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## **Chapter 1: Resolve**

"Slaine, you are a clever boy," his mother said, stroking his hair.

Slaine looked up at his mother's face. In this dream of long ago, his mother was far younger than when he'd seen her last, and he himself was only a child.

"Therefore, for this world, this society—for the sake of this kingdom—you must become the sort of person who can put that cleverness to use, my dearest Slaine."

At the time, Slaine couldn't quite understand the meaning of her gently spoken words. But he clearly remembered that phrase she would so often speak: "this kingdom."

Mother loved this kingdom, her native land.

Slaine woke up.

As he sat up and glanced about the room, everything looked as it always had. The Kingdom of Hasenvalia, ruled by King Frederick IV, was a small country of approximately fifty thousand people in the western region of the Salestakia continent. Within that royal realm was the town of Rutware—and Slaine's home.

However, his home was now different in one important way. Slaine's mother was no longer there.

In fact, she was no longer anywhere in this world. Although she had never before suffered from any ailments of particular note, four days earlier she had suddenly collapsed and passed away.

Slaine did not know his father. According to his mother, he'd been a soldier in the royal army, killed in battle against monsters while she was yet pregnant with Slaine. And now his mother, his only other relative, was dead as well.

Her funeral had been held the day before. Now Slaine was alone.

In the small but meticulously constructed house where he now lived by himself, Slaine rose from his bed.

It was late in winter. The early morning air was still cold. A breeze slipped in through the cracks in the window and caressed his face, making him shudder.

He approached the hearth and lit a fire—quick and easy thanks to his magical firestarter—and then headed for the kitchen to boil a single cup of water, aided by another such device designed for the task.

But the magic stones necessary to power these tools were certainly not cheap for an ordinary person. Given that Slaine had no monetary prospects for the foreseeable future, he figured it best to limit their use.

He steeped some herbs from his mother's garden in the boiling water and finished preparing his tea. Blowing on the surface to cool it off, he took a sip.

Slaine had spoken not a word since the moment he'd risen from bed. He no longer had anyone to speak to.

He helped himself to a few more silent sips and went to open the window by the entryway. The strong wind that rushed in was even colder than the draft, but when he swung back the wooden shutters, the morning sun offered Slaine some respite from his loneliness.

"Ah," he sighed.

With his mother's funeral finished, he was truly on his own. Although he had some friends and acquaintances here in his hometown, he had no family upon which he could depend.

Just as Slaine had reached the age of fifteen and embarked upon adulthood, he had been thrust into an entirely unexpected new life.

There was still much to be done—he needed to inform his mother's clients of the news and secure his own livelihood. Although the funeral had concluded without incident, he had yet to sort through her belongings.

Where should I even start? Slaine wondered.

He finished his breakfast of bread and cheese and changed his clothes. Just as he was finishing, he heard a knock and a voice calling from the front door.

"Hey, Slaine! Are you there?"

He recognized the voice straightaway—his neighbor Erwin, a boy a year older than him.

"I'm here," Slaine called. "Wait and I'll be out in just a moment."

"Hey! Are you still asleep, Slaine?!"

"I'm awake! I told you I'll be out in a moment! Just hang on and I'll be right there!"

Slaine went and opened the door, where he was greeted by the bright, suntanned face of his childhood friend. The boy stood a bit taller than he did, and Slaine had to look up to meet his eyes.

"Oh, so you are up," said Erwin.

"I answered you the first time you called me!"

"I didn't hear you. You've always had such a quiet voice," Erwin said, making a show of sighing and shaking his head.

Slaine bristled. "You're meddling," he said. "What do you want?"

"Nothin'. I figured my friend who just lost his mother might be feeling down, so I came by. Did you eat a proper breakfast?"

"Well, I do appreciate your concern," Slaine replied. "I just ate. The funeral was yesterday, but it's been four days already since she died. I've gotten used to it. I'm fine." Slaine did his best to keep his expression even. He'd have been lying if he said he wasn't putting on a brave front, though.

"So, I obviously couldn't ask yesterday, but what are you gonna do from now on?" Erwin inquired. "Y'know, for work and such. How about you come and work at our place?"

Erwin was the only son of a merchant who ran a storefront in Rutware and traded throughout the realm. Chip off the old block that he was, the boy wore the affable smile of a shopkeeper.

Slaine laughed. "That's kind of you to offer, but I'm quite all right," he said. "I've been helping my mother with her work for some time, and I'd already

planned to strike out on my own in a few years. It's come a bit earlier than I expected, but I'll consult with my mother's clients and see about taking over her trade."

Slaine's mother had been a scribe—she had copied manuscripts into new bindings. She'd taught him how to read and write, and he'd often assisted her in her work. For the past few years, it had fallen to Slaine to go up to the royal capital and deliver the finished commissions to her customers, so he knew her main clients well.

"I see," Erwin said with a smile, apparently unbothered by the refusal. "Well, I suppose you'll be all right, then. You're clever, after all. You learned to read and write faster than me, the son of a merchant! You've always got your nose in a book, and your mind works quick," he went on. "In any case, your mother worked with the businesses and churches and such in the capital, didn't she? We've got some craftsmen to see up there as well, so we're planning to set out from Rutware the day after tomorrow. You should hitch a ride in our carriage."

Slaine hesitated. "Are you sure?"

"You were planning to take next week's stagecoach or walk, weren't you? The stagecoach costs money, and with your looks, you're likely to be mistaken for a girl and carried off if you walk there by yourself. So don't decline just to be polite."

Slaine let out a small sigh. It was just as Erwin said; Slaine was slender like a woman, petite and baby-faced, with black hair down to his shoulders.

However, within Hasenvalia—especially on the roads connecting the royal capital with the surrounding towns—crime was rare. In fact, Slaine had walked the road from Rutware to the capital and back many a time and never once encountered any sort of danger.

Nevertheless, he'd suddenly lost his only blood relative, and his childhood friend was just making an effort to stay close. So Slaine decided it would be all right to accept. "Well, then, I'll take you up on the offer, I suppose."

"All right, then," Erwin said. "We head out the day after tomorrow. Until then, you can relax at home. You have your mother's belongings to take care of, I bet."

With a farewell, he set off.

"The day after tomorrow, huh?" Slaine muttered. Two days would be enough to finish sorting through his mother's belongings, he figured.

And there was also the matter of sorting through his own head. Everything still felt a bit unreal, but he would probably be able to find his footing soon enough. Two days was just enough time for a mental break, and Erwin had likely taken that into consideration when he approached him. Slaine deeply appreciated the thought.

After Erwin left, Slaine spent the day going through his mother's things. As she had preferred a modest life, her belongings did not amount to much.

She had some clothes and a few pieces of jewelry, none of which were valuable.

There were some books as well. She had read many in the course of her work, and had purchased several volumes of academic and historical writing for herself. Books were expensive, but they were ultimately practical items.

Next he sorted through the tools of her trade—her writing implements and paper that Slaine would use if he were to carry on his mother's work.

Her dresser was the only item among her belongings that could be called a luxury—nothing gaudy, but well-built. Slaine could probably sell it for a good price, but it was an heirloom of his mother's. Fortunately, Slaine had enough money saved to eat for another year—as long as he refrained from extravagance—so he had no intention of getting rid of it.

Last was the chest that his mother had forbidden him to unlock. When he opened it up, he found his mother's private letters inside—several dozen of them, grouped by sender.

His mother had grown up in an orphanage in the royal capital, where she'd learned to read and write. While young, she'd served as a menial civil servant in the king's castle. It was there, she had once told Slaine, that she'd met his father, a soldier.

According to her, the people with whom she'd exchanged letters were old

colleagues, all former officials or servants who had retired to start families. Slaine had met some of them himself.

Feeling guilty, he skimmed through the contents of the letters and let out a sigh. "Not here after all, huh?" he remarked to himself.

What he'd been hoping to find was a letter from his father.

From time to time, with a wistful look on her face, his mother had written letters in private, as if trying to hide something from her son. It appeared that his departed father had lingered in his mother's thoughts. Perhaps she had been writing to the man's relatives.

But if that were the case, then it was odd that she had almost never spoken to him about his father, nor ever allowed him to meet any of his father's relatives. And although he had never been certain why, Slaine hadn't gotten the impression that she was reminiscing about her late husband's memory. Rather, it seemed as if she were thinking of someone still out in the world.

Seeing his mother in such a state, Slaine had secretly wondered if his father was still alive.

Could it be that the man hadn't died after all, but was prevented by circumstances from coming forward? Was he secretly exchanging the occasional letter with Slaine's mother nevertheless?

Slaine had been harboring such doubts for some time. As such, he had reckoned he might find a letter from his father inside the chest.

But no such luck.

Had his mother disposed of them all, or had she never received any reply to her letters? Or was it all Slaine's misunderstanding, and his father really had passed away?

Whatever, Slaine thought. If there's no letter, then it doesn't matter. He had lived his entire life thus far without a father. If they were never to meet, then it made no difference. Whether his father was dead or alive would change nothing about the life he'd led.

But just as Slaine was about to wipe any thought of his father's existence from

his mind, there came a sudden knock at the door.

Slaine nearly yelped in surprise, but he managed to compose himself and looked back to the entryway. He had been making his way through his mother's belongings bit by bit in between household chores, so it was already evening, well past time for dinner. The sun had already set. It was an unusual hour for visitors.

A voice followed the knock at the door. "Excuse me," called a man. He sounded middle-aged, or close to it. "Is there a Master Slaine at home?"

The voice and refined tone were completely unfamiliar to Slaine's ear. No one ever called him anything like "Master Slaine." Who in the world was this man? What business did he have at this hour? Slaine couldn't begin to guess, and it left him ill at ease.

"Excuse me for disturbing you at this late hour," the man said, knocking at the door again. "Is Master Slaine at home, by any chance?"

The candlelight indoors was likely spilling outside through the gaps in the window shutters, so there was no sense in pretending to be out. Slaine gathered his resolve and stood up.

Recalling Erwin's criticism, Slaine raised his voice to respond. "I-I'll come outside," he said, approaching the entryway anxiously.

He unfastened the latch and softly opened the door.

A carriage was stopped in front of the house, with several cavalrymen gathered around it. And at the door—standing right in front of Slaine—was a man who appeared to be their commander. Behind him, another two soldiers stood in line.

By the look of him, the man before Slaine was no ordinary soldier. The rank insignia and other decorations affixed to his uniform clearly marked him as a high-ranking military officer, probably a noble peer. He looked to be in his mid to late thirties.

The tall soldier towered over the boy's small frame. "Are you Master Slaine, son of Lady Alma, the scribe?"

"Um..." The question puzzled Slaine. The man in front of him must have been a figure of considerable standing—so why was he speaking to a mere commoner with such deference?

"You are indeed Master Slaine, are you not?"

"Y-Yes," Slaine answered. "I am Slaine, bu—"

But before he could finish, the soldier cut him off.

"I am Victor, Viscount of Behrendorf," he said, "appointed by His Majesty the King to command the royal guard of Hasenvalia. By order of His Excellency Sergey, Marquess of Nordenfelt, Chancellor of the Kingdom, I have been charged with the task of escorting you to the royal palace. Please, come with us."

"Huh?!" Viscount? Commander of the royal guard? His Majesty the King? Chancellor of the Kingdom? His Excellency? Marquess? The strange words flew past Slaine so quickly he couldn't help his senseless exclamation.

Hasenvalia was a small kingdom, but even so, the royal family and the nobles in their entourage were so distant from the common people that they might as well have lived in the clouds. Why in the world did characters of such lofty status wish to summon *him* to the royal palace?

Slaine had not the faintest clue. "I, er..."

The soldier—the Viscount of Behrendorf and commander of the royal guard—stepped to the side. "I understand your confusion, but please board straightaway," he said, gesturing toward the carriage. "We are rather conspicuous here, and must move on before we cause a scene."

Then Slaine saw that the carriage stopped in front of his house was painted with a coat of arms crested with a golden-eyed crow.

The national bird of the kingdom, with the national stone—the rutile quartz—in its eye.

The coat of arms of the royal family of Hasenvalia.

It was strictly forbidden for anyone outside the royal family to display this emblem. As such, there was no doubt about it: this carriage was the property of

the royal family, and this Viscount of Behrendorf was unmistakably a royal messenger.

"My deepest apologies, but we must make haste," said the viscount, in a polite tone that nevertheless brooked no refusal.

So under duress, surrounded by the viscount's subordinates, Slaine climbed into the carriage with only the clothes on his back.

In the carriage were two rows of seats positioned to face each other. Slaine sat down facing the head of the carriage, while Lord Behrendorf took the place across.

With the door and the windows closed, the interior was plunged into darkness. But Lord Behrendorf flicked on a magical light installed inside the carriage, illuminating their faces with a gentle glow.

After a moment, they started to move.

Lord Behrendorf spoke again. "I have been commanded to bring you to the royal palace discreetly, so we shall travel at night. In the morning, we shall arrive at a royal fortress on the way, where we may rest for a time. At nightfall, we shall set out once more—we should arrive at the royal capital of Uzelheim the following morning."

Slaine was still very confused, but the viscount offered no further explanation. Silence fell over the car.

After a short time, Slaine could bear it no longer. "Um, why am I being summoned to the royal palace? And if I've been ordered to appear by His Excellency the Chancellor, then why am I in a carriage that belongs to the royal family?"

Only the royal family was permitted to ride in royal carriages. And the only folk permitted to ride together with such royal persons were certain servants, guards, and approved guests. That was what Slaine's mother had told him.

Even if he had been summoned by the chancellor's order, a mere commoner like Slaine still shouldn't have the right to ride in a carriage marked by the royal coat of arms.

"And—I still haven't a clue what business you have with me, but why has the commander of the royal guard been sent to escort me, a commoner?" Slaine asked. "And, well, Lord Commander, why are you speaking to me so courteously?"

The royal guard was an elite unit charged with the personal protection of the royal family. It was unthinkable for the commander of such a force to be assigned to escort a commoner, even by order of the chancellor. Wasn't this man's place at the royal palace itself?

And he called himself a viscount! In his capacity as commander of the royal guard and a noble peer, he could have spoken to Slaine without any concern for niceties, even demanding, "Come with us, now! His Excellency the Chancellor commands it!"

Lord Behrendorf did not immediately respond to the question. Instead, he carefully looked over Slaine, as if appraising the boy.

Then, with a smile that belied his knowledge, he said, "My deepest apologies, but I cannot explain to you the particulars. My duty is to bring you to the royal palace, and no more. I humbly beg your pardon."

"I understand," was all Slaine could say in reply. There was no way a person in Slaine's position could dare pester the noble commander of the royal guard with questions.

And so with that, Lord Behrendorf ceased any further discussion, and the carriage car fell quiet once more.



The viscount said it was all right to sleep during the journey, so Slaine leaned his weight against the backrest of the seat and dozed to pass the awkward silence. Thanks to the exhausting past few days he'd had, as well as the fatigue of this exceedingly strange situation, he managed a bit of rest.

When dawn broke and they arrived at the fort, the retinue sent him alone into the single room of the stronghold to rest by himself. After returning to the carriage at nightfall, Slaine dozed away the remainder of the trip.

The next time he blinked awake, he was informed that they had arrived at the

royal capital of Uzelheim.

"I can't open the windows, can I?" Slaine asked.

As expected, Lord Behrendorf responded, "No, you may not. As I said, I have been ordered to bring you here discreetly."

Well, it certainly would not have been very discreet to have an ordinary commoner sticking his head out of the window of a royal carriage. That much was true.

So, unable to steal a single peek at the scenery outside the carriage, Slaine had little sense that he was on the way to the royal palace at all.

The carriage continued on its way for some time and eventually came to a stop. Outside stood a large fortified mansion.

Slaine's mother had once told him that the royal family lived and held court within the grounds of the royal palace, walled in by its moats and ramparts. That very palace stood before Slaine now.

Slaine's legs went stiff as he disembarked from the carriage.

The magnificent royal palace. The well-manicured front gardens. The servants and royal guardsmen come to hail the carriage. And all of it surrounding a frail commoner in shabby clothes—Slaine himself.

He felt like a fish out of water. Was it really proper for him to stand in such a place?

"This way, Master. His Excellency the Chancellor awaits," said Lord Behrendorf, gesturing toward the main entrance to the palace with no apparent concern for Slaine's dismay. "Please, let us make haste."

Slaine timidly followed as the viscount led the way.

The entryway was spacious. It wasn't a particularly resplendent sight, but the hall was neat and attentively cleaned.

They passed through the hall, went up the stairs, and headed down another corridor. Lord Behrendorf stopped in front of a certain door. "His Excellency the Chancellor's office," he said.

Slaine hesitated. "I, er, well, I'm not at all acquainted with the proper etiquette for greeting nobility—"

"No need," Lord Behrendorf summarily said, wearing a lifeless smile. Without waiting for Slaine's reply, he knocked on the door. "Your Excellency, it is the Viscount of Behrendorf. I've brought Lady Alma's son—Master Slaine."

The hard, sharp voice of an aged man came from inside the room. "Enter."

Lord Behrendorf opened the door. At a gesture of the viscount's hand, Slaine stepped into the room on unsteady legs. The nobleman followed Slaine inside and shut the door.

Before them was an older man, north of sixty years of age or so. His expression was as sharp as the voice they'd heard through the door.

"I am honored to make your acquaintance, Master Slaine," said the man, bowing his head. "I am Sergey, Marquess of Nordenfelt, Chancellor of the Kingdom, by the grace of His Majesty the King."

Slaine swallowed a mouthful of his own spit.

The Chancellor of the Kingdom presided at the summit of the realm's domestic politics, and the title of marquess called to mind only one house—the most prominent of the kingdom's noble families. Slaine hadn't the faintest clue what the proper response might be to such a distinguished person bowing and scraping at his feet.

"I am sure you have many questions as yet," said the marquess. "Please take a seat and I shall explain in full."

Slaine perched himself on a chair in the corner of the room. The marquess himself took the seat across, while Lord Behrendorf stood at attention behind Slaine.

"First, allow me to illuminate the matter of your position," began the marquess. "Surely you must be wondering why you have been invited to the royal palace in such a fashion. Well, that is—"

"Because I'm the king's son?"

When the marquess responded with a slight quirk of his brow, Slaine paled.

He'd spoken carelessly out of turn. Here was a commoner, of all people, interrupting the Chancellor of the Kingdom to pronounce himself son of the king! Were he to be beaten on the spot, it would have come as no surprise.

"Um, that is to say—m-my apologies," Slaine stammered. "Truly, please, pardon my insolence."

The Marquess of Nordenfelt did not answer Slaine, instead glaring at the man behind him. "You were expressly instructed not to say anything," the marquess snapped.

"Neither I nor any of my men breathed a word," answered Lord Behrendorf, voice exceedingly cool and level. He gave not the slightest indication that the marquess's words disturbed him.

After a brief pause, Lord Nordenfelt turned back to Slaine. "Why is it, then, that you have come to imagine that you are the son of His Majesty the King?"

"Um, well," Slaine began. "First, the way Lord Behrendorf and Your Lordship speak. You are both of noble peerage, and yet you address me with exceptional respect, which is, ah, very strange. I also thought that there must be a suitable reason why a carriage bearing the coat of arms of the royal family would arrive to transport a commoner such as myself to the palace."

Feeling the sting of the marquess's stare, Slaine desperately worked to gather his thoughts. "And, er, my mother told me that my father died before I was born, but I often wondered if he wasn't actually still alive—given how she spoke, at times. And her past," he continued. "My mother worked in the royal palace long ago, and she was loath to speak in much detail about him."

"And those factors alone lead you to conclude that you may be the son of the king," said Lord Nordenfelt.

Though the marquess's tone belied no trace of reproach, Slaine shrank into himself.

The marquess closed his eyes and let out a single heavy sigh, then returned his focus to Slaine. "Why have you been summoned to the royal palace in such a fashion? It is as you have guessed—you are the bastard son of His Majesty the King, Frederick of Hasenvalia."

Slaine's breath stuck in his throat. He had surmised as much, but the confirmation came as a shock nevertheless.

"When your mother, Lady Alma, was in the employ of the royal palace as a menial official, she engaged in relations with His Majesty the King—the crown prince at the time. She departed the palace upon discovering she was with child," the marquess continued. "The infant that would be born was you. That is to say, you are the natural son of the king, though not yet formally recognized as such."

The Marquess of Nordenfelt cut a stern figure; it was difficult to imagine him saying such a thing in jest. After all, he would not have gone along with Slaine's mistake as a joke. As such, Slaine had no choice but to believe it—his father was the ruler of this kingdom, Frederick of Hasenvalia. He was the son of a king, bastard though he was.

Slaine willed his rational mind to believe the story for now, however difficult it was to accept—new questions filled his head. "If I am the bastard child of the king, why have you summoned me to the palace to reveal this to me only now?" he wondered. "Considering that the king has not met me even once, nor come forward to claim me as his son, then I would imagine my status to be something not easily made public, no? I'd think a person such as myself coming to a place like this would cause little other than trouble."

The marquess fell quiet, his eyes downcast.

When at last he raised his head once more, he gazed at Slaine with an unreadable expression. "You have been summoned here to the royal palace because His Majesty the King is dead."

Slaine's eyes widened.

"Were you aware that about two weeks ago, on the night of the New Year's festivities, there was a fire in the royal palace?" the marquess asked. The New Year's celebrations took place around the middle of January. It was the custom in the kingdom for families to gather for dinner on that night to give thanks to God.

"I...may have heard something like that," Slaine responded.

The marquess's words had refreshed Slaine's memory. On the evening in question, a fire had erupted in the royal palace; the rising smoke could be seen from the streets of the capital. Or such were the rumors circulating throughout Rutware, where Slaine lived. His mother had died not long after the stories had begun to spread, and he'd been so consumed with the funeral preparations that the fire had slipped his mind.

"But I thought no one was killed or seriously injured in the fire," Slaine said.

"In fact, I heard that the king himself appeared in the square of the royal capital to declare himself safe and sound." The fire had been contained in the palace while it was yet a small blaze, and the royal family had been entirely unharmed —or so the rumor went. So Slaine had forgotten the fire entirely.

"Indeed, it is true that His Majesty stood in the square and proclaimed himself to be safe. But in fact, he was so severely burned it was surely a struggle for him even to stand," said the marquess, his tone solemn and grave. "He did so to reassure his people and affirm the stability of the royal family. He conducted himself in a manner most befitting of the ruler of a kingdom."

The marquess continued, "That was about ten days ago. His Majesty clung to life with all his might, but some days later he succumbed to his injuries and passed away. And it was not His Majesty alone. Her Majesty the Queen Catalina and His Royal Highness the Crown Prince Michael perished in the fire as well." He added, "Also invited to the dinner were His Majesty's sister, Her Grace Tia, Duchess of Wahlenheit; her lord husband, His Grace Czesław, Duke of Wahlenheit; and their son, Lord Vladren. They, too, have passed."

"Huh?" Slaine could hardly process the marquess's words. If all Lord Nordenfelt had said was true, then the king, his wife, his only son, his sister, his sister's husband, and his nephew—each and every direct descendant of the royal family—had lost their lives. "I-I... How could such a thing come to pass?"

"His Majesty was a man of devout faith. On the night of the New Year's festivities, it was his habit to take a quiet meal with his family in the prayer room on the third floor of the palace and give thanks to God. He went about this year's festive night in the same fashion," the marquess said. "It was there that the blaze erupted. A candlestick set fire to the train of the queen's dress, and in her panic she tumbled into a bundle of straw by the door. This caused

the flames to spread throughout the room."

By custom, the most appropriate setting for supper on the night of festivities was a room encircled with straw to symbolize the bounty of the earth. But not all were so devout, and few families held to such rituals so strictly. Slaine and his mother only decorated their home with two thin bundles of straw, one on either side of the front door. However, the king was well known to be a man of deep religious faith. And so each year he surrounded himself with many bundles as he took his evening meal.

"In keeping with the traditional construction of a prayer room, His Majesty and the royal family were seated in a stone chamber with a single exit. What's more, the windows were small," the marquess went on. "The fire spread to one bundle after another, and the blaze grew so swiftly that it engulfed the queen in an instant. The other esteemed guests collapsed from smoke inhalation. His Majesty attempted to clear a path by moving aside the straw by the door, but in doing so his clothes caught fire, inflicting severe burns on his entire body."

By the time any of the servants or royal guardsmen had sensed anything amiss and managed to extinguish the fire blocking the door, the queen had already burned to death, and smoke had killed the rest. Only His Majesty had escaped the room with his life. The marquess concluded by adding that this account had come straight from the king himself.

"Could...could something so terrible really happen?" Slaine couldn't help wondering aloud.

It was hard to believe neither war nor plague nor assassination had extinguished the bloodline of the royal family, but a mere fire in a single room. They say that fact is stranger than fiction, but this story is simply too shocking for words, Slaine thought. "Tragedy" did not suffice to describe it.

"I understand your incredulity. Even saying it aloud myself, I wonder if it isn't a lie—and would that it were. But this is a reality that we cannot change. The royal family of Hasenvalia has lost its king and his entire direct line, all to one fire in a single room of the palace."

Head bowed, the Marquess of Nordenfelt said no more. Slaine could not speak. Lord Behrendorf, still standing behind Slaine, kept quiet as well. A

suffocating silence pervaded the room.

After several heavy seconds had passed, Lord Nordenfelt raised his head. "I hope you have followed the story thus far. Now," he said, "let us discuss the matter as it pertains to you—the conclusion, as it were. Master Slaine, I beseech you to ascend the throne of the Kingdom of Hasenvalia."

"What?" Slaine's voice cracked awkwardly as he spoke.

Slaine had surmised that the marquess's reason for explaining his origins was likely to be related to his father's demise; perhaps his father had, in a final request, allowed for the fact of Slaine's parentage to be revealed after his death. But Slaine had never imagined for a moment that he would be asked to succeed the throne—to become king.

"I mean— You mustn't be— How could I—" Slaine stumbled over his words. "Surely there must be another with royal blood of more suitable status than me? If you follow the family tree out far enough—"

"There is no such person," Lord Nordenfelt interjected. "As I have said, the king's sister, Her Grace the Duchess, and her son have both passed. Should we trace the lineage further, next we come upon His Majesty's cousins—of the two, one died of illness while he was still a bachelor; the other has already been taken into the royal family of another kingdom as a bride. The Kingdom of Hasenvalia cannot welcome outside royalty to rule under these circumstances—that would reduce us to a vassal state."

"W-Well, then, let's look a bit further. My grandfather, the late king—a descendant of one of his cousins, or—"

"In such cases, the blood grows too thin, and the number of candidates too numerous. It would undermine the legitimacy of the crown itself for a person of such distant lineage to assume the throne, and there would be much strife among the nobles over who should succeed," said the marquess. "And more importantly, there *does* exist a closer potential successor, a direct descendant of the king—you, Master Slaine. Bastard though you may be, you are His Majesty's natural son. There is no one more suitable to assume the throne than you."

Slaine sat in stunned silence.

He was just an ordinary person—a simple commoner who lived a quiet, provincial life. And yet they would have him succeed the throne? Become *king*?

It was unimaginable. Slaine could not even picture himself in such a position. He did not think himself capable of being king. "That's...that's impossible. I couldn't— I—"

Slaine stood, stricken with an urge to flee—to escape from the overwhelming pressure of the marquess's gaze. Lord Behrendorf gripped his shoulder from behind, silent.

"You cannot, Master Slaine. Escape is not an option for you," said Lord Nordenfelt, fixing Slaine with a penetrating stare.

"Are you saying that if I refuse, you'll kill me?" Slaine asked.

"No, not at all. Never could I entertain the thought of striking down the orphaned son of His Majesty the King," responded the marquess. "However, Master Slaine, this is your duty. Yours is the responsibility borne by those of royal blood—you must succeed the throne."

His sharp eyes narrowed even further. "Should you refuse the crown, the kingdom will be left without a king," he continued. "It will descend into turmoil. In such a state, the kingdom will have no hope of maintaining peace—the surrounding kingdoms are not likely to afford us respect. The realm will be divided, its territories plunged into chaos, and its people engulfed by mayhem. Many will lose their way of life, and some will die." He concluded, "Such is the calamity that may come to pass if you refuse the throne. The blood that flows through your veins calls you to prevent this—Your Royal Highness, Slaine of Hasenvalia."

Slaine did not remember much of what the Marquess of Nordenfelt said after that. After several more days, the death of the king and the royal family would be announced, and two weeks later, the kingdom would hold a state funeral with representatives from the nobility and neighboring kingdoms in attendance.

It was also decided that Slaine would be treated as crown prince for the time being, with a coronation ceremony to be held sometime in the fall—at which time he would be formally proclaimed King of Hasenvalia.

That was all the information that Slaine managed to retain—the particulars went in one ear and out the other.

For now, Slaine was to reside in a room at the back of the third floor of the palace, the highest room in the castle—and the former residence of the Crown Prince Michael, or so he was told. Its furnishings were high quality, though not particularly extravagant in appearance.

Although Slaine was now the crown prince, first in line to succeed the throne, it was nevertheless difficult to pass the time in the private chambers of a prince who had passed away only days earlier. Couldn't he at least sleep in a guest room?

When Slaine went to consult Lord Behrendorf about the matter, the viscount refused, citing "security concerns." The palace was structured such that the royal family's private chambers were located in areas not easily accessible to those outside staff or approved guests.

The viscount asked for Slaine's understanding—with the kingdom in the state that it was, they could not afford to risk the loss of the crown prince, however unlikely such an event might have been.

Slaine sat silently on the couch that, until two weeks before, had belonged to the real crown prince—not the feeble substitute that he was—and stared blankly into space.

He refused lunch. He had no appetite, nor any will to sleep. He had slept nearly a day and a half on the journey to the capital, after all.

The sight of the room in his eyes, even the air that filled his lungs—none of it felt real at all. He had only just laid his mother to rest and had been about to secure work—but in the blink of an eye, he had become the crown prince.

He had no idea what to make of any of this. He did not understand the extent of what he did not understand—he did not even know what to think. What sort of thoughts did a crown prince pass the time thinking about?

At that moment, he heard a light tap at the door and then a woman's voice.

"Pardon me, Your Royal Highness."

Slaine stiffened in surprise.

"Your Royal Highness," the woman repeated. "May I enter?"

"Ah, um, you can. I mean—you may."

That was right—because of his status as the crown prince, any who would visit him had no choice but to wait until Slaine had granted his express permission to enter.

At Slaine's flustered response, his visitor finally opened the door. A young woman with striking crimson hair that reached down to her shoulders entered the chambers—dressed not in the attire of a servant but in a military uniform.

Having assumed that a maid was at the door, Slaine was surprised to see her.

She was permitted to enter a room protected by the royal guard, so she had to be a character of some standing in her own right—but Slaine could not deduce exactly who she might be from her appearance. A young woman in military garb?

Notwithstanding Slaine's surprise, the woman dropped to one knee and bowed her head. "It is an honor to make your acquaintance, Your Royal Highness. I am Monica Adrashelm, eldest daughter of Baron Adrashelm. His Excellency the Marquess of Nordenfelt has appointed me aide-de-camp to the crown prince. I have come to serve as such, my liege."

"A-Aide-de-camp?" Slaine stammered, unfamiliar with the word.

"Yes, my liege. As your aide-de-camp, I shall remain at your side at all times, assisting in your duties and daily life. I shall see to your every request and offer my aid in any manner possible."

Slaine more or less understood her position—this woman, Monica, was some sort of attendant. His only question was why the daughter of a baron had been chosen for such an important role. Slaine was the crown prince—the future king. Wouldn't it be more typical and appropriate for an individual of higher standing—and of the same sex—to be appointed as his aide?

Slaine kept his thoughts to himself, however. How could he, a commoner risen to crown prince, complain about the status of the daughter of a genuine

## nobleman?

"Henceforth I shall stand at your side and support you with the utter devotion of my body and soul," said Monica. "It is my honor to serve, my liege."

"R-Right. Welcome," Slaine said.

Monica could not see him with her head lowered, but Slaine found himself bowing in return anyway.

Even after he greeted her, Monica remained motionless, kneeling with her eyes downcast. She did not say anything.





"Ah, um," Slaine stuttered. "Please get up."

"Yes, my liege," Monica responded. In her role as his subordinate, she was not permitted to move unless he gave her express leave to do so. At Slaine's flustered assent, she lifted her head and stood.

"Then allow me to detail your agenda for tomorrow and thereafter, my liege."



Until noon the following day, Slaine went along in a state of bewilderment with whatever Monica and the servants instructed him to do. During that time, Slaine learned more than his fill of what it meant to be crown prince.

First, there was bathing. Although Slaine had visited the public baths of Rutware from time to time, he had not owned a tub at home, so he'd had to make do with wiping himself with warm water.

However, the royal palace had a bath reserved for the use of the royal family, and Monica recommended that Slaine take the time to wash himself there. Although she was careful to word it as a mere suggestion, Slaine got the impression that it was best he not refuse.

The spacious bath, located on the second floor of the palace, was large enough to fit several adults with room to spare. Filling such a tub, whether by bucket or magical tool, must have been onerous.

When Slaine inquired, a servant at the baths told him that filling the tub was the charge of the sorcerers in the employ of the royal family—the royal court mages. The extravagance of using a skilled sorcerer's magic to fill a bath left Slaine astonished.

Next came dinner. To Slaine's eyes, an ordinary meal in the royal palace appeared to be a luxurious holiday feast. Uncured meats, soft and freshly baked bread, soups thick with fresh vegetables in richly flavored broth—each dish was a lavish work of art, not just in appearance but flavor as well.

Last was sleep. The crown prince slept in a canopied bed spacious enough to fit two adults side by side. The mattress was filled not with straw but with a fluffy stuffing made of wool or other such material. It was a wonderful comfort

to lie in such soft bedding, given how worn his body was from the stress.

Besides the luxurious life at the palace, another adjustment that came as a surprise to Slaine was living constantly surrounded by other people, such as the maids who served his meals and the servants who washed his hair and body. The latter were also women, perhaps because the work was not physically demanding. Slaine was naturally embarrassed to disrobe in front of the opposite sex, but the servants went about their work without any sign of emotion.

Although no one entered his room without permission, one of the royal guardsmen would stand vigil in the hall outside his door throughout the night. And just as she had promised, Monica, his aide-de-camp, stood by his side at all times, save only when he entered the baths or slept. She returned to her own chambers in the palace when Slaine retired for the night, but she would appear before him again in perfect military attire the following morning. After rising from bed, he would dress with the help of his servants and then enjoy a delicious breakfast with Monica under the watchful eyes of the maids.

So the life of a royal was one accompanied around the clock—be it aide or servant or guard, there was always someone close by his side. For Slaine, who had only ever lived alone with his mother, being surrounded by so many people who weren't family seemed very uncomfortable indeed.

After his first full day of such an unfamiliar life, just before the following noon, Slaine took his place in the audience chamber.

"Well, then, my liege. May I summon your vassals to join us?" asked Monica.

Slaine did not sit in the king's throne at the far end of the large stone room—he stood before it instead. "Y-Yes. Please do," he answered with a nervous nod of his head.

Slaine was now tasked with meeting the principal vassals of the royal family of Hasenvalia—the Nobles of the Robe. These nobles did not possess fiefdoms but instead held positions in direct service to the crown.

At Slaine's assent, Monica gestured to the royal guardsmen posted at either side of the entrance to the audience chamber, who opened the door—it seemed that the vassals were already waiting on the other side.

A dozen or so people streamed into the room, with the highest-ranked minister—the Marquess of Nordenfelt, Chancellor of the Kingdom—leading the procession.

These premier authorities served as the foundation of the kingdom, responsible for the administration of the royal domain and state. Their attire and countenances were all stately indeed. It was well known that each one, without exception, was an invaluable pillar of the kingdom.

Slaine's face tensed with anxiety. These prominent figures, who only a few days earlier Slaine would never have so much as *dreamed* of approaching, now surrounded him. There was simply no way he *wouldn't* have been frightened.

The vassals stopped some meters away from Slaine and formed a line side by side. Then, as one, they dropped to their knees and bowed their heads.

Monica had briefly instructed Slaine as to the proper protocols prior to the meeting. "R-Rise...please," Slaine timidly muttered, as they'd practiced.

He should have been able to utter a simple command with pride, but Slaine lacked the nerve to speak to such a distinguished audience without courtesy.

As the vassals stood, some wore smiles that Slaine could not discern as genuine or forced, while others, their faces void of emotion, were utterly unreadable.

First to open his mouth was the marquess. With a blank expression, he reintroduced himself once more. "Your Royal Highness, I am Sergey, Marquess of Nordenfelt, Chancellor of the Kingdom."

The assembled nobility followed him in order. A large, muscular man introduced himself with a courteous bow and a vigorous smile. "I am Sieghardt, the Count of Vogel, general of the royal army," he said.

Next an elegant woman with deep blue hair offered a graceful curtsy. "I am Elena, Countess of Estergren, royal minister of foreign affairs."

"I am Victor, Viscount of Behrendorf, commander of the royal guard." Wearing the same lifeless smile he'd had the previous day, the viscount gave an orderly bow.

After that, various peers, high-ranking military officers, and civil officials in the direct employ of the royal family gave their names. Among them was Baron Adrashelm, Monica's father, who announced his position as minister of agriculture.

Last to speak was a confident woman who stood at the end of the line—she had a distinctive hairstyle, cropped short at the left side of her head but worn long on the right. With a sharp bow, she declared, "I am Blanca, Life Baroness and archimage of the royal court."

Life baroness was a title conferred on a noble appointed from outside the traditional aristocracy. While a life peerage could not be passed down to future generations, it was an honor to be granted one nevertheless. Both this and her position as court archimage told Slaine that here was a highly distinguished sorceress.

When all had presented themselves, the Marquess of Nordenfelt spoke once more. "Thus concludes the introduction of the vassals in direct service to the royal family of Hasenvalia," he said. "Solemnly we pledge ourselves faithful servants to the crown, with utmost devotion to our duties, for the sake of the kingdom and its royal family. We swear unwavering fealty to His Royal Highness the Crown Prince, Slaine of Hasenvalia, so help us God!"

The crowd echoed the marquess's words, bowing their heads as one to Slaine. "We swear unwavering fealty to His Royal Highness the Crown Prince, Slaine of Hasenvalia, so help us God!"

What? Slaine thought. Unwavering fealty, to me? Me?

Merely one day ago, Slaine had been nothing but a typical commoner—now all the nobles who administered the kingdom had bent the knee and pledged to him their undying loyalty.

What on earth is going on?!

Slaine felt sick to his stomach. *This is impossible*, he thought. *I can't do this. I can't*—

With little understanding of his circumstances, still processing what was happening, Slaine had done as he was told and now stood in this place. But

faced with this line of noble peers bowing at his feet, he was finally forced to face the unavoidable truth.

This is absurd! An ordinary commoner turned crown prince—and worse, the king?!

It didn't matter his origin—it didn't matter what responsibility of blood he bore. There was simply no way that he was fit for such a task. How could these people be serious?

Monica, in attendance nearby, drew a few steps closer, looking worried. "My liege? Are you unwell?"

Slaine waved her off with one hand, using the other to cover his mouth in a desperate attempt to stifle his nausea.

After calming himself with a few deep, ragged breaths, Slaine managed to avoid the humiliation of disgorging his breakfast in front of a room full of nobles. He turned to face them with a pale and sickly face.

"I-I'm sorry, I can't do this. I can't," he said.

Then he fled.

"Ah, my liege!" exclaimed Monica, chasing him from the audience chamber.

The nobles left behind remained still with their heads bowed for some time—but when the Marquess of Nordenfelt looked up, they all followed suit.

"So he has escaped," muttered the Viscount of Behrendorf, the same lifeless smile on his face.

With the atmosphere somewhat relaxed, the Countess of Estergren answered with a bewitching grin. "It is to be expected. He was a simple commoner until only yesterday."

"Well, I understand how His Lordship feels. I used to be a commoner myself," said Baroness Blanca. She had risen to serve as a mage of the royal court on the merits of her magical abilities alone, so her grasp of court etiquette was slightly amiss—she had just used the wrong honorific for the crown prince—and a somewhat unrefined air hung about her.

It was clear that none of them held any expectations for Slaine at all. But their

voices betrayed no disappointment. They were dealing with a prince raised up from the common rabble—how could matters have gone any other way?

Most of those present seemed to share such thoughts. They had not pledged their fealty insincerely—they had every intention to continue serving the blood of the royal family of Hasenvalia with their utmost devotion, just as they always had. But although they planned to put Slaine forth as the rightful heir to the throne, they did not expect him to be capable of standing above them on his own two feet, at least for the moment.

So despite Slaine's unsightly retreat from his momentous first meeting with his vassals, the assembled lords were neither angry nor exasperated. For better or worse, the situation had unfolded exactly as they had expected, and most present said as much.

There were only two exceptions. One was Lord Nordenfelt, glaring at the door through which Slaine had escaped; the other, the Count of Vogel, was looking toward the empty throne with a pleasant smile.

"But he had a clever look about him, no? Just as one would expect of a child of King Frederick's blood," said Lord Vogel. "Perhaps he has the qualities befitting a wise monarch after all?"

"My, Lord Vogel," teased Lady Estergren with a laugh. "It seems His Lordship has made quite the lofty estimation of our sweet new crown prince, though we've hardly exchanged so much as a word."

But Lord Vogel's expression did not change. Nor did his eyes wander from the throne.

The Marquess of Nordenfelt looked across the line of nobles, then broke his silence. "Your impressions today are of little matter," he said. "Our first task is to sway His Royal Highness from his indecision. In order for the prince to be crowned, we require his assent above all. Nothing can begin until he accepts his position and embraces his ascension to the throne."

