and arts, Ernesta, Baroness of Lant.

Slaine took his place on his throne, and the baroness joined Monica and Victor beside him.

“And so shall commence the Royal Exhibition of Culture and Arts of Year 78,” pronounced Ernesta. “All are encouraged to present their arts and creations worthy of His Majesty the King’s eminence.”

A gathering of bards, traveling performers, writers, and painters was lined up before the king, bowing to show their respects.

The best and most accomplished of the kingdom’s artists and entertainers created poetry, plays, novels, paintings, and other such works for their royal or noble patrons. But most artists made a living on the road, wandering across the

kingdom or to faraway lands to perform and display their works. In order to provide patronage to the greatest among them, the crown held a ceremony every summer to showcase their creations.

Although stateless entertainers and artists were not counted among Hasenvalia's citizenry, it was estimated that about one to two hundred such persons resided within the kingdom's borders. From that number, the crown had selected thirty to present—and today, they were in attendance before the king, who would award them prizes according to their efforts.

"Come, then, first among you. Let us begin," said Slaine.

At the king's command, an artist at the left end of the line stepped forward. Anyone could tell from a glance that the man was a bard—he was clad head to toe in gaudy attire, a lute gripped in his hand. The middle-aged minstrel gave a bow, offered his name, and began to play and sing his verse in a rich baritone.

Slaine leaned back leisurely into his throne as he listened to the bard's song. "Quite good," he remarked.

"This man has sung before the late king in two previous ceremonies," said Ernesta.

"I see. So my father sat on this throne and listened to his verse as well."

When Slaine had been a young child, his mother had read to him many books and poetry collections. After arriving at the royal palace, he continued to experience a broad selection of culture as a part of his education. Although he was now renowned for his wartime accomplishments, he'd always been far more interested in the arts than in battle.

And so Slaine quite enjoyed this summer ceremony. There was no risk of anyone dying at all.

When the bard finished his song, Slaine praised his verse and proclaimed that the man would be rewarded fifteen thousand crowns for his efforts. For a common singer, it was no small sum—enough to live upon for a year, if not more.

Afterward, a procession of minstrels, painters, writers, and traveling actors came forward to present their talents. As they had all been chosen personally

by the minister of culture and arts to perform, they were the best of the best, all displaying works of great merit.

However, there was one aspect that gave Slaine pause.

“They are all praising my success,” he mumbled in a voice low enough that only his vassals beside him would hear.

One poem went on in exaltation of Slaine’s victory against the Great Empire of Galed, while a play depicted scenes in which Slaine inspired his troops to stand strong against a force many times their own number. A painting rendered Slaine in his military attire, sitting gallantly astride his horse as he commanded the army—depicted to be, he noticed, quite a bit taller than he actually was.

Many more works touched upon Slaine’s two martial victories, with the odd poem praising his magnanimity in allowing Julius a nobleman’s death.

From Slaine’s side, Ernesta answered, “Your Majesty’s victories over the empire and the Duke of Wahlenheit are among the greatest feats in the history of our kingdom. It is only natural that the artists and performers of our realm would choose such achievements as subjects for their artistic expressions.”

And, of course, it was to be expected that these artists would create works extolling the king when they intended to present them to the man himself—with the prospect of a prize should they please him.

Rewarding the kingdom’s artists so glorified the crown and equipped them to spread both their works and praise of the king at home and abroad. The arts and politics were, at times, closely intertwined.

“Of course, I knew that arts depicting noble figures were like to be somewhat...*beautified*, but I confess it’s rather embarrassing to see it happen to me,” said Slaine.

“Your late father made similar remarks each year.”

Slaine laughed softly, returning his attention to the performance before him. “It’s a wonder how alike parent and child can be.”

Though it was rather embarrassing indeed, Slaine did not dislike the praise. To the contrary, he found it fascinating to understand the history behind the

stories and poems he had once enjoyed as a common boy. Was this how it felt to be a muse?



By mid-July, preparations for the royal wedding were well underway.

The palace was equipped with all the basic amenities a queen required—a fine set of furniture had been passed down through the generations, and Monica had already moved many of her personal possessions into Slaine’s quarters already. There would be no great hurry to prepare the palace for her formal arrival in September.

Nevertheless, much work remained.

Clothing was of particular concern. The formal dress of an aristocrat—especially a lady—was necessarily bespoke, and as a baron’s daughter turned queen, Monica would have need of an entirely new wardrobe befitting her figure and status.

Her measurements had been taken immediately following the official engagement, but a tailor continued to visit the palace frequently to make fastidious adjustments and select ornaments.

They also had need to prepare various cosmetic tools and small accessories for the queen’s daily use. The late Queen Catalina’s effects had either been interred with her ashes or returned to House Akerlof, so Monica would require all such implements to be fabricated anew. In accordance with her preferences, the crown commissioned a complete set from a woodworking and goldsmithing workshop to be delivered to the palace on the day of her wedding.

As preparations for the ceremony progressed, Slaine decided to offer Monica a gift of his own.

“Oh? You wish for me to have it?” said Monica.

“Yes,” answered Slaine. “I shall give it to you.”

Monica’s eyes widened as she looked over the dresser before her in the vaults of the palace. It was the black oak vanity that had once belonged to Slaine’s mother, Alma.

The late Queen Catalina's own vanity had been a gift from House Akerlof, so the crown had returned it alongside her other personal effects upon her passing. Monica had planned to bring along the vanity she had used in her own room of her father's manse, but she'd acquired it secondhand. After confirming that Monica had no particular attachments to it, Slaine had decided to broach the subject of a gift.

"But—are you sure? You really wish to give me something so precious?" Monica asked, rather hesitant.

Slaine smiled softly. "This vanity is a precious heirloom of my mother's, but I expect she and my father both would be more glad to see it put to use than collecting dust in a vault forever."

Slaine had inquired after the vanity to Sergey and Sieghardt, who had both confirmed that his late father had sent it to his mother following her departure from the palace. The vanity was not an especially magnificent one, but it was of fine craftsmanship—the gift of a king to the woman he had loved. It was entirely fit for a queen.

"I think, perhaps, my mother intended to pass down this vanity to my future wife and my descendants who would carry my father's blood," said Slaine. "And so I wish for you to be the first to have it, Monica. You will be the mother to my children, after all."

Monica placed a hand on her own chest as she listened carefully to his words, smiling. "I understand. Then I will accept your mother's gift and treat it with great care."

"Thank you," said Slaine. "I love you, Monica."

"As do I—with all my heart," answered Monica. "I love you, Slaine."

She drew him close. They kissed as his arms circled around her back.

"Well, then, would you like to have it tonight? The maids have kept everything in the vaults tidy enough. We could have it brought to the bedroom at any time," said Slaine, gazing up into her face.

But Monica thought it over for a moment and shook her head. "No. I think we ought to wait," she said. "As a courtesy to your lady mother, I will have it only

after I've become your proper wife."

Slaine understood Monica's feelings well—she merely wished to show respect for her mother-in-law.

"All right. Then it shall be so."

"Thank you," said Monica, softly touching the surface of the vanity with an adoring smile. "I look forward to the day I may use it."



The royal capital, a fortified city built in a circular shape, was surrounded by vast stretches of farmland. The crown possessed about a fifth of that land, with the remainder owned by landed farmers—from large landowners to small farming families—who lived in the capital.

Many crops grew on these farmlands. The bulk of it was wheat, but the farmers produced a diverse variety of vegetables as well. And among them, now, was the potato.

Although the cultivation of the potato was yet in its experimental stages, both the crown and the capital's landed farmers had begun to dedicate plots to grow the new crop.

The potatoes that had been planted in the spring were growing well by August, sprouting up in lush green leaves. Under a clear summer sky, Slaine visited one such field to inspect its progress.

"As you can see, my lord, their growth is splendid," said Walter, the minister of agriculture, from Slaine's side. "When we factor in the amount cultivated by the landed farmers, we estimate that we will be able to produce enough food for a hundred more people than before we'd begun these efforts."

"Enough for a hundred people more? If I recall, the original projection was for just over fifty, was it not?"

"Indeed. Production has significantly exceeded previous projections—the farmers of the capital have displayed much greater enthusiasm toward the effort than any of us expected," said Walter. "We are still in the midst of researching matters such as replant failure and crop rotations as regards the

potato, so all signs suggest we shall further improve our yield next year.”

“I see. That is wonderful.”

The present population of the royal domain was about twenty thousand persons, with fewer than sixteen thousand of that number peasants. When one factored in the mercenaries, wandering minstrels, and other individuals not counted in the official tally, the royal domain’s agricultural output was insufficient by two thousand mouths. This demanded that the crown compensate with imports from outside the domain.

To lessen that deficit by one hundred individuals with the addition of one single crop—even in its experimental stages—was no small achievement. If potato cultivation continued to progress at a similar rate, it was entirely possible that the royal domain could achieve total self-sufficiency in the not-too-distant future.

Eventually—were fiefdoms to begin potato cultivation as well—the food production capacity of the entire kingdom would increase dramatically. With fewer farmers needed to feed the population, more labor could be devoted to fields outside of agriculture, strengthening the kingdom’s commercial, industrial, and military power.

Even with an eye toward the short-term advantages alone, this increased production would allow the crown to field a greater number of troops should the empire visit war upon them once more.

“Perhaps the royal family ought to serve potato dishes to the citizenry during the nativity celebrations in autumn?” suggested Slaine. “Should we offer meals free of charge, we could introduce the potato to as many of the realm’s subjects as possible.”

The Feast of the Nativity was a celebration of the birth of the Eynthian prophet, with festivities that stretched over two days. Stalls would soon line the streets of Uzelheim, drawing revelers from all over the royal domain.

“A fine idea. Shall we use the potatoes we intended to wholesale to the market?”

“Yes, let’s. Even if we provide a large feast, the loss of their wholesale price

would be a pittance.”

The potatoes harvested from royal farmlands—apart from those set aside for the next planting—were to be consumed in the palace or else sold to the market at discounted bulk rates. Dedicating a portion of that share to free meals would not impact the crown’s income in any significant fashion. The benefits of the potato’s proliferation among the nonpeasant residents of the capital and the visitors from all over the kingdom would far outstrip any such loss.

“Then let us inform the Eriksen Trading Company that we will reduce the crown’s wholesale portion over the duration of the nativity celebrations by about...” Walter took a moment to consider figures. “Let us be conservative and say ten barrels.”

“Please do. Thank you for your work, Walter,” said Slaine, looking out over the potato fields once more.

“No thanks are required, my lord. This is merely my duty as minister of agriculture.”

“Very well.”

Slaine had followed in his father’s footsteps with agrarian reforms, strengthening the foundation of his kingdom.

The duty of a king exceeded merely his obligation to protect his realm from war. Improving the kingdom from within was another accomplishment of which Slaine could feel proud.



In mid-August, Slaine invited Erwin to the palace for tea. Slaine had no business as king for the man—he’d merely heard that Erwin had come to the capital for work, and so summoned his childhood friend for a personal visit.

“Oh, you’re finally getting married, are you?”

On the terrace facing the palace courtyard, Slaine replied, with a cup of herbal tea in hand, “Yes. An announcement will be made to the public next week, but I wanted to tell you first.”

“Well, then, from which house does the lucky lady hail?” Erwin inquired.

“My bride is the eldest daughter of one of my ministers, the Baron of Adrashelm—her name is Monica. The crimson-haired lady you saw at my side as my aide.”

“Ah, that one? She seemed very beautiful and kind. Good for you.”

Even as a commoner, Erwin could likely surmise that a host of complicated political circumstances had led to a lowly baron’s daughter becoming queen. But as a friend, Erwin did not voice such thoughts—their conversations were always light and amiable.

“Thank you. Yes, I agree, Monica will make a fine bride. She is wasted on me, I fear,” said Slaine. He spoke not as a king but as a man preparing to marry the woman he loved.

Today alone Slaine had requested Monica see to other business, so that her presence would not leave Erwin ill at ease. Perhaps a royal guardsman stood just out of sight to protect them, but at least in the moment, they had the leisure to imagine their conversation was a private one between old friends.

“What about you, Erwin?” Slaine next inquired, a bit of mischief to his smile. “You’ve become a royal merchant and heir to your father’s company, which I hear is flourishing these days. Surely you must be rather popular with the ladies yourself.”

Erwin demurred, an embarrassed twinge to his laughter. “To tell the truth, I’ve a partner already, though we’re only engaged.”

Slaine raised an eyebrow at the good news. “Oh? Surely you jest,” he said, half joking himself.

“You recall that Goudsmit supplied the orc hunting party some months ago? It became quite the topic of conversation in Rutware, so I thought, ‘If there is any time to do it, it is now,’” said Erwin. “I asked Anna to marry me—I told her I could make her happy all her life. That if she chose me, I *would* make her happy. And she said yes.” He beamed. “Of course, her father agreed that a son of Goudsmit would make a fine husband for his daughter.”

“I see. Anna, is it?”

Anna was the same age as Slaine and Erwin—she was well-known for her beauty back in the southwestern district of Rutware, where they'd lived. However, the girl's father was an infamously obstinate blacksmith, and many wondered if the man would ever permit his daughter to marry.

Slaine knew them only by face and name, but Erwin must have been acquainted with them through his family's business ties. It was wonderful news that Erwin had won his lady's heart—and even her stubborn father's approval.

"That's just marvelous. You're a hero to Rutware, and now you've bested that old man and found yourself a wife," said Slaine. "Let me know when you are to be married, and I'll send along a wedding gift."

"No, no. I couldn't possibly accept a wedding gift from His Majesty the King," Erwin said with a wry laugh.

Slaine smiled and shook his head. "There's no need to make a big deal of it. It is only a personal gift from one childhood friend to another," he said. "I'll send you good liquor, and some toiletries for your wife, or some other such things. Accept it."

"All right, then. I'm very grateful." Erwin nodded in agreement. "Ah, it's hard to believe we're already old enough to be married. We were still carefree little children only a few short years ago, it feels."

"So it does. We've grown up so fast, and our responsibilities have changed so much."

"In your case, entirely too much."

"Indeed," Slaine said, leaning back in his chair. "I've become so grand I'm shocked myself."

Erwin laughed softly. "So, the royal wedding is next month, is it?"

"Yes. The twentieth. On that day, and the day after, we will be throwing an enormous celebration. You should come to the capital to visit as well, Erwin."

"Oh! Then I'll look forward to it."

For a while longer, the two worked their way through their cups of tea over relaxed conversation.

All that remained for Slaine to do was to wait for the day of his wedding to arrive...or so he thought.

The morning following Erwin's visit, a disquieting report arrived at the palace.

Chapter 4: A Disquieting Report

“Well, then, Your Imperial Highness—on the behalf of my county, it is my greatest pleasure to forge this contract with the empire.”

“Ah! The pleasure is all mine. I promise to endeavor tirelessly to ensure that ours is a mutually beneficial partnership.”

It was the summer of the 283rd year of the imperial calendar. In the imperial palace of the regional capital of Abelhausen, Florenz Meichelbeck of Galed shook hands with one of the great nobles of the western reaches of the empire.

“We will remit the promised funds from the loan next week, so you will need only wait a short while,” said the nobleman.

“That quickly? Fantastic.”

“I act for none other than the imperial family, so of course I shall endeavor to fulfill my obligations with the utmost haste.”

“Simply splendid. You are truly an imperial citizen of exemplary class.”

“You flatter me, my lord,” said the noble. “Now, I shall hurry back to my estates so that I may prepare the financials. Please excuse me.”

In high spirits, Florenz saw the man off, then took a seat on the sofa in the drawing room. “Ahhh, just wonderful. Everything has proceeded swimmingly. Now I’ve no further cause to worry about funding my next excursion.”

Over the previous week, Florenz had signed a series of contracts with several large noble families across the western reaches of the empire. These funds would allow the prince to strike the Kingdom of Hasenvalia once more.

All together, he’d gathered a sum of fifty million marks—enough to mobilize ten thousand mercenaries and conscripts for several months.

Although Florenz had failed to invade the tiny kingdom once before, the emperor’s name allowed him to gather funds from many lords.

Not only had he lied and said his father had granted him the permission to

raise capital, he'd used the seal of the imperial house to strike the deals. The noblemen had no complaints, so long as the money would be returned with interest—and with a guarantee from the imperial family itself, there was no fear of default. Many were eager to agree to an arrangement.

Some time after his scheme to exploit the Duke of Wahlenheit had failed, Florenz had put this next plan into motion. So long as the second invasion proved a success, it would be no matter to report such dealings after the fact. Florenz knew that his father adored him, and the benefits of extending the empire's sphere of influence into the western kingdoms would far outweigh the sums he'd borrowed.

"The money is ready—now it is time to turn gold into troops. Are you prepared to gather our forces?" Florenz inquired of the civil servant at his side.

The man—a high-ranking senior official charged with the administration of this region of the imperial domain, and a close associate of the prince—nodded. "Yes, sire. At your command, we will immediately commence preparations to gather conscripts and recruit mercenaries."