"It is as His Excellency the Chancellor says," concurred Lord Vogel. "We must bring His Royal Highness over to our side with some haste."

"May we presume upon Your Lordship for the task?" asked the marquess.

"I know not if I can accomplish it well—but I shall try nevertheless, in honor of King Frederick's wishes," said Lord Vogel, making his way to the door through which Slaine had fled.

"I... I'm sorry. Such an important moment, and I— And I ran away," said Slaine.

After fleeing the audience chamber, Slaine had taken refuge in the first suitable room he could find. Monica, who had followed close behind, was listening to him stammer away.

"There is no need to apologize. Considering the circumstances, your anxiety is certainly understandable," said Monica. "I regret that I have not been of sufficient aid to set your mind at ease, my liege."

"No, it's not your fault, Monica. I'm just—"

A deep voice interrupted their conversation. "Ah, there you are, Your Royal Highness."

When Slaine raised his head, he saw an imposing, muscular man in the open doorway. "Ah, you're, um, if I'm not mistaken, Y-Your Excellency, the Count of Vogel?"

"Indeed. I am honored that you remembered, my lord," answered Lord Vogel. "But please refrain from addressing me as 'Your Excellency.' As I am your subject, it would not be appropriate."

"O-Oh. I'm sorry."

"It is no matter. May I have a word, sire?"

"Okay—ah, I mean, please sit."

The count sat down in a chair close at hand. "My lord, you appear terribly nervous," he said.

His tone was entirely without reproach, but when Slaine eventually answered, it was with downcast eyes. "Yes. I am," he admitted, embarrassed at his earlier display.

"It is perfectly understandable," Lord Vogel said. "My lord, you led a

provincial life, raised as a commoner—and I understand your mother passed not long ago as well. After being summoned to the royal palace, suddenly pressed to ascend the throne, and thrust into the role of crown prince without so much as a moment to catch your breath—well, your dismay is only natural. Were I in your shoes, sire, I suppose I might have fled as well." He smiled, no trace of scorn on his face. "We may keep our conversation confidential here, so please, speak your honest mind. My lord, would you still renounce your claim to the throne, were it possible?"

Slaine responded to Lord Vogel's cheerful manner with sincerity. "Um, y-yes. If I were to speak honestly, well, I do not want to become king," he said. "I'm just a commoner, you understand? My mother was a humble scribe, and I merely her assistant. I learned to read, write, and count with some skill, but I've received no education to rule as king. I've not prepared for it. I can't be king."

Monica quietly departed the room, but Slaine, with his head bowed, continued to speak without taking notice.

"And to be suddenly told that my father was king—my mother told me that my father had died before I was born. Watching my mother, there were times when I wondered if my father wasn't still alive—but, goodness! To think that he was the ruler of this kingdom..." Slaine trailed off with a deep sigh. "I know that the kingdom is in dire straits, with its entire royal line lost to the fire. I know that my ascension is the most convenient solution. But, His Excelle—I mean, the Marquess of Nordenfelt—he told me that I have a responsibility, being born with royal blood in my veins. It isn't easy, hearing a thing like that."

Although he understood that it was unseemly to complain so, the words continued to tumble from Slaine's mouth.

"Would that I could complain to the king—to my father," he exhaled.

"Without ever acknowledging me as his son, he cast my mother from the castle and left us alone without a pittance of support. He died without meeting me even once—without a single word to me, his son. Why must I accept the responsibility of such an irresponsible father's bloodline?"

"Ha ha!" Lord Vogel laughed heartily. "After hearing your story, my lord, I cannot help but say that Frederick was a rotten father indeed!"

The count's levity left Slaine a bit uncomfortable. Even if he was a prominent vassal, wasn't referring to the king by his given name rather overfamiliar? Slaine couldn't help but wonder.

"I, being close in age to His Majesty, grew up alongside him. Together we studied the arts, martial and academic alike. His Majesty was at once my lord and my comrade," Lord Vogel said, as if answering Slaine's unspoken question. "Prince Slaine, I say this not as his vassal but as your lord father's friend: please, find it in your heart to forgive him."

"Forgive him?" Slaine said, tilting his head quizzically.

Lord Vogel nodded. "Yes. The reason that His Majesty cast your lady mother from the palace, the reason that he did not come forward to claim you as his son—it was all to protect you and Lady Alma, my lord," he said. "When he was still crown prince, His Majesty engaged in relations with your mother, then a menial civil servant. Such stories are not rare in the world of royals and nobility. However, His Majesty and Lady Alma's dalliance developed into a true love affair, and your mother fell pregnant."

The count continued, "At the time, His Majesty was yet a bachelor—but this was not a fortunate circumstance. For a king to welcome a mistress into his bed before taking a true consort, to shower that lover with favor and have a child with her before his queen—well, strife would be inevitable. Had the situation been left as it was, quite possibly Lady Alma's child—that is to say, you, my lord—would have met a suspicious demise at an early age."

Slaine grimaced. It was unsettling to listen to these tales about his own life and death.

"And so, rather than carry on with Lady Alma as his mistress, His Majesty arranged for your lady mother other employ, and sent her away from the royal palace. By severing his relationship with Lady Alma and refraining from formally recognizing you as his natural child, His Majesty protected you and your mother. It was obvious to all involved that this was the only way."

Slaine listened quietly, taking in the secret of his birth and his mother's unspoken past.

"His Majesty made efforts to provide financial assistance, but Lady Alma

refused, I hear. Were the matter of such payments to become known to those around the actual queen, Catalina, one could surmise the king harbored affection for his bastard son, placing you in danger once more. His support rejected, the king oft lamented, 'Woe that I cannot so much as provide for my beloved and our child!' But such were Lady Alma's thoughts on the matter."

Even Slaine couldn't help but smile at Lord Vogel's playful impression of his father's complaints.

"But you and your lady mother weighed on His Majesty's mind. Of course, he showered his legitimate son Prince Michael with affection, and with time love would blossom between the king and his consort, Queen Catalina," the count continued. "But never did he forget about you and Lady Alma, my lord. Sensitive matters of the heart may be difficult for a young boy to understand, but such is the nature of manhood—of fatherhood."

Lord Vogel let out a soft sigh. "Lady Alma wrote a letter to His Majesty once a year, detailing all the happenings of your youth. She wrote in such a fashion that were another to catch a glimpse of the missive, it would make little sense; she routed the communications through various intermediaries as well," he explained. "His Majesty eagerly awaited the letters written by the hand of the woman he had once passionately loved. Reflecting upon the memories of his youth and hearing tell of how his son had grown filled him with great yearning. Although he had not the chance to forge a bond with you as father and son, there is no doubt that His Majesty loved you dearly, my lord."

Lord Vogel, who had thus far only stared off into the air as he spoke, turned his eyes to Slaine. "This is the sort of man your father was. The day before his death, sensing the end was nigh, His Majesty summoned his closest vassals, the Marquess of Nordenfelt and me. He revealed to us that he wished for you to succeed him as king, and for us to serve as your counsel. He bid us to deliver his message to you and Lady Alma, to convey his regret that it had come to this. Sadly, Lady Alma mysteriously passed on the same day as His Majesty," he concluded.

The room fell into silence. Slaine turned the story over in his mind, trying to make sense of this father he'd never once met in person.

Then, suddenly, a cup appeared in his peripheral vision—when he glanced to the side, he found Monica softly smiling, warm drink in hand. Before Slaine had even realized she'd left the room, she had returned with herbal tea. Perhaps it was a coincidence, but the herbs in it were the same kind as those his mother had grown in her garden.

Slaine accepted the cup and brought it to his lips. With a single sip, he felt his jumbled emotions begin to relax and settle deep in his heart. "Ah," he sighed, placing the cup on the table beside him.

The moment that Slaine had learned his father was king, he had trembled in awe. His sense of the father that he had imagined from childhood had swiftly transformed into something strange and unknowable. He'd felt as if he were suspended in midair, hoisted aloft by his own ascension—the crown prince, and next the king. The very existence of someone like himself, heir to the blood of such a person.

But after Lord Vogel's story, Slaine was finally starting to find solid ground. Somewhere in the count's warm voice, Slaine felt he could see the shadow of a real man—the echo of the flesh-and-blood man that had been his father.

It was nothing extraordinary. Frederick had been a king, but also a human being, with ordinary human feelings. Slaine's mother had fallen for that man, lain with him, and given birth to his child.

His parents had been a very ordinary human pair, and he had grown under their watchful eyes, even if his father's way of looking after him might not have been the most typical.

Of course, this did not mean that Slaine had accepted it all completely. He saw another side to his father. That father who had never once shown his face, never offered so much as a single word to him—and yet, at the end of his life, had dared thrust upon Slaine an inheritance the boy was woefully unequipped to face.

There was much Slaine wished he could say to his mother as well. He could hardly believe that his quiet, straitlaced mother had spent her youth burning with passion for a prince leagues above her own social class. He could hardly believe his father had still been alive—why had his mother never told him this

incredible story? What was more, she had passed at the same time as his father. Could it be that she had raised her son until he'd come of age and, satisfied with that, left to be at her beloved's side?

But it was far too late for such questions now. Slaine had no more to say about the burden of his blood, nor about his father's total severance of contact with his former lover and son. It was a simple fact that Slaine had been born as the fruit of a politically troublesome love affair between his mother and father; he could do nothing but accept that all they had done had been for the sake of his protection. Perhaps he'd have done the same in his father's position.

Complaining about his father's crown, or that he had been bequeathed the exceedingly troublesome inheritance that was the throne, would change nothing. There were none blessed with the privilege of choosing their own parents; no one could say, "I'd rather not have been born into this world at all than be the son of a king."

There was simply nothing he could do about any of it.

Nevertheless, Slaine was glad to have had a father. He was glad to have learned who his father was; he was glad to have learned that his father *had* watched over him, that his father *had* loved him. Whether it was logical or not, Slaine could not help but be happier for it. Even if they were never to meet, never to speak, the man was still his father.

Slaine was the son of Alma and Frederick of Hasenvalia. He could not flee from that fact.

"Well, how about it, my lord? Will you succeed Frederick as king?" Lord Vogel inquired, as if he had been waiting for Slaine to collect his thoughts. He looked Slaine in the eye as he spoke. "I am sure you've many concerns as of yet. However, know this: you are not alone, my lord. I promise to you that we, Frederick's surviving vassals, shall give our all—shall quite literally lay down our lives to support and protect you. There is no need to worry."

Slaine hesitated for a time. "I am not my father," he eventually said. "I am not the true crown prince either. I'm a person with royal blood—but that is truly all. Is that really enough?"

"That is why we wish for you to be king, my lord. You are the one and only

true crown prince," Lord Vogel said. "You alone are our next king, and you alone are the lord that we are meant to serve. As the orphaned son of our king who we loved and respected so dearly, please grant us the pleasure of continuing on in your service."

Slaine looked to the ceiling and let out a deep sigh.

You must use that cleverness for the sake of this kingdom.

That day, Slaine finally understood why his mother had taken every opportunity to tell him such things. She had loved this kingdom, her native land —and the man she had once loved had ruled this land as its king. She had even passed on the same day, as if departing together with him. So surely Slaine's beloved mother and the father for whom he had long yearned were looking after him even now.

And if that were the case, what would his mother wish for him? As she stood at God's side, watching over him together with his father, what would she want for him to do? He did not need to contemplate the answer.

Slaine looked down from the ceiling to Lord Vogel's face. Then, with a resigned smile, he opened his mouth to speak.

The Nobles of the Robe still crowded the audience chamber.

"It is taking quite some time," muttered Lord Behrendorf.

"You think so?" replied Lady Blanca. "With the lord prince in the state he was, it's to be expected, no? It may not even be possible to persuade him at all."

"Heh. It's hard to say whether Lord Vogel's character will prove to be a boon or a hindrance," remarked Lady Estergren.

"Perhaps you'd have been better suited for the task, Lady Estergren?" said Lord Nordenfelt. "Verbal persuasion is your principal occupation, after all."

"I'd have gone, had Your Excellency commanded me so," replied the countess, a prim smile on her face. As minister of foreign affairs, it was her duty to converse with dignitaries from other kingdoms. "But perhaps it's best that Lord Vogel had first go of it. If His Lordship, close friend to His Majesty the King,

proves to be incapable of it, then none of the rest of us are likely to fare any better."

At that moment, Monica appeared in the doorway through which Slaine had fled.

"Lords and Ladies. His Royal Highness the Crown Prince, Slaine of Hasenvalia, has returned," she announced.

Lord Vogel stood at her side, his expression tinged with the slightest hint of pride. The crowd went quiet, apart from Lady Estergren, who muttered, "So it seems Lord Vogel was the right choice after all."

Lord Nordenfelt had an unreadable expression on his face.

Then the assembled Nobles of the Robe formed another line, preparing to receive Slaine as his vassals.

Slaine entered the room moments later and stood before them once more. "Please raise your eyes," he said. There was a tremble to his voice yet, but he was far steadier than when he had fled.

The bowed nobles lifted their heads at Slaine's words.

"E-Everyone. I apologize for my earlier deplorable display," Slaine said, fighting off the urge to cast his eyes down. He mustered all his will to maintain his posture. "I have never once met nor spoken to my father, the king. Until yesterday, I was a commoner. I still know nothing of how to comport myself as a king, nor anything about what it is that a king does. However... All the same, I've resolved not to run without making a proper effort of it, for the sake of my father and this kingdom, both of which my mother so dearly loved."

Slaine gathered his courage to look upon the faces of each of his subjects as he spoke. "And so, that is why I...I will ascend the throne. And—I will strive to meet your expectations of me, my lords. I will try to be a good king. I beg your continued support and guidance."

Slaine concluded his speech, and the audience chamber fell into silence once more.

But it was not an awkward silence. Slaine could feel his vassals' surprise and

relief in the quiet air.





"Your Royal Highness, as leader of your assembled vassals, I am pleased with your decision," said the Marquess of Nordenfelt, breaking the silence with his stern voice. "Before you become king, there is much you must learn and consider. First of all—please stop with that tone."

"That, uh, tone?" Slaine replied.

"Yes," said Lord Nordenfelt.

He pointed to Slaine's mouth. While aiming one's finger at a superior was surely a breach of decorum, in the face of the marquess's exasperated expression Slaine dared not say anything.

"My lord, from this day forth—nay, even now—you are the most exalted of men in this realm. It is inappropriate to speak to one's vassals with such deference. As our liege lord, you are to converse with us in the appropriate manner. We ask that you address us by our names, and treat us as your subordinates henceforth."

"Y-Yes, my I— I-I mean, understood," Slaine stammered out.

"Very well, then. Now, my lord, please take this."

Monica advanced as the marquess spoke. She kneeled before Slaine and lifted up a silver necklace of simple design.

Sparkling in its setting was the national stone of the kingdom: the rutile quartz, said to bring about good luck. The clear stone was threaded with countless needles of brilliant gold, and even an untrained eye could tell that the quartz was of the finest quality.

"This necklace adorns the most exalted member of the royal family of Hasenvalia. At the time of the fire, His Majesty wore only his religious vestments, so this necklace was spared any damage," said Lord Nordenfelt. "My lord, as you are the sole remaining heir to the royal line, the pendant is now rightfully yours."

Even at the marquess's urging, Slaine could not bring himself to step forward. He froze, eyes glued to the object.

These are my chains, he thought. This necklace would be the bond that

shackled him, and his life itself, to the throne of the Kingdom of Hasenvalia. Once he placed it around his neck, there would be no turning back.

But it was too late for such doubts. Slaine steadied his resolve, took the necklace from Monica's hands, and slipped it over his head.

When the crown prince departed the audience chamber, Sieghardt was the first to speak. "So he is the son of King Frederick after all," he said.

"Indeed," concurred Elena, Countess of Estergren. "That expression, those eyes—certainly, he has the look of the king about him."

Even Sergey, Marquess of Nordenfelt, did not take exception. "Certainly. That much I cannot refute," he said in a low growl, staring off into the air.

Slaine's eyes, their color, and their shine all called to mind the late King Frederick of Hasenvalia. He'd had eyes the color of gold—as if hewed from the national stone, the rutile quartz, itself. The late crown prince, Michael, had not inherited the color of those eyes.

But, in a twist of fate, Slaine had—and stranger yet, he had taken the crown prince's seat as well.

At first, when the nobles had gazed on Slaine's pitiful face, it had been difficult to discern even a glimmer of Frederick's visage. But when he'd lifted his chin and spoken with resolve, the vassals all had seen it. Faint though it was, in those shining eyes glinted a trace of their late liege lord.

"To be honest, at first I thought this wasn't going to work out," said Blanca. "But if he can keep that up, maybe he's got some promise after all?"

"It may not be as simple as that. It is not so difficult to muster resolve and speak with an appropriate countenance for a brief moment," said Victor, Viscount of Behrendorf. "It is too early yet to presume from his face and words alone that he is so capable—that he shall rise to the level of His Majesty the King Frederick."

Victor spoke his thoughts calmly—coldly, even. Elena softly laughed at his tone. "My, Commander. Such unsparing words you speak."

"Is it not the truth?"

"Indeed it is. However, His Royal Highness took great pains to express his determination, so I would think it only proper to muster some consideration for his heart," said Elena. "If our lord strives as he's promised he shall, then it behooves me to offer him support. Sweet child... There's value in offering our assistance, wouldn't you say?"

Elena's words were as warm as Victor's were cold. Listening to them, Sieghardt smiled. "It is all right," he said. "His Royal Highness is undoubtedly the son of His Majesty the King. He steeled his heart entirely on his own. All there is left for us to do is have faith in his potential and wait."

The boy had run, but he had also returned by his own will. Tense and nervous though he was, he had lifted his chin and spoken with resolve. In this, they could see the image of the boy's late father.

The assembled nobles appraised Slaine each in their own way, but they all agreed his performance had exceeded their initial expectations. Given that he had been a mere commoner, one might even consider it a job well done. They could not know if Slaine would excel as king, but at the very least he possessed the potential.

Sergey alone did not join in the conversation. He remained silent, a stern look on his face, as he fell into deep contemplation.

## **Chapter 2: The Value of Blood**

Slaine had met with the Nobles of the Robe and donned the necklace that gave proof to his status as ruler. What awaited him next was an enormous amount of studying.

The state funeral for King Frederick and his royal family was due to commence in about two weeks. Of course, such a momentous occasion demanded the appearance of all manner of important figures; nobles of the kingdom's aristocracy, prominent figures among the common folk, and dignitaries from abroad were all due to gather in the royal capital of Uzelheim.

Given the gravity of the situation, it was likely many kingdoms would send their monarchs as representatives. Slaine would naturally need to greet such guests in person.

No matter that he was a commoner suddenly raised to the throne—he was the crown prince. He could not afford to embarrass his kingdom.

As such, it was decided that until two weeks hence, Slaine was to focus on acquiring sufficient knowledge of the surrounding kingdoms and at least a basic foundation in etiquette.

"Let us begin at once, Your Royal Highness," said Monica. "It is only the two of us, so please make yourself comfortable and listen well. Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to ask, my liege."

"Understood. Thank you," said Slaine.

This room in the palace had once belonged to King Frederick—henceforth, it was to be Slaine's office. Monica stood by the blackboard, and Slaine faced her at attention.

In ordinary circumstances, the Nobles of the Robe tutored the crown prince—but with the royal family virtually wiped from the political stage as it was, Chancellor Sergey and the other key ministers were occupied with maintaining the state. There was no one among them with the time to coddle the young

prince so.

So it was Monica, the aide-de-camp, to whom the task of his education fell.

"First, I should like to explain the history of this Kingdom of Hasenvalia, as well as the present conditions of those nations neighboring thereto. The Kingdom of Hasenvalia was founded in—"

As the son of a scribe, Slaine had been exposed to many books and had acquired a broader education than perhaps the average commoner. There was much in these basic lessons that Slaine already knew.

In the western region of the Salestakia continent, where the Kingdom of Hasenvalia was located, there had once existed a large unified state. It had long prospered alongside the Great Empire of Galed, which dominated the central region of the continent. However, about one hundred years ago, it had collapsed. After a period of upheaval, during which the ruined kingdom's nobility had clashed and fought, the region had fractured into twenty-two smaller states.

Hasenvalia was one of them. It had been founded seventy-six years ago, and the late Frederick had been its fourth king.

At present, that group of twenty-two states more or less coexisted in peace. Although the occasional border skirmish was known to occur, such conflicts had not resulted in any casualties in quite some time, and neither had they led to any significant escalations of hostility. So the states in the western portion of the continent, as well as their surrounding regions, generally maintained peaceable relations. These conditions had persisted for some decades now.

Slaine also had to grasp the domestic conditions within the kingdom.

At the time of the kingdom's founding, the noble houses of the local region had assembled and, from among themselves, chosen the family of Hasenvalia as royal house.

The kingdom operated under a feudal system of governance—approximately thirty percent of its territory was controlled directly by the royal family. Of the present population, about forty percent, or twenty thousand people, resided within these royal territories.

Those regions beyond the royal territories were administered by another twenty aristocratic families, ranging in rank from baron to count. The royal family granted to these lords lands and protection in exchange for their fealty and military service in the event of a threat to the kingdom.

The royal family maintained a standing royal army of three hundred men. In addition, there were fifty members of the royal guard standing watch over the royal family and palace. In times of emergency, such as an invasion by another kingdom, the royal domain could mobilize a force of two thousand soldiers.

In order to preserve such military power—and the mandate to rule the realm—the royal family managed additional sources of income besides the taxes levied upon its royal domains: iron and salt mines.

The ore production of these iron mines well exceeded domestic consumption, and as such could be exported to the fiefdoms and neighboring states. And as all the salt mines in the kingdom were located within the royal domain, the royal family claimed complete monopoly over domestic sales of salt.

One additional mine held by the royal family produced rutile quartz—the national stone of the kingdom. Although small in size, the gemstones had earned popularity as decorative accessories throughout the domestic market.

The aforesaid information was but a brief overview of the topics that Monica detailed in her lesson to Slaine.

Slaine also learned the names, characteristics, roles, and the present heads of household of the domestic noble families; the names of the surrounding states, principally those of the kingdoms located in the western region of the continent; said neighboring states' defining features and relations with the Kingdom of Hasenvalia; their reigning monarchs' names; and more.

"How are you faring, my liege?" Monica gently asked. "Have you understood everything thus far?"

"More or less," Slaine answered, nodding. There had been quite a bit he'd already known, so it hadn't been too difficult to grasp.

"Great. Well, then, let us make sure you have memorized all that I have just explained to you."

"Eh?" Slaine squawked. "I have to memorize all of that? Before the state funeral?"

"Yes. During a state funeral, the crown prince must have a thorough grasp of the names, faces, and positions of all attendees, my lord. It will be necessary to memorize all of the points I have just explained," said Monica. "There are two weeks remaining until the ceremonies commence, and the latter half of that time will have to be dedicated to learning the funerary customs and preparing for the services themselves, so we must conclude our sociological studies by the end of this week."

Slaine's face stiffened as Monica spoke. "U-Understood. I'll...do my best," he said, bowing his head with a sense of resignation.

Not remembering was...simply not an option. Slaine understood that.

"You have my support, my liege," Monica said.

Slaine answered her gentle smile with one of his own, strained though it was.

And so his first task as crown prince was unexpectedly mundane: he needed to cram his skull with as much information as possible.



"You have managed to memorize all of the basic information about the kingdom's nobility in just two days, my lord. Well done," Monica said, smiling.

Slaine could only answer her praise with a tired look. "Thanks. Well, it's only the fruits of hard work, I suppose." He'd now learned the names of each noble family in the kingdom, the locations of their fiefdoms, and the names of their current heads of household—as well as the characteristics, social positions, and power relations of each noble territory. As the son of a scribe, Slaine had spent his days exposed to many books, so he had a reasonable affinity for such studies.

He would chat with Monica during the course of his lessons, learning more from her about each of the noble families, as well as the complicated circumstances behind his selection as heir. When Slaine had first arrived at the royal palace, he'd proposed to Sergey the possibility of choosing a successor from the line of one of his late grandfather's cousins—and he now realized why

that would have been so difficult.

Slaine's grandfather—the king prior to Frederick IV—had had three male cousins. All had lived fairly long lives and had children. Their descendants totaled nine, spread throughout the noble families in various parts of the kingdom. So it was impossible to choose a successor from among those descendants; they were equally thin of blood and too numerous. No matter which among them were to ascend to the throne, the families of those not selected would have been dissatisfied. Were such a schism to erupt between the crown and its nobles, the balance of the kingdom's aristocratic society—so painstakingly stabilized over the past four generations—would have been thrown into disarray.

Understanding this, Frederick had left a will naming his natural son—Slaine—as his successor, commoner though the boy was.

Slaine couldn't help but feel guilty. Sergey and the other Nobles of the Robe were only following the king's wishes. At the foundation of their decision was their unwavering loyalty to the royal family; their families, too, had served the House of Hasenvalia since before the founding of the kingdom.

Perhaps this was why they had such confidence that they could administer the country, even with a commoner on the throne. Better to have a young, malleable commoner with a strong claim as king than to welcome a successor with thin blood. They had wagered that even had their upstart commoner king lacked the ability to rule on his own, he would be able to stand tall with their attentive support. Slaine understood this to be why they had pledged him their fealty, in spite of his helplessness.

And Slaine, who had yet to learn left from right as heir to the throne, was incredibly grateful to have their backing.

Nonetheless, it was not the greatest feeling. It was as if the nobles had said, "Rest easy—even if you are incompetent, we will run the government!"

Slaine knew he could not continue to presume upon their loyalty. If he allowed himself to remain a mere figurehead forever, he would be letting his mother down. He made up his mind: henceforth, he would learn, train, and develop himself to the fullest extent.

But it was impossible to charge forward without rest forever. Long was the path ahead.

"I expect you must be very tired, my liege," Monica said. "How about a short recess? Shall I bring some tea?"

"Yes, that sounds nice. Please," Slaine replied, grateful.

And so Monica left the room, returning not long after with a tray of herbal tea. When Slaine had fled from the vassals and Sieghardt had followed to persuade him to return, she had offered him the same tea—tea made from the same herbs his mother had used to grow.

While Slaine had never particularly favored this tea, he found himself growing strangely attached to it now. He'd taken a liking to having a cup or two whenever he needed a break.

"At any rate—Monica, you're the daughter of a baroness, are you not? Is it really all right to send you off on such menial errands? Making you bring me tea and such. Should I not leave that work for the servants?" Slaine asked, sipping the warm tea.

Monica shook her head with a smile on her face. "I am your aide-de-camp, my liege," she said. "Should you wish for tea, then I shall naturally see to the task, as I am the one best placed to serve you with haste. Truly, it is an honor to be of service."

"Well, if you're sure," Slaine said, a little befuddled.

Monica had been kind to Slaine from the moment they'd met—so much so that it struck him as a bit odd. Ever since arriving at the castle, Slaine had been surrounded by vassals and servants; he lived a life wracked by tension and anxiety. But whenever he found himself ill at ease, Monica proved to be a kind and gentle presence.

More and more, he'd come to presume upon her aid. He wanted to disgorge to her all his feeble complaints, perhaps so that she might comfort him—but he restrained himself.

Monica was kind because she was his aide-de-camp—it was her job. It would have been improper to overstep the professional boundary between them with

such personal talk. So he kept his gratitude to himself.

At that moment, there was a knock at the door. A maid called into the room, "Pardon me, Your Royal Highness."

It was only around four o'clock, so not yet time for dinner—nor was his office scheduled to be cleaned at that time. So why had a maid come around? Perhaps wondering the same question, Monica made her way over to the door, opened it a crack, and exchanged a few words with the maid.

Then she turned back to Slaine with a smile. "My liege, you've a package from Rutware," she said.

Slaine recalled that he'd asked to have all his belongings brought to the royal palace from his home—the house where he'd lived in the village of Rutware, where he'd been born and raised. "Understood. I'll go and see to it now—if that's all right?" he said.

"Of course, my liege," Monica said. "We've reached a good place to leave off, and you've progressed in your studies ahead of schedule, so let's call it a day. Allow me to show you there."

Slaine had yet to learn his way around the spacious palace. He followed Monica out of the office, down the stairs from the third floor to the first, and then through the hall to the mail room.

Lined up on the floor in that room were the objects that had surrounded him for as long as he could remember: his furniture, clothes, books, and other various small articles. The lot of it looked rather shoddy amidst the decor of the palace, but it filled him with nostalgia nevertheless.

Slaine found himself releasing an appreciative sigh. Not a week ago, he had been living among these things—and yet now it felt as if last week were a lifetime away.

"Is anything missing, my liege?" asked Monica.

Slaine couldn't pry his eyes away from his belongings. "Mmm, no, it's all fine, thank you."

He walked over to the carefully arranged piles and took one of the books in

hand. It was a historical fiction from his mother's personal collection, and a particular favorite of Slaine's. He flipped through it and then set it down again.

Next, he approached his mother's dresser, running his fingers gently across its surface.

"Did that belong to your mother?" Monica asked, her voice quiet so as not to disturb Slaine's reminiscence.

"Yes," Slaine answered with a lonely smile. "It was the only luxury she owned."

"A black oak dresser of this make is likely the work of a craftsman from the Kingdom of Luvonia, renown for its woodworking. His Majesty King Frederick favored this magnificent wood," said Monica. "This palace is filled with many black oak furnishings as well. Perhaps this dresser was a gift to your mother from His Majesty."

Slaine had surmised as much. "My mother preferred a modest life, but she would not part with this vanity," he said with a bittersweet laugh. "She treasured it, often gazing upon it lovingly... I never asked how she came upon it, but I'd always supposed that it was a gift from my father." Though, of course, he'd never imagined that his father might be the king himself.

To his mother, this dresser had been a memento from the man she loved but would never be able to meet again.

"Just as King Frederick kept you and your mother in his thoughts, your mother thought of His Majesty as well," Monica softly said.

Slaine nodded. "Yes, I think so," he replied, recalling his mother's face.

Then Slaine directed the servants to store his belongings with care. The books he had placed in his private chambers, a persistent comfort in this unfamiliar palatial life.



The announcement of the death of the king and his family sent shock waves through the land, both within the kingdom and abroad.

The aristocracy was thrown into disarray, alarm, and confusion. Even those

vassals with little opportunity to come face-to-face with the royal family, who knew the royals' names and not much more, were utterly dumbfounded to hear of the tragedy.

Monarchs from neighboring kingdoms swiftly sent envoys to express their condolences. Given the significance of the news, those delegates sent to visit the palace were all aristocrats of distinguished status in their own right.

Slaine knew of these matters only by hearsay from his retainers. The practical work of actually explaining the matter to the lords and nobles, as well as receiving the envoys from neighboring kingdoms, all fell to Sergey and the other vassals. This was partly to avoid causing further stress to Slaine, who had yet to fully adjust to life as the crown prince. There was also the concern that Slaine might not perform such duties adequately, were he to be thrust on center stage. No one had said it to Slaine in as many words, but it was easy enough to guess.

But although the world had been thrown into uproar, there was no significant chaos, thanks to the strenuous efforts of his vassals. So Slaine continued on with his studies in preparation for the state funeral.

There was now precisely a week until the services would commence. Slaine had forced into his mind a bare minimum of knowledge of the kingdom's aristocracy and the monarchies of neighboring kingdoms. From today forward, he would focus on concrete preparations for the funeral service and the subsequent social mingling that would be required.

Slaine arrived in the audience chamber to receive his next visitor. Before him stood a man between thirty and forty years of age, dressed in the vestments of a clergyman. Smiling softly, the man offered Slaine a clerical bow.

"Your Royal Highness, it is an honor to make your acquaintance," he said. "My name is Arthur, Bishop of the Eynthian Church of Hasenvalia."

The bishop of a kingdom's Eynthian Church was responsible for administering the clergy of that kingdom; many states following the Eynthian faith were clustered in the west of the Salestakia continent. The bishop oversaw the priests and deacons, who themselves managed local congregations.

When the western region of Salestakia had split into numerous smaller states,

the Eynthian Church had also divided and substantially weakened. Although its political influence was now small, the church remained closely enmeshed with society and everyday life.

So Slaine could not afford to dismiss the church as a political actor. The presence of the church was indispensable at certain important traditional ceremonies, such as his father's upcoming state funeral.

"W-Well met," Slaine stammered, a bit nervous to stand before the highest ranking of the kingdom's Eynthian clergymen. He had visited the church at the capital many a time in the course of assisting his mother in her business, but had never had the opportunity of an audience with the bishop. "Rise."

Bishop Arthur lifted his head. "Your Royal Highness," he said, a calm expression on his face. "First, I would like to reiterate my sincerest condolences for your loss. Ever since I received news of His Majesty the King and his royal family's passing, I have prayed to God each and every day that their souls will find peace."

The bishop had a rather long-winded manner of speech, which Slaine supposed was to be expected of a clergyman. Once a few pleasantries had set the boy's mind somewhat more at ease, Bishop Arthur took the opportunity to change the subject.

"Now, my lord, I shall explain the requisite procedures and etiquette expected for the state funeral. There are still some days remaining before the services, so you may take your time to absorb this information piece by piece."



Bishop Arthur explained the particulars of the state funeral customs, while Chancellor Sergey and Elena, minister of foreign affairs, hastily prepared Slaine for the necessary social etiquette.

At last, the day of the funeral arrived.

The kingdom's aristocracy, prominent commoners such as wealthy merchants and renowned craftsmen, and the monarchs of neighboring states—or their proxies—were all in attendance.

More than a hundred mourners gathered in the Grand Cathedral. With them,

Slaine stood witness to the ceremony to send off his father, Frederick, as well as the king's departed family. He quietly listened at the head of the congregation as Bishop Arthur commenced a lengthy sermon.

"It has long been said in the world of men that God does not bestow upon us insurmountable trials—we children of God must needs carry forward in the face of tragedy, even one so grave as this; though now grief overcomes us for the loss of a grand king and his esteemed family, time shall heal all. With its passage shall we shed our pains and our sorrows, until naught remains but memories of sunny days and the magnificent legacies bequeathed by those no longer with us; let us accept that the dearly departed will find peace evermore at the side of God our Lord."

All the mourners were dressed in black. By custom, the crown prince was the conductor of the state funeral, so Slaine stood alone in the front row. Standing behind him were the important domestic figures, as well as the rulers of surrounding states.

Slaine could feel their stares piercing his back.

Naturally, this was not the most comfortable of settings. He had yet to exchange proper greetings with any of the important guests in attendance. It was not difficult to imagine the way they looked upon Slaine, who until just two weeks ago had been merely a common citizen. He was sure the lot of them were thinking, "Who in the world is this boy?"

Slaine felt nervous to the point of terror. Merely standing there in witness to the clergy's rites was enough to leave his legs trembling.

He glanced to the side, spotting Monica where she stood in the corner of the cathedral. When she met his eye, she offered him a small nod, as if to say, "I'm here." Small though it was, her response eased his mind.

"Now, Your Royal Highness. The garland, if you will," said Bishop Arthur, shattering Slaine's small moment of peace.

The first of the many funerary rites for which Slaine was responsible was to place a crown of flowers upon the caskets. A separate funeral had already been held for the duchess and her family, so there were three caskets to be crowned: those of his father, Queen Catalina, and their son, the late Crown Prince

Michael.

As Slaine was the only person to move during this ritual, every eye in the cathedral was solely focused on him. Nevertheless, this sacred act was to be performed by the crown prince, and no other; Slaine had no choice but to carry it out. If he were not capable of such a thing, then he was no crown prince at all.

Slaine willed his trembling legs to steady themselves as he stepped forward to accept the garland from a priest. He held the delicate crown of black lilies, the national flower, in both his hands. Then, in a well-choreographed move, he approached to place the first crown on his father's casket.

As cremation was customary under the Eynthian faith, it was preferable to cremate the body as soon as possible after death. Accordingly, the caskets contained urns of the deceased royals' ashes.

Even in death, Slaine could not learn their faces; he knew of his father's appearance only from the portraits left behind in the royal palace. He gently set the garland down over the casket of the father he would never meet.

He was sending off his own father, the woman his father had loved as his wife, and his half brother. With this in mind, Slaine kept his focus on the task at hand and went about the ritual without any misstep.

After the garland ceremony, Slaine no longer felt so anxious about the funeral.

The pallbearers were to carry the caskets out of the cathedral to parade through the main streets of the royal capital. Then the procession would enter the royal palace, where the urns would be removed from the caskets and laid to rest in the mausoleum.

The soldiers of the royal guard would take up the burden of carrying the caskets, and all that would be required of Slaine was to walk behind them. Monica and the Nobles of the Robe would surround Slaine, and in turn be surrounded by soldiers of the royal army.

So long as Slaine did not wander astray, mistake the words of the funerary

hymns, or forget how to walk, it would be difficult for him to go wrong.

As he made his way through the royal capital, his vassals and soldiers shielded him from view of the people gathered along the city streets.

He simply moved forward mindlessly. He entered the royal palace, reached the mausoleum, and watched in silence as the urns were interred in their final resting places.

And with that, the state funeral was over.

The ceremony was sure to be described as grand and magnificent for generations to come, but Slaine had not the luxury to take it all in. The truly difficult part would come after.

As Slaine and his attendants worked to inter the urns, the other mourners proceeded to the ballroom of the palace to begin socializing. As it was a solemn occasion, the banquet was not a lively one. But with wine and hors d'oeuvres in hand, they greeted one another and exchanged pleasantries.

It was not every day that the lords and nobles of the kingdom, let alone foreign kings and dignitaries, had the opportunity to all gather in one place. With their duty of attending the state funeral fulfilled, they could take advantage of this time to gather information, as well as broaden and deepen their personal connections. A social battlefield of royals and aristocrats.

There, Slaine would be the star of the day—no matter how the thought rankled.

Slaine entered the ballroom, having changed from his funerary vestments into his formal attire. A royal guard posted at the entrance called out in a sonorous voice. "Enter His Royal Highness the Crown Prince, Slaine of Hasenvalia!"

The bustling crowd immediately fell quiet.

All eyes turned to Slaine. Unlike during the funeral procession, he had no choice but to face it head-on. He found himself shrinking back a step.

The silence soon lifted as the attendees returned to their pleasantries. But it was clear enough that their attentions remained focused squarely on Slaine.

The boy felt the anxiety rising in his chest. Every glance seemed to be filled

with scorn, each laugh with ridicule.

"At ease, my lord. I am here to aid you," said Elena, Countess of Estergren and minister of foreign affairs. "So long as you carry out the standard greetings and take care not to mispronounce any names, you'll not have any trouble."

"I am at your side as well, my liege," said Monica, standing alongside him.

Slaine returned a nod and a stiff expression. "Right," he said. "Thank you both."

He gently touched the rutile quartz hung on the chain around his neck. The rutile quartz was said to bring about good luck. He prayed that it would guide him that day—that he would not fail.

"Well, then, my lord. Let us begin by greeting the guests from neighboring states, with a particular eye for those monarchs who have come themselves in person," said Elena. "Over there is King Oswald, sovereign of Ignatov, a most crucial neighboring state. Shall we see to him first?"

The Kingdom of Ignatov was located to the southeast. With a population of about sixty thousand, it was slightly larger than the Kingdom of Hasenvalia. A strong military power, Ignatov boasted of a healthy stock of horses and a large supply of cavalrymen.

Slaine mentally ran through all he'd learned in the past two weeks, recalling basic information about the state.

Of the twenty-one other countries in the western reaches of the continent, fifteen had been able to send representatives in time for the funeral. Of these states, eight had sent their monarchs to personally attend. Naturally, the kingdoms directly bordering Hasenvalia were of high importance—Elena's choice to greet the King of Ignatov was a proper one, Slaine thought.

As Elena approached, even Slaine could tell which of the guests was the King of Ignatov himself. The man looked to be about forty years of age, with the countenance of a stern warrior. At her urging, Slaine approached Oswald himself.

"I-It is an honor to make your acquaintance, King Oswald of Ignatov," Slaine said. "My deepest gratitudes for attending the funeral ceremonies today, Your

Majesty. I am Slaine, the new crown prince of Hasenvalia."

Were they both kings, then their positions could have been considered equal in terms of hierarchy—however, Slaine was still but a prince, and as such he addressed the neighboring monarch with some humility.

Oswald paused for a deliberate moment before he turned to look at Slaine. His gaze was cold and evinced no favor, even in empty flattery. After several seconds of chilly appraisal, he finally opened his mouth to speak—not to Slaine, but to Elena.

"It's been too long, Lady Estergren," he said. "Have you been tasked with minding the children today?"

The king had ignored Slaine in favor of addressing an aristocrat—an obvious slight. He could hardly be ignorant of basic courtesies, after all, and Slaine could feel his contempt in his expression and gaze.

Elena stiffened for a moment, but affixed a peaceable smile to her face and replied, "It has been a long time indeed, Your Majesty. Today I serve as aide to His Royal Highness the Crown Prince, Slaine of Hasenvalia. He is the next king of our country, and the new liege lord to all the nobles thereof. Your Majesty, please kindly direct your responses to my lord," Elena said, perhaps the strongest protest she could make to the king of a neighboring state.

"Is that so? What a bother that must be," Oswald responded. Then he turned his eyes upon Slaine. "So you're that new crown prince, are you?" His expression was filled with such disdain that the look alone was enough to make the boy flinch. "King Frederick of Hasenvalia was a man worthy of the crown. I conferred with him and his family as monarch of a neighboring state. We had our differences, but he was a man I could confront on equal footing. I am here today to pay my respects to him and his family. That is all."

Even Slaine could read between the lines: the king had no interest in this upstart commoner who fancied himself crown prince, a poor substitute for the genuine article.

"It beggars belief, to think they all died in a fire in a single room," Oswald went on. "And to make matters worse, the next king is to be a little boy who's crawled out from the gutters? Is this the end of the Kingdom of Hasenvalia?"

Elena made an effort to interject, aware it crossed the line of decorum. "With all due respect, Your Majesty, the crown prince is—"

"Do not waste your time," Oswald snapped. "As Her Ladyship is a frequent visitor to our kingdom as minister of foreign affairs, I have no qualms with the Lady of Estergren. But I will not suffer the insult of being asked to keep company with this brat. What can a lowly commoner, thrust into his position by luck, possibly hope to accomplish? Never had I imagined I would be made to stand beside such a child as a peer. The mere thought disgusts me."

Slaine had nothing to say in return. He had thoughts, of course, but it was indeed impossible to expect himself to make a good impression under such circumstances.

Oswald was right—Slaine was nothing but a commoner. He had come upon an unimaginable windfall by no virtue of his own. He had gained his status merely through the deaths of his father and his royal family.

The only credit he had to his name was the blood in his veins. The blood he had inherited from his father, Frederick. And it was for that reason alone that he had been placed in the position of crown prince, as Slaine was painfully aware.

The Kingdom of Ignatov was stronger than Hasenvalia, and the difference in ability and experience between their leaders was even more stark. No matter what Slaine said in response, his words had no power here. There was nothing that even Elena, a skilled diplomat, could do to help—and Monica, mere aide that she was, had even less power.

Just as the awkward atmosphere threatened to suffocate them all, Slaine heard a voice call out to them from the side.

"Oh, good King of Ignatov, you mustn't speak in such a fashion. The crown prince is in a terrible predicament."

When Slaine turned, he saw a young man, in his early twenties or thereabouts, with a pleasant smile on his face. Compared to the other guests, he dressed with flamboyant opulence.

"My lord, this is His Imperial Highness, Prince Florenz Meichelbeck of Galed,"

Elena said for Slaine's benefit. Then she offered a polite curtsy to the prince. "Welcome to Hasenvalia, good prince."

The Great Empire of Galed controlled most of the center of the Salestakia continent, separated from the western region by the Eldecio Mountain Range. This young man—Florenz—was its third-born prince. Was it because he carried the prestige of an empire that he did not address Oswald as "His Majesty"?

"Prince Florenz," said Oswald. The harsh expression on his face remained unchanged, but he softened the aggression in his tone as he addressed the imperial prince—perhaps because even the combined might of the western kingdoms was no match for the great empire. "Do you really intend to befriend this common boy?"

"A king is made, not born—through study and diligence he rises to his status," Florenz declared, inserting himself between Slaine and the sneering king. "Our prince Slaine here just happens to have arrived a bit late to the ambition. It would hardly be fair to bully him for the paucity of his ability or the scarcity of his accomplishments when he has only just begun."

Oswald fell silent for a moment. "Do as you will," he eventually spat, stepping away without further comment.

Bewildered by the sudden turn of events, Slaine cast a glance to Monica beside him and met her eyes. At an encouraging gesture from her, he turned to face Florenz head-on. It was time to mingle and forge what connections he could.

Just as Slaine began to fret about how best to introduce himself, the other prince took the initiative.

"Well met, Prince Slaine of Hasenvalia. Let me offer my greetings once more," said the imperial prince. "I am Florenz Meichelbeck, third prince of the Great Empire of Galed."

"S-Slaine of Hasenvalia," Slaine replied. "U-Um, thank you for that."

Slaine's expression remained hard and anxious, but it didn't seem as if Florenz paid it any mind. With a relaxed smile on his face, the imperial prince reached out to shake hands.



"There is no need for such courtesies. I've heard much about your circumstances, Prince Slaine," said Florenz, chuckling. "To be suddenly thrust into such a position—well, it would be impossible to *not* be nervous, I'd think. Especially when faced with such a character as the king of Ignatov."

The prince's levity eased Slaine's anxious heart. He responded with a smile of his own—the first he'd managed since coming to this place.

The other prince went on. "As third prince, I've been tasked with establishing and maintaining diplomatic ties with the countries in the west of the empire—that is to say, those kingdoms in the west of the continent," he said. "I look forward to establishing fruitful relations between us. I understand you've been faced with considerable hardship, so please, do not hesitate to let me know if there is anything I can do to be of assistance."

"Very well," Slaine said. "Thank you. I'm pleased to make your acquaintance." With that, Florenz said his farewells and went off.

"Well, he seems all right, I suppose," Slaine muttered to himself as he watched the imperial prince disappear into the crowd.

Elena smiled. "The third prince, Florenz, is a moderate, known for his delicate touch with neighboring states—though some in his empire would prefer to call it 'weak,'" she said. "He is not particularly prominent among the current emperor's six children, but I have not heard any foul rumors about his character thus far."

Slaine was rather relieved to hear Elena's assessment of the other prince. Perhaps he had finally found a counterpart of his generation with whom he could converse in the future.

"Well, then, my lord. We have only just begun our greetings," said Elena, voice brisk and clear. "Shall we move on?"

Slaine felt like he'd finished up a tough job, but she was right—they had only just begun. With a small sigh, he nodded. "Yes, let's."

The other monarchs were not quite so odious as King Oswald—but neither could they be said to be *friendly*. Some spoke to Slaine with open contempt;

others put up a polite and gentle front, either from pity or concealed scorn.

Those dignitaries sent in proxy for their rulers offered superficial and perfunctory greetings. At Slaine's side all the while, Elena shared her observations—perhaps they wished to distance themselves from the kingdom that dared embrace such an unconventional crown prince, at least until it was clear where all the chips would fall. Slaine had certainly been thrust into his position through unorthodox circumstances.

After greeting all the prominent figures from neighboring states, Slaine moved on to address the lords and nobles of his own kingdom.

First was the Duke of Wahlenheit, a close relative to the royal family of Hasenvalia.

The current head of the Wahlenheit family was brother to the duke who had perished in the palace fire—in other words, a position not so different from Slaine's. Well, apart from the fact that he had been born and raised in a ducal family and so had surely already mastered every facet of noble customs and etiquette.

"Your Royal Highness. Julius, Duke of Wahlenheit," said the newly minted duke, bowing his head. Finding the right words seemed to trouble him. "I... Well, I acknowledge your efforts."

Slaine was already acquainted with Julius. Prior to the state funeral, they had met to exchange condolences for the dead of their respective families.

He did not leave the encounter with a stellar impression of the man. Julius had not conducted himself in an offensive or provocative way—to the contrary, his temperament had been completely peaceable. However, Slaine could perceive the duke's disdain from a glance. Every aspect of the duke's demeanor conveyed his obvious reluctance to accept his connection to an erstwhile commoner. In a sense, it was only natural that a trueborn aristocrat—a duke, no less—would harbor such feelings. Though they had little to no direct blood connection, they shared a mutual awareness that their relationship would be a difficult one to navigate.

For the time being, neither party had any interest in conversing.

"You must be terribly busy, my lord," said Julius. "Shall we leave it at a hello and goodbye?"

"Yes, let's. Another time," Slaine responded.

And so the fruitless meeting between in-laws ended with little fanfare. It would suffice for now; all that was necessary was the basic courtesy of offering first greetings to his relative ahead of the other lords and nobles. The important introductions were yet to come.

Next, Elena guided Slaine to meet an especially stately pair of men.

"Your Royal Highness," said the first. "It is an honor to make your acquaintance. I am Eberhard, Count of Cronheim."

"Tobias, Count of Akerlof. Pleased to make your acquaintance, Your Royal Highness," said the other.

Among the lords and nobles, Slaine held a superior position as crown prince. He was perhaps half their age, but with his baby face, the counts must have thought him even younger than that. Nevertheless, they both offered the prince polite bows.

These were the only two families that claimed the title of count among the noble houses of Hasenvalia. The House of Cronheim watched over the kingdom's eastern border with the Empire of Galed, while the House of Akerlof guarded the western border. These men were the current heads of their respective families, and the most important figures among the domestic nobility.

When Slaine heard the title "Count of Akerlof," he gulped, his voice trembling from his nerves. "Th-The pleasure is mine. I am Slaine, Crown Prince of Hasenvalia. And, I..." He hesitated. "I'm sorry for your loss, Lord Akerlof."

The late Queen Catalina had been the lord's younger sister.

"I deeply appreciate your condolences, my lord," said Tobias, completely emotionless.

The count's response was only to be expected. Perhaps it would have been different had Slaine been a member of the royal family from the start, but how

could an aristocrat be moved by words of sympathy from a lowborn interloper? Surely he was aware that Slaine offered his sympathies out of obligation alone.

"As a member of the royal family, I am terribly so—"

"With all due respect, my lord, the death of my sister Queen Catalina was an unfortunate accident. There is no need to fret or apologize. My family's loyalty to the royal house of Hasenvalia has not changed," said Lord Akerlof.

Slaine fell silent at the count's response. The words ought to have come as some relief, but in truth, they did not please him. He felt as if the count meant to underscore the fact that their relation went no further than the ties between their houses.

Yet another painful reminder that he amounted to nothing beyond the blood in his veins.

"It is as the Count of Akerlof says, my lord," Lord Cronheim said in a bright tone, perhaps intending to lighten the mood. "Please rest assured that we shall continue to serve the royal family as your vassals, defending the borders of the kingdom to the east and west. We are prepared to stake our lives in the service of our duties."

Their introductions concluded, the two counts moved away.

"That was rather strange," said Elena, watching the pair as they went.

"Why?" Slaine asked. "Because those two are ordinarily at odds as leaders of opposing factions?"

Elena turned to Slaine with an impressed glint in her eye. "Oh my. I see you've been studying your domestic politics with diligence, my lord."

The Kingdom of Hasenvalia extended in a long strip from the east to the west. The royal domain was situated at its center, separating the eastern and western nobles' fiefdoms. Lord Cronheim headed up the eastern nobles, while Akerlof represented the west.

Their respective factions often clashed—and so too did the counts themselves. They would greet each other at social functions and exchange pleasantries, but they could not be said to be on friendly terms. Monica had

explained all of this to Slaine.

"The kingdom's present circumstances are...exceedingly unusual," said Elena. "I think, for now, they intend to forget their factional quibbles and discuss the future as fellow nobles of the same kingdom."

Slaine considered her comments for a time, and then mumbled, "To be true, they're a bit..."

"Friendlier than you'd expected them to be, hm?" Elena said with a mischievous smile.

Slaine's eyes widened as the countess guessed at his thoughts. Indeed, he had been certain the prominent counts would be loath to accept him as their new lord. Even if they had not said it in so many words, he'd figured they'd make their disdain known. Their unexpectedly placid demeanors came as quite the shock to him.

Tobias in particular—the man had only just lost his sister and nephew, and to make matters worse, a commoner had come to usurp that nephew's future throne. It was not difficult to imagine how complicated his feelings must have been—it was shocking that he managed to maintain such a calm outward appearance.

"His Excellency the Marquess of Nordenfelt and I have spoken with the nobles about this matter in some detail. Now is the time to mourn the family we have lost and protect the kingdom our beloved King Frederick left behind—in such trying times, there should be none among our ranks who would dare further disturb the stability of the kingdom," said Elena. "And if, God forbid, one were to engage in such treasonous behavior... Well, perhaps he would find himself expunged from the court as a seditionist traitor."

Slaine felt a trace of menace in the countess's smile. While many of the feudal lords could claim distant kinship with the royal family, they had been duly informed that any scheming would be ill tolerated.

"Moreover," Elena went on, "King Frederick splendidly won over the loyalty of the aristocracy. As his natural son, you alone can claim such firm blood ties to the royal family of Hasenvalia. Such a pedigree carries tremendous weight in the eyes of the royals and nobles. They will not cast aside their fealty to the crown so casually. So, I think you may rest easy for now, my lord."

"All right," Slaine responded, his smile rather stiff.

They will not cast aside their fealty to the crown so casually.

But that was not due to any of Slaine's merits, simply the lineage he had inherited. Thrice now, Slaine had been reminded that he amounted to nothing beyond the blood in his veins. If he wished to change this harsh reality and win the aristocracy's respect in his own right, then there was nothing he could do but put himself forward and give it his all.

The subsequent greetings with the lords and nobles ended without apparent issue, but the air was thick with unspoken tension. Slaine felt as if he were walking across a lake blanketed in paper-thin ice—his vassals spoke of their unwavering commitment to the crown, but as expected none professed their loyalty to Slaine himself.

The state funeral was on the surface a solemn occasion, but beneath lurked all manner of mixed emotions.

As the day drew to a close, Slaine finally understood the length of the road that lay before him. What would it take to win over a whole kingdom?

## **Chapter 3: Frustration**

There was not much change to Slaine's life as crown prince after the end of the state funeral.

His most important task was his studies. He had acquired a modicum of domestic and foreign knowledge in preparation for the funeral, but this was not sufficient for much more than perfunctory greetings. There was still much for him to learn—he was well aware that he would need to devote every morning to concentrated study for the foreseeable future.

He used his mother's writing instruments for his notes. As she had been a scribe by trade, her tools were of high quality. It was not strange for Slaine to continue to use them, even as a prince.

While Slaine had the resources to delve into detailed topics whenever the need arose, there was a vast array of topics upon which he had need to acquire general knowledge: History. Mathematics. Etiquette and courtesy. Military affairs. Detailed domestic and foreign political affairs. The kingdom's economy and industries. The cultural refinement befitting an aristocrat. Eynthian theology.

Monica continued on in her role as his tutor, standing beside the blackboard with a book in one hand and a pointer in the other. Slaine submerged himself in study, absorbing all the new knowledge he could.

Day after day went by—before long, the beginning of March had arrived. A bit more than a month had passed since Slaine had become crown prince.

"You're amazing, Monica," Slaine remarked as they chatted over tea. "It's really impressive, the way you can memorize all this information perfectly and explain it so easily."

Monica was Slaine's elder by three years. As the daughter of a baron, the lowest rank among the hereditary nobility, and not even one that stood to inherit her father's holdings, she was not in a position that demanded such

thorough education.

Nevertheless, she had acquired a thorough foundation of knowledge in practically every field. Her personal skills and talents were no doubt exceptional, if she had accomplished this much by the age of eighteen.

Slaine understood now why she had been appointed aide to the crown prince in spite of her age and social position.

Monica answered his praise with a kind smile. "You flatter me," she said. "You undoubtedly possess exceptional wit yourself, my liege. You have progressed through our studies far more quickly than any would have expected."

"I'll be crowned in the fall," Slaine replied, smiling faintly. "I've delegated nearly all my administrative duties to my vassals, but it is not as if I can devote myself to scholarship forever. At this stage, I cannot afford to dawdle."

Becoming king was not simply a matter of sitting through a formal ceremony. If Slaine could not win the recognition of the domestic nobility and the kingdom's foreign neighbors, then he would never be considered a true sovereign.

In order to serve as a true king—in order to protect the kingdom that his mother had loved and his father had left in his hands—Slaine would need to train and reach his full potential.

He was lacking in every respect. It was the least he could do to throw himself into his studies and acquire all the knowledge he would need to serve as king as quickly as possible. Time was running out—he would not be able to rely on his blood or the support of those around him forever.

Slaine felt grateful that he had had the opportunity to help his mother with her work from a young age. He shuddered to think what a struggle it would have been had he not been literate before he arrived.

"Shall we get back to work?" he said, setting his finished cup of herbal tea aside.

Monica answered in a light voice, "You don't wish to rest for a bit longer, my liege?"

"No. The faster we make progress, the better."

"Very well, my liege."

Slaine continued with his studies until noon and then moved to the dining hall for lunch.

Normally, after finishing his midday meal, he would devote the afternoon to his duties as crown prince—whatever simple things were within the scope of his current limited ability. But not today.

"I believe I have the regular assembly to attend today, no?" Slaine asked, cutting the meat on his plate with unpracticed hands.

Standing at Slaine's side, Monica nodded. "Yes, my liege," she answered. "As this is the first time you will be attending, it shall suffice for you to listen to the ministers' reports. It should not burden you much."

Monica also ate during Slaine's lunch break, but in another room, with apparent haste. Usually by the time she returned to his side, Slaine was not even halfway through his own meal.

"All right. Well, I'll give it my all," Slaine said. But after a moment, he had to laugh at his own words. If all that was required of him was to sit and listen to his vassals speak, then what could he even give his all *to*? Inwardly mocking himself, he stabbed his fork into his meat and brought it to his mouth.

As the next king, and the only member of the royal family, the crown prince effectively stood at the apex of the kingdom's population. He was still unused to life in the royal palace, and there were many aspects of his new routine that he found suffocating. But when it came to the food—well, there was truly nothing about which he could complain. He cleared his plate.

Slaine looked to the side as the serving maid approached to take his finished plate and set down his after-lunch tea. This maid, as well as the other servants at the palace, had served the royal family long before Slaine arrived as crown prince.

The quality of their work was exceptional, their performance highly refined. They did not scorn Slaine for his common upbringing, or slack in their duties for disdain of their new liege. By any account, they conducted themselves impeccably in his service.

Nevertheless, Slaine could not help but feel uncomfortable in their presence. He was unaccustomed to life surrounded by servants, and he could perceive an air of bafflement about them—but it was only natural, given that they'd gone from waiting upon a king to serving a commoner. He understood that he had no choice but to endure the discomfort.

It was impossible to tell them to accept him as their master as he was now. It would have been odd had they *not* been left ill at ease after so suddenly losing their previous lord—to say nothing of the fact that they were required to serve a total stranger in his stead.

It was the crown and Slaine's blood that they served, not Slaine himself. But in doing so, they maintained order in the royal palace.

Slaine was little better than an ornament affixed with the label "crown prince." It would make no difference were he to be replaced by another with the same family of origin.

Here, too, it was a matter of blood—no matter where he went, it was all about the blood. Slaine was already bitterly aware of the fact, and yet each new day saw fit to remind him again and again.

He was frustrated, but he knew there was nothing at all he could do about it.

"Shall we be off?" said Slaine as he rose to his feet.

Monica followed suit. "Yes, my liege."

Slaine could not be sure of Monica's true thoughts. But, at the very least, her outward manner never made him uncomfortable. Her presence at his side had become a great comfort.

The official name of the regular monthly assembly was "The Scheduled State Administration Report Assembly of the Kingdom of Hasenvalia."

As the name suggested, each of the Nobles of the Robe was to report the current state of affairs in their respective fields, insofar as it pertained to

management of the royal domain and the kingdom as a whole.

Simultaneously, the meeting was intended to ensure that each principal vassal maintained a broad understanding, thorough grasp, and shared awareness of the present situation in each domain of administration, with the goal of preventing internecine conflict. Or that was how Monica explained it.

At times certain vassals would take a leave of absence from the regular assembly, but today all the Nobles of the Robe were in attendance.

The reports commenced with military affairs. Liturgy, public works, foreign affairs... Every department had its turn. And now Monica's father Walter, Baron Adrashelm, minister of agriculture, was in the midst of his.

Slaine listened carefully from his seat at the head of the assembly, but he was not sure he quite understood the substance of everything he heard.

Both Walter and the other vassals did their best to make their reports in language that was easy for Slaine to understand, supplementing explanations when needed. Unfortunately, there was still much Slaine had need to learn about the present state of the kingdom before he would be able to fully comprehend the conference.

"And so that concludes my report," said Walter. "Have you any questions, my lord?"

Slaine cast a look to Sergey. The chancellor answered him with a nod, so he turned back to Walter. "No questions. That will be all."

As Slaine's abilities were yet insufficient to rule, it was Sergey, Chancellor of the Kingdom, who took charge of the practical administration of the state. It would not have been incorrect to say that the vassals were reporting to Sergey, rather than Slaine. Slaine himself understood that the nobles directed their words to the prince merely as an obligatory courtesy to his status.

Walter took his seat. Three more nobles made their reports in turn: the minister of commerce and industry, then the minister of culture and the arts, and finally Life Baroness Blanca, who represented the royal court mages. Finally, Sergey concluded the meeting with a precise and concise account of the current financial and domestic affairs.

"Next, let us set out our responses to each of the following matters," said Sergey. "First, we acknowledge the reports that the mountain road leading to the third iron ore mine in the north of the royal territory is muddy and damaged by melting snow. We shall make restoration of the road a top priority, and budget from the reserve fund to hire laborers. Any objections, Your Royal Highness?"

"No. I concur with the chancellor's proposal," said Slaine.

"Understood. We shall leave the practical execution to the minister of public works," Sergey continued. "Please discuss the scheduling of the restoration work and mining operations with the minister of mining. Next, as reported by the minister of industry and commerce, preparations for the reopening of the spring marketplace in the royal capital this month will..."

The meeting proceeded under Sergey's leadership from start to finish. Slaine deferred all matters to Sergey's judgment, reduced to a glorified rubber stamp. He had known the meeting would go this way, but he couldn't help but smile bitterly to himself.

Never had his status as a mere ornament been more clear. The frustration that festered in his chest only deepened.

But despite Slaine's doubts, the meeting progressed smoothly, and they arrived upon the final item on the agenda.

"Finally," Sergey said, an unreadable expression on his face. "We shall address the unrest regarding the recent changes in the royal family's circumstances, as reported by several ministers."

Farmers, merchants, craftsmen, scholars, and artists alike—it was patently clear from the nobles' reports that all the kingdom's subjects harbored deep anxieties regarding the royal family's current state.

Every member of the royal family had perished, and now the heir to the throne was a young man from a common background who, at fifteen, had only just come of age—there were many rumblings in the streets about whether the kingdom could truly survive such upheaval.

"Although we cannot simply ignore this matter, practical countermeasures

are limited. We must issue an additional proclamation assuring the realm that we are united and fully equipped to administer the state. Concurrently, we retainers must make an official proclamation that the royal family remains solid, united under the rule of the legitimate crown prince, heir to His Majesty King Frederick. And our words alone shall not suffice—each one of us must work steadily to give proof to this claim."

Slaine clenched a fist under his desk as Sergey spoke. How many times would he be reminded that he was worth nothing beyond the blood in his veins? He had taken his seat by right of blood alone, and even now foisted his own responsibilities upon his subjects.

It was as if he were an overgrown baby.

"Do you object to this response, my lord?" asked Sergey.

Slaine fell into sullen silence. He felt restless, worthless, and mortified by it all. "No," he eventually said. The jumbled emotions simmering inside him tumbled out alongside his bitter laugh. "Though I suppose it doesn't much matter if I reply at all, does it?"

Something changed in the color of Sergey's eyes. First, he seemed surprised—then his expression went icy cold. "With all due respect," he began. "This is the hall in which we lay the foundation of the administration of the state. I beg of my lord to refrain from making such childish remarks."

The chancellor's words were merciless and his gaze was as sharp as a knife. The room fell into total silence.

"I acknowledge your efforts, and the progress you have made in your studies. But it has been but a *month*. A man cannot expect his circumstances to change after such a short period of time," Sergey continued. "Sulking and complaining in the course of your political duties suggests a lack of patience unbefitting of your station. My lord, is this behavior truly that of a great king?"

Slaine froze like a frog before a snake, completely paralyzed by the chancellor's chilly gaze.

"I dare to address the prince with unsparing words, but I beg of my lord to refrain from besmirching the crown. To be a monarch who earns the trust of his

subjects requires knowledge, experience, and above all readiness. One cannot amass all these qualities overnight," said Sergey. "Your aide reports that you possess a prodigious intellect, so I am certain you are equipped to understand the intent of my admonishments, my lord."

Slaine stared wordlessly at the floor for a long moment. Then, in a small voice, he mumbled, "It is as the chancellor says. I apologize for my immature outburst."

"I appreciate your understanding," said the chancellor. "Then that will conclude today's agenda. May I call the meeting to a close, my lord?"

Slaine took a deep breath and lifted his head. He did his best to maintain a calm front, even if a front was all it was. "Yes. Meeting adjourned."

Slaine departed the meeting room with Monica in tow. He headed down the hall to return to his office, but stopped at the sound of someone calling out to him from behind.

He knew who it was before he even turned to look—that lively, booming voice could not have belonged to anyone else.

"Sieghardt," Slaine muttered as he looked up into the tall general's face.

General Sieghardt, Count of Vogel, wore the same good-natured smile as ever. "My apologies for the interruption, Your Royal Highness," he said. "It could not have been easy to hear the chancellor's words, my lord."

Slaine couldn't help but let out a strained laugh at Sieghardt's concern.

"It is all right," Slaine replied. "I said as much before, but the chancellor was entirely correct. I harbor no anger or resentment toward him."

"Is that so? Well, I am relieved to hear it," said Sieghardt, smiling. But something about his expression tightened a moment later. "The reason that Lord Nordenfelt has taken such an uncompromising attitude is that he has great expectations for you, my lord. I beg for your understanding."

"Expectations," Slaine echoed. He'd spent the better part of a month fretting about his own inadequacy, and then capitulated to petulance in the midst of his

duties. With only the magnanimous Sieghardt and the gentle Monica to witness his grumbling, he found himself letting out another whiny complaint. "Am I a crown prince worthy of any expectations?"

But Monica's kind smile did not falter, and Sieghardt showed no sign of being fazed by Slaine's feeble whimpering.

"Of course. After we lost our liege house so suddenly, your resolve to ascend to the throne as a great king came as a comfort to us," said Sieghardt. "You have freely chosen to take the first step toward the crown—and that is precisely why we place such high hopes in you, my lord. I am certain Lord Nordenfelt feels the same. If he is strict or harsh, it is only to protect you and support your growth."

"Protect me?" said Slaine, tilting his head.

"Indeed. The life of a monarch is a perilous one—beginning your political duties in earnest will mean contending with the many conflicting agendas of the aristocrats while facing the royals of neighboring states. As your direct advisors, we shall support you with utmost devotion," said Sieghardt, "but so too will there be many occasions in which you must rely upon your own power as sovereign. The manner in which you conduct yourself at these moments may have grave consequences—should your judgment lead you astray, the kingdom, the royal family, and even you yourself may come to know terrible suffering."

Sieghardt spoke with a cheerful tone, but these were grave matters indeed. Slaine's face hardened as he listened silently.

"Lord Nordenfelt intends to handle you unsparingly so that such misfortune need not come to pass. His Lordship has hardened his heart to protect this kingdom, the royal family, and you, our revered crown prince—he believes that he is the only one who can guide you to stand tall as a king who is not to be underestimated or disrespected," Sieghardt went on. "Ahh, it takes me back... When Frederick was young too, His Lordship was terribly strict. Of course, it was the same with the late Crown Prince Michael. He has no children of his own, that Lord Nordenfelt—I think he found a sense of purpose in guiding those two."

Looking at Sieghardt's face as he spoke earnestly, Slaine could understand the

chancellor's feelings. Sergey was the most senior of the Nobles of the Robe, serving as chancellor before even King Frederick had ascended to the throne. In order to focus on his duties, Sergey had remained single all his life, never to marry. He had appointed his nephew, the son of his younger brother, as heir to his own marquessate of Nordenfelt.

For Sergey, Frederick and Michael had been more than merely liege lords—they had been his future. He had stringently guided the late king and his heir, molding them to serve the kingdom to the fullest of their potential. Now the two people he had dedicated his entire life to teaching and supporting were gone forever—like losing his son and grandson at once. The despair he'd felt must have been immeasurable.

And yet Sergey carried on in his duties, keeping the political engine of the kingdom running. It was certainly not a pleasant role, admonishing the heir to the throne—but to protect the kingdom, the royal family, and Slaine, he devoted himself utterly.

Slaine hung his head, biting his lip. He felt terribly ashamed—ashamed of his foolishness, his childishness, his pettiness.

"My lord." When Slaine lifted his head at the sound, Sieghardt greeted his eyes with a smile full of kind emotion. "I cannot say that I understand everything that you think and feel, but I sympathize with your frustration. So, please, do not push yourself to hurry. We shall be at your side every step of the way—even if the chancellor is a bit harsh."

"That's all right," Slaine muttered. He couldn't muster the resilience he wished he could, but he did his best to smile. "I understand how you feel—how Sergey feels too. I'll never make such an unsightly scene again. I'll do my best not to burn myself out—and I'll give it my all, until the day comes that I am truly worthy of your respect."

"I am glad to hear it, my lord. On behalf of all your vassals, I offer you our thanks," said Sieghardt. "We are all your allies—our fealty is unwavering."

He bowed in a grand, sweeping gesture, and then turned to go.

"Ah, Sieghardt," Slaine called out. When the general stopped at the sound of his name, Slaine mumbled, "Thank you. For what you said. It—it made me feel a

lot better."

Sieghardt looked back, his smile generous as ever. "It is my honor to serve, my lord," he said. And then he went off on his way.

"Lord Vogel is awfully attached to the lord prince, huh? Went after him right after he left," said Life Baroness Blanca as she made her way down the corridor.

Elena, Count of Estergren and minister of foreign affairs, walked at Blanca's side. "Of course," she replied, chuckling. "For Lord Vogel, His Royal Highness is not merely a survivor of the royal family, but the orphaned son of his dear friend. I would wager that Lord Nordenfelt feels much the same way."

Blanca laughed. "Indeed. His Excellency really is trying to raise the prince right, isn't he?"

She and Elena both understood that Sergey was not stern with the prince out of dislike. All of the royal retainers knew the chancellor's manner well. He had handled the late Crown Prince Michael the same way—and although Elena and the others had no direct knowledge of it, they had heard that the chancellor had taken a similar approach when King Frederick was young. Sergey's merciless admonishments were only proof of his serious intent to train the prince into a proper heir to the throne.

"Aren't you rather fond of the prince yourself?" Elena said.

"Well, I can't deny it. I don't know if he'll turn out to be a great king, but he rather reminds me of myself when I was younger," Blanca answered with a grin. "What about you?"

A meaningful smirk unfurled on Elena's face. "Heh heh heh, well... I admit, I have rather high hopes for the prince myself. Though I'd wager Lord Vogel's enthusiasm will be a bit hard to match."

Elena recalled Slaine's performance at the gathering following the state funeral. It had been a mere two weeks since he had assumed his role as crown prince, but he had already seemed to have a thorough grasp of the political elements at play—a name had been all it took for Slaine to assume the appropriate posture and manner when greeting the next guest. And he had

correctly guessed why the counts of Cronheim and Akerlof, ordinarily rivals, had decided to put their differences aside for the occasion.

He had likely memorized only passing knowledge of the key characters—the names of noble houses, their corresponding territories, and other such basic trivia—but it was impressive that he could recall even that after such brief study. Especially when one considered his humble origins.

It gave Elena much to think about. Perhaps Sieghardt's lofty expectations for the prince were not misplaced after all.

"So I guess we all have pretty high expectations for him," Blanca concluded.

Elena gave a wry laugh. "I suppose so."

The nobles' initial expectations had been abysmal. A bastard child, raised to adulthood as a commoner? Some feared they might be forced to contend with an illiterate dunce. But that atmosphere had changed since their first meeting with Slaine.

The young prince had spoken of his resolve to become a good king, and all could see in his visage traces of the late Frederick's features. He was clever in his speech, and as his aide told it, adept in his studies as well. Perhaps one day he would stand on his own as a legitimate sovereign.

Though each of the nobles' hopes varied in degree, it seemed all had embraced faith in his promise.

Back in his office, Slaine slumped feebly against the back of his chair.

"Your tea, my liege," said Monica, offering him a warm cup.

Slaine thanked her and took it from her hands.

At first, Slaine had hesitated to ask a baroness's daughter to stoop to such a menial task as fetching him tea, but now he had grown accustomed to calling upon her to bring him several cups a day. And he no longer felt uncomfortable slouching like this in front of her.

"You look very tired, my liege," said Monica, seeming slightly concerned.

Slaine answered her with a worn-out smile. "You're right," he sighed. His

thoughts were racing, his emotions all a mess. "I really am just...completely exhausted."

"You have exerted yourself much these past few days, my liege. As your aide, I am always by your side, so I know it better than anyone. Though I may not be able to offer much encouragement just by watching."

Slaine shook his head. "No, you are a great help, Monica. It's a tremendous comfort, having you by my side through all this. Thank you."

"I'm glad to hear it, my lord," Monica said, smiling like a blossoming flower. She brought her own cup of tea to her lips—recently, the two had taken to drinking together on their breaks.

Though Slaine appreciated her kindness, it was a terrible temptation, as well—it was difficult to keep himself from presuming upon her support excessively when it was offered. And when she smiled at him like this, when he was already so tired and weak, his self-restraint wavered.

But he held himself back even so. Monica was his aide, and it was her duty to receive him with open warmth. He knew it would not be proper to burden her with his personal matters.

"But I am the crown prince—the future king. It's unbecoming of me to be content with your encouragement and comfort. I know I am yet lacking," said Slaine, resolving himself to shake off his uncertainties.

"With all due respect, my liege, you are making steady strides forward each day. If you keep up your efforts, the rest will only be a matter of time. As Lord Vogel said, you mustn't rush yourself."

"It's all right," Slaine said. While he studied hard in the mornings, his other official duties were quite simple. It was not as if he were busy every minute of the day. "I'll do my best not to push myself unnecessarily. I'd just like to work a little harder, is all. I still have plenty of time to myself in the afternoons."

There were some documents that required his assent as crown prince, merely as a formality—and that was about as far as his obligations went. Often there was nothing at all for him to do after dusk.

"I would not advise stretching our studies further," Monica said. "You will

have less concentration in the evening after you've tired, so it would in fact be inefficient to do so. As the future king, my liege, you should acquire knowledge steadily without pushing yourself unduly."

Slaine sighed. "I suppose you're right. Well, is there anything else I can do to prepare myself for the crown, other than sit at a desk?"

Monica took a moment to think, then nodded her head. "Yes, there is one thing," she said. "I thought it would be all right to leave it until after your accession—but, if my liege so desires, you could start tomorrow, or even this evening."

Something I could start this evening? Slaine thought, gazing into Monica's smiling face. What in the world could that be?



About a month later, Slaine stood in the courtyard of the royal palace, panting and drenched in sweat as he brandished a wooden sword.

"Just a bit longer, my liege. Do your best to keep swinging. Your arms are starting to droop, so be mindful of your stance," said Monica, her instructions gentle but clear.

Monica's suggestion—the skill that Slaine could begin training right away—had been martial arts.

As Slaine had spent all his life cooped up in his home helping his mother with her manuscripts, he had little physical strength to speak of, and his reflexes were poor. When he had been a young child, Erwin and his other friends would often tease him for being so unathletic.

For Slaine, even the simple act of swinging a sword was quite the exertion.

Monica had started Slaine's regimen at fifty swings a day, and after gradually acclimating to the motion, Slaine had worked his way up to one hundred swings. He slashed down with the wooden sword again and again, taking a step forward with each strike.

With Slaine's poor endurance, the final twenty swings were a terrible challenge. His muscles were so tired he could barely lift his arms. Nevertheless,

he persevered to the end, swinging the sword in determined silence.

When Slaine brought down the blade in his final swing, Monica stepped forward to offer him a towel, a flask of water, and a smile. "Good work, my liege. Well done."

"Thank you," Slaine replied, gasping for breath as he wiped the sweat from his face.

He brought the flask to his lips and greedily gulped down the water inside. This flask was enchanted with magic, and thus produced all on its own a supply of clean water to drink. Even those with money to spare would only have used an enchanted flask on long trips—only a royal could afford to wave around such a luxury so casually.

His thirst sated, Slaine took in a deep breath and looked about.

A cool breeze swept through the courtyard as the sun crept toward the horizon. By the front entrance stood a maid, busy with her cleaning. The sight of a servant using magic to sweep large piles of leaves away from the buildings was a spectacle unique to the royal palace as well.

Elsewhere, a mage watered the grasses and flowers in the courtyard, using magic to spray water in a radial arc. Even the most advanced magical technologies could not replicate this sort of mass production of water—witnessing a skilled sorcerer employed to perform such a task was truly a sign of extravagant luxury.

It was a prestigious appointment to serve the royal family directly as a mage of the royal court, but in times of peace, there was often not much for them to do. It was not uncommon to see a sorcerer engaged in such work, whether to develop various other skills or simply to pass the time.

At any rate, there were many opportunities to encounter magic or magical tools in the royal palace. This, too, was another constant reminder to Slaine of his sudden rise in status.

"Shall we start again, my liege?" asked Monica.

Slaine rose to his feet. "Yes, my arms have rested well enough," he answered.

They launched into sparring once more. Monica struck out with her sword in a simple blow, and Slaine parried with his own.

Unfortunately, with Slaine's size and strength as they were, he was not like to become a formidable fighter. As king, there was little chance he would ever cross swords with an enemy in real battle. Even were he to be targeted in a surprise attack or attempted assassination, the royal guardsmen or mages of the royal court would be first to fight.

Nevertheless, Slaine had been training in swordsmanship every day for about a month now, for two reasons.

The first was to train his body. Even if Slaine himself would never have cause to engage in direct combat, in the event of war he would need to serve as commander on the battlefield—and that could mean many long days of marching and camping in unpleasant conditions. Were he as king to be seen exhausted and miserable on the eve of battle, it would surely affect the morale of his troops. This was not a particularly imminent concern, however—there had been no deadly conflicts with neighboring states in recent years, so the only physical threats of note were bandits and monsters.

The second reason, to put it plainly, was to show off. Training in swordsmanship was a simple and readily visible way to demonstrate his sincere commitment to bettering himself as king. In his present state, it was only natural that his vassals and servants would view him as weak and unreliable—and so Slaine had decided to make it a daily routine to train in the courtyard after finishing his official duties. At least then it would *appear* that he was learning to wield a sword.

Since time immemorial, royals and aristocrats had derived their right to rule from their commitment to gallantly protecting their land and subjects. Even in the peaceful present day, when monarchs had greater need of political influence than martial prowess, there was an expectation that a king was also a brave warrior.

Consequently, lords had need to train their bodies and hone their martial skills. A competent ruler could wield a sword; conversely, wielding a sword made one appear to be a competent ruler.

It was little more than a bluff, but such superficial gestures were important in the political realm. If Slaine dedicated himself to training and developing his skills with a sword, then it would be easier to earn the recognition and respect of his servants and vassals—indirectly bolstering the stability of the royal family's mandate.

In sum, although he had no intention to use these skills in combat, it was not a waste to cultivate physical strength for its own sake. Even the appearance of strength would improve his reputation. For Slaine, training in the martial arts was like killing two birds with one stone.

"Superb parry, my liege," said Monica.

His aide had yet to break a sweat, but Slaine's forehead was dripping with perspiration as he wielded his wooden sword.

"You are the one who is superb, Monica," he panted. "Is there anything you can't do?"

It had become readily apparent over the past month that Slaine had absolutely no talent for the martial arts. It was only because of Monica's efforts that he had made as much progress in his training as he had.

Her praise put a conflicted smile on Slaine's face. It was Monica who deserved the commendation: she was an excellent aide, a perspicacious teacher, and an adept martial instructor.

"You are too kind, my liege." Monica lowered her training sword and took a few steps back to adjust her posture. "My abilities do not come from nowhere —I am something of a knight, after all."

Knighthood was an honor conferred upon those who had trained in the royal army or in the territorial unit of a noble lord. Knights were permitted to ride as officers in the armed forces—individuals outside the aristocracy who achieved this distinction enjoyed an elevated status relative to ordinary commoners.

Knighthood was granted irrespective of social status or origin. Conversely, none could be called a knight until they had been recognized for their ability, even if they were the child of a noble family. It was one of the few methods for a commoner to better his standing, and an obligatory hurdle for the children of

the nobility and the military class.

Slaine had heard that Monica had joined the royal army through the Adrashelm family's connections at the age of fourteen, and had been knighted the previous year. Given that it ordinarily took at least five years to achieve such a distinction, this was a remarkable accomplishment.

So it was because she was also a knight that Monica wore military attire in the course of her duties. She was Slaine's aide, but also in fact his protector.

"Well, then, shall we try to swing a bit faster in our next bout?" she asked.

"I don't know if I'm capable of that, but I shall give it my best effort," Slaine answered.

"Please rest assured that I will not strike you directly with my sword, but should you strike *me*, I can endure it—you've no reason to be concerned. Do not hold back, my liege."

As a man, Slaine could not help but feel a bit pitiful. It was as she said—the difference between their abilities was indeed overwhelming. He let out a small laugh, steadied his expression, and then stepped forward with a bit more confidence.

He'd acquired *some* proficiency in the past month of training, at least. Aiming to show proof of that, he swung his sword down with all his might—but Monica deflected the blow with the slightest movement. Then she came rushing forward all at once, effortlessly throwing Slaine off-balance.

"Ah!" he exclaimed as he staggered back.

Monica came to his rescue in a flash. She immediately tossed her sword to the side, and with her free hand caught Slaine around the waist to keep him from falling. He should have been able to keep his body upright with her support, but he ended up doing exactly the wrong thing—in his flustered scramble to right himself, he grabbed hold of the lapels of her military uniform, and brought her crashing right down with him. Not even Monica saw it coming.

The both of them yelped as they fell—Slaine right onto his back. It was only thanks to Monica's quick reflex to cradle his head with her hand that he didn't crack his skull.

But now they found themselves strewn across the ground, Monica draped right over his body. When Slaine opened his eyes, she filled his vision.

Her handsome face was so close to his that he could feel her breath against his skin. She was cradling the back of his head in her right hand, with her left against the ground beside his face—from the side it might have appeared as if she were pinning him down.

A distance entirely inappropriate for a man and a woman who were not married.

This close, he could feel the warmth of her breath that spilled from between her soft lips—see the pale, smooth skin of her throat—smell her perfume, faint but sweet...





Confronted with all these things, Slaine became aware of Monica as a woman. Not only that she was a woman—that she had a woman's body.