The official was extremely competent but also extremely greedy. Florenz had tamed the man with money, and now he sat at the prince's heel, a dog who did whatever he was told.

It was this official alone who knew that Florenz had borrowed the money without his father's permission. All others truly and honestly believed that the emperor had provided his backing to the prince's cause as a matter of course.

"Very well, then begin immediately," said Florenz. "If we dawdle too long, my father will hear of my dealings, and I wouldn't wish to worry him. I shall deliver him the sweet news of Hasenvalia's capture before we need discuss the matter of debts."

Florenz had fielded a respectable number of troops in his first attempt, but the men had been of poor caliber. He'd invested too much in the Count of Dubois's elite cavalry unit, and following its defeat, the remaining conscripts had devolved into a ragtag mob.

But this time would be different. First, Florenz intended to gather a large force of mercenaries with his ample funds. When combined with a conscripted

force of a similar scale to the one he'd deployed in the previous invasion, it would constitute a respectable army—and completely overrun the pitiful Kingdom of Hasenvalia.

Florenz himself would command the force—of course, he intended to delegate the practical work to his officers, but he would issue the orders himself as general. He meant to seize victory over the kingdom and restore his battered honor at last.



It was Elena, minister of foreign affairs, who delivered the disturbing news in the meeting hall of the palace. “My department has received intelligence that the third imperial prince, Florenz Meichelbeck of Galed, has commenced large-scale mercenary recruitment throughout the western parts of the Salestakian continent.”

Slaine listened to Elena's report with Monica, Sergey, and Sieghardt at his side.

“According to our reports, the prince is offering remuneration well above market price—a monthly salary of three thousand imperial marks and full entitlement to the spoils of war. Their mission is to invade the Kingdom of Hasenvalia. The prince expects to recruit two thousand men by early October, for a campaign lasting about two months—or until winter arrives in earnest,” said Elena. “They are mustering in Sauerland Fortress.”

Sauerland Fortress was an imperial stronghold that sat on the Leuschner Highway, a major thoroughfare through a valley of the Eldecio Mountain Range.

A deep moat encircled the stone-wrought fortress, which was equipped with several watchtowers, drawbridges, and powerful wall-mounted ballistae. Inside, it boasted a barracks and warehouse in which a thousand men or more could be stationed. And with the advantage of its position in the valley, the fortress was known across the land to be utterly impregnable.

“So there shall be yet more war,” Slaine exhaled, hanging his head.

The young king had experienced two battles already and had achieved remarkable victories in both—but war was not something to which one could

simply acclimate. Slaine loathed the danger his vassals and subjects would be forced to face.

But however fiercely Slaine detested war, if another threat had presented itself, he had no choice but to deal with it accordingly. And so he steeled himself, lifting his chin to look upon his vassals. “Prince Florenz’s position within the empire is weak. There are few nobles who would provide him financial backing, no?”

“It is as you say, my lord. I have received no indication that the state of the imperial court has changed drastically over the preceding year. Considering Prince Florenz’s standing, he should not be able to raise funding for his army in such a short period of time,” said Elena.

Florenz was prosecuting his invasion into the western kingdoms within his power as a mere prince—he ought to have had little hope of launching military action on a comparable scale to his previous attempt.

Nor was it within the realm of imagination that the emperor of Galed himself had thrown his full authority behind the excursion. The empire was still embroiled in hostilities to the north and the east—it could scarcely afford to embark upon a three-front war.

Accordingly, Slaine and his ministers had believed that as long as Hasenvalia maintained its defenses against small raids, there was little imminent danger. It should have taken years for the prince to build his strength and attempt another attack—or for the situation within the empire to change enough for him to recruit powerful allies to his cause. The Hasenvalians had based their defensive plans around the assumption that they need only keep a careful watch for signs of a sea change and cautiously pursue cooperative ties with neighboring kingdoms for the time being.

But the imperial prince had completely shattered those expectations.

“Based on the information you have collected, the cost of the mercenary units alone would exceed ten million imperial marks. When one factors in funds for conscripts and miscellaneous supplies, such a war effort would demand a budget in the tens of millions,” said Slaine. “But how in the world could the prince gather such a sum?”

“From a loan, perhaps?” suggested Elena.

But Sieghardt inquired, “With his weak standing, could Prince Florenz truly find a creditor willing to offer him such a massive loan?”

“Though the prince himself commands little personal trust, he is yet the emperor’s son,” Elena replied. “Should he exploit his father’s name, it would not be impossible.”

“But Prince Florenz is the emperor’s third son, and the child of a concubine, I hear,” said Sieghardt. “Surely he would not have the power to act in his father’s name without explicit authorization?”

“It is precisely because Prince Florenz is the child of a concubine and uninvolved in successional disputes that he receives such exceptional favor from his father. He may be acting in the emperor’s name *without* explicit authorization, assuming that his father will forgive his impudence—provided he delivers favorable results.”

“Even so, surely the emperor would catch wind of such dealings,” said Sieghardt. But he soon reconsidered, adding, “Ah, possibly not. The imperial territory is vast, with much land separating the western reaches of the empire from the imperial capital in the east. Perhaps the prince *could* conceal news of his activities for a considerable period of time.”

Slaine listened to his advisors speak for a while. Eventually he muttered, “I would not expect an ordinary prince to attempt such a risky gambit—but then Prince Florenz is anything but ordinary. It’s entirely possible that he is borrowing against imperial credit without the emperor’s knowledge.”

“My lord,” Sergey spoke up, “the source of the enemy’s funds is undeniably a point of concern, but we lack sufficient information to draw any concrete conclusions at this time. I think it prudent to focus on the prince’s actions for the time being.”

Slaine concurred. “Yes, it is as Sergey says. We will find the answers to these mysteries when we win—again,” he said, returning the topic to the issue at hand. “Do you think there are enough mercenaries to answer the prince’s call?”

Sieghardt nodded and said, “With a monthly salary of three thousand marks

and full rights to the spoils on offer, it is a truly enticing deal. I expect the prince will receive more applications from the mercenaries throughout the western kingdoms than he can accommodate.”

As mercenary and conscript troops were considered expendable, their labor costs were generally low. Unless they were exceptionally elite, stateless mercenaries could not expect remuneration much greater than two to three thousand crowns per month—and given that these mercenaries had no tax obligation due to that stateless status, they were considered to be quite well compensated. The other western kingdoms were not much different from Hasenvalia in this regard.

In contrast, Florenz was offering a monthly salary of three thousand imperial marks—equivalent to approximately four thousand royal crowns—with a free remit to plunder the countryside to sweeten the pot. Any mercenary would jump at the offer.

“I see,” Slaine muttered. “But even so, why is the prince extending himself to gather mercenaries from the western kingdoms specifically?”

“Either there is some reason he cannot recruit mercenaries from within the empire, or he hopes to hinder our efforts to recruit our own mercenaries in the west by beating us to the punch—or both,” Sergey replied. “I am sure we shall uncover more details upon further investigation.”

“And the mercenaries who answer the call shall muster at the Sauerland Fortress via the Leuschner Highway, yes?”

“Indeed,” said Sieghardt. “Some may reach the fortress via other paths, but we expect the bulk of the force to travel upon the main thoroughfare.”

Slaine hummed. “Can we not simply seal the border and stop all further movement? If we could prevent a battle before it happens...”

But Sieghardt shook his head ruefully. “I’m afraid that would be difficult. Mercenaries are not counted among the subjects of this kingdom, and unless they act in the direct employ of the crown, the royal army possesses no right to command them. Shutting the way to the fort would sever these stateless individuals from their hopes of lucrative employment, currying resentment toward us,” he said. “Hundreds of angry sellswords stranded at the border

could itself incur a large-scale military conflict. In a worst-case scenario, a band of rogue mercenaries could demolish our defensive forces on the border before we even come to direct battle with the empire.”

Slaine rested his chin in his palm, his expression drawn into glum concentration. “It seems there is no simple path through this morass.”

They had no choice but to allow the mercenaries to pass as they pleased—war was all but inevitable.

“My lord, as there are as yet many uncertainties, let us prepare for this battle while continuing our efforts to gather intelligence. According to the recruitment parameters disseminated by the prince, the enemy will not make a move until the first week of October at the earliest,” said Sergey. “Fortunately, there is time to prepare.”

Slaine nodded. “Yes, you are right, Sergey. Let us do what we can for the time being and defer a concrete engagement plan for later,” he said. “Elena, continue to gather information on the prince’s troops and the movements of the mercenaries. Sieghardt, I shall ask you to prepare our defense. Sergey, I leave the supervision of the operation to you.”

With those immediate instructions, Slaine called a close to the meeting.

“Are you all right, Slaine? You aren’t pushing yourself too hard, are you?”

After the discussion with his advisors, Slaine had returned to his office with Monica, where she expressed her concern when they were at last alone.

“I am all right,” said Slaine, a faint, strained smile on his face. “I can’t say the news fills me with joy, but the third go-around is a bit less of a shock.”

Monica’s expression was laced with a complicated mixture of worry and relief, but she returned his smile.

“What we must do has not changed. I shall find a way to overcome this crisis while minimizing the casualties to our troops and citizenry. That is all there is,” said Slaine, his expression and voice both hardened. “We are still in the midst of gathering intelligence, but I will probably find a path forward when the time comes. No—I am sure I shall. I must, whatever the case.” But then, with a bit of

sardonic levity to his tone, he added, “Prince Florenz truly has the most wretched timing, doesn’t he? Last year he planned his invasion right before my coronation, and this year he intends to spoil my wedding.”

Monica laughed softly. “Indeed. But please, do not worry. Even if we have no choice but to postpone the wedding, nothing will change between us. I shall do my very best to support you in surmounting this hurdle—and come what may, we *will* be husband and wife.”

“Thank you,” said Slaine. “I’ll give it my best as well—I want you to put that vanity to use as soon as possible, after all.”

The pair drew close together and shared a tender kiss.



Elena and her ministry uncovered further details regarding the imperial prince’s schemes.

According to reports from her ministry’s spies—and the agents similarly dispatched to infiltrate the empire by King Oswald of Ignatov—Prince Florenz was also in the midst of gathering mercenaries in the western imperial territories, where he himself reigned as the emperor’s nominal representative.

These recruitment efforts were not as extensive as those the ministry had detected in the western kingdoms, but it seemed the prince intended to gather an additional thousand men from within the empire as well.

Elena’s ministry also discovered evidence that the prince had begun to transport large quantities of food to the Sauerland Fortress—presumably supplies for an invasion. The principality had also issued a proclamation regarding an imminent draft.

Based on this intelligence, Sergey and Sieghardt estimated the total enemy force to be just shy of ten thousand men.

“Almost double the size of last year’s invasion?” Slaine muttered. “No matter how many strongholds we erect on the border, we won’t be able to feel safe.”

It was the end of August, and Slaine had gathered in the conference hall with his chief ministers once more.

“Given the nature of the enemy, we cannot calculate the scale of the threat simply by doubling the number. Unlike the ragtag gaggle of conscripts the prince fielded in his previous invasion, this force will comprise at least three thousand experienced mercenaries,” said Sieghardt. His arms were folded, a severe expression creasing his brow. “The prince is like to mobilize his own standing army as well. Our border defenses will struggle to beat back even a few hundred professional soldiers.”

In the previous battle, breaking the ranks of the enemy’s main force of five hundred cavalymen had been enough to obliterate the conscripts’ morale. This time, however, they would be up against several thousand mercenaries and standing army soldiers who lived by their blades. Their prowess would energize the conscripted men—it would be a difficult task to shatter their spirits.

The border stronghold that Hasenvalia had built in the valley last year was still but an extension of their field encampment. Although its defensive capabilities were reasonable, it was not robust enough to fend off a force of ten thousand skilled and confident troops for any meaningful length of time.

“If our fortifications cannot hold them back, what are our chances in a direct battle?” asked Slaine.

“Even if we were to call a draft in the name of our life or death as a kingdom, we might only muster five thousand troops,” said Sieghardt. “Preparations for war are underway, but if I am to be frank, the odds are not in our favor—worse than fifty-fifty.”

The enemy was expected to field a force more than double their number in a best-case scenario, and the ratio of professional to amateur soldiers among them would be about five to one. Slaine suspected that Sieghardt’s estimate of “worse than fifty-fifty” was a diplomatic one—it was in all likelihood many times worse than that.

“Then I suppose it is also impossible for us to strike before the enemy has completed its muster and cut off this invasion at its head,” said Slaine, quashing his own suggestion before it was even out of his mouth.

“Indeed, if their rallying point is in fact Sauerland Fortress, that would be a difficult feat. This fort’s reputation as an impenetrable stronghold is no mere

bluff,” Sergey opined. “When I was young, there were a handful of soldiers alive who had assaulted the fortress in the era when the western kingdoms were still united—I heard tell that an army of five thousand men had not been enough to best the five hundred manning the stronghold at the time.”

Sieghardt nodded. “Our last report indicated that about two hundred mercenaries have crossed the eastern border. Presuming that the prince has been recruiting from the imperial side as well, we can expect that—even if all the manpower in their war effort is not to be positioned at Sauerland immediately—the enemy has already stationed several hundred troops at the fortress. Conversely, the number of troops we can mobilize immediately does not exceed one thousand,” said the general. Then he added, “But of course, if His Majesty wills it, then my army will endeavor with all its might to capture the fortress.”

“No, no, it’s too dangerous. Forget about it,” Slaine said with a deep sigh. There was little hope of victory in either a preemptive attack or a head-on conflict. “I must confess that Prince Florenz is a formidable foe. He is nothing like his reputation.”

“Son of a concubine though he may be, few with a prince’s education would grow to be a fool,” said Elena. “I concur that he is exceptionally sharp.”

The other ministers murmured in agreement.

The imperial prince had spent years acting the dove, building a reputation as a mild-mannered moderate throughout the western reaches of the continent—and he had exploited this mask to catch the kingdom unawares. He’d manipulated his enemy’s own aristocracy in an attempt to assassinate their leader, and even when he had failed, he’d distanced himself from the attempt with no personal consequence to himself. And now the man was gathering funds to crush Hasenvalia outright in an overwhelming military onslaught.

Florenz Meichelbeck of Galed was undeniably a force to be reckoned with—this was perhaps the most dire existential crisis the Kingdom of Hasenvalia had faced in all its history.

“But the Sauerland Fortress,” said Slaine, releasing another sigh. Then he found himself laughing bitterly, adding, “I can appreciate its significance as a

historical monument, but it's a real bother to be up against it as an actual military target."

Sieghardt said, "I am sure the nobles and royals who fought against the empire in the united period despised it as well."

The united kingdom that had once ruled over western Salestakia was said to have been blocked from pursuing its own imperial ambitions in the western reaches of Galed by the Sauerland Fortress—its reputation as an unbreachable stronghold could be traced to such times.

During peace, the fortress had become little but a border checkpoint and lodging place for traders, but no longer. The stronghold's existence shattered any hope Hasenvalia had of an effective counterattack. So long as it stood, the initiative was in the empire's hands.

"But if we could seize that fortress, we could take the upper hand," said Slaine, trailing off in thought. "If we had such a foothold in the valley, we wouldn't have to worry about invasion at all."

A fortress built in a steep mountain valley an army could not cross—a stronghold where five hundred men could beat back a thousand...

If Hasenvalia could take it, then perhaps they need never fear the empire's might again.

Slaine shrugged. "Though I suppose if that were so easy, another would have done it already."

"If you were to repel the invasion and steal the Sauerland Fortress from the empire, my lord, history would speak of you as a man of peerless valor," said Sieghardt, a touch of levity to his tone.

"Indeed. And you would be remembered as the great general who broke the unbreakable, Sieghardt," Slaine said, chuckling faintly. "If we *were* to make an attempt," he ventured, "now, before the enemy has assembled its forces, *would* be the time to do it. The longer we wait, the more troops they will rally."

"Indeed, it is true," Elena interjected. "By the latter half of September, mercenaries will be streaming through the border in droves."

Sieghardt said, “Our reports indicate that several well-known mercenary companies have already crossed—in the end, the battle will resemble a sort of exhibition of all the continent’s most famous sellsword troupes.”

Slaine couldn’t help but laugh darkly at Sieghardt’s words. “Were it anyone else in our position, this might have made for an enthralling show,” he said. Thousands of mercenaries lined up on display—it would be a point of historical fascination, if nothing else.

“In the course of our investigations,” Elena added, “we’ve heard word that the mercenaries en route to the fortress were quite the splendid band of fighters indeed. They even count among them the infamous *Ulvheznar*, a group of Grukbian mercenaries.”

“Oh?” Slaine responded. “I’ve heard the name before—rumor has it that one Grukbian is as good as two ordinary men. If it’s true we’ve made enemies of the *Ulvheznar*, we’re in a difficult spot indeed.”