And with that realization came a jumble of emotions. He was embarrassed. Guilty. Nervous.

Monica, on the other hand, smiled after only a moment of surprise. Up close, her expression was beautiful, mature—and perhaps it was because of the situation in which he found himself, or his disheveled state of mind, but Slaine thought it terribly alluring.

Which was absolutely no good. Feeling such an attraction to his aide simply wouldn't do.

He was the next king. Slaine did not know when he would ascend to the throne, but he was certain he would be arranged a politically suitable match to marry. And until that time came, it was imperative that he focus on preparing for his coronation. He could not permit himself to harbor such selfish thoughts toward Monica.

With that in mind, Slaine smoothed out his expression and did his very best to remain calm.

"My apologies," said Monica, pushing herself off of Slaine's body.

As she rose, she took hold of Slaine's hand and helped him climb back to his feet.

"You are not harmed, my liege?" she asked.

Slaine shook his head. "No, I'm all right," he said. He was lucky that they were in the midst of sparring—if his face was red, she likely thought it only a product of the physical exertion.

Slaine resolved to pretend nothing had happened—that nothing had changed between them at all. He averted his eyes from her face for a moment, willing his expression blank as he brushed the dirt and grass from his clothes.

And perhaps his efforts were successful, as Monica showed no sign of noticing his attention, nor any awareness that anything was amiss. She merely seemed glad he was unharmed, smiling pleasantly.

Then a boisterous laugh erupted from nowhere. Slaine's shoulders jerked in surprise.

"Ha ha ha! Rather daring of you to jump the crown prince in broad daylight, eh, Monica?"

When Slaine turned toward the voice, he found Blanca—archimage of the royal court—grinning back at them.

Slaine floundered, unsure of how to respond to Blanca's rather risqué jape—but Monica took the initiative to set the record straight herself. "We just had a bit of a minor tumble in the midst of training," she said, still wearing her usual serene and gentle smile. "You mustn't speak to His Royal Highness with such irreverence, Blanca."

"Have I offended you, my lord?" asked Blanca.

"N-No, not especially," Slaine stammered. It was the truth—Blanca's expression and tone were so nonchalant that he did not feel any displeasure with her at all.

"It seems I've not offended him, Monica."

"His Royal Highness is exceedingly gracious. But disrespect is disrespect," Monica retorted. "I will be cross with you."

"Oh, what a scary aide you are."

Though they exchanged testy words, it was all in good fun. The two seemed to get on well, their tones light and airy. Slaine was rather amused to see this side of Monica—he had not the occasion to encounter it often. But there was something behind Blanca that caught his eye.

Two creatures stood to her rear—a monster called a horned bear, and a hawk perched on its shoulder.

"Oh, it's your first time seeing them, isn't it, my lord?" Blanca said.

"Indeed," said Slaine. "I'd heard about them, but they really are a sight."

Blanca laughed. "I suppose so! I'm proud to call them my companions."

About one in thirty human beings possessed magical powers. In Eynthian

regions, children at the age of ten underwent a special ritual called the "Sacred Blessing" in order to unleash this latent ability. Slaine, too, had undergone the ritual at the church in Rutware, but he had not manifested any such talents.

There were many different types of magic and a great deal of variance between the abilities of individual casters. Most sorcerers had enough power to make a living with their magical powers, but not much beyond that. The number of sorcerers with ability enough to significantly impact the world, be it in battle or broader society, were a minority of a minority. Such persons could demand considerable remuneration from working in the service of royal and noble houses, or even wealthy merchants and farmers.

The royal house of Hasenvalia, too, had about a dozen such sorcerers in service to the royal court, each placed in positions varying from combat to technical roles. Blanca, leader of that unit, possessed the ability to communicate with and command other living creatures. It was a rare ability among the many types of magic.

Her talents were said to be unparalleled among sorcerers with similar affinities. That she could control such a large male horned bear, an exceedingly powerful and dangerous monster, was a remarkable feat by itself. But to have enough power left over to command a hawk as well—she was certainly worthy of her title as archimage of the royal court.

Blanca turned to address the familiars behind her. "Hey, Axe, Veronica! This here is our new liege lord. Come and say hello."

The horned bear, Axe, seemed to understand Blanca's words. He bent one of his front legs and hung his head. Veronica, the hawk, lowered herself as well, as if in respectful greeting.

The sight of a three-meter-tall horned bear with a hawk on its shoulder bowing and scraping at his feet certainly came as a shock to Slaine.

A horned bear was dangerous even at a distance—it was said that any who happened across one had best prepare himself for death. Its forelimbs were large and powerful enough to shred through Slaine with a single swipe, and its skull was bigger than his entire torso. And yet here it kneeled with its head politely bowed, docile as a domestic dog. What a bizarre spectacle.

"Isn't he clever?" Blanca said, laughing. "You can even pet them if you want." "R-Really?"

"Really! You can stroke Veronica gently with a finger. But with Axe, just get in there with both hands and scritch-scratch his head real good! His fur is so thick he won't even be able to feel it otherwise."

Slaine approached the hawk and, as instructed, softly stroked her small head with a finger. The animal's feathers were smooth, delicate, and soft to the touch.

Next, he gave Axe a thorough scratching. The bear's fur was coarse and bristly—it was said that the stiff hairs of the horned bear could repel even the blade of an iron sword. Slaine had truly never imagined that a day would come where he would be able to touch a living specimen with his own hands.

"Thank you," Slaine said. The two monsters stared back at him.

"Blanca, have you come here to train?" Monica asked.

Blanca nodded. "Yes. I'm assisting the royal guard's training in monster combat."

When Slaine tilted his head, she explained further. The royal guard, commanded by Victor, Viscount of Behrendorf, was tasked with the protection of the royal family. However dangerous the foe, the guardsmen had need to learn how to dispose of monsters they might encounter while escorting their charges outside the city.

Fighting against a human and fighting against a monster were entirely different tasks. Blanca explained that Axe was the perfect training partner to assess the soldiers' combat tactics against monstrous foes.

"By the by, my lord," said Blanca. "I've noticed you've been hard at work, not just with your studies and duties of office, but in training your martial skills as well. I've heard from the royal guardsmen that you've been at it for a month straight without a single break. You've got some grit, eh?"

Slaine answered with a shy smile. "Well, I've got to do what I can, no? I'm taking it one step at a time, making whatever progress I can manage."

From the perspective of Blanca, archimage of the royal court, or that of the elite royal guardsmen, Slaine's efforts to train must have appeared like a child playing with a toy sword.

"That's great," Blanca said, laughing. "Reminds me of when I first came to the royal palace—pardon me if this is too forward, but I think that I understand a bit of how you feel right now, my lord."

She went on to explain a bit about her own origins. Blanca had been born in the slums of the royal capital, and her mother had passed away when Blanca's sister was born—she had lived in extreme poverty with her young sister and sickly father, too poor to afford even food.

Then, at the age of ten, Blanca had discovered her unique talent for command magic. King Frederick III—Slaine's grandfather—had welcomed her to the palace as a mage of the royal court, and King Frederick IV would later appoint her as archimage in recognition of her achievements.

When Blanca had first arrived at the royal palace, it had been a great hardship for her. She had known nothing about noble speech or the etiquette of the court. Using a fork, counting her wages, even writing her own name—she had been utterly clueless about all of it. But she had learned everything she needed to learn, bit by bit.

"Even I eventually learned to act the aristocrat when need be," said Blanca. "And if you are as clever and determined as they say, my lord, I'm certain you shall make even quicker work of it. So, don't you worry—the people around you have more faith in you than you'd think. At least more than they did at the start."

Slaine's eyes widened. Blanca had seen right through his posturing.

"I'm sure Nordenfelt will keep on with his stubborn old man grousing for some time yet, but he's like that with everyone. Don't mind him," she said.

Monica smiled. "Blanca, you mustn't speak of the chancellor in such a fashion in front of His Royal Highness. I really will play the tattletale, if I must."

"Come on, now, you must be joking," Blanca said, returning a forced smile of her own. "I get enough glares for my speech as it is without you piling on." Slaine softly laughed at their exchange. It was a bit of a weight off, knowing it wasn't only Monica who had noticed his efforts. Sure enough, the others had started to recognize him as well.

"Ah, finally got a smile out of you," Blanca said. "Keep up the good work, my lord—and relax a bit. Your vassals are loyal to you and the royal family. My companions and I will support you with our lives. I owe it to my father and sister, after all." At Slaine's confused expression, she continued on. "My father passed away about five years back, at the age of forty. He was so sickly all his life that the physicians often said he wasn't like to make it past thirty—he lived as long as he did because my wages allowed me to buy good medicine. I was able to give my sister a good life and a lovely wedding my father could be proud of," she explained. "I have much work left to do before I can say I've repaid my dues to the royal family. So, please know it really is our honor to serve."

Blanca bid her farewells and went off on her way with Axe and Veronica in tow.

Slaine gripped his wooden sword in his hand. "Monica, can I ask you to stay a bit longer, and go another bout with me?"

There was much left to be done before Slaine would be ready to ascend to the throne. But at the very least, he had the peace of mind of knowing that his progress had meaning and his efforts had not gone unnoticed.

And so he needed to become a man worthy of that throne as soon as possible. It was not enough to take advantage of followers' support to stand on his feet—he needed to be able to work together with them to move forward. Otherwise, there would be no point in climbing to the summit of this kingdom that his father had left him—this country that his mother had loved so dearly.

Monica's smile was as warm as ever. "Of course, my liege. It is my pleasure," she said, brandishing her own training sword.

It was the start of April. The chilly vestiges of winter had ebbed away, and before long, spring would be upon them.

## **Chapter 4: Change for the Better**

It was the end of April, and Slaine's studies were progressing well. He'd already reached the final stages of his history lessons.

As the typical fashion of learning one's history was in chronological order, this meant that Slaine had reached the period closest to the present day—the reign of his father, King Frederick IV.

The first king of Hasenvalia subdued and united the local noble houses, establishing the kingdom during an age of great upheaval. And in a time when military conflict and death were still common, the second king stabilized the kingdom's relations with its neighboring states. The third established the kingdom's present social systems, built its industries, and brought peace to domestic society. And after succeeding his predecessors, King Frederick IV set out to reinforce the foundations of the royal family, thereby strengthening the society built atop it.

By the time Frederick IV ascended to the throne, peace reigned in the west of the continent.

The group of twenty-two small states in the region had not experienced full-scale war in decades now. As some of the disputes and feuds from the early founding days of the kingdom yet remained, there was still the occasional skirmish in the borderlands, but rarely ever of the deadly sort.

To the east, the Great Empire of Galed had long been at war with the mighty powers that lay even farther to the north and east. It had not evinced any ambition for the western reaches of the continent for almost a century now—nor were there any indications that this was about to change.

The western kingdoms also maintained peaceful relations with their other neighboring states, so there was little cause for conflict.

Those who recalled the times of deadly border disputes were all but gone,

and the full-scale wars of yore were even more distant history. Such was the atmosphere in the western part of the continent.

However, Frederick IV was skeptical of this complacency. At the very least, he did not believe that peace would last forever. Therefore, he concluded it was necessary to strengthen the royal authority and equip the kingdom for whatever emergencies might arise in the years or decades to come.

His first step was to bolster the royal army. He established a third battalion alongside the existing two, and raised the standard roster of the army from two hundred to three hundred men.

With this increase in size, the standing army's ability to react to emergencies was greatly improved, and its range of potential responses was expanded as well. By securing an overwhelming military advantage over the noble houses—the two most prominent counties had pledged standing armies shy of a hundred men—Frederick IV was able to maintain domestic stability.

At the same time, Frederick IV aimed to increase production of iron ore, the keystone of the kingdom's industry, and rock salt, a crucial source of revenue for the royal family. He located new veins and expanded existing extraction sites. These increases to industrial capacity also helped sustain the kingdom's larger military forces.

These measures that Frederick IV put into motion over the last decade of his reign all significantly strengthened the royal family's foundation. Given the short period of time over which they all took effect, this was undoubtedly a significant feat.

However, there remained the problem of food self-sufficiency within the royal domain.

As the number of soldiers, miners, merchants, and artisans grew in concert with the realm's increased iron and salt production, the royal domain's already relatively small peasantry declined even further—to less than eighty percent of the total population.

Eighty and a half percent of the population would have had to be engaged in agricultural work to consistently supply the region with all of its food, so the royal domain supplemented this shortage with imports from outside the

territory.

No matter how strong its army, no matter how robust its economic and industrial powers, low domestic food production left the royal territories in a vulnerable state. And even should the royal family meet urgent contingencies with strong leadership, that dependency on food imports from the domestic nobility or neighboring states could significantly curtail its ability to maneuver in times of crisis.

Frederick IV, of course, was aware of this problem; he made improving the royal domain's food production one of the key objectives of his reign.

However, unlike strengthening his royal authority, this goal proved difficult. Although he explored agricultural reforms, dramatically increasing wheat harvest yields was no easy feat.

Though his assistance with the production and promotion of fertilizers did somewhat increase the volume of harvests, he was not so naive as to think that a few years of such trials would be enough to solve the problem by itself. However, just as he was beginning to search for additional ways to further bolster food production, he met his untimely demise.

And so it fell to Slaine, the next king, to shape the history of the kingdom thenceforth.

"So we've got to increase the efficiency of our food production systems," Slaine muttered to himself.

"We are encouraging further use of fertilizers, but it's only in the past few decades that the western kingdoms have finally begun to adopt the three-field crop rotation system developed by the Galed Empire. We have reached a plateau in terms of agricultural responses to the issue," said Monica. "The minister of agriculture—my father—also said that it could be more than a decade before new technologies will significantly improve our current situation."

No matter how extensively the kingdom's existing farming methods were improved, so long as the realm continued to grow the same staple crops, there would be a limit to how far agricultural yields could be increased. Finding novel

methods of farming was no simple matter.

All that the royal house was in a position to do was blindly search for new agricultural advancements and wait for discoveries through chance or empirical research—or take steps to increase the population of peasantry within the royal domain itself.

Either way, Monica explained, the Nobles of the Robe had concluded that it would be ideal if such a solution could be derived during Slaine's reign.

"Therefore, Your Royal Highness, as we continue work to stabilize routes for food imports from outside the royal domain, we—"

"Um, are you saying that there's no use in searching for staple crops other than wheat?" Slaine interrupted Monica with a mumble.

Monica fell silent with her head tilted to the side, as if considering his question carefully. Then she said, "Staple crops other than wheat? Vegetables, you mean?"

"Well, no, not as such," said Slaine. "I mean, have you already tried establishing a new crop that could serve as a supplementary staple food, grown at different times of the year on different farmland from wheat? If we had such a secondary crop, we could improve the self-sufficiency of the royal domain. Right?"

In other words, if it was impossible to reach total self-sufficiency by improving wheat farming methods, then was it not prudent to look beyond wheat? Slaine was simply curious.

When Monica gazed back at Slaine with a puzzled expression, he continued, "The western region of the continent is in itself reasonably large, as is the Great Empire of Galed. There are island states on the periphery of the continent as well. Perhaps even more distant kingdoms would be accessible for research and survey if we were to take the time. If in any of those places there exists some sort of crop not well known in this region, perhaps one could be adapted for use as a staple here?"

It was very odd to see Monica without her usual composed smile.

"Ah, um, never mind it, then," Slaine stammered. He'd said something terribly

strange, he was certain. "Just forget about it. It was only a thought—"

"No, no, my liege—that might be a truly ingenious idea," Monica said, a great grin spreading across her face.

Later that afternoon, Slaine met with Chancellor Sergey and Minister Adrashelm in the council room to relay his suggestion.

Just as Monica had, the two men stared at Slaine with dumbfounded expressions. Then they looked at one another in silence.

Slaine felt himself growing tense and nervous as he observed the ministers' terribly stern faces.

Monica had praised his thinking, but perhaps it was still reckless and presumptuous of him to make such a suggestion to the premier minister of the government and the head of domestic agriculture.

But then Sergey turned back to Slaine. "May I ask how you conceived of such a proposal, my lord?" he asked, his gaze as sharp as ever.

"Um, well, I remember reading a description in one of my mother's history books."

Slaine had often helped his mother in her work as a scribe, copying religious scrolls, technical manuscripts, storybooks, and historical texts. Of course, he'd had to read all those works to transcribe them.

While he'd often lacked the education to fully understand the content of certain specialized academic materials, he'd particularly enjoyed the fictional and historical materials, which were fairly easy for him to parse.

Even if he could not perfectly recite their contents, he could remember much of what he'd learned from those works—and he recalled a certain legume mentioned among the historical accounts he had read.

This bean had become widespread as a crop about two hundred years ago—back when the western kingdoms had been unified under the banner of the Valomean Empire. It was said that the bean had been cultivated in the northern region of Salestakia, and had spread from there.

"I remembered about it when I was taking lessons with Monica. I figured that if there were examples of such a thing in the past, then perhaps there were other new staple crops to be discovered now as well," said Slaine. Nervous of being chided, he made the first move to criticize his own suggestion. "Imprudent of me, perhaps."

"I see," replied Sergey, quiet and motionless. He took a moment to think before he opened his mouth to speak again. "If I may be straightforward, I believe there may be merit to your proposal, my lord."

Slaine's eyes widened. The strict and uncompromising Sergey had found value in Slaine's suggestion? This was perhaps the first time that Sergey had acknowledged one of Slaine's opinions at all.

But the chancellor was quick to temper Slaine's expectations. "It is too early yet to rejoice, my lord. It is a path worth pursuing, but that is all I can say—I do not know if we will be able to find a crop as useful as you imagine, nor if any crop we discover will be suitable for cultivation in Hasenvalia. And even were we to find such a crop, it may not be easy to convince the citizenry to accept this mysterious new produce as one of their staple foods. It took decades for even the three-field system to take root," said Sergey. "No single idea will dramatically improve our society all at once. This will be a major project we must build from the ground up."

Slaine shrank back as Sergey spoke, the joyful expression on his face fading away.

"However," the chancellor continued, "it is certainly worth exploring this proposal. It will be several years yet before our efforts bear fruit—so perhaps it's best we begin straightaway. What say you, Lord Adrashelm?"

Slaine looked at Walter—he must have been handsome in his youth, just like his daughter. "I concur with your thoughts, chancellor," he said. "Fortunately, it is spring—if we can gather any useful new crops from surrounding areas soon, perhaps we can start experimental cultivation this year. From there, it'll be another year or two before we can confirm success. Establishing a new crop in the supply chain may take a while longer yet. Five years at the earliest to see results, I'd wager? Of course, this is a generous estimate—but even if it takes a

decade or more, it's a worthwhile endeavor, I'd say."

The minister took a moment to think, and then continued, "For the time being, we can see about gathering crops within our reach—within the western kingdoms, perhaps, or the border with Galed, or the neighboring isles. We can rely upon Lady Estergren and her foreign affairs cabinet to oversee this effort. They will direct our royal merchant liaisons to range out to collect specimens."

"Very well. Then we shall aim to conduct our initial collections within"—he paused to calculate—"the next two months or so, let's say. That should be enough time to identify all the crops in the surrounding locales," concluded Sergey.

He and Walter turned to look at Slaine.

"Well, then, my lord—how about it? Any objections to this plan?" asked Sergey.

"I am in favor. Please see to it," Slaine answered. This was the first real approval he'd ever given—not as crown prince in name only, but as a true decision-maker.

"Certainly," said Sergey. "We shall make use of the meeting room for a while longer to discuss the particulars."

"Understood. I'll leave the details to you. Thank you both."

Sergey and Walter stood and bowed to Slaine as he departed the meeting room. Monica followed close behind.

As Slaine headed down the hall toward his office, his expression relaxed. "Do you think I looked like a future king back there?"

Monica answered Slaine's question with a kind smile. "I think so, my lord," she said. "Well done. Though Lord Nordenfelt has an unsparing manner of speech, I'm certain even he was impressed with your proposal."

Slaine's grin broadened. "Thank goodness," he said.

It wasn't clear if his proposal would bear fruit—it could even end in failure. However, at the very least, Slaine had been able to take the first steps toward establishing a significant initiative of his very own. Even Sergey had

acknowledged his contribution as valuable.

Although there was much left to learn before he would be fully prepared for his ascension, Slaine had already accomplished *something* of value. Knowing that was a great boost to his confidence, if nothing else.

Now alone with Walter, Sergey remarked with a rather somber expression, "Goodness. I never expected such a proposal from that prince."

Walter replied with a soft sigh. "With all due respect to His Royal Highness, I was frankly surprised. We have been engaged in national politics for many years —for an erstwhile commoner to devise such an idea before us..."

Hasenvalia grew wheat as its primary staple crop. This was a fact as certain as "the sun rises in the morning" or "spring follows winter"—common knowledge established long before even the founding of the kingdom. None thought to question it.

Moreover, Hasenvalia's land was reasonably fertile and did not pose any notable agricultural challenges, so there had never been any cause to attempt such serious agrarian reforms.

And that was why neither Sergey nor Walter—nor even the late Frederick—had ever considered taking such a measure. It was precisely because they had been entrenched inside the box of the political world for so long that they had lost their ability to think outside of it.

However, with just one idea, Slaine had managed to break through this wall of convention. Perhaps he had found a path toward revolutionizing the kingdom's society. Although he had been inspired by a book, his inference was not one anyone could make—it was surprising and worthy of appreciation.

"Do you think we will discover anything useful?" wondered Sergey.

"We can't be certain," said Walter. "My personal bet—a ten to twenty percent chance, perhaps."

Since the collapse of Valomea and the formation of the western kingdoms, it had become significantly more difficult—physically and psychologically—to move from one state to another, compared to traveling within a given country.

Although the royal houses of each kingdom maintained basic ties, the traffic of merchants and travelers had decreased, and the spread of new developments had slowed.

Additionally, much of the knowledge, technology, and culture of the Valomean Empire had been lost in the turmoil of its collapse. Agricultural knowledge in itself was slow to develop and disseminate to remote areas. Even if new crops had been discovered and cultivated outside of the kingdom in the past decades of peace, it was quite possible that such information had yet to reach Hasenvalia.

"Ten to twenty percent," muttered Sergey, lacing his fingers by his mouth in contemplation. "Well, if there's any possibility it will improve our self-sufficiency, then that's high enough. Even King Frederick himself fell short of this goal."

Walter nodded. "As it stands, we have no choice but to wait patiently for advances in wheat cultivation, or a change to the population ratios in the royal domain. However, if His Royal Highness's proposal succeeds—well, it could hasten our self-sufficiency by several decades. An astounding possibility," he said. "I have heard tell that the prince excels in his studies, but it seems he truly is a clever man."

"You think the prince is clever?"

"Indeed," said Walter. "I could see it in his proposal, and my daughter speaks often of his talents. Of course, I have a father's bias—but if that girl says it's true, then I'm certain of it."

Sergey turned away from Walter, falling into deep reflection.

Slaine was clever—even Sergey could agree on that point. Alma had often written in her letters that Slaine was growing into a smart and upright young man, but it was difficult to put much stock in a mother's praise of her own child. Only when Sergey had seen it for himself had he finally understood.

When Frederick declared that he wanted his natural son to succeed him to the throne, Sergey had braced himself for the worst. What if this new prince couldn't even carry on a proper conversation? The Nobles of the Robe might have to administer the affairs of the state alone until the birth of the next crown prince.

But Slaine had far and away exceeded his low expectations. The boy was actually making headway toward becoming a good king. He had not allowed his newly acquired power and status to go to his head, nor did he ignore the advice and recommendations of his vassals.

And above all, he was smart. Often surprisingly so. When Sergey had first spoken to the young prince, the chancellor had seen in him the same quick thinking that Frederick had shown. And that had only been the beginning.

At the state funeral, Sergey had prepared a number of strategies to compensate for the prince's potential gaffes and blunders. But Slaine had recalled all that he needed to know and made it through the day of the funeral without incident.

He had made tremendous progress in his studies as well. Less than two months since becoming crown prince, he had already completed his basic history lessons—impressive even for someone raised by a scribe.

Monica—widely considered one of the most talented among the nobility's children—spoke highly of the prince's wits. Her open praise was another point in Slaine's favor.

And the proposal that the boy had just shared had been eye-opening, to say the least. It was such a simple suggestion that it begged the question why none of the ministers had ever considered it before.

There was no questioning it—Slaine was an intelligent boy, even more so than Michael. Perhaps even more than Frederick had been when he was a child as well.

That ability to reason, remember, and invent—where did it come from?

Was it the work of his royal blood? But Slaine wasn't entirely like Frederick or the late Crown Prince Michael: it seemed that he had been born with all his natural gifts concentrated in his intellect, rather than bravery or martial prowess.

Was it the product of his upbringing? Slaine's mother had exposed him to a broad array of texts from an early age, after all.

Or was it simply a gift from God?

Sergey brought his mind back to the task at hand. "Intellect alone does not make for a good king," he said, turning to address Walter. "Even if one is bright, he may not necessarily be able to put that intellect into practice. His Royal Highness's proposal could be a fluke. The fact that he's displayed some potential does not make him King Frederick's equal yet."

Walter laughed wryly. "You are not wrong," he said. "But it has been not three months since he arrived, and he is doing his best. In light of that, he deserves kinder words, I'd say."

Sergey could understand Walter's point of view—although it was Sergey's fashion to take a firm hand with his liege, it would have been harsh to earnestly compare the new prince to a seasoned king. Nevertheless, Sergey said firmly, "No. If you and the other lords wish to praise the prince, I shall not undermine you. In fact, I encourage you to do so. But whatever his origins, I will not be lenient—nor will I lower my standards. He will need strong guidance so that he may fulfill his lofty ambitions, and so that I may protect this kingdom, the royal family, and the prince himself."

Had Slaine proven unable to rise to his status, then Sergey would not have demanded so much—the ministry of the kingdom could have supported him for however long it took to produce a proper heir. However, Slaine displayed considerable potential—and it was therefore Sergey's duty as chancellor to push him to realize that potential.

Now was the best time for it—he would not have the luxury of scolding the prince once the boy had ascended to the throne. A sovereign's mistake could lead to his death or the collapse of the entire kingdom. Better to use harsh words with him now, when his deficiencies could still be corrected.

And so Sergey did not concern himself with whether the prince might resent him for his methods. Molding the kingdom's next ruler was his life's final mission—better it be the aging chancellor that shouldered the burden of the prince's disdain, rather than the younger vassals who would guide him in the decades to come.

Of that Sergey was certain.

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Until the task of gathering new crops from neighboring regions could be accomplished, Slaine returned to his usual routine of study, official duty, and martial arts training.

It was no longer a surprise to anyone that his studies were progressing smoothly. Now, Slaine could understand the contents of the reports he received in the course of his official duties—no longer need he simply rubber-stamp his vassals' documents without comprehension.

And with this deeper understanding of his office, he was beginning to attain a greater sense of the overall shape of the kingdom's society and systems. Slaine could feel how much he had grown already.

However, he was having no such luck with his martial arts training. He had no aptitude for it whatsoever—his skill with the blade had hardly progressed at all. He was no longer a complete novice, but he had no expectations that he would ever become a strong swordsman.

He couldn't even build muscle. He wasn't sure if it was simply an unalterable fact of his physique, but his arms, legs, and abdomen showed little signs of growth—and what muscle he *had* developed was slim and wiry. And since he wasn't growing any taller either, he was simply a miserable outlier in terms of physical strength.

But that wasn't a terrible problem. In the end, the purpose of his training was to build endurance and show off to whoever might witness his efforts. His strength had improved to the point that he could swing his sword two hundred times without faltering—and there was a good deal of gossip in the court about his dedication to training. That was good enough for the time being.

Slaine had recently begun to practice horseback riding as well.

In times of war, the king served as commander in chief—and a commander naturally had to be able to ride a horse. It provided the king a view from a higher vantage, the ability to move quickly in the event of an emergency, and most importantly projected the dignity of his station.

Although the kingdom had enjoyed peace for many years, there were some

situations in which the army had need to mobilize, such as the occasional border skirmish or the appearance of powerful monsters or bandits.

And if such a time were to come and Slaine still could not even sit in a saddle, he would surely be raked over the coals by the domestic aristocracy and foreign kingdoms alike. There were also several ceremonial functions he would be expected to carry out on horseback.

So while Slaine had no need to learn any sort of valiant horseback swordsmanship—not that he possessed the aptitude to learn it in the first place —he at the very least had to learn how to ride a horse without injuring himself.

"My liege, please relax," said Monica. "It's all right. Hold the reins tight...
Steady, now. That's right. Now, pull lightly on the reins and keep your feet firm in the—please, my liege, calm down."

Slaine was struggling terribly with his riding practice. Monica made her best effort to guide him, but she, too, seemed to be floundering with the task of teaching him the ropes.

He couldn't conceal his fright. "Right. I'm fine, I'm fine. I'm calm... I'm relaxed," he insisted. Feeling the boy's fearful, unconfident grip, the horse didn't seem to know how to react or where to move either. "Whoa..."

Thanks to Monica, Slaine was not at any risk of harm, but he wasn't really getting anywhere.

A horse was a living animal. Frankly, Slaine found it terrifying to sit on the back of a giant four-legged beast like this. Because of his short stature, he had spent most of his life looking up at the people around him—to suddenly reverse that perspective was a frightening shock. The ground looked so far away.

"I-I'd like to take a bit of a break. I want to get down," Slaine stammered.

"All right," Monica said, steadying the horse. "Hold the reins steady, my liege, just like that—yes, that's right, come on down. Don't worry. I'll catch you."

Slaine dropped down off the horse into Monica's outstretched arms. She held him up and guided him down to the safety of the ground. It wasn't any trouble for Monica to lift him and move him about like this—she had more than ten centimeters on the small prince.

He would have ordinarily been quite embarrassed and nervous to be so close to Monica like this, but now he was too frightened to care. He let out a sigh of relief when his feet finally touched solid earth.

"I'm sorry," said Slaine, sulking. "I'm such a wretch."

"There is no reason to apologize, my liege. I am only sorry that I have not been able to give you sufficient guidance," Monica replied. She had a bit of a disappointed expression on her face as well.

Beside them, the black warhorse shook its head and snorted. It must have felt relieved to be free of the weight on its back.

Suddenly, another voice rang out from behind them. "First of all, it's important to build trust with your horse, Your Royal Highness."

Slaine and Monica turned to find Victor, Viscount of Behrendorf and commander of the royal guard, standing at attention. He had a small bundle of grass clutched in his hand.

"Horses have minds of their own, like any living thing," said Victor. "It will try to intuit its rider's desires and move accordingly. But in order for the horse to understand what you want, you must establish a rapport, grow close, and build together a relationship of mutual trust." The viscount approached them, continuing, "Then once you climb into the saddle, you will be able to clearly convey your intentions to the horse. After that, the rest is easy—move forward, stop, change directions, accelerate, decelerate. Once you've learned how to handle the reins, that's it."

Victor paused before Slaine and held out the bundle of pasture grass in his hand. "Start by feeding the horse. Call her name, gently pet her neck. You'll help her learn that you are both her master and a friend."

"A-All right," Slaine said, nodding. He took the grass from Victor's hand and turned to approach the horse. She perked up at the sight of the feed in his hand. "Come here, have some of this."

Slaine held out the grass, offering it to the horse. She lowered her head to Slaine's palm and began politely munching the grass.

"Is that good?" Slaine asked. "Good girl, Freesia."

Freesia, a young mare, had been the favorite horse of the late Crown Prince Michael. She had a magnificent black coat, worthy of a royal steed. Slaine stroked her neck as she chewed her way through the grass and snorted contentedly.

Once she was finished with her snack, she turned to nuzzle her snout against the side of Slaine's face, as if to say, *You're not so bad*.

"Among all the royal horses, Freesia is one of the smartest," said Victor. "Even after such a short interaction, she's already sensed your good character and understood that you are her master, my lord. Why don't you give riding her another shot?"

At Victor's encouragement, Slaine—with Monica's help—climbed back up into the saddle.

"Oh, wow," Slaine said, shocked. This was entirely different from his last attempt—the horse was far more relaxed and steady. No longer did Slaine feel as if she might shake him off at any moment.

Although they'd yet to establish a sufficiently thorough connection for Slaine to direct her at will, it was enough for now just to enjoy the view of the courtyard from up high.

"What a change," said Monica. Even she seemed surprised. "I did not learn any techniques like this when I trained as a knight in the royal army."

Victor answered with a wry laugh. "That is because there was no need to teach it to you—you grasped the knack of riding intuitively and instilled confidence in your horse right away. Each person has a different method of learning that suits them best," he explained. "Before I transferred to the royal guard, I served as an instructor to the squires in the royal army. I'm quite experienced in teaching riding."

"I see," Monica replied. "You are indeed remarkable, Lord Behrendorf."

Slaine let out a strained laugh from atop the horse as he listened to them speak. He may have excelled in his studies, but when it came to swordsmanship and riding, he was utterly mediocre. So he could not imitate Monica, who was gifted in both the literary and martial arts. But Victor was experienced in

teaching pupils with varying levels of natural aptitude, and with his guidance, Slaine had already made progress.

Slaine dismounted from the horse again. This time, he needed only to take one of Monica's hands as support to jump down from the saddle.

"I'm sure I'll be able to ride on my own before terribly long," said Slaine. "Thank you for your help, Victor."

Victor grinned at Slaine's words of gratitude. Compared to his usual lifeless smile, something about it felt a little brighter. "There is no need to thank me. I —and all of your retainers—can see that you are working very hard, my lord," he said. "Of course we shall assist in your endeavors."

Hearing that, Slaine couldn't help but grin. Victor always seemed to be among the most reserved and distant of Slaine's vassals, dedicated to his duties above all. But there was something a bit different about him today.

Perhaps it was because of Slaine's efforts—he felt that he had been gradually earning the recognition of those around him. The day that the strict Sergey would acknowledge his efforts was perhaps far away yet, but he was making steady progress.

"Ah, one more thing, my lord," said Victor. "I hear that you are training in the sword in order to improve your physical fitness, no?"

A rather abrupt change in topic, but Slaine answered quickly. "Oh, yes, that's one reason why. The main reason, I suppose."

"Is that so? Then perhaps you'd like to train with the royal army. Some of the military drills, like marching and running, are designed to hone the body. You would see good results from taking part."

Slaine tilted his head. Observing was one thing, but could the heir to the throne really *participate* in training with the army? Wouldn't he just get in the way? "Is that really all right?" he asked. "Me taking part, I mean?"

"King Frederick and Prince Michael also trained with the royal army from time to time. Not only to improve their fitness, but to forge bonds of trust with the soldiers alongside them," said Victor. "The royal guard's regimen is perhaps a bit too strenuous and specialized, but I wouldn't imagine you'd have any

trouble with the army's training runs. I am sure Lord Vogel would be happy to have you, should you wish to participate."

Slaine looked back to Monica. She nodded in encouragement. "Well, then, I suppose it wouldn't hurt to give it a try," he said.

"Very well," replied Victor. "I'll have a word with Lord Vogel, and we can ask Monica to arrange a more detailed agenda."

With that, Victor bid his farewells and departed the courtyard.

Back inside the royal palace, Victor was soon accosted by a jovial voice.

"You voluntarily offered advice to the crown prince? What in the world?"

Victor turned to look—it was Sieghardt, Count of Vogel and general of the royal army. "Is there something odd about a vassal assisting his liege?" Victor asked.

"Not if it is within the scope of the duties you have been assigned," said Sieghardt. "But the advice you offered to the prince is certainly not the responsibility of the commander of the royal guard. What happened to you?"

Victor's blank expression broke into a slight smile. "Have mercy, Lord Vogel," he said. "I am not accustomed to being teased."

As Victor set off, Sieghardt fell in to walk alongside him. "Forgive me, Lord Commander," Sieghardt said, laughing boisterously. Then, he muttered, "Jokes aside, I see even you have acknowledged His Royal Highness."

"The prince had made significant strides already. He made a promising proposal not long ago," said Victor. "His resolve is clearly not all talk—I am not so obstinate that I would refuse him recognition for his efforts."

Sieghardt laughed as if Victor had said something terribly amusing, clapping the commander on the shoulder. "Ha ha ha! Well said."

Victor threw Sieghardt a sidelong glance, a bit put off by his exuberance.

"It seems the only one who remains is Lord Nordenfelt," said Sieghardt. "I wonder how long it'll take His Excellency to come round on the prince."

"Not overnight, certainly," Victor replied. "I expect he will take an even firmer hand with the prince from here on out. But I'd be more concerned if he *didn't*—the prince has yet to fully mature. He needs someone to keep a close watch as he comes into his own."

"Heh. So you sidestepped that unfortunate role to let Lord Nordenfelt take on the burden of playing the villain, eh?"

"I suppose you could put it that way," Victor admitted. He glanced around furtively the moment the words had left his mouth, as if he were worried Lord Nordenfelt might be hiding around the corner, poised to scold them for such impertinent talk.

At that, Sieghardt laughed even harder.



June had arrived. The air was heavy with the encroaching heat of summer, and the wheat harvest had commenced. On the training grounds of the royal army beside the royal palace, Slaine was running himself ragged.

"Listen up, you sorry bastards!" bellowed Sieghardt, general of the royal army. "Now, don't you think about going easy on the prince just because he's the prince—overtake him if you can! Show your respect by putting the full strength of the royal army on display!"

The soldiers responded in unison, "Yes sir!"

Of the three battalions of the royal army, one was stationed at the royal capital at all times. Two of this battalion's companies—about sixty men in total —were assigned to protect the capital. The remaining third was assigned to regular training. And one after the other, each of these thirty soldiers pulled ahead of Slaine on the track, leaving him completely in the dust.

They were all professional soldiers with several years of military experience—some of them even with records of service longer than a decade. There was never any chance that Slaine, a physically pitiful former commoner, was going to pose any challenge to the lot of them.

"They're s-so fast," he muttered to himself as they sped past, but he did not stop.

By the time the rest of the soldiers had finished, Slaine was a full three laps behind. Nevertheless, he kept at it, and with encouragement from Monica and the other soldiers, he managed to complete the course—even if he wasn't running much faster than if he'd walked the whole way.

Monica met him at the finish line, ready to hand him a magical flask when he staggered to a stop on wobbly legs. "Marvelous work, my liege," she said. "Well done."

Slaine panted, taking the flask and greedily chugging the water inside. "Thank you," he gasped.

Monica leaned in to gently wipe the sweat from his hair, face, and neck with a clean towel as he drank, and Slaine's gaze wandered to her lips and neck. Ever since that day in the courtyard, he couldn't help himself—each time they drew close together like this, he couldn't help but remember how he'd felt when they'd fallen together.

Slaine shook his head in a desperate bid to clear his mind. It was an outrageous disrespect to Monica to entertain such thoughts—she was his aide, and if she drew close to him it was only because her duties demanded it. Monica thought nothing of it; he alone was aware of the distance between them. Slaine repeated this to himself and gathered his composure.

Towel in hand, Monica took a step back. Relieved to have some space, he bent his tired legs and sat right there on the spot to rest. Soon, the soldiers of the royal army were all coming up to gather around him, wiping sweat from their brows with towels or handkerchiefs.

"Well, you've not done half bad for your third time," said a soldier. "Takes some grit to finish the course, at least."

Another concurred. "That's right. I've seen new recruits from the capital give up halfway through."

"But I'll be king before long," said Slaine, forcing himself to smile in spite of his exhaustion. "I've got to be able to manage at least this much."

The soldiers burst into laughter at the sight of him.

"He's not half bad, eh?" said a soldier.

"Yeah, the prince has got guts! He's got us all fired up."

"Now all we need is a beautiful aide to look after us when we're done too, and the lot of us won't have nothin' to complain about—"

Before the soldier could finish his flippant remark, Sieghardt smacked him around the head. "Gregory, you dull son of a bitch! You're a company captain and think you can lust after the prince's aide like this?! If you want to even dream of that promotion to lieutenant colonel, shape up! Don't make yourself look like a fool in front of the damn prince!"

"Ow!" Gregory yelped. The bawdy knight was the captain of the third company of the first battalion—in his late thirties, he was not a particularly sophisticated man, but he was jovial and likable.

"Ha ha ha! The captain's done it again!" The soldiers mocked their superiors with no apparent reservation. "This is why he's never gonna make it to battalion command or transfer to the royal guard—the ten-thousand-year captain."

Slaine laughed along with the rest of the soldiers. Monica politely covered her mouth as she chuckled, and even Sieghardt joined in eventually.

Thanks to the consideration of Sieghardt and the rest of the soldiers, Slaine felt no discomfort amongst them at all.

After the run, Slaine and Monica headed back to the royal palace. The servants inside bowed their heads and greeted their returning liege in unison. "Welcome home, Your Royal Highness."

"Thank you," said Slaine. "I finally made it to the end of the course training with the army today."

The maids all smiled at the news. "That's wonderful," said one.

"Surely thanks to all the training you do in the courtyard, my liege," said another.

"We've prepared a bath for you. Please come and soak before dinner."

The servants and vassals had considerably softened toward Slaine in recent

months. His efforts to make himself visible and engage with his subjects had paid dividends. Slaine would often speak to the gardeners about the trees and flowers in the courtyard, compliment the cooks for their delicious meals, ask for advice on horse husbandry from the stable hands, and thank the maids for their meticulous work.

Even if he could not yet say they were convinced of his worth as heir and future king, at least he was certain they no longer saw him as a common interloper or a helpless figurehead.

It had only been a bit longer than four months—his achievements were commendable for such a short period of time, Slaine thought. He was satisfied for now.



By the end of June, Slaine had received word that the crop specimens collected from the surrounding regions had arrived, so he called a council to discuss the matter in greater detail. He took his place in the audience chamber with Monica, standing before the throne alongside Chancellor Sergey and Walter, the minister of agriculture.