The Grukbian were a people who’d once held territory in the north-central region of the western kingdoms, back when the cluster of small states had been united under one crown. They were said to be descendants of a mountain tribe that had once dwelled deep within the Eldecio Mountain Range and had descended to make peace with the other peoples of the western continent.

Following the collapse of that united kingdom about eighty years before the present day, the Grukbian had been annihilated by the new state that took control of their ancestral holdings. Since then, what remained of them had wandered the continent as stateless vagrants, making their livings primarily as hired swords. The subjects of the western kingdoms often disparaged the Grukbian as “mountain barbarians.”

Slaine had learned of the Grukbian when he was a commoner, and following his ascent to the throne, he had read more of their history in the course of his studies. The *Ulvheznar* were of great renown even among the Grukbian; their leader was a descendant of a Grukbian noble family from the united period.

“The Grukbian,” Slaine mumbled to himself as his ministers spoke. Then, with a sudden start, he turned to Elena. “Do you know where these Grukbian mercenaries are now, Elena?”

“As I recall, there was a sighting just a few days ago—they entered the kingdom from the west, still some ways from the border of the royal domain proper,” answered Elena.

“Good. Then we should have time,” said Slaine, a grin stretching across his face. “Let us make contact with these mercenaries. I have an idea.”



The Ulvheznar, a Grukhan mercenary band, staked their main territory in the south-central region of the western kingdoms. They were renowned for their martial prowess, taking center stage in numerous battles, bandit exterminations, and monster hunts.

There were about fifty warriors in their ranks—not counting about twenty of the group’s members who could not serve as soldiers, such as pregnant women and children under the age of twelve. It was said that their fighting prowess rivaled a hundred ordinary mercenaries.

Their present leader was a thirty-one-year-old man named Jurgis Weinreich. Jurgis hailed from a family that had once ruled over the Grukhanians during the united period. Although they had long since lost their title and landholdings, Jurgis continued to bear his ancestors’ name.

It was toward the end of August when Jurgis caught word of the imperial call to arms—not through a rumor but by the direct invitation of an emissary from Prince Florenz himself.

The prince had offered an eye-watering sum: a monthly salary of five thousand marks per head, in addition to full entitlement to the spoils of war. And if Jurgis himself were to command the Ulvheznar force in the service of the prince, the empire would grant him twenty thousand marks per month.

Such an offer was unprecedented in the west of the continent—and Jurgis had accepted as a matter of course. Sustaining a large mercenary band was certainly not cheap; there was no reason not to jump at the opportunity.

After the Ulvheznar wrapped up the last of their monster-hunting commitments, Jurgis began the march toward the muster at Sauerland Fortress. As it was impossible for a band of seventy to travel such a long distance and

find lodging along the way, the group divided into four units, each taking its own route to the fortress.

By the beginning of September, Jurgis and his party were passing through the royal domain of Hasenvalia, just a few days from Sauerland. And when they reached the small city of Rutware, the Ulvheznar chief decided that they would lodge there, chartering a whole floor of an inn.

Late that evening, Jurgis put his six-year-old daughter down to rest and crawled into bed with his wife. But in the dead of night, just as he was about to fall asleep...

“Pardon me, chief.”

At the sound of rapping on the door, Jurgis instinctively reached for the dagger beneath his pillow. But the voice belonged only to one of his underlings.

The woman beside him was not just his wife but his vice-chief as well. Though she had been asleep only a moment before, she had already leapt to her feet, grabbed her weapon, and begun to throw on her armor. Both of them lived on the battlefield—they were accustomed to moving quickly.

“What do you want at this time of night?” Jurgis croaked, a perplexed expression on his face.

The soldier answered through the door. “Well...” he trailed off, as if unsure of how to tell the story. “A woman’s come to the inn—an emissary of the crown, she said, a countess or the like. She wants to meet. What shall I do with her?”

Jurgis raised an eyebrow in surprise. An emissary of the royal family of Hasenvalia? A bold grin worked its way across his face. “She wants to meet? By all means. Bring her to my room,” he said. “And remember this is a noblewoman. Show her your finest hospitality.”

Prince Florenz had issued a call to arms to break the Kingdom of Hasenvalia—and now the king he intended to topple had sent an envoy to treat with Jurgis. What in the world did the crown hope to accomplish by that? The chief was curious, certainly.

With his wife—already fully dressed—at his side, Jurgis retrieved his own shirt and trousers and had his sleeping daughter brought to another room. Then he

directed his men to set up two chairs for his use.

Jurgis himself took a seat, while his wife stood at the ready—several more of his men took up posts at the rear as well. Once the stage was set, he invited the royal emissary to parley.

“My sincerest apologies for the late intrusion,” said the Hasenvalian envoy, extending a hand. “I am Elena, Countess of Estergren and minister of foreign affairs. I come in the name of His Majesty the King of Hasenvalia. It is my honor to make your acquaintance, Mister Jurgis Weinreich.”

Jurgis stood, rather surprised by Elena’s gracious manner. He accepted her offer of a handshake. “The honor’s all mine. Thank you for the courteous greeting, Your Excellency.” In all honesty, he had expected more arrogance from a countess—he was only a mercenary captain, after all. “This cheap room’s not much, but make yourself at home.”

“Thank you dearly,” said Elena, taking a seat across from the chief with three of her own escorts standing behind her.

One of the men was plainly a soldier. Another, a woman clad in military garb, had a head of blazing crimson hair. And between them stood a slender, delicate thing: small like a child, with gold-streaked black hair—likely a woman, or perhaps a man of exceptionally small build.

The little one wore a hooded robe to hide his or her face, so Jurgis couldn’t be sure. He certainly couldn’t imagine a person of such diminutive stature could be a soldier. Maybe a sorcerer? The other two were surely knights.

“So,” Jurgis began, “what brings my lady to the doorstep of a lowly mercenary such as myself? What business could the royal house of Hasenvalia possibly have with me?”

The chief did not bother to conceal his intrepid grin. Elena returned a charming smile of her own. “My liege lord, His Majesty the King, Slaine of Hasenvalia, wishes to employ your ‘Ulvheznar.’”

“Oh? Fascinating,” said Jurgis. It was what he had expected to hear—he was not surprised. “However, I’m afraid we’ve already accepted a commission from His Imperial Highness the Prince, Florenz Meichelbeck of Galed. We are already

en route to Sauerland Fortress. My apologies, but we cannot possibly accept—”

“We are aware,” Elena curtly interjected. “My lord requests that you enter his service *instead* of that of Prince Florenz.”

“Is that so?” Jurgis replied, his tone flat with anger.

Did this countess intend to make a mockery of him? It was true that he and his men were stateless sellswords—but that did not mean they were mere tools, toys to be tossed to and fro. This countess’s words were polite, but clearly her estimation of the mercenary’s character was dismal. But just as Jurgis was contemplating how best to send her off, Elena spoke up once more.

“Of course, I understand that this is no simple request,” she said. “That is why His Majesty wishes to meet with you, the chief of the Ulvheznar, and confer with you face-to-face.”

“A king? Wishes to meet with me? Ha!” Jurgis barked, laughing. “But when and where would we meet? I could not possibly visit your royal palace, what with my contract with the prince. It would be a disaster, you see, were rumor of my presence to circulate.”

“Yes, my lord anticipated your concerns. That is why he has come here with me today,” said Elena, rising to her feet.

Now, Jurgis had certainly not expected that.

How interesting! The mercenary chief sat back and waited for Elena to call in King Slaine—but the countess did not leave the room. Instead, she stood beside her chair, turning back toward the three people behind her.

“Your Majesty,” she said, bowing her head to the small one in the middle.

The figure pushed back his hood to reveal his face.



Jurgis's eyes widened. "You are the king?"

"Yes. I am Slaine, the fifth sovereign of the Kingdom of Hasenvalia," said the boy. "Pleased to meet you."

And he truly was a *boy*. His features were fine and androgynous, and so was his voice.

After a brief silence, Jurgis grinned and replied, "Even us humble mercenaries have heard tell of His Majesty's exploits. Rumor has it that he defeated five thousand of the emperor's men on the battlefield and quelled an uprising with hardly any bloodshed." He turned his eyes upon Elena. "This child is a rather unfit double for such a heroic figure, wouldn't you say?"

Though he'd addressed the countess, it was the young man who called himself Slaine that answered. "Indeed, when one imagines a great warrior king, surely a more rugged and masculine character comes to mind. How could this boy playing at manhood call himself the king?" he said. "But I'd think this in fact proves that I am the genuine article, no?"

The boy carried himself with calm poise, and his intellect was apparent in his words—Jurgis could not say that his demeanor or manner of speech was *unlike* a king's.

"All right," said the chief. "Then let us converse on the presumption that you are indeed the king as you say."

"Thank you for your understanding," said the boy who called himself Slaine. Then, he took Elena's place upon the chair before him.

As he stepped forward, the two guards standing behind him sharpened their attention—though their expressions had not changed, Jurgis could see in their posture that they were prepared to draw their blades should any harm befall the young man before them.

Perhaps this boy truly was King Slaine after all.

Jurgis, the leader of the Grukhan mercenary clan, was a man in his early thirties. Although he was not of massive build, one could see the toned lines of

his well-trained muscles even through his clothes. Reasonably handsome, he gave off a rather smug and flippant air.

With an arrogant smile on his face, Jurgis addressed Slaine in the chair across from him.

“Well, then, Your Majesty,” he said. “You say you wish to hire my Ulvheznar in the imperial prince’s stead?”

“Yes,” answered Slaine. “The strength of your men is renowned throughout the western kingdoms. Prince Florenz poses a formidable threat to my realm, but with you in my employ, I believe that we can beat back the imperial invaders.”

Jurgis burst into laughter.

The king’s vassals stiffened at the mercenary chief’s impertinent behavior, but Slaine himself paid it no mind.

With a rather mocking look at the young king, Jurgis said, “Well, I’m honored to hear your estimation of our abilities is so high, but there are but fifty fighters in the Ulvheznar ranks—I hear Prince Florenz means to call thousands more sellswords to his cause. Even if you were to hire our blades, it would have little impact on the outcome, I’m afraid.”

“It’s true, the gap between us and the enemy is immense,” replied Slaine. “If the prince is prepared to invade our kingdom in an all-out assault, we will not stand a chance. That is why I intend to launch a preemptive attack of my own, while the empire is still mustering its forces. And for that purpose, I wish to hire you.”

“Oh? M’lord wishes to capture the Sauerland Fortress? The impregnable stronghold that even the full strength of the united western kingdoms could never fell?”

“Yes.”

“Do you have a plan? I’ll hear you out.” Jurgis folded his arms, his eyes raking over Slaine in a challenging glare.

Slaine maintained his composure as he replied. “Those who have attempted it

before me have merely tried to cross its deep, dry moats, or fling themselves at the stronghold's hardy drawbridges, or scale its towering walls," said Slaine. "But if one were to enter the fortress and lower the drawbridge from the inside... Well, capturing it would be a fair bit easier, don't you think?"

Jurgis's expression changed as he listened to Slaine speak—his impertinent grin vanished, a plainly discomforted frown taking its place.

"So, in other words, you wish my Ulvheznar to commit treachery and open the gates to your men? To risk our lives and break our code of honor by betraying our employer? For you?"

"Yes," answered Slaine, his face cool and placid. Silence fell over the room.

Then an aggressive smirk spread across the mercenary's face. "We are indeed stateless blades for hire, disparaged as barbarians and savages in the streets. But I confess it's been quite some time since I've been insulted so callously."

"Have I offended you, sir?"

"Indeed you have," said Jurgis. "Perhaps we mercenaries are expendable tools to a nobleman such as yourself, but even we have our honor. As the chief of my company, I am bound to defend my men; as a descendant of great Grukhan leaders, I am bound to defend my people. And I have my beloved wife and a child to feed."

As the chief spoke, he looked up to the female mercenary standing beside him.

"I work to protect my family. If a mercenary band as renowned as ours were to violate our compact and betray our employer, word would spread quickly of our treachery, and that would be the end of the Ulvheznar," he continued. "We cannot accept such an offer, regardless of whatever compensation you dangle in front of my nose. We would not break our code for anything less than safe harbor and a path to wash our hands of our trade entirely."

Jurgis then returned his gaze to Slaine and squinted at the rutile quartz stone strung around his thin, pale neck. "Instead of discussing such nonsense, I would be better served by capturing you here and now and taking you to Sauerland as my hostage," continued the chief. "I am sure the prince would reward me with

a handsome bonus for such an accomplishment.”

At the chief’s incendiary words, all of the soldiers in the room went taut, prepared for bloodshed. The mercenaries behind Jurgis braced themselves, while Monica and Victor reached for the hilts of their swords. When Slaine glanced to the side, he found that even Elena was ready to draw her dagger. They had reached a critical flash point.

“A handsome bonus, hm? Would you really turn down the reward I’m offering for a temporary windfall like that?”

Jurgis laughed, a contemptuous smirk on his face. “You’re confident, I’ll give you that. What reward do you offer, then?”

Slaine returned a faint smile. “What I offer you is what you have lost—what was taken from the Weinreichs in the shattering of the western kingdoms and the rights of which you Grukians have so long been deprived.”

Jurgis stiffened, shocked—even more than he’d been when Slaine had introduced himself as a king.

“There is a region along the eastern border of Hasenvalia, once a sort of buffer zone against the empire, that has come within the direct control of the crown,” said Slaine. “I’d offer it to you as a fiefdom and grant to you a barony. You may rule as the Baron of Weinreich and create a new safe haven for the Grukian people.”

Jurgis was silent for a long time. “What?” he eventually said. The mercenaries behind him no longer looked poised to kill.

Slaine could see the longing in the mercenary chief’s expression. It was plain as day that Jurgis wanted that land and title.

“That is a truly outrageous proposal,” said Jurgis. As might be expected of a skilled mercenary chief, he soon mended his expression into a shrewd grin. He’d allowed a glimpse of his discomposure to show through for only a few moments.

But those few moments were all it took to give Slaine confidence in his plan.

“What do you mean, give land and title to the Grukians?” said Jurgis. “With

all due respect, *are you in your right mind?*”

“If Sauerland Fortress falls into our hands, it will be an indispensable defensive base. We could use it to safeguard all our territory from the empire,” said Slaine. “For such a boon, I would gladly offer a piece of land and welcome you as a nobleman to our kingdom. I’d consider it a small price to pay.”

“And what shall you say to your aristocracy? Do you truly believe they will accept a Grukhan sellsword as a noble peer?”

“I would be the first king in history to capture the Sauerland Fortress—with such an accomplishment under my belt, I could sway the court to look beyond its pride,” said Slaine. “And besides, the strength of the Grukhan warriors is known throughout the kingdom. Surely even they shall recognize the value of stationing such a formidable ally upon our new border.”

“I see. So you’ll place us on the board as sacrificial pawns for skirmishes in your dangerous borderlands?”

Jurgis and his jabs did not faze the young king, who maintained a gentle smile as he spoke. “I acknowledge that the land I offer you is the least secure area in our kingdom today. But the Sauerland Fortress will become the key to our defense—the crown shall take responsibility for its management and protect it with honor,” said Slaine. “You’ve a sharp tongue, but you see the truth of my words. You Ulvheznar are well-known throughout the western kingdoms—even here in Hasenvalia we know the story of House Weinreich’s quest to regain its honor and find safe haven for its people. If you accept my offer, the life you’ve dreamed of for generations will at last become a reality.”

Slaine turned to offer a nod to Elena, who had informed him of the Weinreichs’ story. The minister of foreign affairs produced a sheet of parchment for Jurgis’s inspection.

“But of course we cannot forge a deal as important as this by verbal contract alone. I’ve had drafted a written oath pledging to you the remuneration I’ve just described, marked with my signature and the royal seal,” said Slaine. “If, after our battle, I attempt to contravene our covenant, you may declare that the King of Hasenvalia is an oath breaker with this writ in hand. And should a man of your stature spread word of my treachery, I have no doubt that my reputation

would fall to ruin, disgraced in the eyes of every monarch and nobleman in all the western kingdoms.”

Jurgis listened to Slaine’s words in silence.

Then Slaine pressed him further. “Will you accept my proposal and restore the Weinreich name to glory? Will you seize control of the future of your people? Or will you refuse and serve the imperial prince?” asked the young king. “The choice is yours—now decide, Jurgis Weinreich.”

For a long while, Jurgis didn’t say anything at all. But then he smiled.

“King Slaine of Hasenvalia... You are an utter fool,” he said, fixing Slaine with a resolute gaze. “All right. I’ll bet our fate on your plan.”

“Thank you,” said Slaine. “I knew you’d see it my way.”

Slaine extended a hand, and Jurgis gave it a firm shake.

After his secret rendezvous with Jurgis Weinreich, Slaine slipped out through the back door of the inn.