"Good day, Your Royal Highness," Elena began. The task of gathering crops from neighboring kingdoms naturally fell to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. "I have come to report regarding the recent agricultural fact-finding excursion. Credit is due not to me, but to the distinguished merchant, Mr. Benjamin Eriksen. I will allow him to explain the particulars."

Elena ceded the floor, clearing the way for a man in his midforties to step forward. Benjamin Eriksen was the president of the Eriksen Trading Company, appointed to serve as the official merchant liaison to the royal family of Hasenvalia.

"Your Royal Highness," said Benjamin, bowing reverently. "I hope you are in good spirits, sire."

Slaine had met this merchant several times before, but because of the man's appearance, he felt a bit uncomfortable around him.

First of all, Benjamin was fat. As a royal merchant, he was one of the richest

commoners in the kingdom, and so he likely ate well. He had a large, protruding belly, and so much flesh hung from his jaw that he appeared to lack a neck entirely. His meaty arms were probably thicker than Slaine's thighs.

And if that were all, there would have been nothing wrong with him. Some would consider his size to be a sign of his wealth and good fortune. So long as it didn't harm his health, he was free to grow as large as he wished.

But in addition to his physique, he had a peculiar look to his face.

He always had a merchant's grin on his lips. However, because he had a wide face, narrow eyes, and a sensitivity to heat that often left his forehead glistening with a sheen of sweat, there was something awfully slimy about that smile.

And on top of it all, he had a habit of rubbing his hands together as well.

With this combination of physique, facial features, expressions, and gestures, he exuded the air of the sort of stereotypically greedy, corrupt merchant that might appear in a story.

Of course, that did not mean he actually was greedy or corrupt. All of Slaine's vassals—including the uncompromising Chancellor Sergey—were unanimous in their praise of the man's abilities as a merchant. Slaine had no doubt that Benjamin was a trustworthy subject.

It had been a while since they'd last met. Now reacquainted with the man's overwhelming aura, Slaine found himself shrinking back.

"Well met. This must have all been quite the undertaking—thank you for your hard work," said Slaine, fixing a stiff smile on his face.

Benjamin's jowls wobbled as he shook his head. "It is no trouble at all, sire. It is my honor as a royal merchant to fulfill any commission from the royal family of Hasenvalia—including your first as crown prince," he said, rubbing his hands together as was his habit. "Well, then, without further ado—allow me to introduce the crops we have gathered from neighboring regions."

Benjamin gestured to the other merchants in his retinue to lay out the collected crops for inspection. In the course of their investigation, the survey team had explored the western and southern regions of the continent that

were particularly distant from the Kingdom of Hasenvalia. They had also made an excursion to an island off the southwestern coast and inspected the regions along the border with the Great Empire of Galed. Among the crops that were widespread in those regions but completely unknown to Hasenvalia, the survey team had collected four potential specimens in total.

Three of the candidates were not particularly remarkable. The first was a white bean about as large as a thumb. Filling and nutritious, but not particularly distinct from the beans already endemic to the kingdom, it seemed neither to yield a more efficient harvest nor to grow any faster. Perhaps it would be possible to cultivate this bean in the soil of the kingdom, but this would do little to address the issue of food self-sufficiency in the royal domain.

The second was a reddish, flattened vegetable, similar to an onion in appearance. It didn't taste bad, apparently, and it was possible it could generate some economic benefit as a novel foodstuff, but likely not enough for it to be worth the effort to promote it.

The third was a vegetable with a rounded taproot and long, thin leaves. In the westernmost reaches of the continent, where it was grown, it was known as the "sugar beet." However, its use was largely restricted to food for the poor or feed for livestock—the least attractive of the options presented thus far.

"I cannot say they are altogether worthless, perhaps, but they are not very good," murmured Sergey, giving a frank voice to the consensus shared by all present.

Of course, it was no simple matter to find a crop that would solve a problem as critical as their food self-sufficiency. Seeing the lackluster results from his proposal, Slaine privately resigned himself to failure.

But just then Benjamin's grin stretched even more broadly across his face, giving him the air of a magician about to unveil some manner of crafty trick. "Allow me to introduce our final discovery," he said.

The merchant held aloft a strange round thing, about the size of a clenched fist.

"This is called a potato!" he declared. "Though we obtained it from the island kingdom of Staria, local merchants tell us that it made its way over the southern

seas from the Atucan Continent. It took root about twenty-odd years back, and it's seen wide proliferation as a staple crop since."

The room perked up at this. Slaine's eyebrows rose in surprise.

According to the information Benjamin had collected, the potato was a tuber —a vegetable with a swollen edible stem. Apparently, in the mountainous regions of Atuca where it originated, it was an even more widespread staple crop than wheat.

Its cultivation was comparatively simple as well. After just a few weeks in the sun, the potatoes would sprout—and when cut and planted again, each sprout could be planted to grow a new potato. Twenty to thirty potatoes could be grown from a single potato, with yield rates nearly three times higher than wheat.

"Take a look at this," Benjamin said, holding out another potato for inspection. "Here's one that's begun to sprout."

Slaine felt his face stiffen as he got a good look at the tuber. "It, er, certainly leaves an impression," he remarked.

The first potato that Benjamin had presented was a hearty yellow color, and fairly appetizing to look at. But this one was covered with a green tinge, pockmarked by misshapen buds that burst haphazardly from all sides of the spud. It was, for lack of a better description, absolutely ghastly.

Benjamin's slimy smirk broadened at Slaine's reaction. He explained further that potatoes were attractive for their ease of cultivation—they could even be planted in soil that verged upon barren. As they were native to a mountainous region, they were resistant to aridity and chill.

What was more, the potato only took about four months from plant to harvest—half that of wheat—so it could be grown twice a year. And it was a simple ingredient to prepare: it could be eaten baked, boiled, or simply after being cooked on the fire with the skin left intact.

"Here is a real example of how potatoes can be prepared," said Elena, speaking up in the midst of Benjamin's explanation.

A maid entered the chamber carrying a tray. She approached Slaine and set

down a plate for his appraisal. On the plate was a pile of boiled potatoes, chopped up and seasoned with salt, pepper, and herbs.

According to the servant, the dish had been prepared by the palace chef, who had tasted the ingredients himself to confirm that the potatoes were edible.

Reassured, Slaine picked up one of the chunks and popped it into his mouth.

"Oh, yes, that's quite good," he said. The texture little resembled bread, barley, beans, or any other sort of vegetable he knew, but it was tasty enough. Although a commoner would not have access to the sort of seasonings they enjoyed in the royal palace, it was probably palatable even with only salt. "Not to mention, it seems like it wouldn't take much to fill you up."

Sergey, Walter, Elena, and Monica also tried a bit of the dish. All agreed that the potato was filling and comestible, certainly suitable for use as a staple.

"President Eriksen," asked Walter, "how long will they keep, these potatoes?"

"According to the farmers and tradesmen I met in Staria, they'll keep for about three months if stored in a cool, dark place out of the sun," said Benjamin.

Walter brought a hand to his chin. "I see. Rather short compared to wheat, then."

"Indeed. This is one of the few deficiencies of the potato," said Benjamin.

The potato itself contained a good deal of water, and would rot if left for too long. So in that respect, it was not a perfect substitute for wheat, which could be stored for years. According to Benjamin, even the mountainous regions of Atuca, where the potato originated, kept stores of wheat as well.

"It's incredible that you've not just found it and brought it back, but researched it in such thorough detail," said Walter.

Benjamin bowed, grinning that merchant's grin of his. "It is the seller's duty to understand as much as possible about the goods he avails to his clients."

"What do you think? It looks like we can use it to approach food self-sufficiency, doesn't it?" Slaine said, turning to Walter and Sergey.

After a few moments of contemplation, Sergey spoke up. "Perhaps. If we can

confirm that it is possible to cultivate it within our kingdom, then it may prove a useful supplement to wheat. What say you, Lord Adrashelm?"

"I concur," said Walter, nodding. "For the time being, let us begin experimental cultivation within the royal palace. Should these trials progress smoothly—and from all President Eriksen has said, it seems to me quite likely they will—I think we could expand cultivation to farmland within the royal domain by next year."

Both positive responses—it seemed like Slaine's proposal might really bear fruit after all. He couldn't help but smile.

"It's rather early to rejoice yet, my lord," said Sergey once again, as if to wipe any trace of happiness off the prince's face. "Even granting for argument's sake that cultivation is successful, it will not be simple to convince our countrymen to accept this crop as a new staple food." He pointed to the hideous eyecovered potato. "Look at the appearance of this specimen that has sprouted in the sun. My lord, if you were told to plant and eat such a thing, would you be eager to comply?"

Well, he isn't wrong, Slaine thought.

Slaine had developed a rather logical manner of thinking because he had grown up surrounded by books—but most commoners were given to thinking with their emotions. He could understand why the sprouted potato would inspire revulsion in some.

Impolitic promotion of this new crop might even cause the citizenry to distrust the royal family—a heavy risk to take at a time like this, when the crown was already so unstable.

"The people detest change. And they are especially conservative when it comes to the foundations of their daily lives, such as food," said Sergey. "We can expect to encounter considerable challenges introducing this crop to society. Only once these hurdles have been surmounted may you boast that we have accomplished reform, my lord. This is only the beginning."

His joy was quashed yet again by the merciless chancellor. "Yes, you are right," said Slaine, smiling bitterly. "This is only the beginning," he echoed, "but we have taken the first step toward success. So, let us move on to the next.

Lord Adrashelm, may I entrust the particulars of the cultivation experiments on palace grounds to you?"

Walter seemed momentarily taken aback to be addressed by the prince, but he mustered the composure to nod. "Yes. Leave it to me, my lord."

"Thank you. And since we went to such lengths to acquire them, I'd like you to try out the other three crops as well." There was no such thing as too much agricultural diversity, after all. The greater the variety, the less damage in the event of crop failure due to abnormal weather or disease. It could improve the stability of domestic productivity significantly. Slaine added, "As for how to convince the people to accept the potato as a new crop, I'll begin to consider it carefully. There is time yet. Sergey, what do you think?"

Sergey, too, seemed surprised by Slaine's confident response. "Very well, sire," he replied after a moment.

"Okay, then that is how we shall proceed," said Slaine. He turned toward the merchant. "Mr. Eriksen, I am grateful for your hard work."

Even Benjamin appeared somewhat unprepared for the change in Slaine's demeanor, but he had the sense to immediately conceal his surprise and bow politely. "Thank you for your kind words, sire," he said. "It is an honor to be of service."

The merchant took his leave of the audience chamber. The civil officials would compensate him for his work elsewhere.

"If there is nothing else that requires my presence, I will call it a day," said Slaine. "Thank you all for your dedicated service. We will convene again to go over the practical details before long."

"Yes, my lord," said Sergey, answering on behalf of the group. Elena and Walter bowed their heads in silence.

Once Slaine and Monica had departed the chamber, Walter spoke up. "I am honestly astonished it's all gone so smoothly," he sighed. "His Royal Highness has not only the power of imagination, but luck as well."

Elena laughed softly. "Sometimes luck can make or break a kingdom. I'd say

it's a rather advantageous trait for a future king," she said. "I'm not any sort of agricultural expert, but it certainly *sounds* like this will all proceed well."

"Yes, perhaps," said Walter. "Once the cultivation is successful, it's only a matter of time until the country folk come around. It will take some time, but if we keep steady—"

"Yes. It will take time," Sergey said, his tone rigid. "And so until we have taken that time and seen the results, we cannot celebrate the prince's success just yet."

Both ministers chuckled at the chancellor's dour objection.

"As meticulous as ever, Your Excellency," said Elena.

Sergey glared off into space, answering in a low voice. "Of course. It is the duty of the Chancellor of the Kingdom to keep a thorough grounding in reality," he said. "You lot may do as you please, but I shall not soften my stance with the prince until His Royal Highness truly delivers results."

## **Chapter 5: Nearly There**

By the end of the June wheat harvest season, the upheaval throughout the kingdom had settled. Slaine had been concentrating on his studies and duties for nearly six months when Monica suggested that he visit the hot spring at the royal retreat on the outskirts of the domain—and with Sergey's assent, Slaine set out for his first excursion from the palace in quite some time.

Before long, Slaine and his retinue entered Rutware, a tiny village on the road between the royal capital of Uzelheim and the southern border—and the town in which Slaine had been born and raised.

His carriage came to a stop, and soon after he heard Commander Victor's voice from outside. "Your Royal Highness, we have arrived."

Monica disembarked first, holding open the door for Slaine to follow. Surrounded by Victor and the other men of the royal guard, Slaine descended to the earth. "Thank you all for your work," he said.

He looked about his old home, taking in a deep breath of the familiar air. From the moment he'd been born until that fateful day six months ago, Slaine had spent almost every waking moment here.

"How are you, my liege?" asked Monica. "Feeling nostalgic?"

Slaine had never felt this way before. "Yes. There's something comforting about it," he answered.

He'd had the carriage stop close to his old home, so this was precisely the area he had used to frequent as a commoner: The alleys and riversides along which he used to run. The trees that bloomed in the spring and turned red in the fall. The road that led into the heart of town.

He missed it all terribly.

Wearing a bittersweet smile, he looked around. "But things will never be the way they used to be," he added.

His visit to Rutware was purely a personal one. For his security, he had informed no one that the crown prince was about to arrive. It was rather unusual for a royal carriage flanked with guards to appear in broad daylight, so nearby residents naturally gravitated toward the scene.

"Hey, isn't that the new crown prince?" said one villager.

"Why would he come to a place like this?" said another.

"The new one's a former commoner, ain't he? From this village, no less. Is that why he's come by?"

"Oh, that scribe's son, the one who used to live on the outskirts of town?"

"So this is the royal guard. Never seen 'em up close before..."

About a dozen commoners had gathered around the carriage. None dared approach the crown prince, but they all muttered amongst themselves, staring at Slaine from afar.

"As I said, we're a rather conspicuous party," said Monica.

"Yeah," Slaine agreed. The throng of curious onlookers swelled in size as they spoke. "Rutware's in the royal domain, but it's a ways off the main road. Royals seldom make it out here."

Because of her work, neither Slaine nor his mother had spent much time out of the house—and so he did not have many acquaintances even in his hometown. His few friends and most of his neighbors would have headed into the center of town for work during the day.

It was a small village, so there were a few among the onlookers that he knew at least by face and name, but none he knew well enough to go out of his way to approach.

"We may have the crowd cleared if you wish, my lord," said Victor.

Slaine shook his head. "No, that won't be necessary," he replied. "I wouldn't wish to disturb their lives any further. I don't intend to stay for long."

Rutware was only a stop along the way to their final destination. Slaine had planned to set out again immediately after indulging in a bit of nostalgia. But then Slaine finally spotted a familiar face among the growing throng of

spectators.

"Ah," Slaine said.

Looking back at him with an equally surprised expression was Erwin, Slaine's childhood friend.

"Ha ha ha, I never thought the day would come when I'd be inviting His Royal Highness the Crown Prince over to our filthy home. My mother will collapse from the shock when she hears about this!"

After asking Victor to bring Erwin in closer, Slaine had decided to spend some time chatting with his old friend over tea.

His former home had been cleared of all its furniture and belongings, so they had stopped by Erwin's house—a place Slaine had visited many times before.

"Glad to hear it," Slaine teased as Erwin flitted around the room hastily tidying the table and chairs. "It's good to know I was able to give you this valuable experience."

"What's with the self-important—" Erwin started to complain, but thought better of it midsentence. "Eh, no, you really *are* important now, aren't you? Y'know, if it wasn't *you* who'd ended up the crown prince, this really would be an impossible situation—wait, is it disrespectful of me to call His Royal Highness 'you'?"

Erwin looked at Monica and Victor as he asked—however much Slaine may have wished to have an uneventful cup of tea and a chat with his old friend, there was never any chance his aide and protector would have agreed to leave his side.

"Don't worry yourself about it. Out of the sight of my subjects, you can call me whatever you'd like," Slaine said. "Pretty impressive back there, the way you called me by my full title and bowed all proper-like."

Erwin grinned at Slaine's ribbing. "Hey, hey, I'm a merchant, right? Come on—of course I know how to switch my tone to cater to the client."

It really had been quite a shock to Slaine, seeing his childhood friend drop to a

knee and address him with such formal, deferential language.

He'd worried that they wouldn't be able to speak casually with one another any longer, so it was a relief to know that wasn't the case. Until six months ago, he had never imagined he would find a relaxed conversation to be so heartening.

Erwin placed a finished cup of tea down before Slaine's place at the table. "So, Your Royal Highness—how are you? Have you been eating well? Oh, well, I'm sure you've been eating much better than me, whatever the case."

"Ha, you're not wrong," answered Slaine. "Well, I think I've settled into my new routine. There's much about being a ruler I've yet to learn, but my vassals have been supporting and teaching me."

"Your 'vassals'? Goodness, you really are royalty now."

Slaine lifted the cup of tea for a sip, but Monica reached out to take it from his hands. "It must be tasted for poison, my liege," she said, bringing the cup of tea to her lips—opposite the side from which Slaine would drink. She took in a mouthful and swished it around to ensure there was nothing amiss with the taste or smell. When she was certain it hadn't had any effect on her body, she returned the cup to the table.

Outside the royal palace, Slaine was not permitted to consume anything without first having it tasted—even a cup of tea made by an old friend. It made the distance between them feel terribly vast.

Across from him at the table, Erwin did his best not to show a response as he watched the young woman test the cup of tea he'd prepared.

Slaine cleared his throat. "How has everyone been since I was whisked away to the palace?" he asked.

"There was an enormous commotion about it! I heard a rumor that a bunch of cavalrymen appeared in front of your house in the middle of the night, and when I went to ask you about it, you were nowhere to be found," Erwin said, gesticulating. "No one had the faintest clue what had happened to you."

Slaine laughed sheepishly. "Is that right?"

"Then, a few days later, soldiers from the royal army showed up in full suits of armor to cart all the belongings out from your house—and a man who looked to be their commander came all the way to our house to tell us you'd been taken away to the royal palace for some reason he wouldn't say. Maybe a week or so after that, we got word that a new crown prince had risen up from among the common folk, and that his name was *Slaine*," Erwin continued. "As you can *imagine*, it came as a bit of a shock!"

When Slaine had requested his belongings be brought up from his former home, he'd also asked that his neighbors—Erwin in particular—be informed that he was alive and well. At the time, the deaths of the royal family had not yet been publicized, so it hadn't been possible to reveal all the details of his disappearance.

"I have to admit I was skeptical at first. But when the day of the state funeral arrived, I had no choice left but to believe it," said Erwin. "I went to the royal capital to observe the ceremonies. And there you were, walking through the streets of Uzelheim alongside the caskets of the royal family members—I only saw you for a split second, but I'd never mistake you for a stranger."

"Ah. So you were among that crowd too," Slaine muttered, bringing his cup of tea to his mouth for a sip.

At the time of the funeral, Slaine had still been insecure in his position—he'd hid behind his escort all the way from the church to the royal palace. He'd had no clue that Erwin had been standing with the onlookers.

"It was an even bigger shock, actually seeing you as crown prince," said Erwin.

"I can imagine. It came as a shock to me too," Slaine replied. "They suddenly brought me up to the royal palace, told me of my secret parentage, and called on me to step up as heir to the throne. I could hardly keep pace."

"So you grew up without knowing it yourself? You always said your father died before you were born."

"Indeed. I had no clue at all that my father had been alive—let alone that he was the king."

"So when I was a child, I used to play and fight with the son of the king,"

Erwin remarked. "And absolutely trounced him, no less."

"It's rather outrageous when you put it that way." Slaine laughed. It was fun to idly reminisce like this. "You'll be bragging about that all the rest of your life, won't you?"

"So, Slaine—what's it like being crown prince? Is it tough work? I've not a clue what a crown prince even does, to be honest."

Slaine put on a strained smile, tilting his head to the side. "Hmm... Well, I can't say it *isn't* tough work."

"Ha ha ha! Of course."

"I came into this position with no royal education at all. I suppose I'm still learning and acclimating myself to the office little by little. I've been working on my physical fitness as well."

"Well, I'm sure you'll do well with your studies and your 'duties,' whatever that entails. You've always been a smart one." But after a moment to think on it, Erwin added, "The physical training must be real rough on you, though. You could hardly win a fight with a field mouse."

"Loath as I am to admit it, you are completely right," Slaine said, grimacing. He had made progress to be sure, but his martial ability remained thoroughly mediocre. That wasn't likely to change for as long as he lived. "I need to cultivate more of a *presence* as crown prince. A unifying force. I was raised as a commoner, and, well—I look like *this*. I have to do my very best to grow into a king who can bring people together."

The Nobles of the Robe, court servants, ministry officials, and soldiers had already pledged their devotion to the royal family—and it was because Slaine was the son of the late king that they remained committed in spite of his current inexperience. But Slaine would need to win over the hearts and minds of his other subjects through his own merit.

The present problem at hand was how to convince the common folk in the royal domain to accept potatoes as a staple crop, and Slaine was struggling to devise a plan for what he, as king, could do to encourage widespread cultivation. In order to gain the trust of his people, he needed to build a record

of success—but in order to build a record of success, he needed to gain the trust of his people.

Alas, the potato project was a matter of government affairs, so Slaine could not discuss it with Erwin in any detail.

"I see, I see," Erwin said. "Well, I think you're all right. From my point of view, at least, you seem to be a perfectly likable crown prince. Since you used to be a commoner too, right? So you understand how us little people feel—a common prince."

Erwin spoke with a light, glib tone, but hearing that made Slaine feel like he'd stumbled onto a breakthrough.

"A common prince," Slaine echoed. Maybe it really was a unique strength. If he could show that he understood the feelings of the ordinary masses, perhaps that would earn him enough goodwill to establish a foothold.

After listening to Sergey and his other vassals, Slaine, too, had put King Frederick up on a pedestal, looking toward his late father as his goal and a figure to emulate—a king who exuded unwavering majesty.

But majesty was not the only way to win over the people. Kindness and personability could make a statesman too. In fact, Slaine had read of such amiable kings and lords in the annals of history—Hasenvalia's second king, his great-grandfather, had reportedly been such a man.

"Thank you, Erwin," said Slaine. "I might be able to make it work—thanks to you."

"Hm? Oh, well, I've no clue what I've done to help, but I'm glad to hear it."

After promising they would one day meet again, Slaine asked Erwin to give his best wishes to his mother and left the house. Slaine knew he couldn't stay long.

"Well, then, my liege, shall we be off to the royal retreat as scheduled?" asked Monica.

"Oh, right. Ahh... I know we'd planned to stay two days, but I think I'll stay only the night and then head back," Slaine replied. "There's something I want to

try, so I'd like to make it back to the palace early."

Monica nodded with a pleasant smile. "Very well. Then I shall adjust our arrangements accordingly."



After a thorough soak in the royal family's exclusive hot springs, a simple but fine meal, and a good long night's sleep, Slaine hurried back to the royal capital.

There, he commenced his next experiment.

"Oh my goodness. Is that—the crown prince? In the flesh?"

"I've never seen the prince up this close before."

"Hello, everyone," said Slaine, laughing personably.

Slaine sat upon the raised base of a small clock tower at the center of one of the capital's several public squares, surrounded by his subjects.

Of course, none came close enough to touch—Slaine had Monica and Victor and the men of the royal guard to protect him. Nevertheless, even this distance was far closer than any commoner had expected they might come in their lives. They stood only a few meters away from where Slaine sat.

"You, there," Slaine said, addressing one man among the throng of commoners. "Are you a farmer?"

The middle-aged man seemed surprised by the question. "H-How did you know?" he stammered.

"Your fingernails, and the way you're covered in dirt up to the knee. Proof you work diligently each day tilling the earth," Slaine answered. Then he turned his eye to another subject. "You over there—you're a freight hauler, no? I can tell from the musculature of your dominant arm."

This man, too, reacted with surprise. "That's right," he said. "Amazing that you can tell such a thing from a glance."

Slaine laughed, smiling brightly. "Of course I can. I used to be a commoner just like you, after all."

Although he'd often been cooped up inside helping his mother, his fifteen

years as a commoner had given Slaine plenty of opportunities to watch laborers of various professions at work. He could recognize the characteristics of the more common trades with ease.

The assembled city folk began to murmur amongst themselves. "Wow. If he says it himself, then I suppose the rumors are true."

"It's true," replied another. "The crown prince really is a former commoner."

Then, a young woman approached Slaine with nervous trepidation.

"Um, Crown Prince. Your Royal Highness," she said, timid.

Slaine answered her with a pleasant smile. "Hm? Yes, what is it?"

"I'd heard that the crown prince himself had begun to make the rounds in the capital city, talking to us lowly folk," she said. "But—why?"

Slaine made a conscious effort to sound as kind as possible when he spoke. "Because I—as the future king—care deeply about all of you," he said. "A kingdom is not built by nobility and royalty alone. You ordinary folk work diligently day in and day out, pay your taxes, and fulfill your duties—you are the reason the Kingdom of Hasenvalia knows peace and stability. And since I am a common prince, I understand full well how hard all of you work for this kingdom."

Slaine looked around at his assembled subjects. As he directly praised their efforts, some wore proud expressions, while others looked shy.

"That's why I, as heir to the throne, want to remain in touch with my subjects and hear their stories. So from time to time I'll go around the city just like this," said Slaine. "I'd like to visit the other towns and villages eventually, but first I want to hear from the residents of the royal capital, the seat of the crown."

The future king is a former commoner. He's kind to the common people. He understands how we feel. If Slaine were able to establish such a reputation now, then it would be an invaluable boon to his attempts to disseminate cultivation of the potato later down the line—surely his subjects would be more eager to go along with this strange new crop if they already had a favorable impression of him.

And so Slaine began to descend into the city to converse with the ordinary people. For his safety, the dates of his appearances were not announced—he went out to speak with no forewarning.

At first, the city folk were not entirely receptive to his efforts. Of course they met the unprecedented appearance of the crown prince in the heart of their city with suspicion, looking at him from afar with nervous apprehension.

But Slaine persisted, patiently visiting each square to personally approach his subjects. After several attempts, his gentle reputation began to spread, and the city folk gradually drew closer and closer each time.

Some began to not just answer when addressed, but speak up themselves, like the woman who had just approached him. Slaine could feel that his efforts to connect with his people were beginning to bear fruit.

"So, how are all of you doing these days?" asked Slaine. "Is there anything that troubles you? Any problems or concerns?"

The assembled subjects looked at one another. Eventually, the manual laborer that Slaine had conversed with earlier spoke up. "Well, not especially. There haven't been any particularly bad harvests or monster attacks, and taxes haven't changed for a long while."

But then a farmer cut in. "Ahhh, but food prices have increased quite a bit, I'd say," he said.

His interjection drew the eye of the crowd—when he began to shrink back under the attention, Slaine gently said, "It's all right. I won't be angry. Go ahead and speak your mind."

"Our wheat harvests are quite good each year, but the fees for using the water mill and bread ovens are higher than they were in the past," the farmer continued. "Even if the wheat fetches a decent price, with these increases to our expenses, our net profits haven't kept pace."

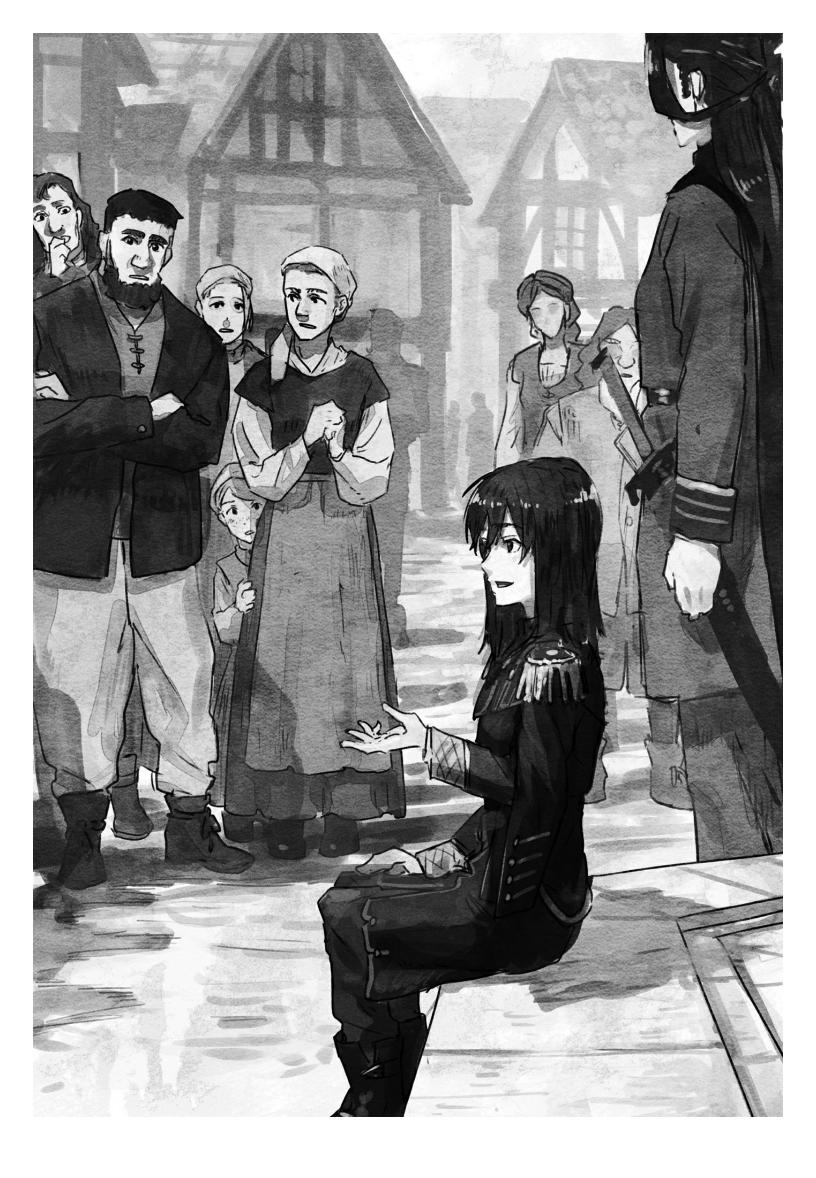
Another woman spoke up. "The price of bread at the bakery has gone up a good bit since I was young."

"Vegetables and meat are more expensive too, you know," said another man. "I think salt's the only thing that hasn't changed at all."

Urged on by the farmer's remarks, the subjects began to converse amongst each other.

As the royal domain's food self-sufficiency had declined, the kingdom had begun to supplement with imports from other territories—but the transportation costs associated with these imports naturally contributed to inflated food prices throughout the realm.

Judging by how his subjects spoke, Slaine did not think it to be a dire problem as yet—but food was an essential part of human life. The sooner the situation could be improved, the better.



"Thank you all for sharing your opinions," said Slaine. "I truly do appreciate it."

The assembled subjects drew back in surprise.

"Did the crown prince just thank us?"

"Well, I'll be damned."

None of them knew how to respond to Slaine's displays of familiarity and kindness.

Victor and the other men of the royal guard kept vigilant watch, maintaining a seamless perimeter around the prince. Thus far, none of the city folk had made any missteps that would demand the guard react.

Slaine's powerful guard reminded his subjects of his status, but his demeanor was affable and personable. Through this deliberate juxtaposition, he was able to both interact with his subjects and project his position as crown prince.

After a while longer chatting with the assembled city folk, Slaine called it a day. "Well, then, it's about time for me to be heading back. Today was a pleasure," he said, bidding them all farewell.

Slaine returned to the palace by carriage. Inside, he ran into Sergey by chance.

"Welcome home, Your Royal Highness," said the chancellor, a glum expression plain on his face. "Out to mingle with your subjects again?"

Slaine replied with a strained smile. "Yes. I spoke with my subjects about various things today. I received useful feedback, and didn't encounter any problems of note."

Naturally, Sergey had balked when Slaine first suggested that he wanted to go out into the capital to converse with the city residents. The chancellor feared that Slaine's casual contact with ordinary people might destroy his authority as future king—and, of course, he worried that it would be dangerous to emerge from the palace so often.

To allay the chancellor's concerns, Slaine had proposed that he bring with him

an escort of royal guardsmen as a show of force. With rigorous security, he could make direct contact with the city's denizens without needing to worry for his safety.

For good measure, Slaine had also raised the example of his great-grandfather, Frederick II, who was renowned for his kindness toward the common people—as a former commoner himself, Slaine aspired to become such a king.

After all, even the chancellor could not deny that Slaine was certainly not like to become the sort of king who would awe his people with strength and majesty. Assured that Slaine was not in fact the sort of fool who would denigrate his own position as future king, Sergey had reluctantly given his assent—on one condition.

Sergey had demanded that should Slaine find himself in danger even once, or if Monica or Victor ever reported that Slaine's activities had begun to erode the proper separation between himself and his subjects, that he would cease such excursions immediately.

"How was it, Lord Behrendorf?" asked the chancellor.

Victor replied promptly, "As His Royal Highness said, there were no problems in terms of security. Nor any issues with the crown prince's conduct."

"Very well," said Sergey. "Take care not to strain yourself, my lord."

Slaine smiled stiffly at Sergey's reply—it sounded more like a warning than a comment from any genuine place of worry. The chancellor did not mean it in any sort of malicious sense, but it was his duty to concern himself with such pragmatic considerations.

"I won't," said Slaine. "Now that we're finally starting to see results from our interactions, I won't need to push it much further."

There were only about five thousand residents in the royal city of Uzelheim. Slaine had gone out to meet with his subjects just shy of a dozen times, and spoken to about ten people each time, so he figured that meant he'd been able to interact with roughly a hundred citizens thus far.

Rumors of Slaine's amiable character had already begun to spread throughout

the capital city. Surely this reputation would prove a boon when the time came to promote cultivation of the potato, as well as any other projects the royal family might undertake in the future.

And it had already had positive effects on Slaine himself.

Slaine thought all the subjects he met on his excursions were lovely. Men, women, and children alike would each come up to him, calling him "Lord Crown Prince" and "Your Highness the Crown Prince." He felt deeply that he ought to treat them with love and affection.

It helped him understand why people considered his late father to be a good king—and why his father had worked so hard to maintain that. A king was like a father to all his subjects. Even Slaine, who was still only fifteen years old and crown prince for not yet half a year, had already begun to feel what that meant.

Wondering if he was anything like his late father, Slaine returned to his office.



September had arrived. There was only about a month left until Slaine's coronation. Today, Slaine was making a visit to a plot of farmland on the outskirts of the royal palace grounds.

This farmland was maintained to grow food for the royal household to eat each day. Lately, they'd also made use of it to experiment with new crops and farming methods. The potato experiments were progressing in one corner of this plot.

"As reported, the potatoes are growing well in the royal plot," said Minister Walter as he gestured to a lush growth of leaves. The tubers were flourishing in the earth underneath, he added. "We have also seen good results from the plantings in the small vacant lot inside the royal palace itself. In both cases, the required cultivation time seems to match President Eriksen's report—harvest time will come in about a month. And once the yield is confirmed to be safe for human consumption, we will commence cultivation in the regions surrounding the capital."

Although Slaine had received regular reports, this was his first time seeing the growing crop firsthand. "It seems to all be trending toward the ideal outcome,"

he said.

While all initial forecasts suggested the experiments would progress well, agriculture was a fickle art—Slaine was deeply relieved to see such positive results.

Preparations to incorporate the fruits of the harvest into the kingdom's food supplies were already underway. Slaine's efforts to build ties with his subjects were progressing smoothly, so the groundwork had been laid.

Everything looked to be fine—so long as nothing unexpected occurred. Slaine would be crowned as king having already established a significant foothold among his vassals and subjects through his improvements to the domain's self-sufficiency. At last, he would be the monarch of this kingdom in both name and fact.

He was no longer the confused, helpless boy who had first arrived at the palace.

Although there was much he had left to learn, Slaine had made significant strides already. No longer did he need to leave every decision to his vassals, or depend on them completely for support—he was learning to stand on his own two feet, think for himself, and speak with his own words.

The way his vassals viewed him had changed as well. It was perhaps premature to say that they thought him a competent king, but they saw promise in him, certainly. The servants of the royal palace, the soldiers of the army, and the kingdom's subjects had all come to view Slaine with some favor as well. He could feel it.

It was the best outcome he could have hoped for—he would be crowned with the confidence that he had done all that his abilities would allow.

After finishing his inspection of the potatoes, Slaine returned to his office in the palace with Monica.

"Would you like to take a short break before you commence your remaining duties, my lord?" asked Monica.

"Yes, please," answered Slaine.

"Very well. I'll brew a pot, then."

With her usual gentle smile, Monica went about the motions of preparing Slaine's usual herbal tea with the set in his office.

And after a leisurely break with Monica, Slaine began his afternoon office work. Piled up on his desk was a stack of letters addressed to the crown prince.

Most pertained to next month's impending coronation. Neighboring kingdoms had sent word that their monarchs or representatives thereof would attend the ceremonies.

Among the pile of letters was one from Florenz Meichelbeck, third prince of the Great Empire of Galed. Slaine recalled that the imperial prince had greeted him affably at the state funeral.

In the missive, Florenz—who served as a diplomat to the western reaches of the continent—declared that he would attend the event himself. He had included a personal message for Slaine as well. It read:

My deepest apologies for my lack of contact since the day of the funeral. I understand that there are many hardships one must face as crown prince, but is there anything you've found particularly difficult in this time? When I come to visit for the coronation, I would be glad to share a meal with you and discuss any of your concerns. As we are both young men tasked with heavy burdens, I am sure there is much about which we could commiserate.

Florenz was an upright man, Slaine thought.

Their conversation at the funeral may have been merely a social one, but Slaine was surprised that an imperial prince from such a massive empire had taken such careful interest in the common prince of a tiny kingdom.

Was he an exceptionally kind man, or just a bit of an eccentric with a soft touch? Smiling faintly, Slaine picked up his mother's pen and began to compose a letter in response. In the body, he wrote:

Thank you for your kind words. Since the funeral, I have pushed myself to grow into my station and live up to my people's expectations of a future king. I think I have made considerable progress—I've forged ties with my vassals and my subjects, and all is proceeding well enough. I've no cause for concern.

However, I would be elated to share dinner with you when we meet. Though we have our respective positions, it would please me if the two of us could call each other friends as well.

Once Slaine had finished with the customary salutations, he turned to Monica. "I would like to give this letter top priority," he said. "May I ask you to see to it?"

"Of course, my liege. I will make the necessary arrangements straightaway," said Monica, taking the letter from Slaine's hand. She departed the office shortly thereafter.

From there, she would need to bring the missive to Sergey to verify that none of its contents were objectionable. With the chancellor's assent, she would then enclose the letter in a parchment envelope, fasten it with the royal wax seal, and then arrange its transport to the Great Empire of Galed.

In the solitude of his office, Slaine gazed out the window into the autumn sky. "Only a month to go?" he muttered to himself.

It felt as if all that time had passed in the blink of an eye, and at the same time, like it had crawled past as slow as eternity. His days of living in his tiny house in his tiny town felt at once like yesterday and a thousand years ago.

Soon, Slaine would be king.

It was a terribly strange sensation. He'd resolved himself at last, but still none of it felt real quite yet. He wondered if it ever would.

Two weeks later, an urgent report arrived. Three hundred cavalrymen had crossed the kingdom's border.

The Great Empire of Galed had attacked.

## **Chapter 6: Muster at the Brink of War**

"Morgan, this is my official order as third prince of the empire: commence the assault upon the Kingdom of Hasenvalia posthaste."

The city of Abelhausen was the regional seat of the imperial house and the largest settlement in the western reaches of the Galed Empire. And it was in the palace there, on one fateful day in the midst of September, that Prince Florenz Meichelbeck of Galed met with Morgan, Count of Dubois.

"If I recall the previous directive, Your Imperial Highness, the invasion of Hasenvalia was to take place after the new year," said Morgan, doubt plain on his battle-scarred face. The count was more than twice the prince's age, and he could not conceal a twinge of frustration.

Dubois County was a significant territory in the west of Galed, home to more than two hundred thousand people. And Morgan, lord of that fief, was renowned as one of the greatest warriors in the west.

Whenever strife arose—be it between rival ethnic groups or minor nobles in the west—the third prince would call upon the Count of Dubois to courageously suppress rebellion. The public often called him the Mercenary Count.

While Morgan stood at attention, Florenz leaned back in his luxurious chair and waved the letter in his hand.

"Yes, yes, but things have changed. The next king of Hasenvalia—that young boy who was raised a commoner—is growing into his station more quickly than anyone anticipated. I hear tell that he's built a good reputation in the kingdom, and according to this letter that's just arrived, all is well," said Florenz, an exasperated expression on his face. "If we wait until the new year, he may have already secured a stable position as king. We must smother Hasenvalia while its prince is in his cradle yet—before his coronation." Then he added, "It'll be easier that way."

Florenz's reputation within Galed's courtly society was incredibly poor. But as

the son of the emperor's favorite concubine, far removed from the struggle for imperial succession, he had been spoiled and doted upon by his father all his life.

He wanted to repay his father's love. Now in his midtwenties, it was past time he began to act in a way befitting a proper member of the imperial family; he needed to put some achievements on display, however small, and begin the work to ameliorate his poor reception at court.

If he could accomplish that, then surely his father would praise him and shower him with even more love.

Five years ago, Florenz's siblings had saddled him with the sinecure of overseeing the western reaches of the continent. It was then that he had begun to devise a plan.