Rutware was Slaine’s hometown, and he was acquainted with the inn’s proprietor through Erwin’s merchant family—the innkeep was a smart and honorable man. Slaine could trust that a modest bribe and a careful reminder would be enough to keep his meeting with the mercenary chief properly hush-hush. The innkeep watched quietly as Alma’s boy—now in an extraordinarily different position—vanished with his vassals.

Outside, a unit of royal guardsmen was waiting to join Slaine’s escort.

“All men, move out immediately,” barked Victor. “Our talks were a success, but we consort with mercenaries. Do not let down your guard.”

The men saluted, one of them immediately departing to relay the commander’s orders. There were dozens of guardsmen lurking around the inn, having entered the city after dark—they’d been prepared to rescue Slaine, had the Ulvheznar decided to bare their fangs.

These soldiers remained vigilant. It was still possible that Jurgis, even after pledging his word, could turn on the king and attempt to deliver him to the

imperial prince. Although invisible to their charge himself, the guardsmen moved as the king moved, keeping watch over the area until Slaine boarded his carriage and departed the region. Under the cover of darkness, they fled unit by unit.

Finally safe inside his carriage, Slaine leaned back in his seat and let out a sigh of relief. “That went rather well, wouldn’t you say?”

“Splendid work, my liege,” said Monica.

“I imagine Jurgis would have attacked us already if he intended to—it seems the mercenary chief has come over to our camp after all,” said Slaine. “If he upholds his part of the bargain, so must we.”

Betraying the imperial prince in the midst of the Sauerland Fortress was a dangerous role. And if Jurgis was willing to play it, then Slaine would need to face a perilous task of his own: convincing his aristocracy to accept a Grukhan into their ranks.



By mid-September, the crown had gathered its forces at the eastern border in preparation for an assault on the Sauerland Fortress.

The strike team comprised two battalions from the royal army and royal guard, a unit of royal court mages, about two hundred soldiers dispatched by the territorial armies of the noble fiefdoms, and six hundred conscripts from throughout the kingdom. The Kingdom of Ignatov had also provided two hundred troops as reinforcements. All together, Hasenvalia’s forces totaled about one thousand two hundred men.

As their plan did not demand overwhelming manpower, the crown had focused on skill over number while recruiting. The conscripts—now experienced from regular training and monster hunts—were to be deployed as auxiliary forces, while the fiefdom soldiers would take up the rear guard.

The troops gathered the night before the assault, prepared to sortie in the morning. Slaine called Tobias, Count of Akerlof, and Richard, Count of Cronheim, to his field tent to explain his scheme to capture the fortress; he’d decided it was prudent to reveal the details of his plan to his allies beyond his

inner circle only upon the eve of battle, in order to avoid potential leaks.

“I see. So we have an ally inside Sauerland,” said Richard, once Slaine had explained the entirety of the operation. “Indeed, there is a good chance we could topple the ‘impregnable fortress’ with such an advantage.”

Tobias concurred. “From your past performances on the battlefield, I had expected you would concoct some sort of scheme—but you’ve already won collaborators to our cause? Impressive work, my lord.”

“May I inquire as to the identity of this collaborator?” said Richard.

“The Grukhan mercenaries,” answered Slaine. “We’ve recruited the entirety of the Ulvheznar.”

The two counts responded with identical looks of shock. “That barbarian army?” said Richard. “But I hear they’ve lived as proud mercenaries for generations. How in the world did you convince them to betray the empire?”

“With the former buffer zone on the eastern border of the empire,” answered Slaine. “I’ve pledged the land to the Ulvheznar commander. I’ll grant him a barony as well—he’s the descendant of a family that once held a title back in the united period. Once I’d promised him a path back to honor and a safe haven for his people, he was more than happy to agree to my proposal.”

The two counts grew even more surprised. Richard and Tobias stared back at Slaine in wide-eyed astonishment.

“My lord, with all due respect, that is—”

Slaine cut off Tobias before he could finish, holding up a hand. “I understand your reservations. To men of fine noble pedigree such as yourselves, of course the thought of welcoming a Grukhan into the aristocratic fold is repulsive,” said the young king. “But I beg of you to consider it carefully. If this operation succeeds, the Kingdom of Hasenvalia will take the Sauerland Fortress. With such a stronghold under our control, our chances of defending our land from the empire’s aggression will be vastly, vastly improved. A modest parcel of land and a lowly barony is a small price to pay for such security.”

The two counts fell into silence. Emotionally, they recoiled at the thought of a Grukhan noble—but, rationally, the king’s argument compelled them. Slaine

did not need to explain what a boon the Sauerland Fortress would be to the defense of the kingdom.

“Lord Cronheim, I understand that the creation of a Grukhan territory right at the border of your domain is cause for concern. But consider the suffering your proximity to Galed has caused your people—and your own family,” Slaine continued. Richard’s own father, Eberhard, had lost his life in the previous year’s battle. “If a new territory were to be established to your east, that would become the new front line against the empire. The Grukhan barony will become a wall to protect your people.”

Richard wore an inscrutable expression on his face as he listened to the king’s argument. “I see,” he eventually said.

“You’ll have no need to worry about maintaining public order. While we’ll give the borderlands to the Grukhanians, the crown will control the fortress itself and station a number of troops for its defense. With a royal command post right next door, the Grukhanians would not dream of running roughshod through the kingdom—and should any such unfortunate happening come to pass nevertheless, we would be positioned to deal with it expeditiously.”

Of course, Slaine did not intend to use the Grukhanians—who would become his subjects like any other—as sacrificial pawns at the border. He believed Jurgis to be a wise man and unlikely to lead the Grukhanians into any foolish acts that might jeopardize the safe haven for which they had struggled for so long. However, Slaine understood that he needed to speak to his vassals in language they would understand.

“I understand the advantages, as you say, of posting the Grukhanians to the border,” said Richard. “However...”

The count’s reluctance was plain on his face, but he seemed to be struggling to express his reservations in words. Tobias looked to be in a similar position.

Exclusivity was the flip side of unity. Although Richard and Tobias were the heads of their respective rival factions, they were aligned in that moment—there was a certain brotherhood between all the aristocrats of the kingdom, after all.

Slaine could not easily brush their concerns aside. He knew that he would

need to earn their trust and respect through his own merits.

“My desire is to protect the Kingdom of Hasenvalia from the empire’s aggression, now and ever after. And that is why I shall be the first king to seize the Sauerland Fortress,” Slaine declared, bowing his head. “Welcoming the Grukhiens to our kingdom is a means to that end. I beg of you to recognize my conviction.”

The two counts responded with surprise and discomfort at their king’s show of submission.

“My lord, you need not debase yourself so,” said one.

“Please, there’s no need to bow to us,” said the other.

Slaine didn’t catch who said which. So he lifted his chin and quietly waited for their response to his plea.

Reluctantly, Richard answered, “My liege, if you are truly so determined, then I cannot refuse you. After our victory, I shall explain the matter to my eastern nobles and convince them to accept your decision.”

“Thank you for your understanding, Lord Cronheim,” said Slaine. Then he looked to Tobias. “Lord Akerlof?”

“I raise no objection either. I shall treat with the western nobility,” said Tobias.

Both counts had accepted their lord’s resolve. Slaine’s reputation among the aristocracy was already exceptional, thanks to his martial achievements. If he could manage this feat, then he was sure to become a great king whose name would resound through history.

And that great king had bowed his head to his vassals and begged of their grace. The counts were not about to lose face in such a position—of course they’d accepted his plea. It had gone exactly as Slaine had hoped.

“Good,” he said. “Now, let us prepare for the battle in the morning. Rest well, the both of you.”



The morning after Slaine briefed the nobles, his strike team set out upon the

Leuschner Highway and took up a position before the Sauerland Fortress.

As the valley between the peaks of the Eldecio Mountain Range was long and narrow, the march was forced into a thin line. And at the end of that line, a quarrel erupted.

“We are in the midst of an important military action!” bellowed Gostav, Viscount of Rustrem, who commanded the rear of the army. “If we allow you to pass now, you will hinder our movements! Return to the west!”

“Ye think we care? We’ve been hired by an imperial prince!” shouted back an insolent mercenary, fearlessly squaring off with the viscount. “We’re getting to that fortress, whether ye like it or not! Let us through!”

Prince Florenz had announced the start of October as the deadline for the muster at Sauerland Fortress. That deadline was still a ways away; nonetheless, dozens of mercenaries streamed through the highway to reach the fortress each day.

Of course, Hasenvalia’s march upon the fortress had created a road block. The mercenaries who wished to pass had found themselves stymied by the long line of troops taking up the narrow path forward.

Now a group of sellswords was amassing at the rear. Their representative, this exceptionally loud man, clashed with the royal army’s lieutenant general.

“Ye lot’ve got a head count of a thousand or so, by the looks of it, yeah?” said the mercenary. “Ye can’t capture Sauerland with a skeleton crew like that. An army of simpletons, are ye?”

Gostav bristled and spat. “You! You dare to mock the king’s army? His Majesty the King, Slaine of Hasenvalia, commands us from the battlefield himself!”

“I’ve said nothing but the truth,” replied the mercenary, unbothered by the lieutenant general’s opprobrium. “Face the facts: a puny kingdom like yers ain’t got a fighting chance against the empire!”

“I shall not brook such insolence! I will cut you down, dog!”

“Izzat right? Then come and try it, if ye can!”

Gostav and the mercenary drew their blades. Tension filled the air.

The merchants had been placed toward the back of the formation, safely away from the battle—they began to fuss and move about, attempting to distance themselves from the clash. Benjamin, the chairman of the Eriksen Trading Company, saw the profit of accompanying the king to his death in war, but they stood to gain nothing by perishing in a petty skirmish before the battle proper.

But then a calm voice cut through the commotion. “What is all this fuss about?”

It was Victor, Viscount of Behrendorf and commander of the royal guard. He’d arrived, several of his men in tow, to investigate the cause of the disturbance at the rear of the march.

“Your Excellency!” shouted Gostav. “Call for reinforcements! I’ve told this rabble they are not to pass, but they attempt to force their way through!”

Victor let out a deep sigh at Gostav’s discomposure, inserting himself between his fellow lord and the mercenaries. “Settle yourselves. His Majesty would not wish for us to waste our strength in a place like this.” Then he looked toward the sellswords. “You! I know you wish to pass through to the fortress, but can’t you wait until our operation is complete?”

The mercenaries’ representative scoffed. “Don’t make me laugh. What will we do if we miss out on our chance to take the prince’s coin? We’ve a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, ripe for the taking.”

“But there is plenty of time left until the empire’s recruitment window comes to a close,” said Victor. “Win or lose, our battle will be finished in a few days at the most.”

The mercenary’s eyes widened.

“What—in all your worry about losing out on a lucrative job, did you forget to consider that we might simply assault the fortress and defeat the prince’s army before it even marched?”

But then the mercenary snorted. “Naw, naw. Ye lot haven’t got a shot.”

“Well, then,” said Victor, “it will be no trouble for you to wait a few days longer. Once we’ve been routed, you may enter the fortress over our dead

bodies. The prince's objective is to seize the whole of the kingdom—even if we are defeated in one battle, your work will not be lost.”

The mercenaries glanced around at each other. Eventually, their representative spoke up with a reluctant expression on his face. “Fine, fine,” he said. “It’d be a waste to die in a fight here. We’ll go to the west and wait it out.”

Victor saw them off with a simple nod. “Thank you for your understanding and cooperation.”

Gostav stared at the retreating mercenaries’ backs with a look like he’d bitten down into a foul-tasting bug.

“You look like you’ve a complaint, Lord Rustrem,” said Victor.

“Does it not vex you, my lord? They’ve made fools of us, those rotten sellswords,” answered Gostav.

But Victor merely shook his head with a small smile. “What these mercenaries have to say has no bearing on our battle—our victory is satisfaction enough. And once we’ve captured the fortress, we shall return home with our heads held high and make them eat their words.”

Still bitter, Gostav let out a rattling, defeated sigh. “Indeed, my lord, it is as you say.”



In the Sauerland Fortress, one of the keystones of the Galed Empire’s defense of its western border, Prince Florenz was in the midst of preparations for his next invasion of the Kingdom of Hasenvalia.

Stationed at Sauerland already were the three hundred soldiers who had originally manned the fort, as well as the seven hundred mercenaries who had responded to the prince’s call to arms—about a thousand men in total.

Two hundred of the regular soldiers and a hundred of the mercenaries had been put to work handling logistical matters, such as transporting supplies for the march; there was a risk that hired swords would simply take what they could and disappear, which necessitated that the bulk of such work be handled by the empire’s standing army.

Another hundred of the regular soldiers served as the prince's direct guard, while the remaining six hundred mercenaries had been assigned to the defense of the fortress—in the event that Hasenvalia were to launch a preemptive attack.

Florenz had gathered most of his mercenaries from among the western kingdoms to minimize the likelihood that his father would discover his activities—and the debts he'd incurred to fund it—at an inopportune time.

As he intended to serve as commander in chief himself, the prince had already arrived at the fortress several days earlier. It would be another week or two before the troops would be assembled in earnest, but the exhilaration of commanding the invasion kept him tethered to the stronghold.

And on that afternoon in mid-September, a patrol returned to report that the Hasenvalian army had marched onto the Leuschner Highway.

"Of course I'd considered the possibility, but I truly hadn't expected that the Hasenvalians would attempt to capture the fortress," said Prince Florenz. "This is indeed the king Slaine who bested Morgan's army. He's got pluck, I'll give him that."

The prince had climbed up the western ramparts to watch the enemy's approach himself, his face lit up with glee. "But you report a force of a thousand men? Why, that is far too few to make an attempt on Sauerland."

At Florenz's side was the commander of his standing army, who served the prince as an advisor. "Our enemy is a minuscule country with a population shy of fifty thousand, my lord. Even if their common king wishes to stage a reckless attack upon the fortress, his manpower is inevitably limited. He is doomed by his optimism," said the commander. He thought Slaine a total fool.

"I suppose that's true," muttered Florenz, almost pitying. "What a difficult predicament it is to be the ruler of a tiny kingdom."

Florenz recalled the time he'd met with Slaine face-to-face. The prince, himself the child of a concubine, had experienced prejudice at court on account of his lineage as well; he held no personal distaste for the common-born king. However, regardless of whatever affinity or sympathy he might have felt toward Slaine, it did not move him from his ambitions. He quickly wiped his

mind of such thoughts and returned to the matter at hand.

“We’ve seven hundred troops at the fortress, while our enemy commands a mere thousand and change. I cannot imagine how we could lose such a battle, but you must defend the fortress vigorously nevertheless,” said Florenz, turning toward the other commander who stood beside him on the ramparts overlooking the Hasenvalian forces. “I’ve paid a pretty penny for you barbarians. I trust you will give me my money’s worth?”

Jurgis Weinreich was the most renowned of the mercenaries to have answered the empire’s call to arms. Florenz had appointed the Grukhan mercenary to command the fortress’s defense, alongside the corps commander of his standing army.

The mercenary chief answered with a bold grin. “Leave it to me, my lord,” he said. “In the defense of your fortress—and our subsequent invasion of Hasenvalia—I will prove exactly why we fetch such handsome salaries, and then some.”

Florenz laughed. “A confident man! If your performance truly exceeds my expectations so, then I will grant you whatever you wish as a reward.”

“How kind. Well, then, I would be overjoyed if you were to offer me a noble title, as well as a parcel of land for the Grukhians to call home.”

The imperial prince’s laughter turned into an uproar. “Ha! Give land and a title to the Grukhians, a band of barbarians despised as savages even among the backwoods people of the western kingdoms? You’ve a fantastic sense of humor, good sir.”

Even as Florenz openly disparaged his people, Jurgis’s smile did not falter.

“Ha, you are truly a funny man,” said Florenz, wiping tears of laughter away from his eyes. “But keep your foolishness to jokes.”

“Of course, my lord,” answered Jurgis, turning to face the edge of the ramparts. “As a lowly Grukhan, I know my place.”



“I’ve never seen it in person before. It sure is a magnificent thing,” muttered

Slaine, gazing upon the massive fortress blocking the road.

Its towering stone ramparts were about as tall as the three-story palace in which Slaine lived. There were more than a dozen ballistae set into the walls, and four sturdy towers reaching into the sky. Surrounding the walls was a wide, empty moat that one could not hope to jump across without the assistance of magic. And as the path leading to the fortress sloped slightly downhill, Slaine could see that the dry moat was filled with wooden stakes sharpened into spikes.

The only path across was the fort's drawbridge—presently raised, of course.

Sieghardt, looking upon the stronghold from Slaine's side, spoke up. "Not only is this fortress a marvel of construction, its location makes it incredibly troublesome as well. Only overwhelming force could bring it down, but terrain like this makes a large military assault all but impossible. It truly is a vexingly magnificent defensive base."

Slaine had read in his historical texts that Sauerland had been assaulted many times in the united period, but every attempt had ended in failure.

One prospective assailant had employed physical sorcerers to enhance its army's martial prowess, and wind sorcerers to ferry troops across the moat, but had lacked the raw manpower to shatter the fort's defenses.

Another had attempted to charge down the steep mountainside and attack the fortress from the flank, but most of the men had simply tumbled down the sheer cliffside, resulting in several hundred deaths among their elite fighters.

Yet another had assembled a team of skilled pyromancers to assault the stronghold, pummeling the fort with hundreds of great balls of flame. But the hardy stone walls had withstood the blaze easily.

"Many great rulers of old were brought to their knees by this fortress, and I am the next to challenge it," said Slaine. "I wonder if my strategy will fare any better."

Although Slaine was a peace-loving person, he was about to undertake a task that might well rewrite the history of warfare. Facing down this daunting fact, Slaine wore a rather self-deprecating smile.

Just then, a voice interjected, “What are you talking about? You ought to brazenly declare, ‘I’ll be the first king to tear down those walls!’”

Slaine glanced to his other side—there was Oswald, the King of Ignatov.

“Of course, in my heart of hearts I believe it shall be so,” said Slaine. “King Oswald, do you truly intend to join us in this battle?”

“Naturally. With your strategy, we may accomplish that which all before us have failed to achieve,” said Oswald, ever the warrior. “How could I not participate in such a momentous event? Our soldiers are glad to lend their blades to this historic occasion.”

Slaine smiled faintly. “Your words are very reassuring, sire.”

At that moment, Blanca arrived with her hawk perched on her arm. “Your Majesty, I have received a signal from the leader of the Grukhan mercenaries. He has confirmed he intends to launch his operation tonight,” she said.

“Thank you for your report,” replied Slaine. “I see. So we will be going forward with the plan in a matter of hours.”

The manner in which the mercenary chief signaled from within the fortress was exceedingly simple and successful: Jurgis performed a predetermined gesture outdoors within the view of Blanca’s hawk, Veronica, who then returned to the Hasenvalian base to confirm that the military operation was cleared to advance that night. This system allowed Jurgis, their man on the inside, to choose the most opportune time based on the enemy’s internal conditions. Slaine had assumed it could be several days before Jurgis gave the signal, but sooner was certainly better than later.

“Sieghardt, allow the soldiers to rest while they still can. We must be ready to move upon nightfall,” said Slaine.

“Understood, my lord,” said Sieghardt, saluting respectfully.

Just a few hours later, after the sun had sunk beneath the horizon, the Hasenvalian forces began to prepare for battle under the cover of darkness. The army formed units, prepared its weaponry, and assembled into columns.

All that remained was to steel themselves for war.

Chapter 5: The Battle for the Fortress

At sunset, Jurgis stood atop the western ramparts of the Sauerland Fortress overlooking the Leuschner Highway.

“Oi, Grukhan!” called another mercenary, jeering at the chief’s display of vigilance. “Y’think those Hasenvalian bastards’ll dare attack us in the dead o’ night? There ain’t no visibility in this blasted valley.”

Jurgis laughed and shook his head. “How would I know what the enemy’s planning? Prince Florenz is paying me well, that’s all. When you’ve been appointed to a commander’s post, being prepared for any eventuality is part of the job.”

Earlier that day, Jurgis had advised Florenz to consider the possibility that Hasenvalia might stage an attack at night.

Other mercenaries had opined that it was difficult to imagine the enemy attempting a night siege, given the poor footing in the dark—but Jurgis had still suggested that more men be assigned to the night watch, and the prince had acquiesced.

Then Jurgis had volunteered to head up the night watch himself and had assigned all of the Ulvheznar under his command to the force.

There were presently about a hundred men scheduled for the evening’s shifts. About thirty were resting inside the barracks, with the remaining seventy—including all of the Ulvheznar—standing guard outside.

“Boss, it’s right about time, yeah?” one of his underlings piped up.

Jurgis grinned and said, “I suppose so.” All the men except those on the night watch had already turned in to sleep. It was the perfect time to strike.

A man from another mercenary group loitering outside looked quizzical at Jurgis’s exchange with his underling. “What? It’s far too early for a shift cha—Hrgkh?!”

Before the man could finish his question, Jurgis drew a dagger and stabbed him through the neck at blinding speed. The mercenary's eyes widened, his voice dying in his throat.

"Don't take it personally," said Jurgis, yanking back his blade. Blood spurted in a great flood from the gaping wound it left behind in the man's neck. "The future of my people is at stake."

The sound of the blood splattering against the torchlit walls cut through the stillness of the night.

There were only two more of the prince's mercenaries nearby, but the Ulvheznar had already cut their throats by the time Jurgis's kill slid to the ground.

Jurgis signaled with a short, sharp whistle, and instantly the rest of his men sprang into action.

One by one, the Ulvheznar eliminated all of the prince's hirelings who had been posted to the ramparts, slaying them before any could raise the alarm.

Then Jurgis got to work lowering the drawbridge. The prince had assigned only two of his standing army soldiers to man the defense of the levers—in the blink of an eye, the Ulvheznar had killed them.

It took great manpower to raise a bridge but only a few hands to lower it. The massive plank fell across the moat, creaking with the sound of its heavy chains.

The descent of the drawbridge marked the royal army's cue to act.

"Blanca!" barked Slaine.

At the sound of her name, Blanca nodded and released her hawk. Veronica flew in a circle above the fortress, then returned to her master's arm. After a mere second's glance exchanged between them, Blanca announced, "My lord, there are no signs of a large defensive force waiting for us inside."

If Jurgis had betrayed the crown, then surely Florenz would have had an army prepared to stop their entry into the fortress. But Blanca's reconnaissance confirmed that there was no such risk.

The Ulvheznar had flung open the fortress gates while Slaine had been waiting for confirmation—now the way inside was clear.

Touching the stone in his necklace, Slaine commanded, “Then let the operation commence.”

“First team, at the ready! Push forward!” shouted Sieghardt.

The royal vanguard sprung into action.

Leading the charge was Gostav, Viscount of Rustrem. About twenty cavalymen streamed behind him as he rode toward the open fort. One hundred and eighty infantrymen followed, accompanied by Blanca and her horned bear familiar, Axe.

By nature, a night raid was a difficult operation. An army could only move effectively when its commander was aware of his surroundings and could give precise orders.

Nocturnal assaults were feasible when using a small number of troops to raid enemy encampments on open fields—but here in the valley, with the light of the moon obstructed by tall mountains and the high walls of the fort, one could hardly see anything at all.

But Slaine had engineered ideal conditions through his man on the inside. The army’s only task was to ride forward in a straight line, directly toward the torchlit gate of the open fortress.

Gostav and his men galloped across the bridge spanning the empty moat, passing right under the gates.

In the middle of the wide-open space encircled by the fortress walls was a line of barracks and warehouses. There were sconces lit here and there, so it was bright enough to see, even at night. And the Ulvheznar were gathered by the open west gate.

“Welcome to the Sauerland Fortress, my dear people of Hasenvalia!” Jurgis exclaimed.

Gostav ignored Jurgis’s light and jovial welcome to bark, “What is your status?!”

“The drawbridge clattering down alerted the prince’s men that something is amiss, naturally. There’s not been a big commotion just yet, but I am sure they will continue to rouse,” said Jurgis. “Speak of the devil—here they come.”

The buildings of the fortress were not clustered in one spot but scattered throughout the space, perhaps to minimize damage in the event of an attack. And from one of those buildings—the only one lit inside—came the thirty night-watch mercenaries who had been resting in preparation for their shifts.

Upon noticing the Hasenvalian invaders, they began howling to wake the other soldiers.

“Are all your Grukhiens together with us?!” Gostav demanded.

“Yes,” Jurgis answered. “Anyone who is not with us now is the enemy. You may kill without restraint.”

“Very well,” Gostav replied. Then he barked, “Cavalry, follow me! Infantry, make way and secure this area!”

With that, the lieutenant general kicked the flank of his horse and led his twenty cavalymen into a gallop—charging straight toward the group of enemy mercenaries attempting to rouse their allies.

As Gostav and his men scattered the imperial sellswords, Blanca smacked her bear on the rump and commanded, “Listen up! Every man inside that building is our enemy! Kill them all! If your own life is at risk, retreat and regroup! Now, go!”

Axe charged away like a speeding arrow, rampaging into the barracks closest to the fort’s western gate. Not long after the bear disappeared into the building, screams erupted from inside.

It was not difficult to imagine the scene: dozens of unprepared, defenseless mercenaries come face-to-face with a giant horned bear... It was surely a bloodbath.

As the first squadron secured the perimeter of the west gate, the rest of Hasenvalia’s forces took their places. The soldiers assumed a semicircle formation, with the royal army soldiers at the front, the crossbow-equipped conscripts and noble fiefdom troops defending the left flank, and the Ignatov

soldiers guarding the right.

By then, the enemy mercenaries—only just barely finished preparing for battle—were spilling out from the other barracks scattered around the interior of the fort. They surged out of their buildings in gaggles of six or a dozen, gathering together with other groups to form disorganized, improvised squads.

And in those spots where the imperial fighters looked the weakest, the Hasenvalian forces pounced.

“At the ready!” shouted Richard, Count of Cronheim, commanding his crossbow unit from the right flank.

Of the roughly eighty marksmen, half fell to one knee and readied their weapons.

“FIRE!”

Forty bolts whizzed through the air. About half that number hit home among the line of enemy fighters, decimating the ragtag group of mercenaries.

“Next round!” barked Richard. “Fire!”

The other forty marksmen stepped to the fore, firing a volley of shots. The enemy mercenaries held up their shields or used the bodies of their fallen allies to protect themselves from the rain of bolts—but still about ten of them fell, unable to defend themselves from the onslaught of projectiles.

“Attack, attack!” shouted Tobias, Count of Akerlof. “Pincer the remaining enemy troops!”

As the marksmen hurried to reload, Tobias led his force of fiefdom soldiers in a charge. The men advanced from either side of the crossbowmen, encircling and overpowering the remaining twenty enemy mercenaries.

Once they felled that group, the soldiers regrouped and returned to formation—clearing the way for the marksmen to fire another round.

More enemy mercenaries continued to stream out of the barracks, but a team of royal court mages kept them in check. Some flung balls of fire to forestall the enemy’s approach, while others fired off great gales of wind, fanning the flames and knocking the empire’s bolts and arrows off course.

Thanks to the sorcerers' defensive cover, the troops on the right flank had quickly regrouped and once again moved to attack. The marksmen thinned the enemy ranks, and the fiefdom soldiers picked off the imperial fighters left standing.

And amidst all the clamor of the battle, Richard and Tobias—the perennial rivals—met eyes.

“I never imagined I might one day fight shoulder to shoulder with Eberhard's son,” said Tobias.

Richard grinned. “The enemy of my enemy is my friend, as they say.”

Meanwhile, the Ignatov troops launched a preemptive strike against a squad of enemy mercenaries who had assumed formation for an attack. The noble leaders of the allied kingdom and the subjects in their command overwhelmed the sellswords with their numbers.

And after scattering the first round of enemy troops, the royal army soldiers returned to defend the front of the Hasenvalian formation. With Gostav wielding his blade at the fore, the royal army—the pride of the Hasenvalian crown—sliced through the mercenaries in their path.

As the royal forces brought the fort under their control, Slaine entered the scene, surrounded by his guard and entourage. “To think the ‘impregnable Sauerland Fortress’ could be captured so easily,” he muttered to himself, half in a daze. “A few collaborators on the inside were truly all it took?”

There were no reinforcements following Slaine and his escort. The remaining conscripts had been left posted at the rear, guarding the path into the fortress in the event that the mercenaries waiting at the border attempted to intervene.

Sieghardt spoke up from Slaine's side. “No fortress, no matter how strong, was designed to be attacked from the inside,” said the general. “Your plan was an ingenious one, my lord.”

“Your name shall be engraved in history as the first monarch to fell the Sauerland Fortress, King of Hasenvalia,” said Oswald, who stood at Slaine's other side.

Slaine looked about until he caught Monica's eye—she returned his gaze, nodding her head silently.

“The capture of the fortress is nearly complete,” said Sieghardt. “All that remains is to kill or subdue Prince Flor—”

But before the general could finish, two great blasts rang through the fortress courtyard.

Slaine and his men looked in the direction of the sound—their ten o'clock—to witness an enormous ball of fire surging through the air, hurled from the window of a barracks. The magical projectile exploded upon contact with the ground, blowing away the dozen or so Ignatov soldiers who had been advancing toward the building.

Taking advantage of the opening the blast and the blazing heat had created, an imperial squadron rushed from the barracks.

Perhaps the last cohesive unit left in the fortress, it comprised about a hundred armed and armored regular soldiers, several dozen of the most elite sellswords in the prince's employ, and a handful of imperial sorcerers. This was the very unit Florenz himself commanded.

“Slaine of Hasenvalia!” Florenz bellowed, cutting through the clamor of the battlefield. “You're a stubborn one, you are! I'd quite prefer it if you'd obediently lie down and die!”



“Clearly *you* are the stubborn one, Florenz Meichelbeck of Galed,” Slaine muttered to himself, heard by no one. Then, he turned to Sieghardt at his side. “Sieghardt, can you neutralize the prince and his guard?”

“Of course. The enemy force is barely two hundred men strong. Our numbers shall overwhelm them. There is no escape for the emp—”

But when the prince’s army began to charge, Sieghardt stopped in his tracks with wide eyes.

“Lord Rustrem! Protect the right flank of the left wing!” shouted the general.

Meanwhile, Oswald issued orders to his own troops. “Men, to the right! Intercept the enemy! Hurry!”

The enemy forces had aimed for the boundary between the left flank and the front line—the spot where command of the Hasenvalian troops was most ambiguous. Florenz had spotted the opening from the break in the flags raised and the difference of the equipment of the soldiers, and he planned to turn the tides by striking off the royal army’s head.

Slaine had to commend the nerve of it—both on the part of the enemy commander who’d made the call on the fly, and on the part of the prince, who’d mustered the courage to charge in right along with his army.

The king’s entourage closed ranks: Monica and Sieghardt placed themselves in front of him, Oswald drew his sword, and Victor rallied the royal guard. But even these, the most elite soldiers of the Kingdom of Hasenvalia, could not stall the advance of a hundred determined soldiers charging at full speed. Slaine’s expression fell as he looked to his left, staring down the approaching attack.

Gostav led the twenty cavalymen of the royal army in a sprint to break the enemy’s momentum—only to be met with another blast of fire from the empire’s sorcerers.

The magical volley was not intended to fell the cavalry unit, merely to buy time for the prince’s unit. It was enough: flames sprang up across the field, holding the horses at bay. It seemed the empire had a skilled team of sorcerers on its side as well.

Gostav and his cavalry no longer had any chance of stopping the attack. The Ignatov troops hurried to turn to their right, but the sudden redirection was causing confusion throughout their ranks—it was not assured that they would intercept the prince’s squadron in time.

But just as Slaine was all but convinced they would break through...

“This is the battle for our future!” shouted Jurgis, his sharp voice ringing across the field. “Ulvheznar, show them what it means to be a Grukhan warrior!”

With that, the mercenary chief and fifty of his men leapt directly in front of the charging enemy troops. They surged across the battlefield, baying like wild animals, and collided with the imperial vanguard head-on.

“Wow” was all Slaine could say in his astonishment.

Monica supplied a more articulate response. “It is as if we stand in witness of a god of war at work.”

Even from Slaine’s vantage at the far end of the formation, it was clear that Jurgis and his men were fighting like hell. The Grukhanians’ reputation was no mere legend.

“Soldiers, surround the enemy troops!” hollered Sieghardt, as Oswald rallied his own men: “Warriors of Ignatov! Do not fall behind!”

Jurgis’s forces stalled the prince’s momentum, giving the crown’s army the time it needed to regroup. The Hasenvalian and Ignatovian fighters moved in concert with their commanders’ orders, encircling the empire’s men.

All that remained was to rout the enemy—but that did not mean the empire was ready to surrender just yet.

A knight in splendid armor—the apparent commander of the imperial army—shouted amidst the fray, “Men, shift toward eight o’clock! Push forward!”

The prince’s unit turned on a dime, swerving in an attempt to break through a thin opening in the formation encircling them.

They smashed through the hastily assembled Hasenvalian ranks with shocking speed, dashing straight toward the eastern gate of the fortress—the one

leading back to imperial territory.

And in front of that gate, it appeared that several imperial cavalrymen had hurriedly saddled up a handful of horses from the stables. These men charged in to meet the retreating unit—and from among the swell of fighters, they swiftly assisted a luxuriously dressed man in climbing astride the back of a horseman's mount. There was no doubt that this was the prince.

"Prince Florenz means to escape!" yelled Gostav. "Stop him, now!"

The royal troops rushed after the fleeing prince, but the empire was swift to intercept.

The imperial commander, defending his prince, leapt toward the mounted Gostav. "Let His Imperial Highness escape!" howled the commander. "I will show you my loyalty to the empire!"

Gostav swung his blade to beat back the attacker, but the imperial commander did not flinch away from the blow. The man took the strike head-on, clinging to Gostav's waist.