He was courteous and gentle with the tiny, insignificant western kingdoms, lulling them into a false sense of security with his reputation as a feeble moderate. He'd selected Morgan as a general and sent him out to quell domestic rebellions, at once sating the man's lust for bloodshed and bolstering his record of service—in short, taming him.

So the herd of small kingdoms had lowered its guard, and Florenz had secured a formidable weapon in the Mercenary Count. All that was left was to deliver results—and at last the time had come. Florenz believed with total conviction that Hasenvalia's royal tragedy had come as a sign from God to strike.

The prince had already received permission from the emperor to attack. When he had sent word detailing his plans, his father had responded with encouragement: "I'd no idea you had such a determined spirit. If you've taken it this far already, see it through."

The love between parent and child was truly one of life's most powerful forces.

The empire's adversaries to the north and east posed far more pressing threats to Galed than the western frontier. Florenz's two elder brothers, locked in competition for the throne, were utterly preoccupied with those border disputes. Removed from the watchful eye of the imperial house, Florenz was largely free to move as he pleased. And this was a prime opportunity to show

his true potential. Invade the Kingdom of Hasenvalia, occupy it, and—

Well, he hadn't put terribly much thought into what would come after that.

He could rule it as his personal playground, or continue his invasion into whatever neighboring kingdoms he thought vulnerable to similar attacks. Or if he found it too bothersome to govern the region himself, he could pawn off the task onto whatever bureaucrat he could borrow from his father.

Successfully seizing a whole country on his own initiative—even if the kingdom were small—would be a tremendous boon to his curriculum vitae. All that mattered to the prince was bettering his standing in court, and the praise of his father.

"Besides—best to strike when the enemy is at his weakest, wouldn't you say, Morgan?" said Florenz. "No matter how puny the state, it's a terrible bother to smash a united polity."

"Yes. It is as you say, Your Imperial Highness," replied Morgan. "However—"

Florenz cut him right off. "Yes, you understand! That is why we simply must attack with haste, seize control, and decapitate the royal family!" Then he laughed and added, "Family, I say—but all that's left of it is that one upstart common boy. Ha!"

"Understood," the count conceded. "I shall begin the preparations to invade immediately."

"Best of luck to you. Should you succeed in this assault, you will be known as the greatest warrior in all of Galed! Oh, and I'm sure my father will increase my allowance as a reward, so I can pay you a greater bounty as well!"

Theirs was a truly symbiotic relationship. Florenz would have the success and approval he desired, while Morgan would enjoy great honor, the spoils of war, and the thrill of battle itself!

"However, understand that a sudden invasion will demand a change in plans," said Morgan. Then he launched into an explanation of his new strategy.

First, he planned to send an elite unit of three hundred cavalrymen, the core of the Dubois County army, over the border. The overwhelming speed and size

of this strike force would swiftly lay waste to Hasenvalia's direly outmatched defenses.

The following day, the cavalrymen would cross through the outer counties and into the heart of the royal domain itself. Taken by surprise, the enemy would have no time to detect the invasion or field a counteroffensive.

They would conscript recruits from those imperial territories directly bordering Hasenvalia as well. The skill or quality of the troops was of little significance in this case: a peasant army with crude weapons would do the job well enough. Overwhelming numbers were the key to this fight—a goal of five thousand men, if they could muster it. The infantry of the count's territorial army and the soldiers in Florenz's imperial army would command this peasant force.

That would suffice to reduce Hasenvalia to ruin. The cavalry would obliterate the enemy army, and the infantry would overrun the kingdom's territory, plundering and pillaging the countryside. The occupation would be complete in a month's time.

Florenz hummed contemplatively when Morgan was finished. "Well, I don't know much about war, but that all sounds swell to me," he said. "Shall I lend you some of the imperial troops my father left to me? How many will you need?"

"About a hundred men will suffice," answered Morgan. "We shall mobilize the same number of infantry from my territory. Two hundred regulars ought to be able to handle the conscripts."

"I see, I see. Well, if you say so, then so it shall be."

Florenz trusted Morgan's military sense. The count's signature strike was to follow a cavalry charge with an infantry attack. Florenz had never seen him struggle, let alone lose a battle.

The prince settled into his chair with a contented expression on his face. He'd already finished all the political back channeling and groundwork he'd needed to lay for the assault, so the rest was up to Morgan—the prince could sit back and relax in the palace until word of his victory had arrived.

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The twenty-two small states that made up the western kingdoms were separated from the Great Empire of Galed by the heights of the long Eldecio Mountain Range.

Its slopes were so steep that even seasoned climbers faced considerable danger when passing through. It was functionally impossible for a large army to cross.

But not every crossing was so perilous. There were several areas in which the elevation was relatively low, or the mountains gave way to valleys. These passes had long been used as trade routes between the western and central parts of the continent.

The easiest of these routes ran through the eastern border of the Kingdom of Hasenvalia.

This special path was called the Leuschner Highway. The road, which cut through a valley between the mountains, was only about fifteen kilometers east to west. One could cross it in half a day on foot.

Separating the empire and Hasenvalia was a ten-kilometer-wide buffer zone. The western side of the valley was totally uninhabited apart from the officials manning the border checkpoint, partly to avoid provoking the empire, and partly because the terrain was too rugged to sustain large settlements or agricultural development.

The eastern side of the valley, on the other hand, had a strong defensive line thanks to the imperial fortress that the empire had constructed on the edge of the buffer. The two nations had maintained peaceable relations since before the founding of the empire, however, so this fortress, too, served as little more than a border crossing. It even offered lodging to merchants passing through the valley, in lieu of an inn.

But now, for the first time in nearly a hundred years, this fortress had returned to its original function: the Dubois County army, led by Lord Morgan himself, had garrisoned it to serve as a forward base for the empire's invasion from Leuschner Highway.

And the next morning, on September 22nd, year 282 of the imperial calendar—year 77 by Hasenvalian reckoning—the army's three hundred imperial cavalrymen crossed the buffer zone and invaded Cronheim County.

Only a short while prior, a messenger from Prince Florenz had delivered the empire's declaration of war to Hasenvalia's border crossing.

The prince proclaimed that Hasenvalia's military buildup over recent years posed a critical risk to the peace and safety of the empire—a farcical claim.

But there was no room for negotiation. The kingdom's royalty and nobility would be killed, and its territory and citizens claimed for the empire, as a punishment for threatening the stability of the region.

About two hours following this declaration of war, Eberhard, Count of Cronheim, stood at the peak of a small forested hill overlooking the advance of the enemy cavalry.

The three hundred troops were occupying a farming village on the eastern edge of Cronheim.

From his position, hidden by the tree cover, Eberhard could see cavalrymen resting or forcing the village residents inside the local church. There did not appear to be any disorderly pillaging or abuse of the civilians, but some villagers lay motionless on the ground, perhaps slain for resisting.

"Wretched Galed bastards," Eberhard muttered to himself. Despite the anger simmering inside him, a smirk rose to his face. "You think you can rely on the size of your army for everything? Careless."

The empire's sudden invasion had shattered a century-long peace. When word of this crisis had arrived from the border, Eberhard had moved swiftly. He'd sent a message to the crown and simultaneously begun drafting recruits from the countryside. To intercept the imperial force, he'd issued orders to all the troops in the county to gather at the territorial capital of Toriet.

However, the enemy force—composed entirely of cavalry—had the advantage of speed. They were likely to reach the territorial capital in just a few hours, so the gates would need to be shut tight by then.

And it was difficult to imagine that the invasion would end there—infantry

surely followed not far behind. And with the might of the Great Empire of Galed behind them, that could mean an army thousands-strong on Cronheim's doorstep in a matter of days.

The county was preparing for a siege.

Eberhard had ordered food brought in from the farming villages surrounding the county capital, and arrangements be made to accommodate the impending influx of county troops. Women and children had been evacuated to the west, the adult men confined in the capital with the soldiers. Such measures were necessary to fortify the east.

If Toriet were to fall, Cronheim would be lost—and, like as not, the overwhelming strength of the imperial forces would bring an end to the Kingdom of Hasenvalia itself.

Anticipating the enemy's course, Eberhard had taken a path out of sight of the invading forces, climbing to the top of the hill where he stood overlooking the approaching army now. An assault on the cavalry as they rested would throw the troops into disarray and delay their advance.

The count planned to send his forces to kill as many of the horses as possible, or at least wound the soldiers. Even if all it bought was a few hours' time, that would be enough for Toriet to prepare.

However, it would be a costly maneuver. There was no guarantee any of them would return home alive.

Eberhard turned back to where his men stood, about twenty in number. "What say you, soldiers? Have any among you had a change of heart? Better to desert now than to cower in the face of the enemy."

The men laughed.

"You must be joking, my liege," said one soldier. "None of us would shrink back at this late an hour. Isn't that right, boys?"

Another concurred. "Indeed. At our age, we can die without regrets!"

"Those horsemen think they can underestimate us 'cuz we're a small kingdom," said a third, the eldest member of the territorial army—a knight who

had planned to retire at the end of the year. "But we'll buy time for our land, our homes, and our families, and while we're at it, give those Galed bastards a good beating!"

Rallied, the soldiers cheered.

All the men gathered here were volunteers—the count had recruited any willing man who could ride for this desperate bid to stall the empire's advance. There were knights and soldiers among them, but ordinary peasants, as well. All were at least middle-aged, but some were even old enough to have grandchildren. Eberhard had dismissed all of the young men who had stepped forward—there was no hope of survival.

"Heh. You're all fools," said Eberhard, but he was glad.

Eberhard could not stomach the thought of sending his knights, soldiers, and subjects to their deaths while he, the count, lived on. By his pride as their liege lord, he intended to personally lead the assault.

Should his honorable defeat allow the county capital to successfully garrison, the enemy could not simply ignore a fortified city building strength—they would not be able to advance farther without fear of a sudden strike from the rear. Galed would have no choice but to capture Toriet.

Even surrounded by an army of five or six thousand men, Toriet—home to about two thousand residents in times of peace—would be able to hold out for a week or so. Thus it would buy the crown time to muster its forces.

A week's time—the best outcome for which Cronheim County could hope. What came after that would not concern Eberhard.

His son would inherit his seat. Perhaps the boy was not an outstanding character likely to carve his name into the annals of history, but he was a wonderful son. He lacked nothing as an heir.

The fate of the kingdom was to be decided by that upstart commoner, the crown prince. Eberhard did not know if the young heir to the throne was prepared to defend the kingdom in the face of a mighty imperial army, or even if he was prepared to go to battle at all—but that was out of Eberhard's hands.

All that he could do was fulfill his duty. At the founding of the kingdom, the

houses of Hasenvalia and Cronheim had been enemies—but Hasenvalia had welcomed Cronheim into the new age with amnesty, granting to Cronheim land and titles. Eberhard and his family owed the royal family a debt of loyalty.

"Men, take up your arms and mount your steeds," he commanded, climbing into the saddle of his prized horse. The assembled volunteers followed suit.

At the edge of the forest, just out of sight of the enemy, Eberhard looked up to the heavens. Clear blue sky peeked between the gaps of the trees.

"A beautiful day to die," he said.

Smiling, he drew his sword.

Then Eberhard spurred his horse and burst out from the trees, his twenty brave men close behind.



On the afternoon of September 23rd, Sergey stood in the audience chamber of the royal palace. "Repeat it again," he said, a grim expression on his face.

Slaine stood before the throne next to the chancellor, stiff with mute astonishment. Monica was wide-eyed, her usual serene and gentle expression nowhere to be found.

At Sergey's other side, Sieghardt, Count of Vogel and general of the royal army, stood in total silence. Although his expression did not crack, a heavy air swirled around him.

The messenger was a soldier of the Cronheim County army. He'd come straight from the count's territory, riding hard for over a full day—he'd even changed horses on the way. "Yes, Your Excellency," he said, and then began his report again:

"Yesterday morning, the Great Empire of Galed declared war upon the Kingdom of Hasenvalia. Simultaneously, approximately three hundred cavalrymen crossed the Leuschner Highway into the buffer zone. They then advanced farther westward into Cronheim County; House Cronheim immediately commenced defensive preparations. That was the state of affairs when I departed the count's territory."

"Understood," said Sergey, a grim expression on his face. "Thank you. You are dismissed."

The messenger stood straight and offered a swift salute—but he was so exhausted that it looked as if his knees were about to give way. A pair of royal guardsmen rushed to his side to support him and carried the soldier out from the audience chamber.

The room plunged into heavy silence.

"Oh, God," Slaine exhaled, stunned and dazed. Clutched in his hand was the declaration of war from Prince Florenz Meichelbeck of Galed. Shaking, he spread open the declaration again. "Wha... What? Why? This is all just so... The reasons he's written are complete nonsense—a false pretext."

Sieghardt nodded. "Indeed—our enemy's intentions are plainly despicable. And to send a declaration of war in the name of not the emperor but a mere *prince*—the empire underestimates us because we are small. Absolutely preposterous."

"The empire has always looked down its nose at our kingdom—nay, at all the western kingdoms," Sergey spat, a frown furrowing his brow. "It is only because it had not suited them to attack sooner that the empire has maintained peaceful relations until now."

Even the largest kingdom in the western region did not surpass a population of two hundred thousand. Although the cluster of small nations had avoided deadly conflict for some time, relations between individual states were often strained. They were not in a position to swiftly unite and confront the empire.

Should the empire decide to invade the western kingdoms in earnest, there would be little they could do to forestall defeat.

However, relations between the empire and the western kingdoms had been relatively peaceful over the past century due to the empire's rivalries to the north and east. The kingdoms on its eastern border had come together to form a single great power—and its northern neighbor also had begun to amass power through its negotiations with that new unified state, posing an alarming threat to Galed.

Preoccupied with its conflicts with those powerful neighbors, the empire had left the western kingdoms alone, forgoing the trouble of invasion for the moderate profit of peaceful trade instead.

"The empire surely remains at odds with its northeastern neighbors. It is yet unclear why they have chosen to invade now, but we have no recourse but to face their assault head-on, my lord," said Sergey. When Slaine did not respond, the chancellor called out to him again. "Sire?"

Slaine was shocked mute. What was that friendly letter that Florenz had sent the month prior, then? He could picture the imperial prince's gentle smile in his mind clear as day. Why? Why? he asked, again and again—though there were of course no answers to be found in his own mind. His dark thoughts threatened to swallow him.

Then, suddenly, a booming voice called out, "Your Royal Highness!" Snapped from his reverie, Slaine turned.

The voice belonged to Sieghardt, general of the royal army. "My lord, I will call the troops stationed throughout the royal domain up to the capital. I would like to simultaneously commence drafting from among the citizenry as well," said the general. "I think it would be most prudent to postpone devising a detailed counterattack for the time being, and instead focus on gathering our forces together as quickly as possible. Do I have your consent?"

"You have it," Slaine replied, nearly automatic. If the general of the army believed that to be the best course of action, then it was certainly so.

"At your command," Sieghardt replied. With an impeccable parting bow, he departed the audience chamber immediately.

Face ashen, Slaine turned back to the chancellor and his aide. "Sergey, Monica—I—after this—what is...going to happen?"

Slaine was due to be crowned in just a month. He had believed that his days would continue on much as they had, diligently administering the nation and writing history for years to come. He'd had no reason to doubt it.

The twenty-two small kingdoms in the west had maintained peace for a century, both amongst themselves and with the empire to the east. And Florenz

had put himself forward as a moderate. How could everything have fallen apart so easily?

"You have two options," said Sergey. "Either send Hasenvalia into war—or seek asylum in another state."

Slaine swallowed. "Which is the better choice?"

"Though I am not an expert in military affairs, the empire has an overwhelming advantage in strength. Even were we to gather our forces with haste, we have little time. The enemy's cavalry force is threat enough, but it is like that additional reinforcements will arrive—they may have already infiltrated our territory," said Sergey, his expression growing ever more grave. "We may be facing a numerical disparity of a factor of three or more."

A factor of three? Slaine stared back in astonishment.

"As for asylum," Sergey continued, "your position poses a problem. Having lost the kingdom you were meant to rule and—with all due respect—being a former commoner, it is inevitable that the neighboring royals will look down upon you. And we cannot be certain that this invasion will end with Hasenvalia—in fact, I would say it is probable that the empire will advance to attack the surrounding states as well. They will scarcely be in a position to shelter a helpless, exiled prince who has fled his ruined kingdom with a scant retinue of followers."

"A scant retinue?" Slaine said. "Y-You mean the Nobles of the Robe?"

"Surely you jest. We cannot abandon our duties as nobles and flee. The Nobles of the Robe—and all the aristocracy of this kingdom—shall resist the empire until we draw our dying breaths on the battlefield," said Sergey. "And with our deaths we shall buy time for Your Royal Highness to flee along with the ordinary folk. Accompanying you would be a few royal guardsmen, a handful of servants, and your aide-de-camp."

Slaine's lips parted in shock when the chancellor finished speaking. "That's it?" he said. "Those are my only two options?"

"Indeed they are." Sergey answered. "Will you flee, betting on the slim, nigh nonexistent chance that you might rebuild our kingdom? Or will you fulfill your

duty as heir and stand up against our enemy? Any words of comfort I could offer to you would be hollow."

Slaine wobbled on his feet, eyes shimmering at the brink of tears. Concerned, Monica reached out to support his shoulders. "My liege. Are you all right?"

"W-Wait," Slaine stammered. "Just... Just let me have a moment to—to think."

And so Slaine staggered out from the audience chamber on unsteady legs, Monica close behind.

Slaine wandered aimlessly through the palace grounds. He couldn't remember where he'd walked—he could hardly see the view in front of him.

His mind was in total disarray. Confusion, dismay, despair.

Throw himself into desperate battle against an enemy many times his size, or abandon his people to seek unlikely asylum. What was he supposed to do?

It was as if all of his efforts had been for nothing. How could this happen?

After a while of walking about in a daze, cursing the world and the cruelty of his fate, Slaine found himself at the palace gates. He realized it only when he heard the voices of his people calling out to him.

"Ah, the crown prince!"

"Is it true that the empire has attacked?!"

"When will the enemy be upon us? What will happen to our kingdom?"

"Please tell us, Your Royal Highness!"

Perhaps the early efforts to garrison troops had alerted them to the state of affairs—dozens of confused subjects gathered in front of the royal palace to seek answers.

As Slaine approached the gates, the city residents crowded in even closer. Royal guardsmen prevented them from rushing into the palace grounds.

"Crown Prince! What do we do?"

"What is going to happen to my house? To my children?"

"I'm scared! I'm so scared!"

"Please help us, Crown Prince!"

The assembled subjects occupied the entrance to the palace, anxious and frightened expressions plain on their faces. One after another, they begged for the prince to save them. Some of them even began to cry.

All Slaine could do was stare back at the tableau in shock.

He had gone out into the capital many times to speak with his subjects and listen to their stories. Young or old, male or female—he felt a deep compassion for all of them.

And now they were pleading with him. They were frightened, terrified. These were the people of his nation, and there was nothing else they could do.

At that moment, it was as if a switch had flipped inside of him.

He sat upon the highest seat in the land. He was the crown prince, the future king.

He had a duty to protect these people.

No—he wanted to protect them.

They had nothing but their kingdom. They had no one else to safeguard them.

It was the very meaning of his existence to save them—his reason to live.

He would become king not only to live up to his father's legacy, not only to repay his mother's love, not only to meet his subjects' expectations—above all, he would become king to protect his people, their lives, and their happiness.

Slaine looked over the faces of his assembled subjects and smiled. When he spoke, his voice sounded so calm even he was surprised to hear it. "Everything is going to be all right," he said.

He stepped toward the palace gates. When the royal guardsmen attempted to restrain him, he brushed them off with a glance and gesture of his hand. Then he joined the crowd of his subjects.

"It's all right," he repeated. "I am your crown prince. I am your future king. I will protect you—I swear it, I will protect you."

Slaine touched his people's shoulders, their faces, their outstretched hands, as if to pour his compassion out onto them. "There is no reason to worry," he said. "Place your trust in me. Work together with me. Those of you who will fight together with me, please, follow me. I will lead this kingdom to victory."

When Slaine turned back, he met Monica's eyes. She stood stunned and frozen, staring into his face.

Was she dismayed with him for turning on a dime and promising to these people a victory in which no one could truly be certain? Slaine's smile grew strained. "Let's go back," he said. "We must prepare for battle."

When Slaine returned to the audience chamber with Monica, Sergey was still there.

Sieghardt—apparently finished giving the order to call up troops—was present as well, alongside Victor, commander of the royal guard, Elena, minister of foreign affairs, and Blanca, archimage of the royal court. It appeared that the ministers had already commenced discussion of future measures amongst themselves.

"Lords and ladies, His Royal Highness the Crown Prince has returned," Monica announced. Interrupted from their conversation, the five nobles turned at her voice.

They shared a look amongst themselves, and then Sergey stepped forward to speak as their representative.

"We understand your discomfiture, Your Royal Highness, but we must come to a deci—"

"We shall fight," Slaine said, cutting off the chancellor before he could finish.

Sergey and the rest of the nobles responded with a wide-eyed silence. After a few seconds of floundering, Sergey replied, "I'm sorry? My lord, you—"

"We shall fight," repeated Slaine. "We'll fight the empire, and we'll win. I will protect Hasenvalia—I'll protect my kingdom."

As if he couldn't believe his own ears, Sergey turned back to the other four.

The lot of them seemed just as shocked. Next among them to speak was Sieghardt.

"With all due respect, Your Royal Highness—in a war against such a powerful enemy, you, as heir to the throne and the sole survivor of the royal family, will be called into battle as commander in chief," said the general. "But if I am to speak plainly, it is a hopeless struggle. Of course, we shall fight to the death for you and this kingdom, but there is no guarantee that we will be able to protect your life on the battlefield, let alone seize victory. Should you choose to seek asylum—"

"I don't care," Slaine said. His voice was calm. He even smiled. "I decided to follow in my father's footsteps. I decided to protect this kingdom. I am the crown prince, heir to the throne," he said. "If we do not fight back against the enemy, Hasenvalia will disappear. Its name, its history, its culture, and all its citizens' peaceful lives will be stolen away. And that is why I too must—no, that is why I am the one who must stake his life on the battlefield. My fate and the fate of this country are one and the same."

Seeing Slaine stand up and speak as if he'd become a different person entirely, Sieghardt laughed. "Well spoken, sire," he said. "You are my liege lord, and I am your vassal—I will join together with you, then, and fight with all my strength."

Victor concurred in an uncharacteristically strong voice. "I, too, as commander of the royal guard, shall stake my life to battle beside you, Your Royal Highness."

"Me too, of course," Blanca said, a determined grin on her face. "Your Royal Highness."

Elena smiled and added, "I, as minister of foreign affairs, shall devote to you all I am capable."

Of course, it was the chancellor's duty to speak with a firm tether to reality. "My lord, as chancellor of the kingdom, I am truly pleased to hear you wish to fight," said Sergey. "However, pragmatically speaking, the chances that we will prevail against the empire are incredibly slim. In a proper clash, it's a one in a million bet we'll win."

The chancellor's words stung. "You're right. It's just as you say," said Slaine. "So from here out, we will consider how we can win." He turned back to the general. "Sieghardt, I'd like to know how long it will take until we arrive at the decisive battle, and the shape you expect our forces to be in when we meet it. I wish to hear your opinion as a general."

As if he had already considered this matter thoroughly, Sieghardt replied immediately. "The decisive battle will be upon us in days at most," he answered. "Given the size and speed of the invading force, Cronheim County is not like to be able to garrison a proper defense of Toriet—it may be lost already. The enemy's numbers will increase as they advance farther west. So we may either batten down the capital for a siege, or settle the matter on the battlefield. However, I expect choosing to allow a siege would be tantamount to suicide."

Had they hope of reinforcement, choosing to withstand a siege could be a valid strategy. But even if they garrisoned Uzelheim to fight, there was no one to come to their aid.

The neighboring kingdoms were like to focus on fortifying their own borders, using Hasenvalia's defeat to buy time for themselves. They could not expect any of the western kingdoms to lead an army to defend them in this time of crisis.

The empire commanded tremendous national power. If it wished, it could send out and maintain a force in excess of ten thousand men. Even were the kingdom to hole up in the royal capital for months, it would surely be Hasenvalia that first exhausted its resources to fight.

But there was still a chance, however slim, that they could strike out and defeat the enemy in battle while its forces were comparatively small, Sieghardt explained.

"Should we choose this path, we must engage the enemy in battle before they fall upon the capital. And if we wish to do that, then we must set out to the east tomorrow," Sieghardt said, a bitter grin rising to his lips. "However, not only would we struggle to draft fighters from among the citizenry, we may not even be able to properly assemble the royal army soldiers stationed throughout the kingdom. Our forces may number less than a thousand, the bulk of it

infantry and inexperienced conscripts. Even assuming battle formation may be outside their ability."

"I see," Slaine said. "A difficult situation."

The more he heard, the more hopeless it seemed. A bead of sweat trickled down his temples as he forced a confident smile.

Just then, a royal guardsman rushed into the audience chamber, shouting, "Messenger! Messenger! Your Royal Highness!" A wartime messenger had no need of permission to enter any room but the king's private chambers.

Behind the guardsman came two more, a breathless soldier shouldered between them. From his uniform, he looked to belong to the army of Cronheim County.

"A-A letter from the Count of Cronheim, Your Royal Highness," gasped the soldier as he was lowered to the floor. He pulled a letter from his pocket and held it out toward Slaine.

Slaine hurried to take the missive—the moment the soldier saw that the prince had received it, he slipped into unconsciousness. How fast had he rushed here?

After seeing to it that the soldier was carried out, Slaine opened the letter and began to read.

"Noon, September 22nd, the 77th year of the royal calendar. The enemy has already attacked and occupied a farming village on the eastern edge of Cronheim County. We believe that they intend to invade farther and lay waste to our territory, and to the rest of the kingdom thereafter. Our only recourse to slow their advance is to fortify Toriet for siege. Therefore, I shall lead a small squadron to assault the enemy, and with our deaths buy time for the defense of our territorial capital. I offer my life to grant respite to the royal family, to whom I have pledged my unwavering allegiance. Glory to the Kingdom of Hasenvalia."

At the bottom of the letter was signed a name: Eberhard, Count of Cronheim. The count wrote not in the hand of a poetic aristocrat, but with the brevity of a soldier.

A heavy silence fell over the chamber when Slaine finished reading.

"Eberhard, Count of Cronheim," said Slaine. "I will never forget your loyalty and dedication. I will not allow your sacrifice to go to waste." He did not shed tears, nor did he look sad. This was war. The time to mourn the dead would come later. He turned. "Sieghardt."

"Yes, my lord," answered the general.

"Presuming the Count of Cronheim's desperate measure succeeds in buying us time, and Toriet fortifies without issue, how does that change our situation?"

"Toriet, the capital of Cronheim County, has a peacetime population of approximately two thousand people. Should the county's soldiers and regional locals gather therein with its women and children evacuated to the west, there should remain a thousand and change," said Sieghardt. "Eberhard's eldest son will have assumed command—he is an outstanding heir. Even should the enemy receive reinforcements in the thousands, Toriet ought to be able to hold out for about a week—provided its soldiers and citizenry can maintain morale."

Slaine took a moment to consider Sieghardt's explanation. "When is the earliest you can confirm whether Toriet has been successful in preparing for siege?"

"If it's only a confirmation—today," Sieghardt answered, turning his gaze to Blanca.

Blanca stepped forward in response. "By His Excellency Vogel's command, I have sent my familiar Veronica to the east. A hawk can make a round trip between Uzelheim and Toriet within a day. She does not have the intellect to understand the fine details of battle, but she can at least determine if the gates of Toriet are closed, and if a large group of people has gathered inside."

"At the same time, we shall send scouts to periodically investigate the status of the siege. I've already taken the liberty to dispatch the first ones," said Sieghardt.

"I see. Thank you both," said Slaine. "Then, Sieghardt—should Toriet successfully fortify for the siege, how much time have we left before we must depart from the royal capital?"

Sieghardt put a hand to his chin in thought. "It should take about three days for an army to reach Toriet, advancing at top speed. With that in mind, we should have about three days from tomorrow to prepare. Still hardly sufficient, but far and away better than the prospect of leaving tomorrow."

They'd managed to secure a respite of three days when they'd had none at all before. Even if that was all, they could use the time to gather troops and prepare for the march.

"Understood. Sieghardt, please continue to prepare for battle. Is there anything else we can do to help Toriet maintain morale for a siege?"

"Once she returns from reconnaissance, we can make use of Blanca's hawk for that as well," said Sieghardt.

"I can send Veronica out to Toriet tomorrow to deliver a letter from the crown prince," Blanca said. "It will bolster the people's spirits considerably when they hear that reinforcements will arrive if Toriet can hold out for a week."

"That's a good plan," said Slaine. "Is there anything else we can do?"

At Slaine's question, Elena stepped forward. "Time is short, but if Your Royal Highness permits it, I can reach out to our neighbors to inform them of the situation and request reinforcements. They are not like to respond, given that, from their perspectives, we must look doomed to defeat—but it is the only diplomatic maneuver we have available to us at this time."

"Understood. Please do so. I will leave the details to you as minister of foreign affairs," said Slaine.

"As you wish, my lord," Elena said with a ministerial bow.

"And then... Sergey. I don't know. What do you think of that as the plan for now?" asked Slaine.

Although all Slaine had done was listen to each of his vassals' opinions and give his approval, Sergey seemed stunned to see the boy boldly take charge as crown prince. When addressed, his expression tightened. "I have no objections," said the chancellor.

"Good. Thank you. There is much I won't understand about the fine details of these plans—can I rely upon you as chancellor of the kingdom to oversee their execution?"

"Yes. Leave it to me. It is my duty," said Sergey.

"Thank you," Slaine said, looking out over his vassals. "Well, then—let us each do what we can for now, and wait to hear word about Toriet's status."

That evening, Veronica the hawk returned from Cronheim County with confirmation that Toriet had successfully garrisoned for the siege. But infantry reinforcements had already begun to arrive to bolster the enemy army.

Additionally, the letter that Veronica retrieved from the commanding officer in Toriet confirmed that the enemy commander was the Count of Dubois, a nobleman of the Galed Empire—the missive reported that the banner of Dubois County flew alongside the imperial flag.

The senior statesmen of the kingdom gathered in the meeting room once more.

"Morgan, Count of Dubois, huh? He's a warrior from the western reaches of the empire. His military exploits are renowned throughout the west of the continent," said Sieghardt, crossing his arms. "The Dubois County army is famous for its large force of skilled cavalrymen as well. They have quelled many rebellions within the empire with their strategy of breaking through enemy formations with their cavalry, and then annihilating what remains with infantry reinforcements."

Victor spoke up next, an unusually grim expression on his face. "It is a small mercy that Toriet has successfully prepared for siege. With an army commanded by the Count of Dubois as our opponent, anything but the most fortified stronghold would have little hope of withstanding an assault for long. Had they struck before we were ready, Toriet would've had little chance of surviving even a week."

A siege did not begin the moment the doors to a city were closed. Soldiers who were scattered about the region needed to return, food and serfs needed to be brought in from the countryside, and women and children needed to be

evacuated as far away as possible. Only then could the gates come down and preparations for war begin in earnest.

If not for Eberhard's brave sacrifice, the enemy would have reached Toriet effortlessly and smashed through the city's unprepared defenses.

Victor continued, "But be that as it may, it is a grim omen that we are to go to battle against an army with such a seasoned warrior as its general."

"Undoubtedly. Defeating an army many times our size and commanded by the Count of Dubois will be no easy task," Sieghardt concurred, his expression shifting from reserved to gloomy as he contemplated the battle. "No easy task" was an understatement—it was virtually hopeless. "Well, then—how shall we engage this enemy?"

"The terrain of Cronheim County, including in the vicinity of Toriet, is exceedingly uneven. Shall we consider staging battle from the top of a hill?" said Victor. "Should we claim the high ground, we may substantially curtail the efficacy of Count Dubois's preferred strategy, which begins with a mounted assault."

Sieghardt hummed in contemplation, arms crossed. "That may be the best course available to us at present," he said. "However, even should we position our formation atop a hill, that advantage alone will hardly suffice to overcome a severalfold difference in strength. The enemy's numbers threaten to overwhelm us. If they can maintain a constant offensive, it is like that we will be the first to exhaust our staying power. But if we were to not only stage formation atop a hill, but build an entire battlefield encampment there, perhaps that would change the equation."

"That may also be difficult to accomplish," said Victor. "As soon as we reach the outskirts of Toriet, the enemy will immediately halt their offensive against the city, then regroup to confront us. Although we have the advantage of flexibility and may decide where to position ourselves, I cannot imagine the enemy will afford us the luxury of time to build a camp on the field."

Blanca spoke up next. "If we can arrive before Toriet is lost, what about staging a pincer attack together with the remaining forces of the Cronheim County army?"

"No, that too would be difficult," said Sieghardt, immediately quashing her suggestion. "By the time we reach Toriet, the soldiers inside the city will be exhausted. We cannot expect them to have many troops left standing to support the siege defensive, let alone a complex maneuver on the open battlefield. The enemy is like to pin their few remaining soldiers down inside the city with a flying column posted in front of Toriet's gates."

The military officers fell silent. The discussion had come to a deadlock, each of its participants grim in countenance.

In the midst of this, Slaine's expression remained unchanged, a hand on his chin in thought. After a while longer of pondering, he spoke up. "I...may have an idea."

All eyes turned to the prince.

"We would be glad to hear your suggestion, my lord," said Sieghardt. By now, all the assembled vassals were well aware of the prince's intellect—Sieghardt's expectant tone of voice put a faint smile on Slaine's face.

"I've no experience on the battlefield, so this may be nothing but an amateur's foolish plan," Slaine began. "But the Count of Dubois specializes in following a mounted assault with infantry reinforcements, right?"

"Indeed," said Sieghardt.

"Do you think the Count of Dubois will use that strategy in the battle against us as well?"

"This is but my personal opinion, but I think it is highly probable," answered Sieghardt. "The count's battle strategy is simple, but that is why it is so powerful. Especially given that the cavalry leading the assault are all invariably the elite of the elite. As the differential in power between us is so great, I would wager the count will elect to use a tried-and-tested method to win the war, rather than some more outlandish strategy. What say you, Lord Behrendorf?"

Victor nodded and spoke up to answer. "I concur with Lord Vogel. The enemy will underestimate us on account of our small numbers. Were I in the count's position, I would certainly choose a strategy I knew to be effective. However, this may not be the case if we were to claim the high ground—a hill would

drastically reduce the efficacy of a mounted assault."

"So, if we were to position ourselves at the *foot* of the hill," said Slaine, "would that then increase the probability that the Count of Dubois would choose the predictable strategy?"

Sieghardt and Victor appeared taken aback.

"Well, I suppose so—were he to attack from the *top* of a hill, the count would certainly choose that strategy," said Sieghardt. "My lord, are you suggesting that we...deliberately cede the high ground to the enemy?"

As the general quirked a brow, a wry smile spread across Slaine's face. He nodded. "If there's any chance my plan can work, and we decide to carry it out," he said. "But just one more thing to confirm first—if, starting right now, we were to gather as many sorcerers who can cast water elemental magic, how many could we assemble?"

The vassals looked between each other. Sieghardt spoke up on their behalf. "With all due respect, my lord, water magic provides an advantage in terms of providing a stable drinking supply, but it is not ordinarily useful in battle."

There were many sorts of magic. Not all sorcerers were capable of playing active roles on the battlefield. On the contrary, magic was unsuitable for battle more often than not.

In fact, even among the royal court mages in service to the royal family, there were only about five individuals who could be said to possess abilities of direct use in a military confrontation. The water sorcerers were not among them.

Depending on his or her ability, certain water sorcerers could produce enough water at once to fill several barrels. Although that was perhaps useful to surgeons, troops in need of drinking water, or to respond to fires in urban areas, its utility in direct combat was exceedingly limited.

"Yes, in ordinary circumstances. I learned as much in my studies with Monica—it is common knowledge that water magics are useless in battle," said Slaine. "That is precisely why I believe the enemy will never imagine that we might field water sorcerers in a battle. I've given it a bit of thought, but..."

Slaine went on to describe his plan in detail. The chancellor remained silent as

he spoke, turning to Sieghardt and Victor when the prince was finished.

"I am no expert in military strategy," said Sergey. "Lord Vogel, Lord Behrendorf, what say you? Is this something that we can accomplish?"

"Such a tactic has never been tried before, as far as I am aware. There are no examples of similar strategies deployed in the history of the military engagements in this region," said Sieghardt. "But while I cannot say for certain, I think that it just might work."

Victor agreed. "I concur with Lord Vogel. Although it is a strange plan, it is not particularly complicated to execute. At least to the extent necessary to produce the desired effect."

Sergey's expression turned even more severe as he mulled over the two soldiers' opinions. "Then let us aim to implement the plan," he said. "There are two excellent water sorcerers among the royal court mages. Cronheim County must also have several in employ as well. We may also be able to enlist the assistance of the sorcerers who serve other nobles as we march east, perhaps bringing the total to five or six."

Blanca spoke up as well. "A water sorcerer in service to a royal or noble house is as good as several ordinary sorcerers put together. They ought to be valuable assets in our fight," she said.

"Approximately one in thirty individuals possesses the ability to use magic, and about one in ten of that number can cast water magics. By a simple calculation, there should be more than a hundred of them in the east," said Sergey. "However, time is scarce, and it will not be easy to find and gather them all for battle. Say we manage to gather about half that number—together with the royal and noble sorcerers, that's about fifty individuals."

Slaine took in Sergey's calculations, and then asked, "Sieghardt, with that few, would it still be enough to carry out the plan?"

Sieghardt nodded. "Yes. In terms of numbers, that should be sufficient."

"However," Sergey interjected, "most that we gather will not be soldiers, but ordinary commoners with no battlefield experience. Should we put your plan into practice, it will mean exposing these sorcerers to danger. There will be

those who lose their nerve and desert at the eleventh hour, and those who cannot perform due to their fright."

"You are right, Sergey. That is why we'll offer an attractive, tangible reward," Slaine said, smiling faintly. "How about this? We'll award the sorcerers gold coins in accordance with the number of times they cast magic on the battlefield. Perhaps most will only get one shot, but they'll still get a gold coin for the effort—ten thousand crowns. Then the royal family will issue a certificate as proof of their contribution to our victory. An exceptional reward for a commoner to receive in exchange for a single spell."

Although water sorcerers were comparatively plentiful, water magic was limited in practical use—and so many were not particularly wealthy in spite of their claim to the title of sorcerer. To such a person, ten thousand crowns was no small sum. A royal certificate would be a great boon to one's future career prospects as a sorcerer as well—to say nothing of the credibility they would amass in return for stepping forward for such a perilous job, and the prestige of heroically saving their kingdom from the brink of certain doom.

A reward of this magnitude could completely change the life of a common sorcerer. Surely it would be enough to motivate many of the water sorcerers they gathered from the countryside to muster the courage to fight.

After a moment of contemplation, Sergey replied, "If the total compensation distributed does not exceed a hundred gold coins, that is a small price to pay to save our kingdom. I see no problem with issuing commendations to combatants either, so long as the wording is careful to avoid misuse. I have no objections to your proposal, my lord."

Permission from Sergey, the minister charged with overseeing the kingdom's finances and internal administration, settled the matter of rewards.

"All right," said Slaine. "Then tomorrow we shall issue a proclamation in the name of the royal family and begin gathering the sorcerers."

With a trump card in hand and a strategy to play it, the meeting concluded.

Tomorrow, the preparations for the decisive battle would begin in earnest.

## **Chapter 7: The Decisive Battle**

When the time came to prepare for battle, everything about the process was novel to Slaine. It was the first time he had ever been faced with a fight.

The first task was to muster troops.

The royal army, the backbone of the military force, totaled three hundred men divided between three battalions. One hundred of those men were scattered and garrisoned at various locations throughout the royal domain, while another hundred were stationed along the southern border.

The crown recalled the bulk of these forces to the capital, leaving a skeleton crew of about thirty men to guard the border.

Additionally, the royal guard, which operated under the direct command of the royal family, left ten men to defend the palace—the remaining forty prepared to join the eastward march. The army was the sword of the kingdom; the guard was its shield. On the battlefield, the guard was to serve as the primary line of defense for the royal encampment, protecting Slaine's perimeter—and if circumstances demanded it, they could function as a reserve force.

Next was to gather conscripts from among the citizenry.

The royal domain itself had a population of approximately twenty thousand people. After excluding women, children, the elderly, and the infirm, about six thousand were suitable for conscription. But it would not be possible to mobilize all of them.

Even were the crown to assign as many soldiers as it could to the task of recruitment, there was not sufficient manpower to call troops at such a wide scale—nor were there the funds to feed, move, or encamp that many soldiers. Furthermore, upon word of an enemy attack, many ordinary citizens had hidden in the forests or mountains or fled to faraway locales before they could be conscripted.

There wasn't the time for it in any case. The royal army and guard both had

need to prepare for their own sorties, so there was no path but to recruit troops from among the residents of the capital, and then leave it to the broader population to come up to serve of their own volition. It was perhaps more accurate to call them enlisted recruits than conscripts.

The crown instructed the soldiers returning to the capital from their posts to recruit from among the towns and villages along the way, but they were in such a great hurry to return that they did not have much time to dedicate to this effort.

As a consequence, the crown did not anticipate the force to exceed ten percent of the target population—perhaps five hundred troops at best.

Most of the noble holdings to the west of the royal domain could not be counted in the calculation, as it was physically impossible for them to reach the eastern edge of the kingdom in time.

After setting out from the royal capital, the nobles in the east would join in the march, but a viscounty had only about two thousand people, and some baronies were home to populations of fewer than five hundred. As they, too, had only a short time to prepare for battle, the fiefdoms were not expected to mobilize more than a few hundred troops altogether.