It was impossible for Gostav to keep upright on his horse—he toppled to the ground, pinned beneath the enemy commander, who drew a dagger.

Winded from the impact of the fall, all but nailed to the ground by the commander's weight, Gostav had no way to resist.

As the blade swung toward his neck, Gostav thought, *This is it.*

But then the enemy commander's head flew off his neck.

It was the Grukhan chief who had struck first. When the commander—now down a head and an arm—collapsed dead on top of Gostav, Jurgis kicked the corpse away.

Looking down at Gostav with an intrepid grin, he held out a hand. "Are you all right?"

"Yes," said Gostav, taking the offered help to climb to his feet. "Thank you."

Gostav took a look at the scene around him—the Ulvheznar mercenaries had joined forces with the royal army, sellsword and knight battling side by side. Jurgis's men were perhaps the most exhausted of the combatants on the field,

and yet they stood proud on the front lines, wielding their weapons without fear.

Gostav silently readied his blade. Beside him, Jurgis gripped his own in his signature one-handed stance.

It was certainly a sight: a noble general of the kingdom and a stateless Grukhan mercenary chief fighting shoulder to shoulder.

Though the two men had their differences, they joined forces to fend off the enemy soldiers' last-ditch attacks. Gostav followed the path of the knightly mercenary, cutting down his foes with a practiced hand and deflecting imperial blades with his heavy plate armor.

Jurgis, meanwhile, nimbly circled to protect their perimeter. He would deftly lunge to slash down any attacker aiming for Gostav's blind spot, then pull back to observe and analyze the enemy's next move.

Countless such scenes were unfolding all across the battlefield. The regular soldiers of the Hasenvalian royal army advanced in orderly formations, the Grukhan mercenaries weaving through their lines to provide agile support.

As Hasenvalia closed in on the eastern gate, the empire's defeat was all but assured. And yet they continued to fight, never once balking in the face of the overwhelming odds. Covered in blood, missing limbs—even those men who could no longer stand crawled on their knees and fought back with their teeth.

This muddy extermination seemed to go on forever, even if in fact it lasted but a matter of minutes. It was not until the prince's soldiers had been slain to the last that the battle was well and truly over.

But by the time there remained no one else to stand in their path, the prince had long since escaped with his cavalry.

"Your Majesty," Sieghardt said, "we could pursue the prince, if you will it."

But the young king shook his head after a moment of thought. "No, let us not. We do not know what lies beyond the eastern walls. Prince Florenz may have already met with reinforcements—we must not allow our greed to blind us," he said. "Let us fortify our position and begin treating the wounded."

“Understood,” said the general, bowing his head in remorse. “My deepest apologies for our failure to capture the prince.”

But Slaine merely smiled and shook his head. “You’ve nothing to apologize for—we have captured the Sauerland Fortress. That is enough.”



Of the seven hundred troops on the empire’s side, over half had been slain in action. All of the imperial standing army, save for those who had escaped with the prince, as well as over three hundred mercenaries, were counted among that number.

Half the remaining mercenaries had fled through the east gate before the prince had even begun his escape, while the other half had surrendered. Many of those mercenaries hailed from lands throughout the western kingdoms, perhaps hesitant to try their luck in foreign imperial territory.

The Hasenvalian forces suffered no small number of casualties as well. Nine royal army soldiers, twelve soldiers of the noble domains, and three conscripts counted among the dead. Ignatov reported that eight of its countrymen had lost their lives as well.

But the bold and brash Ulvheznar felt the losses more keenly than any other: twelve of their fifty fighters had died.

The number of wounded doubled the count of the dead.

Blanca’s bear, Axe, had single-handedly slain about thirty enemy soldiers, but he’d sustained a blow to his front leg in the midst of the battle, taking him out of commission for some time.

Gostav complained of pain in his leg after the dust had cleared. Examinations by a field physician and a sorcerer revealed that he had cracked a bone in his thigh. It was nothing treatment with powerful healing magics couldn’t fix, but he would be unable to return to military service for some time.

Although the physician had ordered the injured Gostav to rest, the lieutenant general attempted to rise when Slaine arrived to visit him. “Your Majesty,” he wheezed. “I allowed the enemy general to escape. I have disgraced the crown.”

Slaine ordered Gostav to remain where he was and seated himself. “You’ve no need to apologize. You all fought well,” said the king. “It is thanks to your tireless efforts that we were able to accomplish the impossible. As your king, I feel nothing but pride for what you have done.”

“I am unworthy of such praise,” muttered Gostav.

Slaine sentenced the frustrated Gostav to more rest and then went about speaking with the other wounded. After visiting the patients, he departed the barracks’ makeshift infirmary, escorted by Monica, Victor, and several of his guardsmen.

As he stepped back out onto the field, Sieghardt approached.

“What is your report?” Slaine asked.

“Preparations for the defense of the fortress are proceeding without issue. Though it may take time yet for them to act, our scouts and Blanca’s reconnaissance have shown no movement on the part of the empire to retake the fortress. Our worries are no more,” answered the general.

Two days had already passed since Hasenvalia had captured Sauerland. Slaine and his entourage had no time to rest—handling the aftermath of the battle was an all-consuming effort.

The crown had distributed payments to the captured mercenaries from a cache of gold and silver coins discovered among Florenz’s belongings—his apparent war fund, stored in a safe in the command building. Then they had released the sellswords outside the fortress. With a handsome month’s salary in their pockets, the lot of them had returned to their homes without complaint.

What remained of the prince’s coin had been divided among the noble lords and rulers in proportion to the number of troops each participant had brought to the battle.

Now, the crown was in the midst of preparations to defend the fortress in the event of an imperial reprisal.

Sauerland’s position in the middle of the valley made it a difficult target for an assault—but the eastern half of the stronghold was not nearly as well fortified as the west. The moat was shallower, its gate was weaker, and there were no

ballistae or other such arms installed atop the walls.

Workers were in the midst of hastily transferring ballistae to the eastern ramparts and reinforcing the gates. Soldiers with available hands had been tasked with deepening and widening the dry moat; a team of earth sorcerers helped the effort along as well.

“Well, that is good to know,” said Slaine. “I am sure Sauerland’s original masters understand better than anyone how solid she is. They are not like to act rashly against us.”

Sieghardt gave a reverent nod of his head in return. “It is as you say, sire. Now, the impregnable Sauerland Fortress and the unparalleled honor of its historic capture are yours. A truly brilliant victory.”

“Thank you. Prince Florenz was a formidable opponent but always one step behind,” said Slaine. “In our battle of wits, I am victorious once more.”

The empire’s preparations for an invasion had been superb. And the prince himself had had the temerity to ride into battle himself, charging alongside his own men on the front lines. However, Florenz had erred in placing his trust in a western man, and that carelessness had led to his defeat.

“I have one additional point to report,” said Sieghardt. “It appears the Ulvheznar intend to hold a funeral in honor of their fallen comrades.”

The Ulvheznar mercenaries had gathered in an open stretch of field off the highway, to the west of the Sauerland Fortress. The Grukhiens’ noncombatant comrades, who had been waiting on the Hasenvalian side of the border, joined them to mourn.

Slaine approached the gathering, Monica at his side. Jurgis raised an eyebrow in surprise at the king’s appearance.

“I’d been instructed to inform you of my intent to hold rites for our dead, but I’d not expected His Majesty himself to show his face,” said the mercenary chief.

Slaine looked out across the funerary urns set lined up across the ground. “You Ulvheznar fought bravely on the behalf of my kingdom, the linchpin of my

plan to capture the fortress,” he said. “It is only proper for a king to mourn the loss of those who served his kingdom so gallantly.”

Placed before each of the twelve urns was a small wooden box. Although the Grukhians followed the Eynthian faith as well, they observed their own tradition of preserving the little fingers of the deceased—this digit alone was to be spared the crematory flames, embalmed in a solution of salt and special medicinal herbs. It was a spiritual custom of their ancestral forebears, passed down from the times when their tribe had resided upon the mountains. Such traditions had played no small part in the Grukhians’ reputation as barbarians throughout the western kingdoms.

“If it’s no intrusion, I would like to join you in your prayers,” said Slaine.

“Of course you are welcome. The dead will be honored by your presence,” said Jurgis. “We are Eynthians as well. Though we have no clergy, and some of our words may be unique to our people, the fundamentals of our rites differ little from yours.”

With that, Jurgis began the funeral service. The mercenary chief read his scriptures, and then each of the Grukhians closed their eyes and prayed for their dead.

Slaine and Monica stood a respectful distance aside, offering their own silent words to God.



A number of days passed as the Hasenvalian forces worked to continue fortification efforts and send off the wounded. Once preliminary preparations had been completed, a group of a hundred gathered in the center of the fort.

Lined up in rows were the lords of Hasenvalia who had participated in the battle, as well as their heirs and the knights of their entourage, interwoven between Grukhiian mercenaries and the knights and nobles in the service of the crown. They encircled the two men at the center of it all: King Slaine of Hasenvalia and Jurgis Weinreich.

Jurgis had fallen to a knee, his head bowed low. Slaine held a light ceremonial sword in his hand—he lifted the blade and gently placed the tip against the

mercenary chief's shoulder.

"Jurgis Weinreich," began the king, speaking ceremonial verse in a solemn tone. "In recognition of thy loyalty to the crown and the unparalleled bravery thou hast evinced in battle, I confer upon thee the noble rank of baron. This title shall pass to thy children and thy children's children, in perpetuity, for so long as thy noble house persisteth in leal and faithful service to the crown. Before the eyes of our one and only Lord do the royal house of Hasenvalia and the Barony of Weinreich swear this oath."

"It is an honor and a blessing," said Jurgis. "On behalf of my family, the Barony of Weinreich, I hereby declare unwavering loyalty to the Hasenvalian crown, in this generation and ever after."

Not for more than fifty years had a new lord been sworn into the nobility of Hasenvalia. But the expressions upon those who stood witness to the occasion were mixed.

The rival counts, Richard and Tobias, had succeeded in persuading the nobles of their factions to accept the Grukhan barony. After the crown's unprecedented success in capturing the fortress—in which the Ulvheznar mercenaries had played a critical role—none dared express open opposition to the king who had devised and implemented the strategy.

But that did not mean the aristocracy was wholly prepared to accept Jurgis with open arms. Each family was divided according to its own ideological values. Some had no qualms after witnessing the Grukhanians' service to their kingdom; others acquiesced, with extreme reluctance, only because it was their king who demanded it.

These mixed feelings unavoidably darkened the atmosphere of the momentous occasion.

"I, the sovereign king of Hasenvalia, hereby proclaim the birth of a new noble house, the Barony of Weinreich," said Slaine, lifting his ceremonial blade to the sky. "I do swear patronage unto the Barony of Weinreich and its people. God and all who hath gathered here today bear witness to mine oath."

With the rite complete, a hush fell over the crowd. Sieghardt, not far from Slaine's side, stepped forward to break the silence.

But applause erupted before Sieghardt could bring his own palms together. All heads swung to the source of the sound: it was Gostav.



Gostav, still recovering from his injuries, attended the ceremony seated in a chair. He stared down Jurgis with an impassive expression, clapping in loud, rhythmic strikes. Jurgis looked back, an eyebrow raised in surprise.

The lieutenant general was considered a hawk among the nobility—and yet he had taken the lead in welcoming the Grukhan to the aristocratic fold. A small murmur traveled through the crowd, but it was soon overwhelmed by a wave of applause.

“Congratulations, Jurgis of Weinreich,” said Slaine. “You are now a nobleman of our kingdom. Your people are our people.”

Jurgis placed his right hand over his heart, bowing his head in reverence to his king. “Thank you, Your Majesty. You have my deepest apologies for my past disrespectful behavior. My loyalty and respect belong to the crown.”

And on that day, applauded by aristocrats and knights, the mercenary chief Jurgis became a noble lord of the kingdom.

Chapter 6: After the Battle

It was early October, a few weeks following the seizure of the Sauerland Fortress.

Hasenvalia's invasion force had already disbanded. The kingdom's hired swords had returned from whence they had come, leaving about five hundred knights, soldiers, and conscripts to man the stronghold. Sieghardt took direct command of the defensive force.

The empire had yet to make any move to retake the fortress. The troops stationed at the stronghold passed the days peacefully—or in agonizing boredom, depending on whom you asked.

Meanwhile, preparations for the royal wedding resumed, albeit a month later than planned.

Just two weeks remained until the day of the ceremony, and Slaine was excited and nervous in equal measure. But it seemed the empire was not content to allow him peace just yet.

Monica brought the pressing report to his office.

"So an imperial emissary has finally requested to meet," Slaine remarked to himself.

The loss of Sauerland was much more than a simple defeat for the empire. Even if Florenz lacked the military might to retake the fortress immediately, Slaine had expected them to react in *some* fashion. What did it mean that they had dispatched a messenger this long after the battle? Slaine couldn't make sense of it.

"So, then, what did the prince's messenger say?" he asked.

"Not the prince's messenger," said Monica. "This emissary has come at the behest of the emperor himself."

Slaine raised an eyebrow. "The emperor himself? Well, I suppose that

explains why it took so long. Is this envoy anyone of note?"

Monica nodded. "Indeed he is, according to our reports."

Slaine's eyes widened when she mentioned the name.

There was no time to waste; the young king immediately departed the capital to return to the fortress himself.



In the command building of the captured stronghold, the King of Hasenvalia met with the emperor's messenger.

The man who sat down across from Slaine was a hard-faced, mustachioed character with a pompous air about him. "I am Maximilian, Crown Prince of Galed," he introduced himself.

To Slaine's knowledge, the current crown prince of the Great Empire of Galed was thirty-four years old. The man across from him now indeed appeared to be about that age.

Slaine looked toward his minister of foreign affairs, Elena, who was present to advise him during the meeting. She returned a silent nod—she'd met the crown prince once before on one of her own visits to the imperial capital.

Then the man's identity was not in question: this was indeed the crown prince. So Slaine addressed him with a smile. "I am Slaine, fifth monarch of the Kingdom of Hasenvalia."

"Please accept my best regards, King Slaine of Hasenvalia," said the crown prince. "Thank you for coming all this way to treat with me here at our fortress."

The ruler of a small western kingdom and the crown prince of the powerful Galed Empire were of roughly equal status, according to the dictates of court etiquette—though the latter wielded vastly greater influence in practice, and Slaine was nearly two decades the prince's junior. It was no surprise that Maximilian did not care to address the young king with especially honorific language.

Slaine maintained an amiable smile nevertheless. "It was no great hardship.

Our kingdom is small, so it takes but three days to reach the border from the royal capital. It is only proper that I personally greet such an esteemed guest to *our lands*,” he said, not about to let the prince’s insinuation about the fortress’s owner go unremarked. “So what is it that you’ve come here to say, Prince Maximilian of Galed?”

When Maximilian had first arrived at the fortress, he’d declared that he would not discuss his business until he had met with the king himself—so Slaine had no insights at all about the prince’s agenda.

“I have come at the behest of my father, His Imperial Majesty the Emperor, to speak in his name,” said the prince. He played at being troubled, as if there were simply too much to say. “Ah, but where to begin? Perhaps there’s something you’d like to ask, King of Hasenvalia.”

Slaine did not hesitate to accept the invitation to a question. “Indeed. I’d like to know what became of the third prince after he fled. And I heard that you were leading the empire’s campaign against your eastern neighbors—what brings you to this most distant place?”

“To put it simply,” the prince began, “my half brother, Florenz, has been relieved of his duties as diplomat and governor of the west, remanded back to the imperial capital to answer for his blunders. He is still en route with his escort, I expect.”

Slaine’s eyes widened.

“About two months back, my father received word that Florenz had borrowed large sums of money from several noble families in the emperor’s name —*without* permission,” Maximilian continued. “It takes about a month to travel from the western border to the capital, so I expect my brother believed he could keep our father in the dark about his dealings until after his invasion. But, as you know, fortune did not smile upon him.”

The prince went on to explain: When Florenz had been in the midst of gathering mercenaries for his invasion, one of the aristocrats from whom he had solicited a loan had made a hasty return to the capital for a family funeral. That lord had spread gossip of Florenz’s supposedly emperor-sanctioned borrowings throughout the imperial court.

It hadn't taken long for word to reach the emperor's ears. And no matter how dearly the emperor adored his son, he could not tolerate such flagrant abuse of his name. He'd had no choice but to hold Florenz to account.

Not long after, one of the empire's own sorcerers had dispatched a hawk familiar to swiftly deliver the news of Sauerland's capture.

Florenz's deceit was crime enough—but to add insult to injury, he'd lost one of the empire's keystone defensive strongholds as well. The emperor had ordered his own personal guard to apprehend the third prince, then sent an emissary to parley with Hasenvalia.

At that time, Maximilian had recently returned to the capital following a major imperial victory on the eastern front. In light of the gravity of the situation, the emperor had judged that the most appropriate envoy was one of solid standing, well apprised of the interests of the imperial family; thus, he had appointed his own heir to meet with the Hasenvalian king.

Maximilian had been able to greatly shorten his travel time with the help of an imperial court mage—the sorcerer had lent the prince a massive eagle familiar, which allowed him to traverse the expanse between the imperial capital and Abelhausen in a week. From there, Maximilian had switched to an ordinary horse for his steed, arriving at the fortress a few days ahead of Slaine's arrival.

"Ah," replied Slaine. "You've had an arduous journey, it seems."

Maximilian let out a deep sigh. "Indeed I have. To be perfectly honest, I am vexed to leave my post at the eastern front," he complained, clearly exhausted. "Why must I, the crown prince of the empire, be banished to this remote frontier to clean up my wretched half brother's mess?"

"I see," said Slaine, choosing to allow the prince's contemptuous grumbling to go unremarked. "So you are here on the emperor's behalf. But what specifically does he wish to discuss?"

The prince answered bluntly. "Sauerland. It is an indispensable asset to the empire's defense, and we want it back. I have come as an emissary of peace to that end," he said. "Of course, we do not expect you to return it for nothing. You've captured it through war, and we must pay an appropriate price in

recompense. The emperor shall furnish two hundred million marks.”

Slaine raised an eyebrow at the price.

Maximilian continued, “We can pay it in a lump sum or in installments. Coin, gold, silver, whatever form you please. In return, my father requests that you vacate the fortress.”

Two hundred million marks—worth about two hundred fifty million to two hundred seventy million royal crowns. It was certainly a large, unprecedented sum—another reminder of the empire’s might.

But Slaine settled his expression and calmly replied, “My apologies, but I cannot agree to your offer.”

Maximilian made a show of puzzlement at Slaine’s response. “And why is that?” he asked. “What I offer you is a sum larger than the entire annual income of your royal family. How could you object?”

“Oh, it’s not that your price is *objectionable*—to the contrary, it is a truly exorbitant offer for a single fortress,” said Slaine. “Alas, it is too paltry a sum to trade for our peace of mind.”

Maximilian narrowed his eyes. “‘Peace of mind’?”

“Yes. The peace between our regions was built on the back of a centuries-long history of trust that the empire would not invade—but recent events have proved that trust to be misplaced.”

Florenz’s invasion had changed everything. Hasenvalia had learned that even a century of peaceful economic ties was no guarantee of anything—and the kingdom’s neighboring states were sure to be of similar minds.

“We cannot return the fortress, whatever your price,” said Slaine. “With Sauerland under our control, we possess insurance against your empire’s capricious whims. As king, it is my duty to protect my country and my people—how could I possibly agree to surrender it?”

“And if I were to say the empire shall take it back by force if you do not comply?”

“Is that truly what you intend?” Slaine asked, tilting his head.

The empire's population exceeded ten million—the total number of military troops it could continuously mobilize during peacetime was about one hundred fifty thousand. Almost all of that number was stationed on the northern and eastern borders, as well as the southern coast, in order to maintain internal stability. Sergey, Sieghardt, and Elena had stressed this point to Slaine several times.

It was difficult to imagine that the empire would wish to divert forces from these battlefronts in order to retake its position on the border of an insignificant neighbor state.

And Sauerland could not be razed through manpower alone. If the crown were to station a mere few hundred men to the post, the fortress could hold off any army attempting to invade.

"Indeed, my kingdom has seized the Sauerland Fortress. However, we wish to maintain control of it solely for the sake of our own national defense," said Slaine. "We pose no threat to your empire. I do not see what you stand to gain by resorting to force against us."

Maximilian had a sharp eye trained upon Slaine. It was clear he understood the young king's point—further conflict would amount to little but senseless bloodshed, and the tiny kingdom had no desire for that either. The prince let out another deep sigh. "I see. Well, I suppose I would say the same thing, were I in your position," he muttered.

Slaine was rather surprised to hear Maximilian acquiesce so quickly. "You expected me to reject your proposal?"

Maximilian pressed his fingertips to his temples, as if he were suffering an awful headache. "Indeed. The value of this fort is obvious to all. Even a small country such as yours would undoubtedly fight to retain it, whatever the price. And I said as much to the emperor," he said. "My father is a great man, but he has grown old and set in his ways. He believes any sovereign of a small state would easily bend to such an exorbitant offer of coin. But of course that is not so."

The prince uttered idle complaints about his family as if he cared not who heard—another sign of his total disregard for the tiny kingdom.

Though Maximilian was far and away a more reasonable conversational partner than his younger brother, he was a son of the imperial family indeed. He clearly looked down his nose at tiny kingdoms like Slaine's.

"Peaceful negotiations have failed. That was inevitable. Your kingdom has neither the means nor the motive to launch an attack against the empire—and even if you were to try, it would be no threat to us," said the prince, laughing scornfully. "Indeed, it is of little consequence to us if Hasenvalia retains control of the fort."

Slaine did not respond. He knew that his kingdom was insignificant to this grand imperial prince, and nothing he could say would change this fact.

"Nevertheless, it would be a great trouble for me if my father were to order me to repel your hypothetical aggressions—even as the crown prince, my position is not unshakable," said Maximilian. "If I cannot concentrate on the east and deliver results, my place in the succession could be threatened. So I prevail upon you: *don't try anything strange.*"

"Of course. You needn't tell me twice—I detest war, to tell the truth," said Slaine.

Maximilian's mouth quirked into a grin. "Do you, now? Not words I expected to hear from the man who repelled my brother's invasions, bloodlessly settled a civil war, and captured an impregnable fortress all in the span of a single year," he said. "But if you are truly the peace-loving dove you claim to be, then we have no quarrel. With your assurances that peace shall be maintained, we will have no further need to worry about our western border. I shall convey the facts to my father."

"And that will be enough to convince His Imperial Majesty the Emperor?"

"Yes, I expect so. The loss of the fortress is a blow to be sure, but my father will not dig the hole any deeper. The empire has not the capacity to trouble itself with such trifles," said Maximilian. "We shall leave the Sauerland Fortress in your care...for now."

"This will shape up to be a rather long '*for now*,'" replied Slaine, a bit of a bite to his tone.

Maximilian grinned, amused. “Word is you were once a commoner, King of Hasenvalia.”

“Yes, that’s right,” said Slaine. “Although royal blood runs in my veins, until early last year I lived all my life as a lowly subject of the realm.”

“Is that so? Bold of you, then, to speak so brazenly to the face of an imperial prince,” said Maximilian. “You are an interesting man, I’ll admit. I don’t dislike you. Though our positions may preclude any friendship between us, when I succeed to my father’s throne, perhaps we shall consider each other *good neighbors*.”

“*Good neighbors*? I hope so as well—though it will require a *mutual* effort.”

The prince smiled at Slaine’s careful emphasis. “Well, then, I’ll be off. I must return to my place on the eastern front without delay.”

“A pity. I’d hoped we could break bread and stay a while, but if you simply must go, allow me to do you the courtesy of a proper send-off.”

“Ahh, you have my thanks,” said the prince. But as he moved to depart the conference room with his dozen guards, he grumbled, “I can’t believe I’ve wasted so much of my time in a place like this!”

Slaine, protected by equally numerous guardsmen, followed Maximilian out.

The prince mounted his horse, surrounded by the rest of his entourage, who had been waiting outside the command building. He was in the midst of a fortress, with hundreds of enemy soldiers all around him, but he displayed not the slightest hint of nervousness.

If Slaine were to lay a finger upon the imperial crown prince, the scene would devolve into mayhem. The empire would take back the fortress and destroy Hasenvalia on the spot. Both the prince and the young king understood this fact well.

“I wish you robust health, King of Hasenvalia,” said Maximilian.

“Thank you for the kind words,” replied Slaine, rather surprised to receive well-wishes from the empire.

“You are a rational, well-spoken man. You will not act recklessly against the

empire,” said Maximilian, perhaps perceiving Slaine’s confusion. “It is everything I could hope for in the monarch of a neighboring state. In all sincerity, I pray for your continued fortune. Farewell.”

With those rather pompous parting words, Maximilian shook the reins of his steed. He and his men departed the fortress at last.

As Slaine watched his “good neighbor” disappear through the gates, he muttered to himself, “So the crown prince of Galed is such a man.”



Saint Elfrieden, the imperial capital, stood on the banks of a great river a little to the south of the middle reaches of the empire.

The city took its name from the founder of Galed, the first empress. Its exact population was unknown, but estimates placed it around six or seven hundred thousand. As the heart of the greatest superpower of the continent, it was renowned throughout the land—its economic and military might rivaled that of many medium-sized states.

The imperial palace occupied a vast swathe of land on the western side of the city, situated between the river and the main population center. And in the audience chamber of that imperial palace, Florenz Meichelbeck of Galed knelt before a magnificent throne. Even with his head bowed low, he could feel his father’s withering gaze bearing down upon him.

“Lift your chin, Florenz,” said the nineteenth emperor of Galed, August III.

“Yes, father,” Florenz meekly replied.

When the third prince did as he was told and met the emperor’s eyes, he thought, *My father has grown old.*

August had already passed his sixtieth year. Although he had once been a warrior-king who rode alongside his troops with his sword held high, little trace of that youthful vigor lingered in his features now. And his weathering was not one of patrician dignity—he had grown into a tired old man, clinging to power through inertia alone.

And that old man looked upon his son with an expression of weary dismay.

“Florenz,” he intoned. “Do you understand why I have relieved you of your duties in the west and summoned you to the imperial capital?”

“Of course. Because of the debts I have incurred, my defeat at Fort Sauerland, and my two prior failed attempts to invade the western kingdoms,” answered Florenz, a wry smile on his face. “I’ve blundered thrice in a row and brought great shame upon myself.”

Florenz was not the son of the empress—his mother, a concubine, had been but a lowly daughter of the Barony of Meichelbeck. And because she’d passed not long after his birth, the grief-stricken emperor had doted blindly upon the child who so resembled his lost love.

So confident of his father’s love for him was Florenz that he smirked even now. But August, who once would have laughed off his darling son’s failures like so much spilled milk, stared back with an unmoving expression of exasperation.

“Father?” said the prince.

No, no, he was wrong—when he looked deep into his father’s eyes, it was not merely exasperation etched into his face. It was *disappointment*.

August released a deep, despairing sigh.

“Last year, I granted you permission to invade Hasenvalia in recognition of your strong will and ambition. But it seems you’ve misunderstood the intent of this gesture,” said the emperor. “Listen to me, Florenz. In choosing to wage war by your own authority, you have proclaimed yourself a full-fledged member of the imperial family. You have placed yourself upon the same footing as your brothers.”

As Florenz felt his father’s tone and countenance darken, he stiffened in surprise.

“I was *glad* to see you grasp for independence, Florenz. And I forgave your failures because I did not wish to discourage you from growth and maturity. All I have done has been for *you*,” the emperor continued.

Then, his gaze sharpened, as if all the majesty of his bygone days had returned to his tired eyes for just a moment—Florenz felt it like a slap.

“And what has come of it all? One failure need not be the end of everything—we all must err. But you were not defeated once, nor only twice. You incurred exorbitant debts and allowed the Sauerland Fortress to be ripped from our control! Utterly pathetic!” August sneered. “To think my own son could humiliate me so.”

Florenz was not alone as he received his father’s caustic rebuke. They were surrounded by nobles of the imperial court.

And close by the emperor’s side was his heir, Maximilian. Although the crown prince wished to return to the eastern front with all haste, his father had demanded he be present to witness Florenz’s sentencing. He beheld the farce unfolding before his eyes with great displeasure.

Indeed, Florenz was an incompetent wretch of a man, and the loss of Sauerland Fortress was a devastating, historic blunder. However, Maximilian could not help but note that there was a simple cause for all this needless trouble: that his father had allowed the third prince to act at all.

From the perspective of an empire so grand and vast, that small cluster of states in the west of the continent was utterly insignificant—perhaps even best left alone. There was some minor profit to be found in trade and other peaceful relations with the region, and no military threat of note.

And yet so blinded by affection had the emperor been that he had allowed his concubine’s son to make a playground of the west. Maximilian did not think it an irreparable disaster, but the events of the previous year had certainly been no boon to imperial interests. August would never have erred so senselessly in the glory days of his reign.

Florenz had always struggled in courtly society. He’d learned to cultivate an image as an intelligent, virtuous man, but the hardships he had faced on account of his parentage had twisted his character. He lacked the responsibility to carry out the role he had been given.

The third prince ought to have been confined to the capital, free to spend his days in leisure. Instead, their father had left the boy to his own devices in a faraway land.

Maximilian averted his eyes as his half brother trembled on the brink of tears.

He couldn't bear to watch the pitiful display. The nobles surrounding them gazed down upon the third prince with contempt plain in their expressions—but witnessing their disdain only deepened Maximilian's discomfort.

It was unremarkable for the court of a great state to grow corrupt and vile. But during the emperor's more youthful days, he had swept away much of the rot infesting the halls of the palace—through the spilling of noble blood, if need be. But three decades on, new depravities had taken root, and many of the lords and ladies of the court had grown spoiled and complacent in their lot.

What a wretched place. Maximilian was loath to remain there for long.

It was imperative that he bring the war in the east to an end before his fortieth year—only a grand victory on such a scale would assure his ascent to the throne. Then, he would return to the capital and purge the court of the corruption that plagued it, ushering in a new age of strength and nobility. He had no time to concern himself with his half brother's trifles so.

Perhaps sensing his elder son's eagerness to depart this place, the emperor sighed and moved things along to a conclusion. "It is no matter. The debts you have incurred will be paid back through the treasury. And while the loss of Sauerland is certainly a blow, the state that has stolen it away is no threat to us. It is far too late for my scolding to be of any use," he grumbled. "We've not met face-to-face in nearly two years. Have your features grown more masculine since last we spoke?"

Florenz choked at his father's words, lighting up with hope. Had the emperor turned his favor upon his son again?

But the prince's hopes were misplaced.

"You've lost any resemblance to Emmeline," August spat, averting his eyes.

Florenz's shoulders slumped. He understood at last that things were well and truly over.

Though he knew his mother's face only from portraits, there was no doubt that she had been a beautiful woman. Florenz was proud of the androgynous features she'd passed down to him, which his father had often praised. But a man could not maintain such youthful, effeminate beauty forever.

It was not as if Florenz had grown ugly with age—his features had sharpened, his beard had thickened, and his hair had grown more coarse, but such qualities were not *unbecoming* of a man entering his late twenties. To the contrary, there were those who might say he was more handsome now. But no longer could he be mistaken for his mother at a glance.

It was obvious to him now: his father had never adored Florenz, merely the memory of the lost love his face recalled. And with that gone, there was nothing left between them at all.

In that moment, something inside of the third prince snapped.

“Ahhh, ahhhhh, aaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!” Florenz wailed as he fell to his knees, cradling his head in his hands.

August and the court nobles recoiled at the display. Maximilian, too, stared at his half brother with mute astonishment.

“Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!” the third prince screeched. “Father! Faaaaaather! Faaather, father, faaaaaaaaather!”

“Wh-What in the *world* are you doing, boy?” the emperor stammered, staring down in disbelieving disgust at his son. The boy had fallen to all fours and begun to crawl toward the throne, as if he’d lost all human reason and turned into some sort of ghastly monster. August rose from his seat, appalled.

Prince or not, the emperor’s guardsmen were not about to allow anyone to approach their liege in such an unsettling and threatening manner. The men at August’s side sprang forward, seizing Florenz before he could make his way any farther to the throne.

“Your Imperial Highness!” shouted a guardsman.

“Please, calm yourself!” pleaded another.

“Nooooooooooooo!” Florenz wept. “Nooo, nooooo! Father! Faaaaaaather!”

The emperor’s guardsmen endeavored to avoid injuring the prince in their efforts to subdue him. But while Florenz did not possess any special physical strength, it was not exactly easy for even the most elite knight to effectively restrain an adult man flailing on the ground like a wounded animal.

Nevertheless, a team of several men eventually succeeded in binding the prince's arms behind his back, forced him to stand, and then dragged him from the audience chamber.

"Ahhhh!" Florenz screamed. "Faaaaaaaaaathhhheeeeeeeeerrrrrr!!!"

The prince's screeching voice faded into a muted whine when the heavy doors of the audience hall slammed shut behind them.

August wiped drips of sweat from his brow. "My goodness," he exhaled. "To think my own son could cause such an unsightly disturbance! Maximilian, you must be astonished."

Maximilian replied in a flat tone, "Perhaps less than you'd think."

Though once a bold and powerful statesman, August had never quite mastered the subtleties of the heart. Privately, Maximilian was astonished that his father understood not at all the role his own words and deeds had played in his son's madness.

"I'd planned to detain him in the palace until he could take proper responsibility for his failures, but now..." The emperor trailed off. "Well, you saw. Perhaps it'd be best for him to see someone for, ah, *treatment*."