The crown elected to supplement the force with a few mercenaries as well, though only a few could be gathered due to lack of time.

All that remained was the manpower of Cronheim County—as of yet still battened down for the siege. After a week of fighting, they were sure to be exhausted; a hundred men to join the battle was an optimistic estimate.

All in total, the Hasenvalian army was likely to come in shy of fifteen hundred troops—a considerable effort all told, given the tiny population and a scant few days to prepare.

And, lastly, the crown aimed to gather a force of fifty water sorcerers in order to carry out Slaine's plan. One reason that the conscripts were so few was the choice to prioritize this recruitment effort.

Once the crown had settled the mobilization force, it was necessary to make the arrangements to supply such a large army. Chief among the concerns were food for the soldiers and fodder for the horses. Additionally, it would be necessary to gather some firewood and other miscellaneous materials in locales where local procurement would be insufficient. Weapons and other ordnance to be distributed to conscripts could be deployed from the royal armory.

There was no need to prepare drinking water, however, as the water sorcerers and rivers on the way were sufficient to supply the army.

Even the royal family could not gather the supplies to mobilize a fifteen-hundred-head army in an instant, so the crown also enlisted the help of merchants, chief among them the royal merchant Benjamin. These vendors were of particular help in procuring food.

Moreover, in order to ensure prompt local procurement along the path of the march, civilian officials in the service of the royal family, as well as officers of the royal army, were dispatched to conduct preliminary negotiations with the towns and villages on the way.

Three days had passed since the battle preparations had commenced, and the afternoon of the march had arrived. In his office at the royal palace, Slaine received Sergey's status report.

"The Eriksen Trading Company is experienced in food procurement and has a strong influence among the various merchant associations, so food supplies are in a good state for the march. Combined with what we can procure along the way, and what foodstuffs we can transport to the front at a later time, we should have no need to worry about starvation," said the chancellor. "Additionally, it seems that we will be able to conscript more troops from the capital than anticipated. Many volunteers have stepped forward since we commenced recruitment—I've heard that many among them have pledged that they would fight to the death under the banner of the crown prince. Surely a result of your efforts, my lord."

Slaine laughed. It was certainly rare to receive such praise from the chancellor. "That's wonderful to hear," he said.

While Sergey's bone-deep fatigue was plain on his face, Slaine was in high spirits yet. Despite all the hectic preparations that had taken place over the past

three days, the prince himself had not much to do.

Sieghardt and Victor called up the troops, while Sergey oversaw the work of preparing supply transports, as well as the overall execution of the entire operation. With the ministers' skills, there was no role for Slaine to play.

And so Slaine had even more free time than was typical. His vassals had instructed him to save his strength for the march and encampment, so he slept early and rose late.

While he understood that it was only because Sergey was the most suitable man for the job, Slaine felt a bit guilty that the chancellor, an old man, was forced to work and toil, while the young prince had the luxury to sit back and relax.

"How fares Toriet?" asked Slaine.

"Blanca's hawk continues its reconnaissance efforts. Apparently, Toriet has safely withstood the siege thus far," Sergey answered. "At this rate, it seems probable that they will endure until our arrival."

"Ah, thank goodness," Slaine exhaled, relieved. Their entire plan was premised on the assumption that Toriet could hold out a week; if the city were to fall, the war's toll upon the kingdom would be even more grave.

"As for the water sorcerers, our recruitment efforts are progressing smoothly as well. The promised rewards were attractive indeed," said Sergey. "Apart from that, I have nothing of note to report."

"Everything is going well, hm?" Slaine remarked. "It is thanks to all my vassals—especially you, Sergey—that we have managed to scrabble together this whole operation in only three days. I'm truly grateful for your scrupulous work."

"Thank you, my lord," replied Sergey, unable to completely disguise the fatigue in his voice. "Tomorrow morning, when the march begins, I shall transfer all practical authorities to the general of the royal army, Lord Vogel. This is as far as I can be of service—were I ten years younger, I could accompany you to the battlefield as well."

"It's all right. You've worked almost without sleep or rest over these past three days," said Slaine. "It must be awfully tough on your old bones. Leave the fighting to us youngsters."

Slaine meant it as a good-natured joke, but Sergey did not laugh. His expression grew even more serious. "My lord," he said, completely disregarding the prince's attempt to lighten the mood. "I beg of you. Please, return home alive."

As chancellor, Sergey restricted his comments to practical advice and remonstrance. It was unlike him to speak of his own wishes so, especially with no assurance that they could be granted.

Slaine smiled at his heartfelt plea anyway. "Don't worry. I am the heir to the throne—I will seize victory, return alive, and continue to protect this nation thereafter as its king."

After calling the meeting to a close, Slaine departed the palace with Monica.

Outside, the army was making hasty preparations for the morrow's departure. Unhorsed wagons lined the palace grounds, loaded with food and other supplies. Elsewhere, the army was organizing units for the march and distributing swords and pikes to the capital residents who had responded to the call to arms.

"Ah, the crown prince," said one of the conscripts upon spotting Slaine. He was holding a crude spear, lined up as the royal army soldiers had commanded.

The royal guardsmen and army soldiers jumped to attention when they realized that the prince had arrived. All of the military men hurried to salute, and the merchants carrying supplies to the wagons bowed deeply. The assembled conscripts began to murmur amongst themselves.

"Sorry to interrupt. Continue your preparations," Slaine apologized, flustered. He'd only come by to pass the time and offer the men a few words of appreciation for their efforts—he hadn't meant to waylay their progress.

The soldiers immediately returned to their work, and the rest soon followed suit. Relieved, Slaine went about the palace grounds, thanking the soldiers, merchants, and recruits he passed.

For the moment, this was the only contribution that Slaine could make as

their leader.

When he finished making the rounds, he looked toward the gate to see a young merchant who had just entered the palace grounds on a wagon. It was Erwin, his childhood friend.

A little surprised to spot Slaine, Erwin brought his wagon to a stop and jumped down from his seat. After taking a few more steps forward, he dropped to a knee. "Your Royal Highness."

"You really are a proper son of the Goudsmit Trading Company, huh?" said Slaine. They were in a crowded public place—Erwin had adopted the stance of a common merchant, Slaine the manner of a crown prince receiving his subjects.

As a private individual, Erwin was a jovial young man—but as a merchant, he was a capable adult in his own right. "Indeed," he answered. "I have been invited by the Eriksen Trading Company to supply the canteen for the march. It is my pleasure as a merchant to serve the royal family in this way, however small my role."

Slaine smiled at the boy's composed response.

In order to serve as a canteen merchant in times of war, one needed to have a connection to the royal family or its official trading company. Supplying the canteen was a prime opportunity for a merchant company to sell everything from daily necessities to luxury treats—the army and its camp followers formed a massive consumer base.

Although Erwin's family company was a modest outfit from a tiny village, Slaine had requested that Benjamin allow the Goudsmit Trading Company to join the canteen supply. It was the least that Slaine could do to offer his thanks to Erwin, who had remained a loyal friend even after his ascension to crown prince.

Of course, Slaine had no doubt that Erwin was fully capable of the role in his own right.

"It is a great reassurance to the royal family to have a dedicated merchant such as yourself in service to the crown," said Slaine. "I look forward to working together with you."

"You are too kind, my lord," said Erwin. He rose, offered Slaine a respectful bow, and then returned to his wagon.

As he rode past, he flashed Slaine a smile—just quick enough that those around them would not notice.

Slaine lingered for a moment. Then he said, "Shall we go, Monica?" "Yes, my liege," she replied.

And so Slaine returned to the palace in high spirits. Monica followed, a smile on her face.



Early in the morning of September 27th, year 77 of the royal calendar, Hasenvalia's forces departed the capital and began the eastward march.

However, the whole of the army did not set out at once. The larger the force, the slower the march, so the army divided into smaller units and departed the capital in sequence.

First were the slow-footed conscripts. While the sky was still dark, a few dozen of these troops departed with each platoon of the royal army. These units were not responsible for transporting supplies—their mission was simply to advance in time for the battle.

Next followed the rest of the royal army, either in platoon or company formations. These units brought with them the supplies amassed by the crown. Sieghardt set out with one of them as well, ready to command the force at the rallying point.

The troops of each noble fiefdom, as well as the soldiers tasked with recruiting conscripts from more distant locales, set out for Cronheim County instead—these disparately dispatched groups would convene with the main army along the path through Alfven Viscounty, west of Cronheim.

Last to depart the royal capital was the party accompanying the crown prince.

This unit comprised Slaine and Monica, Victor and his royal guard, the royal court mages, the doctors and clergy, and the hired water sorcerers. Following the camp was a convoy of canteen merchants, including the Eriksen Trading

Company and their escort of mercenaries. All told, the group was near two hundred strong.

"It'll be a long ride, but we're in it together, Freesia," said Slaine, stroking his horse's neck.

Freesia snorted contentedly, nuzzling Slaine's face in return. Slaine laughed as the horse's nose tickled his cheek.

"Apologies for keeping you waiting, Your Royal Highness," Monica said as she arrived. She was mounted upon her own favored horse, a chestnut mare. "Lord Behrendorf just gave the word that the army is ready to depart. Have you made all your preparations, my liege?"

"Yes, I'm all set," said Slaine, climbing up into his saddle. He'd learned to mount and dismount his horse on his own—though with his short stature, it still demanded a good deal of effort.

Monica spurred her horse and rode ahead of Slaine, leading the way. When he followed her to the gate, they found Victor and the rest of the guard assembled in waiting.

The subjects of the royal capital greeted the prince's departure with a grand send-off. Slaine, along with the rest of his unit, set out along the eastward road, toward Cronheim County.

Leading the team was a royal guard platoon, followed immediately by the carriage transporting the royal court mages. Behind were Slaine, Monica, and Victor, as well as another platoon to protect the three of them.

Farther back were the remaining royal guardsmen, the supply transport, the merchants' wagons, and the carriages carrying the doctors, clergymen, and water sorcerers. Bringing up the rear were the mercenaries escorting the Eriksen Trading Company.

Blanca, archimage of the royal court, took up a position between the mages' carriages and Slaine, riding on her horned bear Axe. Veronica the hawk perched on her shoulder, occasionally taking flight to circle above the troops and scout ahead.

The whole formation was dozens of meters long. In the midst of it all, in the

safest position, was Slaine—swaying back and forth in the saddle, dazed.

The greatest benefit of a horse was that it could think and walk on its own without its rider's direction, so long as they were following a beaten path. The road on the way to Cronheim County was wide and well-maintained, so the army could march forward at a steady pace without interruption. Slaine had no need to guide Freesia at all.

The group comprised the elite royal guard corps and canteen merchants accustomed to traveling long distances, so they could move with relative speed —but even so, the unit did not proceed much faster than an ordinary person's gait.

Slaine, whose horse tack was of the highest quality, was not quite so fatigued from riding as the others. He even had time to take in the scenery.

Thinking aloud, Slaine said, "I didn't expect it to be like this. It all feels so..."

"Pastoral?" Monica suggested.

A little surprised to hear her guess at his own thoughts, Slaine turned to look at Monica beside him. She smiled back.

"I've participated in a few border skirmishes, back when I was a squire," said Monica. "The march into battle is always unexpectedly idyllic."

Victor, guarding Slaine's flank opposite Monica, spoke up. "So long as it is not a surprise attack, or a hasty retreat pursued by an enemy, this pace is quite typical of a march," he said. "Forcing troops to rush will only encourage desertion and worsen our fatigue upon arrival at the battlefield—a disadvantage in a real fight. Slow and steady wins the race, as they say."

"I see. I suppose that's true," Slaine muttered.

Though they had departed the royal capital with great courage, there was time before the battle yet. They would arrive in Alfven Viscounty at around noon the day after tomorrow—so departing from the rallying point there, they would be upon Toriet by evening.

The enemy had likely only just reached Toriet's walls and begun their assault. As neither side would be prepared for a confrontation when the Hasenvalian

army was due to arrive, the decisive battle would take place the following day—three days from today. They needed to conserve their energy until then.

This was what war was—sometimes the road to the battle was longer than the clash itself. Slaine had already known this in theory, but it was strange to experience it himself.

"Don't stress yourself unduly. We can move forward at ease, my lord," said Victor.

Slaine laughed. "Yes, let's," he said. "Even so, I'm glad I learned to ride. Had I not begun to train before today, I would be in serious trouble."

They lived in an age in which peace had long been taken for granted. As a prince with a common background, Slaine's first order of priority had been to deepen his knowledge of political and cultural matters, rather than develop his martial or riding skills. He had not been meant to begin such training in earnest until after his accession to the throne.

However, Slaine had gone above and beyond to begin learning these skills early, and he'd built at least a rudimentary foundation already. He'd have had no hope of riding on this march if he hadn't.

"It's thanks to the both of you that I've learned to ride Freesia like this," said Slaine.

"It is thanks to your own efforts," Monica replied.

Victor concurred. "Monica is right," he said. "As in anything, training a skill depends upon one's own aptitude and hard work. Our aid is but support to your own endeavors."

They continued to chat in this manner for a time as they made headway along the path.

The idyllic march continued under the crisp autumn sky.

The army unit protecting Slaine had departed just before noon, so by the time the sun began to set, they'd walked for about six hours with a break in the middle. It was time to call it a day.

Had they more time to spare, they would have stopped overnight at a town or village along the way, but they were marching in a hurry. Instead, they made camp directly on the plains along the road.

"My, they're all very handy," said Slaine, watching with admiration as the troops erected tent after tent, prepped bonfires, and got to work cooking dinner.

"Both the royal guard and the royal court mages are trained to march and make camp, and our canteen merchants are well accustomed to living outdoors," Monica explained. "Their skill in camping and cleanup was part of the reason they were chosen to depart with this final unit."

Suddenly, a large shadow approached. Slaine felt the setting sun behind him abruptly darken, and when he turned back, he saw that it was Benjamin—the merchant's massive build had blocked out the light.

"Fine work today, Your Royal Highness," said Benjamin.

"Thank you, Benjamin," said Slaine. "Is something the matter?"

With his slimy smile and the way he rubbed his hands together, an onlooker might have mistakenly assumed that the merchant was up to something devious.

But it wasn't anything so sinister. "Nothing, my lord. It's just that I've heard that this is your first march—I figured you must be awfully tired, and wanted to ask if there was any way I could be of service," he said. He'd approached out of genuine concern, it seemed—Slaine felt an inward guilt at the way he had instinctively braced himself when Benjamin came by. "I could prepare for you a honeyed citrus drink, or anything else you might like. What say you?"

Slaine looked to Monica—he'd certainly have appreciated a nice drink, but he wasn't sure if it was appropriate to avail himself of such a luxury at a time like this.

As if reading his mind, Monica smiled gently. "Above all, it is important for you to remain in good health, my liege—there ought not be any problem should you have something sweet to relieve your fatigue," she said. "You sit upon the highest seat in the land. If you wish to have a fruity drink, it only befits your

noble position."

"Well, then. Yes, I suppose I'll have one," said Slaine.

Benjamin bowed his head reverently. "Very well, then. I'll see to it straightaway," he said, and then turned to go.

"Ah, Benjamin—just one more thing," said Slaine. "How fares Erwin—the merchant with the Goudsmit Trading Company?"

Benjamin stopped at the sound of his name, turning back with a smile. Slaine had confided to Benjamin that Erwin was a childhood friend when he'd requested that the boy be invited as a canteen merchant—but Benjamin had not appeared bothered by Slaine's indiscretion of mixing public and private affairs.

"He has been a great help to us. As far as I am concerned, he is a capable young merchant," said Benjamin. "Perhaps this opportunity will afford him the chance to develop the Goudsmit Trading Company into a great, successful enterprise."

"I see. That's good to hear," said Slaine, smiling with relief.

Erwin had attained his position from his connections to the future king—Slaine hoped the boy could make good on that fortune and attain greatness.

But that depended upon Erwin's own ability. Slaine had worried that Erwin's pride as a merchant wouldn't allow him to accept such preferential treatment—that the boy might have felt uncomfortable receiving the future king's favor, concerned those around him might think him unworthy.

Although Slaine had been confident Erwin would do well, he was happy to hear that everything was proceeding smoothly.

By the time they were finished setting up all the tents, the sun had disappeared far beyond the horizon. And amidst all the commotion, dinner began.

In a military encampment, meals were served in shifts. Slaine was first to eat, along with the soldiers and sorcerers. They all gathered around the campfires,

bowls in hand. Slaine sat beside Monica at one such small fire.

Dinner was a large soup with dried meat and assorted vegetables, along with bread, baked hard to preserve it.

Slaine ate the same food as the soldiers and sorcerers to show his solidarity with the troops. But to mark his status as commander in chief and future king, Slaine's dish came with one extra treat—tonight, a small apple.

Slaine dipped his inedible bread into his soup to soften it up enough to chew, glancing around at the camp. Those who had not yet been called for their turn to eat were still up and about, working through their respective tasks, like keeping watch or tending to the horses.

And in one corner of the encampment, the water sorcerers—the key to Slaine's plan—were training, lined up in an orderly formation.

"Fire!"

At the signal of the officer supervising the exercise, light erupted from the sorcerers' outstretched hands—and a moment later, a flood of water shot out toward the uninhabited plains.

Most water sorcerers were used to being treated like walking barrels of water, accustomed to dispensing liquids directly into a bucket or flask. Sometimes they'd also be called to suppress fires, casting out their magic in radial arcs.

This training was designed to familiarize them as much as possible with an unusual method of casting—shooting out a mass of water at a distant target.

Current magical technologies could not reproduce water sorcery at volumes like this. It was one of the reasons why it was essential that human sorcerers be enlisted for the task.

"It seems the sorcerers' training is going well, my liege," said Monica, perhaps having noticed that Slaine was watching them off in the distance.

Slaine nodded, smiling. "Indeed," he said. "It is they who will decide the battle, as well as the fate of this kingdom. At this rate, I'm sure they'll do just fine."

The plan had been called "strange" because there was no way to know if it would work before they tried it. To be honest, Slaine's strategy faced a number of uncertainties—there was no absolute guarantee of its success.

Nevertheless, Slaine had pledged that Hasenvalia would be victorious. His people had staked all their lives on the success of his scheme. No matter what, Slaine could not show fear or anxiety—he needed to remain calm and project confidence with his expression.

After dinner, those with no further tasks began to prepare for sleep.

The royal guard and the merchants' mercenaries were assigned to first watch. The others, in order of those who had finished their chores, went into their tents for the night. The royal court mages and enlisted water sorcerers all went to their bedrolls straightaway, in order to best preserve their magical energies.

Slaine, too, turned in early, heading into the crown prince's tent to rest after his first tiring march.

After washing his hair and wiping down his body, he changed into his nightclothes and settled down onto his preassembled cot. Beside him, Monica spread out her own bedroll.

"You're sleeping in the tent with me, I see," said Slaine.

"As your aide-de-camp, it is my duty to remain by your side so that I may hear your orders swiftly and protect you in the event of an emergency," said Monica. Finished with her task, she looked up. "My apologies. Does my presence displease you, my liege?"

As Monica—so close beside him—tilted her head and gazed into his face with a concerned expression, Slaine froze up.

There were a surprisingly large number of women accompanying the march—there was nothing that prevented a woman from being just as skilled as a man in sorcery, medicine, sales, or clerical duties, after all. There were noble families headed up by women as well, and even a few female soldiers to guard these other women in battle.

In large encampments like this one, a special tent was prepared for the women. There they could change their clothing and attend to other various

feminine matters. Monica also washed in that tent before preparing to turn in for the night.

Her hair was still a bit damp, shining with moisture, and the skin of her cheeks was still flushed from the warm bath. Although she had dressed again in her military equipment so that she could move quickly in an emergency, she looked more thinly attired than usual—she wasn't wearing her typical jacket.

Slaine had never seen Monica in such a state. She always had her hair neatly coiffed, with a light touch of makeup on her face. Her military uniform was pristine, never a strap out of place. The way she looked now was a bit of an intimate sight—a little vulnerable, even. Slaine felt more acutely aware of her womanhood than ever.

The top button of her shirt was undone, and without her jacket, Slaine couldn't help but notice the feminine lines of her body. Flustered, he hurriedly averted his gaze.

"N-No," Slaine replied, guilty and awkward. "Not at all. Sorry."

They were in the midst of marching toward the battle that would determine the fate of the entire kingdom. What on earth was he thinking, at a time like this?

Thinking it best to get to sleep quickly, Slaine lay down on his cot and pulled his blanket up under his chin. But Monica drew close to his bedside. "Today was your first march, my liege," she said. "How are you feeling? Have you any aches or pains in your body?"

"I-I'm fine," stammered Slaine, his voice coming out a little too high. "No problems at all."

Slaine had steeled himself to go to war—but he was altogether unprepared to sit alone in a tent with Monica in this modest state of undress. How had the distance between them unsettled him so? It was deplorable of him.

It was fortunate that the light was so dim inside the tent, so that she couldn't see the bright blush in his cheeks.

"I am glad to hear it," said Monica, kind as ever. "Well, then—good night, my liege."

"R-Right," said Slaine. "Good night."

Then Slaine shut his eyes.

He was so nervous he feared he wouldn't be able to get to sleep, but it seemed the fatigue from his first day of marching had set in after all. Before he knew it, he'd fallen into a deep slumber.

He had no idea that Monica lingered as she was, close by his side, watching his slumbering face.



The invading forces of the Great Empire of Galed, led by Morgan, Count of Dubois, continued their assault upon Cronheim County's capital of Toriet.

Another two hundred riders, drafted from Dubois County, followed the three hundred cavalrymen that led the charge. Several thousand infantrymen joined the westward march—mainly conscripts from among the empire's subjects. The assembled troops all joined with the vanguard, bringing the total strength of the empire's army to five thousand men.

But although the assault had amassed such manpower, Toriet had yet to fall.

Cronheim County had guarded the border between Hasenvalia and the empire for more than a century. Although its territorial capital was small, Toriet was a thoroughly fortified city—even encircled by five thousand men, it was no simple matter to tear it down.

The competency of the enemy commander—as well as the number of amateur troops among Morgan's ranks—contributed to the ongoing stalemate.

As Morgan observed the deadlock of the siege with a blank expression on his face, one of his close aides, a knight, arrived to report.

"Lord Dubois, I come with news from the scouts to the west," said the knight. "The enemy has dispatched an army of approximately fifteen hundred men, flying the banner of Royal House Hasenvalia. They advance from Alfven Viscounty toward Cronheim County. We anticipate that they will arrive in a matter of hours."

"Is that so?" Morgan replied. An intrepid smirk spread across his face. "They

really came, hm?"

The invasion of Hasenvalia had not proceeded as planned.

In truth, they should have been able to neutralize Cronheim County within days of their arrival and been encroaching upon Uzelheim by now—seizing victory before the crown prince had time even to consider a counterattack. Instead, the prince's army was headed their way, prepared for battle.

But this was just the way that Morgan liked it.

For the Count of Dubois, fighting was a way of life—but the only battles he'd experienced had been in the course of his military service in the northeast, or in suppressing revolts in the west of the empire. His status as a western aristocrat had limited his opportunities to amass military accolades, and smashing small bands of rebellion fighters was hardly a satisfying feat.

Such small, meaningless victories could never sate his appetites. Morgan longed for a *real* fight.

And at long last, he stood on the precipice of such a clash. Though he, too, had thought Hasenvalia would lie down and die without much protest, the tiny kingdom had defied all expectations.

The lord of this enemy fief had rallied a small team and gone out in a splendid blaze of glory, buying time for the city of Toriet to prepare itself for siege. And now that same man's son was tenaciously defending his domain against a force that commanded overwhelming numerical dominance.

No one had expected that common prince to have the guts to stand his ground and fight, and yet here he was, leading an army their way as they spoke. Fifteen hundred wasn't half bad a count, given the kingdom's tiny population and the scant days they'd been afforded to prepare after the declaration of war. The tiny state had done well.

This was not going to be an easy fight by any means. It was true war.

Morgan was earnestly delighted.

"What shall we do, my lord?" asked the knight. "Shall we form up and meet the enemy?"

"No. Our troops have tired from besieging day in and day out. Let us take a step back and regroup," Morgan answered. "Tomorrow, we shall strike the enemy with all our might and seize overwhelming victory. It is the respect I owe to that crown prince, who has so bravely marched into battle."

After successfully completing their three-day march, Slaine and his unit joined with Sieghardt, who had rallied the various units that had preceded them.

The army convened in Alfven Viscounty, assumed formation, and before the day's end marched out toward the battlefield—Cronheim County.

Before evening, they were within sight of Toriet, the territorial capital.

"Five thousand enemies," Slaine muttered. "Seeing them in person like this is really something else."

Sieghardt nodded. "I've been a soldier for more than twenty years, and never in my days have I ever seen an army so large," he said. "It's a shocking sight indeed."

The scouts had confirmed the size of the invading force. However, it was another thing altogether to actually see such a massive force firsthand.

In the small states that made up the western kingdoms, even relatively large skirmishes rarely saw forces that exceeded a few hundred troops on either side. Often, such conflicts amounted to little more than a few dozen people clashing in a flashy brawl.

The greatest battle the Kingdom of Hasenvalia had ever experienced was a border dispute with a neighbor some seventy years back—the two armies combined had numbered only a thousand men. The death toll was less than a hundred in total, or so the story went.

Compared to that, the prospect of meeting five thousand enemies in battle was truly something unimaginable. Who wouldn't have been shocked when confronted by an army that amounted to nearly ten percent of the total population of the kingdom?

However, shock was as far as it went. Slaine wasn't worried...yet.

"From the looks of it, it'll be a while longer before they regroup," said Slaine.

"Large armies are not known for their agility," said Sieghardt. "Even in our case, it took about half an hour to assemble our fifteen hundred men into formation and set out to march. It would take longer than an hour for a force that size to notice our approach and pull back their troops."

Both Hasenvalia and Galed had sent scouts to inspect the status of their respective enemy forces. The empire was aware of Hasenvalia's approach, and had begun preparations to withdraw its troops from the assault upon Toriet.

The siege had exhausted the soldiers, so the enemy was taking the moment to regroup—as were Slaine and his men. Both sides knew there would be no battle today. Hasenvalia's army paused to observe and recuperate.

It was not until the sun began to set that the enemy finally commenced its retreat. Then Hasenvalia resumed its march toward Toriet.

Slaine's fifteen hundred men hoisted the royal banner and neared Cronheim County's regional capital.

The city's ramparts were damaged and stained with the blood of enemy combatants—perhaps soldiers who'd attempted to scale the walls. The gates themselves were sturdy, in decent shape yet—and for the first time in nearly a week, they opened up.

A young man on horseback emerged from inside.

"That is Lord Richard, the Count of Cronheim's heir—or, rather, the new Count of Cronheim himself," said Sieghardt. The man's father, Eberhard, had perished in battle, passing the seat to his son.

Slaine advanced to the front of the gate with Sieghardt, Victor, and Monica in tow. Recognizing the prince, Richard dismounted and fell to one knee.

The young count's hair and metal armor were dirtied and stained with blood. It was clear from his appearance that Toriet had been waging fierce battle over the past week.

"Your Royal Highness," said the man. "I am Richard, Count of Cronheim, assuming command on behalf of my late father. As the lord who guards the

border to our realm, I offer my sincerest apologies for allowing the enemy to invade the kingdom's territories, as well as for our inept defensive tactics."

"Lord Cronheim, lift your chin," said Slaine.

Richard did as he was bidden, looking up at the prince from where he knelt on the ground. There was a fresh wound on his left cheek, perhaps a graze from an arrow or a spear. His expression was hard, volatile emotions swirling in the depths of his eyes.

Though Slaine lacked majesty, he was a clever prince—but he enjoyed this recent reputation only within the palace and the region of the royal capital. Richard, as the heir to a more distant feudal holding, would have had no way to learn of Slaine's intellect or of his commitment to victory.

What was the proper manner in which to look upon his common prince? Could he place his trust in Slaine? Believe in him? The uncertainty was plain on Richard's face.

Slaine smiled to offer reassurance, however small the comfort.

"There is no need to apologize. The royal family had no knowledge that the Great Empire of Galed would invade without warning. We administered the state under mistaken assumptions—the royal family assumes responsibility," said Slaine. "All I wish is to offer you our thanks. We are deeply grateful to Cronheim County for holding the enemy at bay."

Richard's eyes widened, as if Slaine's words and calm demeanor came as a shock.

"Despite the empire's terrifying strength in numbers, the Kingdom of Hasenvalia succeeded in staving off its invasion for a week's time—right here in Cronheim County. This is undeniably a credit to House Cronheim's distinguished service. As your future king, I sincerely thank you for your tireless efforts," said Slaine, lowering himself to his own knee—willing to dirty himself to meet Richard's eye. "And I swear to you: From here on out, we shall fight against the empire. We will fight, and we will win. I will not let your struggles go to waste—I will not let your father's loyalty and devotion, his sacrifice, be for nothing. So be at ease. And have you any remaining strength, please, lend it to me."

We will win. Astonishment flashed across Richard's face as he took in Slaine's confident words, but he quickly hardened his expression.

"Yes, my lord," said Richard. "I will fight together with you to the very end."



It was midnight. The sun had completely set, and a deep darkness enveloped the land.

About ten figures stood at the foot of a hill near Toriet—Sieghardt, several elite members of the Hasenvalian royal army, and the individuals they were escorting: two royal court mages, both users of earth magic.

Several lookouts stood watch around the perimeter to ensure that the team would evade notice by the enemy scouts.

"General, it is done," said one of the royal court mages.

Sieghardt made his way over to the spot upon which the sorcerers had cast their spells. He reached down into the ankle-high grass to sink his fingers into the earth, checking to confirm that the soil was soft and loosened.

"Hmm. Yes, this will do," he said.

Earth magic could move or create new soil, sand, or stone. However, earth spells took quite a bit longer to cast than fire or wind magic—from dozens of seconds to over a minute—so it was rarely used in battle.

But that was not to say it was altogether useless in a fight. In a matter of minutes, an earth sorcerer could perform earthmoving and cultivation work that would take several laborers an entire day to complete. And a mage of the royal court commanded the power to perform the work of dozens, if not hundreds, of people.

The royal court mages' task was not to dig up the ground in this area, but to loosen a thin layer of the soil on its surface. The hard earth simply relaxed, the grass above undisturbed. At first glance, it appeared as if nothing had changed at all.

"All right," said Sieghardt. "It's time to head back. All that's left is to rest up for tomorrow."

Upon their general's order, the small, secretive unit quickly turned back for camp.

**•** 

In the early hours of September 30th, year 77 of the royal calendar, Slaine and his army prepared for the morning at their encampment in front of Toriet.

The army, the guard, the court mages, the conscripts of the royal domain, the soldiers from the various noble holdings in the east of the kingdom, the mercenaries, and the water sorcerers—as well as the hundred-plus lightly injured and mildly fatigued Cronheim County troops commanded by Richard—all joined together to form a force about sixteen hundred strong. Their numbers were still less than a third of the enemy's.

"However, morale is strong," said Sieghardt, reporting on the status of the soldiers. "The troops are determined to protect their land, their homes, and their families. All the men have faith in our victory. Your unwavering confidence has inspired them, my lord."

Slaine did his best to smile. "I see. That's good to hear."

Finally, the day of the battle had arrived. Today's victory or defeat would determine the fate of the Kingdom of Hasenvalia.

Slaine's hopes were high, but he was a little nervous too. This was his first battle—few in the history of the continent had been faced with such a momentous, important clash for a first campaign as general.

Escorted by Monica and Victor, Slaine walked through the morning encampment—not to encourage the soldiers, but in hopes of receiving some encouragement himself.

"Ah, Crown Prince!"

"Good morning, Your Royal Highness!"

The conscripts called out to Slaine in cheerful voices when they saw him, their crude spears and swords clutched in their hands. Slaine recognized a few with whom he'd exchanged words in the capital.

"Good morning, everyone," said Slaine. "And good luck today."

"Leave it to us!" said a soldier.

"You're our general, Your Highness, so we're good and ready to go!" said another.

Except for the generals and the water sorcerers involved, no one else knew the specifics of Slaine's strange plan. The conscripts did not even know that Slaine *had* a plan.

Nevertheless, they had placed their trust in Slaine and had pledged to follow him. That fact made Slaine all the more determined.

It wasn't only the conscripts that called out to Slaine—the soldiers of the royal army raised their voices as well. Among them was the knight Gregory, captain of the third company of the first battalion, whom Slaine had met when he joined the army for their training runs. "Your Royal Highness!" cried the knight.

"Good morning, Gregory," said Slaine.

"Oh, you've remembered my name? What an honor! My lord, I will bravely fight and serve you victory in this battle! And when I do, please make me the next battalion comma—"

"Gregory, you damn fool!" interjected Gostav, Viscount of Rustrem, lieutenant general of the royal army, and commander of the first battalion. He followed his rebuke with a merciless strike across Gregory's cheek. "You dare to go over my and the general's heads to beg His Royal Highness the Crown Prince for favor? A demotion is what you'll get!"

"Ow!" Gregory yelped.

The soldiers all laughed at Gregory's plight—the man hadn't changed at all. Slaine couldn't help but join in.

Afterward, Slaine continued his rounds of the camp, exchanging words with the royal guard, Blanca and her royal court mages, and the eastern lords and nobles—chief among them Richard. Just as Slaine was about to return to his tent, he spotted the canteen merchants.

While Slaine and his unit were about to head out to the site of the battle, the merchants would remain here at camp to wait. Or, at least, that was what

Slaine had heard—for some reason, Benjamin and a few of the other men had strapped themselves in leather armor, preparing to move.

"Well, well. If it isn't His Royal Highness the Crown Prince," said Benjamin. "Good morning."

"Good morning, Benjamin. Are you coming as well?" Slaine asked.

"Indeed," said Benjamin. "Immediately following your victory over the enemy, my lord, we merchants will manage the spoils of war, see to the replenishment of medical supplies, and handle other such mercantile matters. I shall accompany you to the battlefield so that I may perform my duties with the utmost haste."

"Isn't it dangerous? Especially on a battlefield like this one," said Slaine.

The enemy was more than triple their size—Slaine fully intended to win, but he could not know the outcome until the battle was settled.

Should the army of Hasenvalia break and be swallowed by the enemy's hordes, Slaine could not guarantee that Benjamin or his men would survive. In a melee, there was no distinction between combatants and civilians.

Benjamin smirked in response to Slaine's concern. "With all due respect, my lord, a merchant's credit is his life. The Eriksen Trading Company, as the official mercantile partner of the crown, stakes its profits and fate upon the royal family of Hasenvalia. My own life is a small price to pay, should it sufficiently demonstrate our resolve and win our sovereign's trust."

Slaine's eyebrows lifted at the merchant's words. "Thank you," he said, breaking into a grin. "I will not disappoint your commitment."

Benjamin answered with a reverent bow. Slaine felt as if he finally understood why the Nobles of the Robe—as well as his late father—had placed so much trust in this man.

Before long, Hasenvalia's army of sixteen hundred men was ready to march. But just as they were about to depart, a single horseman approached the encampment.

The royal guardsmen stopped the rider before he could enter—it was a knight

in the service of the ministry of foreign affairs, one of Elena's subordinates. "Her Excellency the Countess of Estergren sends a report for His Royal Highness the Crown Prince!"

Slaine allowed the knight to approach, and the man dropped to one knee before his prince.

"We are pleased to report that the Kingdom of Ignatov has responded to our request for reinforcement! King Oswald of Ignatov himself will momentarily arrive with fifty cavalrymen!"

Upon receiving news of the King of Ignatov's arrival, Slaine delayed the army's departure to convene with Oswald and his fifty cavalry. Acting as a guide to Ignatov's army, Elena appeared before Slaine with Oswald in tow.

"Your Majesty!" Slaine exclaimed, greeting the man with a smile. "I am truly grateful that you have come to fight alongside us. I don't know how to thank you enough."

Oswald answered with a sullen scowl. "Do not misunderstand. I did not come to your rescue because I have any favor for you," he said, rebuffing Slaine's bright grin. The king looked as if he'd just bitten down into a foul-tasting bug. "Should we allow the Great Empire of Galed to seize control of Hasenvalia, the Kingdom of Ignatov will be left bordering a hostile empire; better to lend our assistance while Hasenvalia yet survives than expose ourselves to such a crisis. I am looking out for my kingdom's best interests—that is all." Then, as if an aside, Oswald added, "And I've been cross with the empire for a good while now. Here's a convenient excuse to give them a proper thrashing."

Like Hasenvalia, Ignatov was separated from Galed by the Eldecio Mountain Range. However, there were a number of crossings between the mountains, and bandits and thieves were known to spill out from the empire to plunder the region from time to time.

The royal family of Ignatov often protested to the empire of the damage caused by this pillaging, but the empire's power was so great that it afforded little mind to the complaints of smaller states. Naturally, this did not leave the Kingdom of Ignatov with a glowing impression of the empire. Slaine had learned

as much in the course of his studies of the western kingdoms.

"We sought reinforcements from several other surrounding states, but it was not possible to organize and dispatch troops in time—or else they refused on the grounds that the Kingdom of Hasenvalia was beyond saving," Elena explained. "By now, I expect they are making defensive preparations to fortify their borders in the event that we are felled by the empire. Only His Majesty King Oswald has heeded our request."

The king snorted in discontent. "Your sudden request for aid came as a terrible inconvenience. Know that these fifty cavalrymen are but a sliver of our forces. Had we more time, we could have dispatched additional soldiers."

"Fifty cavalrymen will be a great aid to our forces nevertheless," Slaine said, answering the king's hostility with a wry smile. "With Your Majesty's help, our kingdom's victory will be all the more decisive. Yet again, I thank you for your support."

While Slaine had confidence that his plan would have the desired effect, he was less assured that his army possessed the offensive capabilities to seize certain victory.

Of the sixteen hundred troops beneath the Hasenvalian banner, fewer than a hundred were cavalry. Subtracting Slaine's direct guard and the officers commanding the infantrymen, that left a mere sixty cavalrymen to operate as a unit.

Oswald's reinforcements nearly doubled that count. A force of over a hundred cavalrymen could be decisive, if deployed at the right moment.

Oswald clicked his tongue. "You smile like a fool," he spat. "Whatever—this is your war. Lady Estergren says you have a plan. Use us as you wish, but do not think we will suffer ineffective command. If it looks as if your kingdom has no chance of victory, we shall retreat immediately. So keep that in mind."

The king turned to leave after that, but he paused to turn back for a final comment. "I must confess I had expected you would flee rather than fight. When we first met at the state funeral, I cursed you as a lowly commoner—I retract my insult."

Without waiting for Slaine's response, Oswald returned to his own troops.

Slaine's eyes widened as he watched Oswald ride off, shocked by the king's unexpected words. Gradually, he broke into a grin—and when he looked to his side, he found Monica smiling back at him.

But then Sieghardt spoke up, "My lord, we must ensure that we have assumed battle formation before the enemy. It will soon be time to depart."

Slaine's expression grew sober at the general's advice, and he nodded. "Right. Let us be off."

Just before noon of the same day, the sixteen hundred troops of the royal army of Hasenvalia—led by Slaine—joined together with the fifty cavalrymen from the Kingdom of Ignatov and assumed battle formation on the plains east of Toriet.

The vanguard faced to the east, with the main body of the army to the west. Slaine, Monica, General Sieghardt, and the forty royal guardsmen under Victor's direct command, as well as Benjamin and the other merchants, were at the center of this force.

Immediately ahead was the infantry, flanked on both sides by a small unit of archers that comprised soldiers from the royal army, aristocratic holdings, and the conscripted force. Also in formation were the royal court mages and sorcerers drafted from the various noble families—not to mention the group of water sorcerers who served as the trump card in the prince's outlandish scheme. All together, the force numbered fifteen hundred strong.

Additionally, the one hundred and ten cavalrymen were deployed to the right flank of the infantry. This mounted unit could make the difference between victory and defeat.

The main body and vanguard infantry assembled in an orderly fashion, while the charging cavalry and rear guard—composed mainly of conscripts—took up positions that allowed for maximum mobility in combat. Bishop Arthur, the highest authority of the Eynthian Church of Hasenvalia, circled around the military formation mounted on a horse.

"God is our father and our mother. God sees all. Our battle to protect the earth and the children of the Lord is a righteous one, and so He walks together with us," the bishop prayed. "God is our father and our mother. God sees all..."

Holding his blessed staff aloft, the bishop repeated the sacred text again and again, bestowing divine protection upon the army. This alone was enough to visibly calm the agitated soldiers—especially the conscripts, who were unaccustomed to battle.

The church did not command much power in the western kingdoms. Nevertheless, when one's own life was at stake, this manner of divine prayer had no small effect upon the psyche. Man would cling to what comforts he could.

When his prayers were complete, Bishop Arthur joined the main body of the army and approached Slaine with a smile. "Your Royal Highness, it is done," he said. "God's blessing shall be with all who go into battle on this day."

"Thank you, Bishop," said Slaine. "You intend to remain upon the battlefield as well?"

"Those children of God confronted with war have need of one who would speak the word of God," said Arthur. "This is my duty as a servant of the Lord."

"I see. Then I offer you my thanks as commander in chief."

"I am deeply grateful, my liege," said the bishop.

When Slaine finished exchanging words with the bishop, he turned forward—just as Blanca, archimage of the royal court, approached.

"Your Royal Highness, I've sent Veronica out to scout from the sky, but it seems that the enemy formation is just as it appears. Cavalry in front and infantry to the rear—that is all. No other units in play, as far as a hawk can see," she said.