"With all due respect, father, a physician or healing sorcerer may be skilled at curing physical ailments, but there is nothing one can do for a shattered mind," said Maximilian.

"Then what am I to do?" said August, at a loss. He was not the sort who would ever understand such pain.

"Time is perhaps the best medicine for the heart," said the crown prince. "It would be best to have him sent to a peaceful place where he can rest and recuperate."

"Is that so? Then I shall. I suppose even if he doesn't come to his senses, he won't be able to cause any more trouble locked up at some retreat far from the capital," the emperor said. "I shan't trouble myself with him any longer."

"Yes, you are right," replied the prince, a little shocked by the starkness of the emperor's turn. His father had once adored Florenz dearly, but there was no

longer any trace of affection in his voice.

Maximilian pitied Florenz, but there was a limit to his sympathies—he could not allow his fatuous half brother’s indiscretions to consume his attentions any longer. His place was on the eastern front.

Florenz Meichelbeck’s ignominious fall entertained the imperial court for a time, but within weeks, the gossip surrounding his scandals had grown cold. Within months, it was as if he had been forgotten entirely—as if he had never existed at all.

And thus did the story of the third prince draw to a piteous close.

Unless...

Final Chapter: Together

The royal wedding finally came together in mid-October, nearly a month later than planned.

The royal domain was to host a succession of great events over the course of a week: a celebration of the historic victory at the Sauerland Fortress, the Feast of the Nativity, and the marriage of the king. The wedding and the festivities that would accompany it were to take place on the final two days of the week.

Unlike the bustling palace or the lively streets of Uzelheim, the Grand Cathedral of the capital was severe and solemn. Slaine and Monica bowed before the altar as Bishop Arthur read the scripture that would solemnize their union.

“God is our Father and our Mother. Forever shall His love rain upon this land and all its inhabitants,” said Arthur. “As the king protecteth the realm, so too shall the king’s bride protect the king. Upon their children and their children’s children doth the Lord bestow His blessings...”

Slaine had donned his crown for the occasion, while Monica wore a silver and iron circlet encrusted with a rutile quartz stone—an heirloom passed down through the royal family for generations. Only the rightful queen was permitted to make use of it.

Guests lined the pews of the church. Many were nobles of the kingdom or envoys from neighboring states, but several monarchs had deigned to attend the ceremony in person.

The king, a former commoner, was about to take a baron’s daughter as his wife; their marriage was of little political significance beyond the simple perpetuation of the royal line. And yet figures of great import had made the arduous journey to witness their union—spending even the sacred period of the Feast of the Nativity in transit to the tiny kingdom.

And all of this was owed to Slaine's unprecedented battlefield victory. Having defeated Prince Florenz and secured safety for his realm—and by extension, all of the western kingdoms—Slaine had become a formidable political figure whose favor many wished to curry.

While once his neighbors had viewed him as merely “competent for a former commoner,” now the young king was among the most important rulers in the west of the continent.

“On this most hallowed day shall this man and this woman evermore be joined together as husband and wife, pledged to love and cherish one another until such a time as the Lord recalleth them to His side,” said Bishop Arthur. “Slaine of Hasenvalia, Monica of Hasenvalia, with God above as our witness, you may kiss to seal your vow.”

Slaine and Monica rose from their pious bows and turned to face one another.

Monica's dress was black and sleek as a crow's feather, decorated with gold thread and rutile quartz stones. Specially made for the queen-to-be, the gown accentuated the lustrous beauty of her rich crimson hair and awe-inspiring line of her figure.

This is the most beautiful woman in the world, Slaine thought.

He took a step toward her, and she toward him. He looked up into her eyes with wonder in his gaze.

Their lips softly brushed together. And then the audience erupted into applause.

“I love you,” Slaine exhaled as he drew back, voice low enough that no one but Monica would hear. “I always will.”

Monica smiled in return. “So do I,” she whispered back. “With all my heart, I love you, my dearest Slaine.”



With the blessed ceremony drawn to a close, Slaine and Monica returned to the palace to oversee the next step in their union.

A group of servants was working to transport Alma's vanity to the newlywed couple's bedchambers. Now that Monica was Slaine's wife, the heirloom rightfully belonged to her.

Once the servants had left the pair alone, Monica approached the vanity and softly ran her fingers over its glossy surface. "Ah, I can use it at last," she murmured to herself, sitting down on the vanity chair.

"I'm sure my mother would be overjoyed for you to have it," said Slaine. "I'll make a visit to the mausoleum and let my parents know everything that's happened later."

"Of course, Sla— Oh?" Monica stopped midsentence, surprised. She'd idly pulled open a drawer of the vanity to find something unexpected inside.

Curious, Slaine took a step forward to see what it was she'd stumbled upon. "What's the matter?"

"Slaine, do you think this might be a double-bottomed drawer?"

Slaine inclined his head to peer inside the drawer. It *did* look rather shallow, compared to its apparent depth from the outside.

"I've barely touched it, and my mother never told me anything special about it," he said. "Could we get it open, do you think?"

"Yes. There's a little gap here for a finger."

Monica reached into the drawer and pushed against the false bottom panel—it slid back smoothly, revealing the hidden compartment inside.

The secret cache contained a single framed portrait, no larger than an open book. It depicted an image of a woman sitting in a chair with a man standing beside her—and in her arms was cradled an infant baby.

"That must be your late father," said Monica. "He looks so much younger than his portrait that hangs in the palace."

"Indeed. And the woman in the chair is my mother, I'm sure," said Slaine.

Although his mother appeared much younger in this portrait than the last time he'd seen her, Slaine had no doubt that they were the same person. He recalled this kind, youthful face from his childhood.

Slaine had thought he would never see her again outside of his fading memories, but sure enough, there she was, her likeness rendered expertly upon the small canvas.

“Then the baby she’s holding must be...” Monica trailed off.

“Yes, of course it’s me,” Slaine muttered, gently lifting up the framed portrait.

When he turned it over, he found there was a message inscribed into the back panel. It read, *I regret that this is all I may leave you. I love both you and Slaine.*

The young king found himself at a loss for words. “I— I had no idea they’d left me anything like this.”

Slaine had perused countless old documents in the palace—he had no doubt that this was his father’s hand. And there was his own name, written clear as day.

He found himself brushing his fingertips over the marks that made up the short inscription. It wasn’t until he felt Monica softly dabbing her handkerchief against his cheek that he realized he’d begun to cry.



When he turned to look up at her face, he found her beaming warmly back at him. He returned a smile of his own.

“I suppose this was the best he could do,” he said. “It’s proof that my mother and father loved one another and that they had me.”

Slaine turned the portrait back over and stared at the image within the frame.

Though Slaine recognized his father’s face, the clothes Frederick wore in the painting were hardly kingly—elegant but modest enough that an observer not intimately familiar with his likeness would not think twice about it. Alma resembled nothing more than the wife of a respectable common house.

And there was no name left to mark it besides Slaine’s—no signature from his father nor any address to his mother. Only one exceptionally close to the royal family would have recognized what this image depicted. The couple had surely found themselves in a difficult position, limited in what they could do.

Had Alma intended to entrust this secret portrait to her son and divulge the secret of his parentage one day? There was no longer any way to know. Slaine’s mother had died suddenly, and the hidden portrait had escaped anyone’s notice until this moment.

“I don’t remember it, but there was a time when my mother and father were together like this,” Slaine remarked. “And I was with them too.”

The portrait came as a great solace to Slaine. He had believed that he had never once met his father—had never made any sort of direct contact at all. But there had indeed been a time, however brief, that the three of them were together as a family.

This portrait was proof of that.

It should have been a source of joy, of happiness. And yet Slaine couldn’t help but weep. He set the portrait back on the vanity so that he would not wet it with his tears.

The young king moved away from the vanity to sit down on his bed, unsure of what to feel. The tears kept streaming down his face. Monica settled in beside him and drew him into a gentle embrace.

When Slaine spoke, he was shocked at how childish he sounded. “This was the only time the three of us were ever together,” he sobbed. “I’ll never see my mother or my father ever again.”

He felt so lonely. He’d thought he had accepted and moved past his parents’ deaths—past their absence. But it was all just so sad. He couldn’t remember what it was like to have his family whole, and he would never have a chance to feel it again.

Monica drew Slaine close and cradled his head against her chest. He let her do as she pleased, allowing himself to be coddled like a child.

After a good while of warm, comforting silence, Monica began to speak. “I will always be by your side,” she said. “I am your wife, your family. And we’ll create our own house together, like the one in this portrait.”

“Thank you, Monica,” said Slaine, his arms circling around her waist.

The couple held each other tenderly, gazing into each other’s eyes. Then, their lips brushed together, and...

Shortly thereafter, Slaine and Monica went to visit the mausoleum in which the ashes of the royal family were interred.

Surrounded by well-manicured trees and flowers, the building was sequestered on a corner of the palace grounds, far from the doldrums of daily life and governance. Slaine knelt before the urn in which Frederick of Hasenvalia lay in eternal repose.

“Father,” Slaine began. “I found the portrait that you left to me and my mother. I read the words you wrote. I’d believed that my blood was the only thread left to bind us, but this painting and your message are indispensable proof of our kinship.” He gently touched the rutile quartz stone slung around his neck as he spoke. “I have succeeded to your throne, and today I have taken a woman as my wife. The royal family of Hasenvalia has been restored with a king and queen. There is still much to be done, but we have come a long way.”

Before the late king Frederick had succumbed to his injuries, he had wished for Slaine to have the crown. Having lost his family and future, wracked by a

regret few could imagine, he had made a final dying wish for his natural son to sit upon his throne.

And Slaine had resolved himself not to disappoint that wish. He accepted that his father had been king—that he was the son of a king. Despite his complicated emotions, Slaine had embraced his own destiny, and his own two legs had carried him this far.

“I will continue forward together with my wife,” he said. “I will continue to do my very best to be a good king—to surpass you. And I will strive to be a good father. So, I beg of you: please watch over us.”

With that, Slaine left his father to rest where he lay beside his late wife and son.

Then the couple stepped outside the royal mausoleum and made their way to a smaller crypt nearby—Alma’s urn had been discreetly interred inside this separate building. Although Alma had been a mere commoner, her ashes had been brought from Rutware and placed on the grounds of the royal palace in a special exception to interment regulations.

“Mother, I got married today. Monica and I are now husband and wife,” said Slaine, speaking with a softer voice than the one he’d used to address his father. “The two of us can overcome any obstacle together, hand in hand. You have no need to worry about us.”

After Slaine’s words were finished, Monica knelt down on the well-manicured lawn in front of the urn to offer her own respects.

“Lady Alma, it is because you gave birth to Slaine that the two of us were able to meet and join together like this. And as your son’s wife, I would like to offer my deepest gratitude to you. I wish we could have met in person.” Monica reached out and, with a gentle, fleeting touch, brushed the tips of her fingers over the ceramic surface of the urn.

“I have inherited your vanity, as well as your role as Slaine’s protector. From this day forth, I shall watch over him as a member of his family. I will do my very best to support him as you did, and when one day I give birth to our children, I hope to be as wonderful a mother as you were. Please watch over us, my dearest mother-in-law.”

With her speech finished, Monica rose to her feet and looked back at Slaine. She returned to his side and took his hand in hers.

The two of them were married. Monica was queen. And tomorrow, their reign would begin in earnest—they would stride forward together as husband and wife for the rest of their days.

Slaine returned Monica's affectionate smile. Then, the newlywed couple left Slaine's departed ancestors behind, walking hand in hand.

Afterword

This is Surume Enoki. It's a joy to meet with you all once again.

I'm pleased to present the second volume of *The Crown of Rutile Quartz*. Your continued support has made it all possible. Thank you!

In the previous volume, Slaine of Hasenvalia faced great challenges, overcame harrowing ordeals, and ascended to the throne in a grand coronation. But that was not the end of his story—merely the very beginning of a long, long reign.

And so this installment in Slaine's saga depicts his first steps down the path of a king. The original web version has been updated with revised sections and all-new scenes. We've done our very best to make this tale of war more thrilling, more dramatic, and more exciting.

Every state faces troubles, both at home and abroad. It is an inevitable part of the human world. A country's upper class, ordinary citizenry, and neighboring states all have their own circumstances, interests, and value systems.

And sometimes those factors collide, giving birth to unpredictable developments. This is how the turbulent vicissitudes of a state become history and the path a king treads becomes legend. I hope that this tale of a kingdom's history and its monarch's journey through it has touched your hearts.

Also, I am happy to announce that a manga adaptation of *The Crown of Rutile Quartz* is progressing smoothly! Tai-sensei will be providing the illustrations, while Shirou Sekino will be handling the composition.

I've been overseeing the production materials and manuscript, and I'm completely captivated—both as the original author and as a reader. I'm really convinced it's shaping up to be an incredible piece of work! I hope that you'll all enjoy it as well.

And now for some acknowledgments:

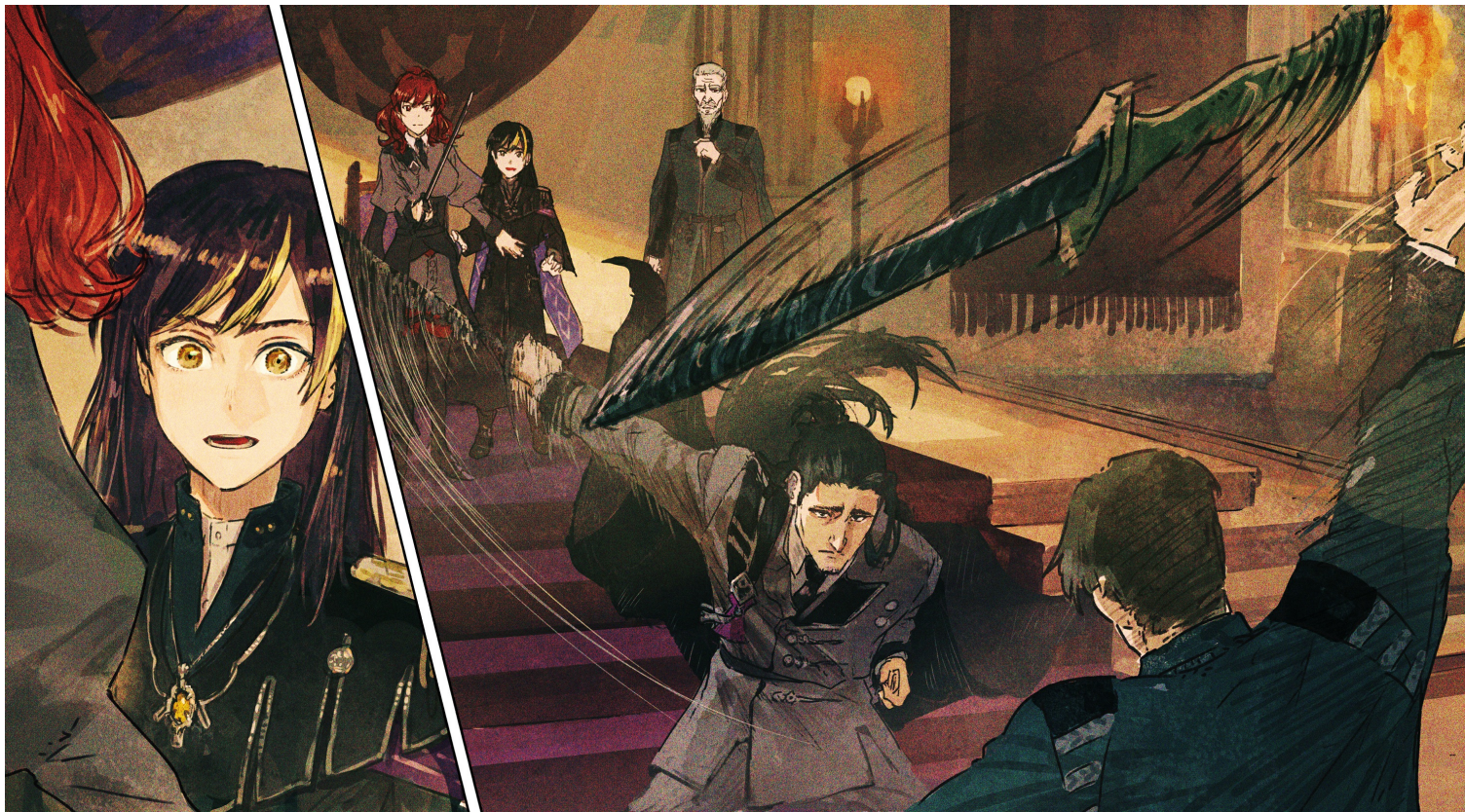
I must offer my sincerest gratitude to my illustrator ttl, who has done a

wonderful job in depicting the upheaval of this second installment with outstanding impact; the editors who oversaw the publication of this volume; and everyone else involved in bringing this story to the world.

And to the readers who have followed this work since its first installment: I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

I hope that this story will be one that lasts in your memory for years to come.









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