There were human scouts out to inspect the conditions of battle, but Veronica's literal bird's-eye view of the field was an invaluable asset. The area was nothing but hills and plains, so there were no nearby forests from which to stage an ambush. If a bird of prey could not spot them, then it was certain that the enemy had no flying columns lying in wait.

Cavalry in front, infantry to the rear. There was no doubt about it: the Count of Dubois intended to use his signature tactic.

"Understood. Thank you for the report. It has been a great help," said Slaine.

"There is no need to thank me," said Blanca. "Well, then, I'll be off."

Blanca departed the main body of the army and made her way over to the cavalry, where her horned bear Axe was waiting.

Slaine returned his gaze to the front, looking at the enemy camped out on the hill. The enemy force, three times the size of his own army, posed a daunting threat. However, even when Slaine gazed directly upon them, he felt no fear at all.

Someone rode up beside Slaine on a horse—when he looked to the side, he saw that it was Monica.

"Your Royal Highness, we are all together with you," she said, smiling.

Slaine returned her smile with a nod. "Right."

Together with you. Hearing it from Monica—who had been at his side since the day he accepted the crown, longer than nearly anyone else—the words had an unshakable power of persuasion.

Yes, Slaine had vassals to serve him, soldiers who followed him, and subjects who adored him. He had lords and nobles who had decided to fight alongside him, and a king to aid them in their struggle.

He was the crown prince. He was the heir to the throne. And as the future king, he had come this far—to stand bravely before the enemy. He had made it. All that remained was to fight.

Sieghardt spoke up, "Your Royal Highness, I would ask you to address the soldiers."

"Understood. Allow me a magical device to amplify my voice," said Slaine.

A mounted royal guardsman supplied Slaine with a tool imbued with wind magic, through which the prince could project his voice over long distances.

Sieghardt called out to the camp, "At attention, men! His Royal Highness the

Crown Prince, Slaine of Hasenvalia, is about to speak! Listen closely!"

Once Sieghardt had gathered the soldiers' attention—his own voice was so booming he had no need of magical assistance—Slaine took a deep breath and brought the tool to his lips.

Then, he began to speak.

"Soldiers, you stand here today to defend the Kingdom of Hasenvalia. You've answered my call to arms, and for that I thank you from the depths of my heart. From here on out, I swear that I will always protect your property and your families—and to that end I beg of you only one thing," said the prince. "Please do not flee. All can see that the enemy has the advantage of size—I understand that the sight of a massive army bearing down upon us will surely inspire fear and terror. But please, do not flee. Gather your courage and stand strong. That is all I ask—if you stand your ground, we will win. I swear it to you." Then, in as bright a tone as he could muster, he concluded his speech, "Now let us seize victory and defend our kingdom!"

The soldiers raised their fists, cheering and shouting. Although they faced a formidable foe, their morale was at its peak.

Slaine gently touched the necklace of rutile quartz strung around his neck.

They were going to win. For some strange, inexplicable reason, he believed that with total certainty.

As the Hasenvalian forces were completing the last of their preparations, Galed's invading army, led by Morgan, Count of Dubois, was close to finished as well.

Unlike the crown prince of Hasenvalia, who positioned himself safely at the center of his army formation and was surrounded by elite guards, Morgan took his place at the head of the empire's vanguard. As he looked out over the enemy lines, he let out a sigh.

"Do they truly intend to fight with that formation? Is our enemy a band of morons?" wondered the Count of Dubois, unable to grasp the kingdom's logic.

It was common sense to place the infantry at the center, with the vanguard

flanked by archers and sorcerers—an incredibly standard formation.

It was also perfectly sensible to situate the cavalry at the right flank. Whatever the timing, the destructive force of a hundred mounted men would be greater when grouped together, rather than dispersed across both wings.

All comprehensible—Morgan could follow that far. But why in the world were they camped at the foot of a hill?

Upon uneven terrain, it was naturally more advantageous to position oneself upon the high ground. Whether staging a charge or letting loose magic or arrows, the simple power of gravity was a great boon to an attack. This was basic, common sense warfare.

As the enemy commanded a smaller force and could march with greater speed, by all rights they ought to have been able to take the favorable position. Nevertheless, they had deliberately chosen to orient themselves at the foot of a hill. Why?

It was only to be expected that the enemy general, a former commoner and an amateur in warfare, would err in ways that a seasoned soldier would never. However, he had noble warriors by his side to advise him—how could they have acquiesced to such a blunder?

Was there some political reason that his advisors were in such a weak position that the prince would not heed their advice? Or was the Hasenvalian army all thoughtless fools, from the lowest foot soldier to the highest general? Could decades without experience in proper battle truly reduce a nation's military to a gaggle of idiots?

One of the subordinates at Morgan's side appeared just as baffled as the count. "My lord, does the enemy mock us?"

"I do not know. Their thinking is impossible to understand," answered Morgan. "Well, in any case—the enemy's idiocy is not a mystery we need solve. It is a terrible disappointment, but in the end, the result is the same regardless: we shall crush them utterly."

Morgan's force was positioned at the top of the hill, five hundred cavalry to the front with nearly five thousand infantrymen to the rear. The count's strategy was quite simple: the cavalry would charge forward and break the enemy ranks, and the infantry that followed would finish off what remained.

The total strength of the enemy army barely exceeded fifteen hundred troops, most infantry—and the better part of that unskilled conscripts with crude weaponry. Whatever trick the little kingdom's prince might've had up his sleeve, it would be little use against five hundred mounted soldiers. The empire would destroy their formation and overwhelm their forces without a doubt.

From there, the kingdom's army would be thrown into total disarray, easy pickings for the empire's infantry. With the numbers in their favor, it did not matter that the bulk of the count's army was recruited from among the peasantry. All they needed to do was attack when the kingdom's defenses were shattered. Even the conscripts would charge down the hill with courage.

Though the empire's inexperienced troops were slow to assume battle formation, they would be finished before long. All the units were in place.

After confirming the readiness of his army, Morgan looked over the soldiers at the vanguard of the force.

"All right, men, listen up!" he shouted, his voice bolstered by the pride of a man who had seized countless victories on the battlefield—small-scale though they were. He had no need of a magical device to amplify his words; it was as if the air itself trembled in the face of his confidence. "Before our eyes stands the army of the Kingdom of Hasenvalia! They are few in number, and their soldiers are weak! This is all the strength that little kingdom can muster! And at the center of this paltry force hides their commander in chief, the sole remnant of their royal family! Once we break their pathetic army and take their leader's head, there will be no further obstacles to our advance!"

Morgan's confidence was infectious—his soldiers rallied, bolstered by their general's pride.

"Once we've smashed their ranks, we will have no enemies! Overrun their lands to your heart's content!" Morgan bellowed. "Take anything within reach! Abduct them, violate them! Treasure awaits at the end of the road—and it all belongs to you! Grab however much you wish!"

The soldiers bayed like beasts at their general's howl.

Many were the spoils of war. The soldiers of the Dubois County army and the imperial standing forces knew this from experience—but even the amateur conscripts were champing at the bit, knowing well that they stood to acquire great wealth unavailable to the ordinary commoner.

The empire commanded an overwhelming advantage in both numbers and terrain. Morale was high. There was no chance that they would be defeated.

Morgan turned to the fore and brandished his sword. What little remained in his head of his frosty rationality reasoned that he ought to begin this war while the fires of passion were yet hot within the men.

"Cavalry, pride of the county of Dubois!" Morgan shouted. "Ready your blades and follow my lead!"

Then he seized the reins of his steed and broke into a gallop—the signal to begin the war.

Behind the count followed five hundred cavalrymen, all on a mad dash toward the enemy at the foot of the hill.

And as the empire began to move, so too did its enemy.

About fifty of the kingdom's infantrymen struck out from the main body of the army, lined up side by side. These troops were empty-handed, unarmed even with shields.

Morgan clicked his tongue, undeterred in his assault. Perhaps this group of unarmed men was meant as fodder to slow the speed of the charging cavalrymen, a sacrificial wall of human flesh.

Morgan did not care for such tactics. The enemy's naivety disgusted him. How could a wall of fifty unarmed men do anything to stall the advance of five hundred mounted soldiers, spurred on by the momentum of a downhill descent? It was as if they were attempting to stop a blade with a sheet of paper.

Slaine, the Crown Prince of Hasenvalia. The boy had the guts to come out and fight, but in the end, he was nothing but a foolish child of common upbringing.

There was no way that a seasoned warrior would be defeated by such a brat.

At the moment that Morgan was most assured of his victory, the fifty troops that the count had thought to be nothing more than a line of human sacrifices threw out their hands in the direction of the empire's charge.

A short while after Slaine and his army had finished arranging the battle formation, the invading forces of the empire shouted out in unison. The sight of five thousand human beings howling together all at once was tremendously powerful indeed.

Then the five hundred cavalry at the vanguard began to move. Surprisingly, the enemy general, the Count of Dubois himself, seemed to be at the front of the pack—the group of cavalrymen came thundering down the hill, following a single horseman clad in imposing metal armor.

Shatter the formation with a mounted assault and finish them off with the infantry—this was the count's signature tactic: a highly simple, hugely destructive, and horrifyingly effective technique. And just as Slaine had hoped, the enemy had chosen the predictable path.

"My lord!" shouted Sieghardt.

Slaine nodded silently.

With the prince's assent, Sieghardt called out, "Water sorcerers, step forward!"

Just as instructed, the fifty spellcasters at the center of Slaine's plan took their places at the front of the battle formation. At the ready, they began to prepare for the right moment to execute their orders.

The enemy's cavalry were closing in, gradually picking up speed in order to smash through the kingdom's line. Five hundred horses' hooves stomping against the ground sent tremors through the earth.

As the enemy was charging down a hill, all the empire's forces were visible to the soldiers. While the royal army troops stared down the onslaught without flinching, the ordinary conscripts among the ranks recoiled, unable to stop themselves from stepping back.

"Do not run away!" shouted Sir Gregory, facing the common conscripts. "Summon your courage and face the enemy with bravery!"

As a company commander, Gregory was not positioned with the cavalry unit on the right flank, but instead served as one of the officers in command of the infantry.

"This is your native land! Why should we run away from our country?! It is the enemy who should flee from *us*! Isn't that right?!" he barked, riding by the conscripts on his horse. He exuded the air of a skilled, honorable warrior, no trace of his usual jovial attitude.

His words bolstered the morale of the troops. Elsewhere, other knight commanders spoke words of encouragement to their own subordinates.

Meanwhile, the fifty water sorcerers at the front lines—with Gostav, Viscount of Rustrem at the command—faced down the enemy.

"At the ready!" shouted Gostav, raising a hand in the air as the enemy combatants drew near. In concert, the water sorcerers thrust out their dominant hands and began to muster their magical energies. The fastest were ready in under two seconds, but even the slowest took no longer than ten to prepare.

Still, Gostav did not immediately give the next command. He lay in wait for the enemy to approach even closer.

Gostav was renowned as one of the most valiant fighters among the nobles in service to the royal army—he had fought on the front lines in skirmishes with neighboring kingdoms, battles against monsters and bandits, and so forth. Although in his midthirties, he was the youngest of the noble lords in the warrior class; only Sieghardt and Victor surpassed him in military experience.

And now Gostav served in a most dangerous role, carrying out the plan of his new lord. He had volunteered himself to stand at the vanguard.

Although he hailed from a common background, Slaine of Hasenvalia worked hard and showed great determination. He was a true leader—his plan had genuine promise. And so Gostav had obeyed the prince's order, placing his own life on the line, whatever the outcome might be.

Undeterred by the sight of five hundred cavalrymen thundering across the earth, undaunted by the pressure of knowing that if they were to fail, the entire kingdom would crumble, Gostav glared his enemy in the face—and then brought his hand down hard.

"FIRE!"

At that moment, bright blue lights sparked at the sorcerers' outstretched fingertips.

When the fifty "unarmed" troops at the front of the enemy lines flung out their hands, Morgan realized that they were sorcerers. Puzzling, he thought.

Although there were certainly a number of sorcerers who could conjure great power in battle, such sorcerers were exceedingly rare. First a sorcerer required magical talent suitable for combat, and on top of that they needed to command an exceptional volume of magical power to wield it proficiently.

Taking population into account, there could have been at most a dozen such sorcerers throughout the Kingdom of Hasenvalia. What were the chances that all of them had gathered on this battlefield today?

And although magical attacks were quite effective against groups of slow-moving infantry, they had limited efficacy against swift, agile horsemen clad in full suits of armor. Even were all fifty of them skilled mages, there was not a chance that their spells could stall the onslaught of five hundred cavalrymen. Surely the enemy understood that.

Morgan's mounted assault picked up speed on the descent, clad in such destructive power that none could hope to stop their charge. What on earth did Hasenvalia expect to do in the face of such power?

Then the sorcerers' hands erupted with magical light. Blue—they were casting water sorcery.

Fifty masses of water released all at once. Some of the casters were skilled enough that they followed their first volleys with another shot or two.

However, the sorcerers' spells could not travel much farther than twenty meters at most. The masses of water all crashed to the ground, far ahead of

Morgan's assault. And after releasing their spells, the fifty sorcerers broke ranks all at once. Splitting to the left and right, they fell backward into the ranks of the infantry.

Morgan hadn't the faintest clue what they'd intended to do. Had they really been commanded to unleash water magic, which was useless in battle, at a distance that could never have hoped to reach the enemy combatants, and then retreat in a panic? None of it made any sense. All they'd accomplished was wetting the ground ahead of—

Tch. In that moment, Morgan finally understood the enemy's intentions.

He was storming down the hill with five hundred cavalry—an assault with such destructive power that it seemed no one in the world could hope to stop the charge.

And indeed, there was no one who could stop the charge. Not even Morgan himself.

The enemy had released water magic right in the path of their onslaught—and with fifty sorcerers on their side, it was a sizable volume of water indeed. The liquid seeped into the ground, soaking the earth, and what could not sink into the soil lingered on the surface, rendering the footing perilous.

While the waterlogged ground would only remain unstable for a short time, it was all they needed to stage their trap. Especially if the enemy had used magic or some other means to prepare the ground to facilitate the snare the night before. Though it was not possible to tell from a glance that they had, Morgan would have done so himself, had he been in their position.

It was obvious what would happen if the group of horsemen galloped at full speed into a muddy strip of ground at the foot of the hill.

"Damn it!" Morgan swore, but there was nothing he could do to avert his fate now.

The cavalrymen at the front could see what had become of the ground ahead of their assault, perhaps, like Morgan, realizing the enemy's aims. However, at their present speed, they could no longer stop, nor change course—slowing even a little would have sent all the horsemen behind them, who had not seen

the sorcerers' trick, into a chaotic collision with the vanguard. In tight formations, with full helmets restricting their vision, all they could see was the backs of their comrades ahead.

Although Morgan and his vanguard now knew a trap lay ahead, they soldiered forward at full speed. Morgan's horse, the leader of the pack, sank its hoof into the sodden earth, and then—

Squelch. The very next moment, the horse slipped and tumbled forward, tossing Morgan from its saddle as if it were a trebuchet launching a stone. The ground ahead rushed up to greet him, colliding with his body with such tremendous impact that he lost consciousness immediately.

Morgan blinked back to his senses a few moments later to find himself strewn across the ground, his helm rolled away, his armor damaged, his sword broken. His chest seared when he sucked in a breath, and his whole body ached with a dull pain.

When he turned to look to his rear, a hellish tableau unfolded before his eyes.

The vanguard horsemen had been flung from their steeds as well, and many of them lay motionless on the wet earth. The cavalry to the rear stumbled over their allies in front, either collapsing in the collision or falling as their horses tripped in the mud.

The horses continued to fall, piling on top of each other one after the other. The cavalrymen were flung from their saddles and knocked to the ground, or trampled by their own companions as they tumbled off their mounts. It was an unstoppable chain reaction.

The destructive force of the charging cavalrymen was so great that they utterly destroyed themselves. The pride of Dubois County—obliterated in an instant.

Morgan sucked in a harsh breath as he tried to stand, overwhelmed by intense agony.

Searching his body for the source of the pain, he saw that his left leg had broken—bone jutted out from beneath his skin. He could no longer move at all. The horses and riders continued to crush one another behind him, a torrent of

destruction sliding down the slope, threatening to swallow him up.

Morgan looked ahead to the far end of the enemy line.

It was hard to imagine a warrior devising such a strange plan. Either that crown prince had a wily advisor by his side, or he himself possessed exceptionally cunning guile.

The latter would be shocking; even were it the former, accepting such unconventional advice would demand a remarkable degree of grit and resolve from the prince. Morgan was astonished.



Though he had not been granted even a chance to display his strength as a warrior, he could bear no grudge against the enemy commander. There was neither justice nor evil upon the battlefield—merely victory and defeat.

Morgan had erred, and the enemy commander was a cut above. That was all there was to it.

A smirk unfurled upon the count's face.

"Brilliant work, King of Hasenvalia," he muttered, moments before the horses behind descended upon him and crushed him to death.

"A tremendous success," Sieghardt said as he watched the enemy vanguard trip and fall to the sodden earth, dragging the cavalrymen to the rear into a vicious circle of self-destruction. "It all unfolded precisely as you expected, my lord."

The enemy onslaught was crashing headfirst into its own ruin. The soldiers hollered and shouted with joy at the sight.

Drinking in the cheers, Slaine offered Sieghardt a wordless smile and a nod. He was pleased that the enemy cavalry had been neutralized, but even more relieved that his outlandish scheme had worked.

Slaine had recalled a book he had read while he was assisting his mother with her work—in it was a description of an army that had failed to mount a downhill charge after a rain, thanks to the muddy earth trapping the horses' hooves. He had devised his strategy supposing it might be possible to artificially reproduce similar conditions.

A simple memory from his childhood with his mother had saved them all.

"Let us move to the next stage, my lord," said Sieghardt.

"Indeed," said Slaine. "Well, then—let the archers and sorcerers unleash their assault, and then send in the infantry."

Sieghardt recited the prince's command in a booming voice, and the subordinate officers echoed those orders to their own troops. With that, the army of Hasenvalia launched a full-scale offensive.

First to attack was the hundred-strong unit of archers and sorcerers.

Propelled by the tailwinds of the wind sorcerers' spells, arrows and fireballs rained down over the chaotic tangle of cavalrymen. Still in the midst of confusion, the enemy soldiers were completely defenseless against Hasenvalia's attack.

After another two volleys of ranged attacks, Gostav gave the signal for about a third of the infantry to advance. Led by the Viscount of Rustrem himself, the experienced soldiers among the army crashed into the enemy lines without fear.

Much of the enemy cavalry remained alive, if injured. Even more of them had broken bones or fallen unconscious, completely motionless. Unable to mount any organized resistance, they fell prey to the Hasenvalian infantry.

Some fought to the death, while others were outnumbered, beaten down, and seized along with their weapons. Most surrendered when it became clear there was no path to victory.

Even those few enemy cavalrymen at the rear who had been lucky enough to escape the crush were helpless to save their fallen comrades—and they, too, would soon be pulled from their saddles by the assaulting infantry.

A knight could fetch a costly ransom—each captured enemy cavalryman became a valuable trophy. Well aware of this, the Hasenvalian vanguard attacked with caution, taking as many living prisoners as they were able.

But the enemy did not simply surrender without a fight. About a dozen horsemen, the few at the edges of the cavalry formation who had escaped their demise, danced away from capture.

They circled around to the left flank of the Hasenvalian army, attempting to pierce through to the heart of the formation where Slaine and his men were commanding the force.

The archers and sorcerers on the flank attacked, but they could not completely fell the riders. Nine remained to charge toward Slaine's position.

"Royal guardsmen! Protect the crown prince!" Victor barked.

The forty royal guardsmen moved at once. Ten among them trained their crossbows upon the horsemen.

Crossbows were costly, complicated to craft and maintain, hampered by lengthy reload times, and lacked the range of a bow. However, a crossbow's metal bolt was powerful enough to slay even a knight in full plate armor.

"Crossbowmen, fire at will!" Victor commanded.

The guardsmen pulled their triggers.

Of course, not all their bolts struck home—the riders moved at blinding speed, and their plate armor deflected some of the shots. Nevertheless, the volley knocked five of the men off of their mounts.

Monica and Sieghardt maneuvered their horses to protect Slaine, and the rest of the royal guardsmen adjusted their formation in preparation for the enemy approach.

Victor yelled, "Cavalry, intercept!"

Ten of the royal guard's riders, including Victor, turned toward the four enemy cavalrymen. Victor led the pack, charging straight ahead—and launched his sword directly at one of the approaching horsemen.

Caught off guard by the unexpected attack, the mounted soldier raised his own sword to deflect the Hasenvalian commander's thrown blade.

But the brief opening proved to be a fatal one. A royal guardsman followed Victor's assault, charging forward to thrust his own sword into the enemy rider's undefended armpit—the weak point of his plated armor.

The enemy rider vomited a torrent of blood, collapsing from his steed. The remaining three cavalrymen clashed with the royal guardsmen, outnumbered three to one. The altercation lasted less than ten seconds—in the blink of an eye, the Hasenvalian royal guard had deftly finished or captured their adversaries.

"It is done," Victor announced.

"The royal guard is an elite unit indeed," Slaine remarked, turning back to the fore. There remained no further enemy riders to mount resistance.

At the sight of their cavalry's gruesome demise, the imperial army's force of nearly five thousand infantry stopped in its tracks.

As the crown knew from prior reconnaissance, most of the enemy infantry had been recruited from among the peasant class. Having prioritized speed and number over quality, the empire's ranks were ramshackle—some of the imperial troops even wielded farming tools as weapons.

After a successful cavalry charge, even such paltry conscripts would have been a formidable force, coasting upon the elite soldiers' momentum to seize an overwhelming victory.

However, the empire's cavalry charge had been *far* from successful. Hasenvalia had utterly annihilated the empire's prized mounted unit. The Count of Dubois had disappeared, swallowed up in the tide of horses and knights crashing down the slope.

Naturally, the imperial conscripts descended into anarchy. Even Slaine could see their disarray from his position at the core of the battle formation. Surely all the men were thinking, *This is not the story I was told!* 

Although not all of the five thousand men were conscripted commoners, it seemed even the regular soldiers and commanders were dismayed by this turn of events.

"The enemy infantry has devolved into a mob. This is prime time to strike, my lord," said Sieghardt.

"Understood. Send in the cavalry," said Slaine.

Sieghardt bellowed his prince's commands again, and the one hundred and ten cavalrymen at the right flank sprung into action.

Slaine had entrusted command of the cavalry to King Oswald of Ignatov. The king was a skilled knight, but he also possessed superior standing to Slaine in terms of rank; it was only proper to afford the guest general an honor befitting his position.

"Time at last!" shouted the king. "Men, at my command!"

As Oswald drove his massive steed forward, the cavalrymen of Ignatov charged alongside Hasenvalia's royal soldiers and noble horsemen.

And in time with their advance, Archimage Blanca sent out Axe, her horned

bear familiar, to attack.

"Follow the horses and hunt! Any unmounted man is your enemy—strike as you please!" Blanca shouted. "When I blow my whistle, return at once without harming anyone else. Now, go!"

At a smack to the flank from his master, Axe dashed forward as if he'd been launched like a projectile. Surging alongside the cavalry, the monstrous bear closed in on the enemy infantry.

One hundred and ten cavalrymen and one horned bear, charging together. At the head of the onslaught, Oswald raised his hand to the sky. "God, lend me your power!"

Oswald was a king, a valiant knight, and an exceptional wind sorcerer.

It was a sign of his tremendous skill and training that he could perform the daunting feat of concentrating magical power while riding a horse. Oswald's hand glowed with green light, conjuring wind at his fingertips.

A strong tailwind propelled Oswald and his men forward. It lessened the disadvantage of their uphill charge, whipping them toward the enemy with great speed.

Meanwhile, rather than intercept the king's assault, the enemy infantry was devolving into further disarray.

"Oh, God, the enemy cavalry is coming this way!" shouted a conscript.

"What are we going to do?!" cried another. "We can't go head-to-head with horsemen!"

"Enough! Form a line, men! Ready your weapons and block the enemy's onslaught!"

"What the hell are you talking about?! We can't stop a massive cavalry unit with weapons like these!"

"It's hopeless! RUN!"

The conscripts who made up the bulk of the empire's infantry were capable of little but charging forward and swinging their weapons. They lacked the dexterity necessary to assume battle formation and intercept a mounted

assault.

Their unit had not been assembled with such contingencies in mind. They had neither coordination nor mutual trust—and, even more crucially, lacked morale.

The empire's few remaining mounted commanders and two hundred—odd regular soldiers endeavored to order their troops to assume a counterattack formation, but it was as if the conscripts were deaf to command. Thinking only of their own survival, the units at the edge of the formation began to desert.

It had been the powerful imperial general's promises of bright futures and assured victories that had kept the near five thousand recruits in line—but with Morgan dead, that calculus had radically changed.

"Run! Quickly, run!"

"Idiot, not this way! Run that way!"

"Ahhhh, don't drop your weapons in a place like this! People are going to get stabbed!"

"Fight, damn you! Stand up and fight! We still outnumber the enemy!"

"Shut up! Fight the battle yourself if you're so confident!"

"Stop! Don't push! I can't breathe!"

One hundred ten cavalry and a single horned bear surged toward the helpless infantry. There were a few archers and sorcerers placed among the enemy force, sporadically sending volleys of arrows and fire over the battle lines. However, even when their shots did strike the heavily armored charging cavalry or densely packed infantry, they did little to deter Hasenvalia's advance. To make matters worse, Oswald's tailwind was a powerful headwind from the perspective of the empire's forces—what strength remained of their attacks was severely curtailed.

The cavalry sustained minimal damage, charging forward without a single casualty.

A horse weighed between four and five hundred kilograms, and a fully armored cavalryman would add another hundred or so to that total. A hundred and ten cavalrymen were like an entire building rushing toward the enemy line

—the empire's amateur infantry had no recourse.

What was more, just the sight of a horned bear at rest was enough to make a man brace himself for death. To see one charging at full speed—well, that was plainly horrifying.

"We're going to die! Ruuuuuuun!"

"Hey, move! Out of the way! Open a path!"

"Dammit! At your battle stations, men! Line up, spears at the ready!"

"Ahhhhhhhh! They're coming! They're coooooooming!"

Oswald's cavalry unit rushed into the crowd of screaming, panicked conscripts. Even the empire's regular soldiers were helpless to maintain their bearings.

It scarcely mattered that there were nearly five thousand of them. A kick from a horse could shatter a human skull like a piece of pottery, and the cavalry's spears cut down the empire's poorly armored infantry like a knife through butter.

Not far away, Axe rampaged through the enemy troops. The destructive power of a horned bear was extraordinary: the creature could slice a human body in half with a swipe of his paw, sending blood and guts spraying through the air. One bite could crush a human head like a ripe fruit.

Some of the empire's troops attempted to fight back, but their dull weapons had no hope of piercing through the bear's thick, hard coat. Their farming tools and swords did no damage at all, and the unskilled thrusts of their spears hardly grazed the bear's skin.

It would have required a dozen highly coordinated men armed with long spears to properly dispose of a horned bear. The empire's regular soldiers made their best effort to gather the conscripts into proper formation to encircle the monster, but it seemed as if the infantry heard nothing at all. It was every man for himself.

Even the most skilled of the empire's professional soldiers were powerless, killed instantly by Axe's unstoppable strikes.

Those conscripts who had not yet been cut down by the kingdom's bear or cavalry attacks were in a state of total panic. The soldiers in the center of the formation had a poor view of their surroundings, and while they were aware that they were under attack, they had no visibility of the direction of their enemy's attacks.

"The enemy is coming from the right. No, they're coming from the left. No, from the front! No, from the rear!" All the contradictory shouting left the troops fleeing every which way.

Many died from causes other than direct combat as well: some fell and were trampled in the chaos, while others found themselves stabbed through by an accidentally dropped weapon, or were crushed to death by the stampede pushing in from all sides. The regular soldiers began to die as well, no longer able to shout their futile orders to regroup.

The few cavalrymen who remained to command the army either fled to the eastern border or met the kingdom's charge and were easily slain for their effort.

With no one left to lead them, the empire's army completely collapsed. The enemy infantry finally broke free of the chaos in the center, fleeing like rats in all directions.

"We've won," Sieghardt proclaimed. "My lord, let us finish this."

"So it seems. Let us send in the rest of the infantry and begin our pursuit," said Slaine.

Sieghardt relayed the prince's final instructions, and the officers carried on the orders from there. Led by Richard, Count of Cronheim, the rear guard began its forward march.

Meanwhile, Blanca sounded her whistle to recall Axe from battle. As a monster, the bear could not easily distinguish between friend and foe on the field, so it was best to remove him from play at the present stage.

The kingdom's infantry split to the left and right in pursuit of the fleeing enemy, leaving space for the cavalry to continue its efforts to capture the soldiers in the center.

Conscripted and enlisted troops were weak and demoralized when at a disadvantage, but with the winds of victory at their backs, they were strong. The kingdom's amateur soldiers pushed forward with morale so high it seemed to break through to the heavens, surging up the hill and shouting at the tops of their lungs as they pursued the empire's fleeing ranks.

What followed was a one-sided chase that could hardly be called a battle. The enemy infantry, assaulted by the kingdom's foot soldiers from behind and cavalry from the flanks, fled toward the Eldecio Mountain Range and the empire beyond it.

On September 30th, the 77th year of the royal calendar, the Kingdom of Hasenvalia's forces defeated the Great Empire of Galed's invading army.



Later that afternoon, the Kingdom of Hasenvalia sorted through the aftermath of the battle.

Disposing of the corpses and managing the captured prisoners of war—roughly a thousand each—made up the bulk of the work. Although it was autumn, Hasenvalia could not simply allow such a large volume of corpses to sit unattended. The royal conscripts and the inhabitants of Toriet mobilized to dig a large pit for a bonfire, and into it they pitched the bodies of the dead. Several priests oversaw the cremation so that the souls of the dead would depart this world without lingering attachments that might bind them to haunt the earth.

Those wounded prisoners not expected to survive were allowed mercy killings so as not to prolong their suffering. The survivors were provided simple medical attention, their legs and arms bound in rope to prevent their escape. If the empire was not willing to pay ransom for their return, then they would be fated to enslavement; the Kingdom of Hasenvalia did not operate a system of slavery, but the prisoners could be sold to other nations that did.

Conscripts and regular soldiers alike were subject to the same treatment. Knights and those prisoners of noble rank were separated from the pack and managed individually, each name kept on file. The Hasenvalian army tended to the wounded as best it could, and though the prisoners' limbs were restrained, they were provided with tents and clean blankets to stave off the cold.

In most cases, a knight or a nobleman would fetch a large ransom from his family and return safely to his home—walking spoils, so to speak. It was in the kingdom's interest to keep as many of these prisoners alive as it could.

After General Sieghardt and Minister Elena had settled the administration of the captured knights and nobles, they appeared in the crown prince's tent to report. Slaine, exhausted from his first battle, relaxed as he listened to his vassals speak.

"All the captured cavalrymen are knights, and some among them hail from noble families," said Elena, who was charged with the matter of negotiating the exchange of prisoners. "The number of surrendered and wounded knights totals 328. Excluding those prisoners captured by our noble lords or mercenaries, the royal share is 281. We can expect a hefty ransom."

Slaine gave a wry smile. "The market price of a head is no less than fifty-thousand crowns—two hundred thousand for one with a noble title. I imagine the total will exceed twenty million crowns," he said, laughing. "That is a lot of money indeed."

Not long after the empire's surviving troops had fled to the border, a messenger arrived alone to negotiate. This messenger seemed to have come not as a representative of the empire, but of Dubois County—he requested the return of the nobles and knights who had fought in the battle under the count's command.

The messenger declared that the county would pay a sensible ransom in exchange for the return of the prisoners, and had even prepared some capital for the immediate retrieval of several particularly important individuals, including relatives of the late count himself.

War was profitable—for the winner. But the capture of several hundred knights and nobles in a single battle was doubtlessly a rare feat, even in all the annals of history.

"Additionally, we will profit from the sale of the prisoners' weapons and armor. President Eriksen will furnish an estimate at a later time, but I would say we may expect at least ten million crowns from the proceeds," said Elena, smiling faintly.

Slaine was relieved. "That much from the loot alone?" he said. "We can use these funds to provide appropriate recompense to Cronheim County, who has suffered so much in this war—with enough left over to strengthen the defense of our borders as well. Good."

If the total spoils exceeded thirty million crowns, then even subtracting reparations for the ravaged Cronheim County, the expense of materials and labor for reconstruction, and the cost of stationing additional troops along the borders, there should still be funds left over.

"I have one additional issue to report," said Elena. "I have received notice from an emissary of Dubois that the imperial county has abducted approximately three hundred residents of Cronheim County. We shall know the truth of it when Lord Cronheim confirms the status of his territory—perhaps this messenger speaks falsehoods as well—but the empire has requested to exchange prisoners at a rate of one knight for thirty Cronheim citizens."

For a state as small as Hasenvalia, three hundred human lives were not something the kingdom could easily abandon.

"Is one knight for thirty citizens a reasonable ratio of exchange?" asked Slaine.

"'Citizens' also includes children and the elderly, who offer little labor value to the empire, so I would say that the terms of this exchange are in fact rather favorable to us," said Elena.

"Very well, then, I have no complaints. You may exchange prisoners under royal custody for the county citizens."

"Are you sure, my lord?" Elena asked, a bit surprised. "As Cronheim County is a fief of the royal house, it would be ordinary practice for the county to incur this expense."

Slaine nodded. "House Cronheim has suffered enough hardship as it is. Ten knights is a small price to pay to demonstrate the royal family's benevolence and magnanimity."

Elena returned a small smile. "Very well, my lord. Then I shall convey your sentiments to Lord Cronheim."

Next, Sieghardt stepped forward to report.

"We have discovered the remains of the Count of Dubois, buried beneath several deceased enemy knights and horses. Although his corpse was not immediately identifiable, a close aide of his in our custody confirmed that the armor equipped upon the body indeed belonged to the count. We have cremated the count's body separately, then interred his ashes in a funerary urn."

"I see," said Slaine. "Shall we return the count's ashes to his family together with the prisoners?"

"Yes, that is standard procedure," answered Sieghardt.

It was typical to expect ransom for the exchange of prisoners, but the remains of the deceased were ordinarily returned without compensation. This was basic etiquette of war.

And Slaine intended to follow it—had he not, there was no telling what treatment Hasenvalia might face should the kingdom ever find itself in the opposite position. It did not serve them to allow rumors to spread that they had carelessly handled the ashes of an enemy general; this would hinder future diplomatic relations with neighboring states.

Additionally, the Count of Dubois had returned the bodies of Eberhard and his men to Toriet ahead of the battle. The empire had waited three hours to begin their siege of the county's regional capital so that House Cronheim would be allowed sufficient time to cremate its late head of household.

Such a concession could perhaps be described as *too* honorable. But the courteous return of the Count of Dubois's ashes would clear Hasenvalia's slate of debt for this courtesy.

"Well, then, please make the arrangements," said Slaine.

"Yes, sire," replied Sieghardt.

"I shall inform the enemy emissaries of your decisions," added Elena.

Sieghardt continued his report. "As for the losses incurred by our own side, our ally, the Kingdom of Ignatov, has suffered virtually no casualty but for a few minor injuries. It must be said that Ignatov's forces are of elite caliber indeed," he said. "About forty soldiers of the Hasenvalian army incurred serious wounds.

The toll of deaths is twenty-one."

"Twenty-one dead?" Slaine repeated, shocked.

Sieghardt nodded. "Indeed. Eight royal army soldiers, six soldiers from the noble territories, one mercenary, and six conscripts," he said. "Taking the strength of the enemy into account, I would say we suffered surprisingly few losses."

Losses. Twenty-one dead. About one eightieth of the total force. Considering that the empire's army was over three times their size, that was a small cost indeed.

However, there were losses. It was to be expected—seven thousand men had fought a battle.

Slaine understood that—of course he understood. And yet he could not help but feel the shock of the words. *Twenty-one dead*.

It was strange that he had not considered the possibility until the battle was finished. Perhaps his mind had subconsciously *refused* to consider it.

Sieghardt sensed Slaine's discomfiture at the news. "We have separated the bodies of our dead from the enemy's so that the remains may be identified. We intend to cremate each of the deceased individually and return the ashes to their respective families," he said, keeping his expression carefully level. "Would you like to see the deceased, my lord?"

The remains of the dead had been neatly laid out beneath the cover of a large tent. Bishop Arthur stood over the bodies, offering up a prayer.

Usually, in a large-scale war, all the bodies of the dead would be gathered and cremated together. But because Hasenvalia had suffered such minimal casualties, it was possible to afford each of the deceased meticulous care. As Sieghardt explained these matters, Slaine arrived to face the dead.

The moment the prince entered the tent, the suffocating stench of blood and death threatened to choke him.

All the carefully arranged bodies were severely disfigured. This was to be

expected in war. Slaine had seen the bodies of enemy infantrymen who had been just as badly wounded, as well as cavalrymen who were more mangled still.

But there was a crucial difference between those bodies and the ones laid out here—Slaine had commanded them. These people had followed his orders and died because of it.

Slaine looked over the faces of the dead one by one. Among them was a man he remembered well.

"Gregory," Slaine exhaled.

The jovial company commander, the loyal knight who had followed Slaine's command, was dead. The right half of his face had been crushed in.

"According to a soldier who witnessed his death, during our pursuit, Gregory defended a young conscript from an attack by an enemy soldier. He was struck in the face by a blade," said Sieghardt. "A noble end for a knight."

Slaine listened to Sieghardt speak in silence, staring down at Gregory's body with a stunned expression on his face.

"A noble end." "A proud sacrifice." "A hero who died in defense of his kingdom." However one might attempt to dress up the words to describe it, at the end of the day a man was dead. Skin torn, bloodstained, muscle bared—a mute and motionless corpse.

The same could be said of Eberhard, Count of Cronheim, whose sacrifice had made Hasenvalia's victory possible. Though Slaine had pledged that he would never forget Eberhard's loyalty, the man had bled and suffered, perhaps even screamed in agony in the final cruel moments of his life.

Faced with the body of a man he knew, Slaine finally understood the full totality of what this meant.

"My lord, I beg of your forgiveness for speaking beyond my station as your vassal, but please allow me to impart upon you some words of advice," said Sieghardt.

Still dazed, Slaine answered, "Go ahead and say it."

"With all due respect, my lord, I understand that you possess a deep love and compassion for your vassals, your soldiers, and your subjects. These feelings are wonderfully valuable to you as a statesman. However," said Sieghardt, "those vassals, soldiers, and subjects—they are all mortal beings."

Slaine took in the general's words as he gazed down at Gregory's body.

"Human beings die of war, of disaster, of disease. It is my personal belief that it is the role of a statesman to bring peace and prosperity to his nation, and to provide happiness to as many of his people as possible. My late liege and friend, Frederick, believed so as well," Sieghardt continued. "As your humble servant, I suggest that the path of fewest regrets shall be to govern our kingdom with this in mind."

Sieghardt's advice was undeniably sound, his words carefully chosen in consideration for Slaine's inner feelings.

"The path of fewest regrets." As the general said, it was best to seek such a path—indeed, there did not exist such a thing as a path of no regrets at all.

"It is as you say, Sieghardt. I understand that," said Slaine. "But right now—I just—I need a bit more time."

"Of course, my lord. Lady Estergren and I shall oversee the postbattle management considerations, so please take some time and rest your heart."

Slaine lingered in silence for a time. "Thank you," he eventually said.

Afterward, Slaine returned to his tent with Monica. The moment she closed the flaps of the tent behind them, he fell to his knees on the spot.

Slaine understood. He really did. But all the same, he could not get those dead men's faces—Gregory's half-crushed skull—out of his mind.

The moment Slaine let his guard fall, his turmoil rushed to catch up with him —he felt himself grow pale, his body tremble, his breath run ragged.

No matter how great a king he were to become, it was not possible for Slaine to save all of the people under his care. It was the most he could do to choose the best option from among the limited choices available to him.

Slaine had chosen to fight back against the Great Empire of Galed. And as a consequence, people had died. They had died because of Slaine's choice. Anyone could have anticipated this. He had chosen to walk this path understanding that it would require sacrifices.

How could he be shocked now? How could he be upset? Had the exaltation of victory driven from his mind any cognizance of the sacrifices that he knew must have been made?

No. It did not befit his station to make such naive excuses, even if only within his own heart.

It was the duty of a king to decide, understanding that no matter how diligently he were to strive, there would be those who fell victim to those decisions. Slaine would be called upon to choose again and again in the future. And he would do so knowing that those choices, too, would demand sacrifice.

It was another barrier he had need to surmount in order to become a king.

Accept it. Accept it. Accept it—

Slaine did his best to calm his frantic breathing, trying to control his trembling.

He clenched his fists until his fingernails dug into his palms and drew blood—but then a soft, gentle pair of hands wrapped around his. It was Monica.

"My liege," Monica called out to him, barely louder than a whisper.

Then she pulled him into her embrace.

"I have been watching over you for a long time, my liege. I know better than anyone how hard you've worked—how you've agonized for the sake of this kingdom and its people. And I intend to continue to watch over you, closer than anyone—I would like to stand by your side and support you more than anyone. So, please," she said, her voice trembling. She hugged him even tighter. "Please, allow me to share in your suffering. There may not be much someone like me can do to support you—but, I beg of you, allow me to shoulder part of that burden. If there is anything I can do to ease your heart, I will do whatever I can. It is my only wish in this world."

When the final words had passed her lips, their eyes met.

They were so close together that Slaine could feel her breath against his skin. Her eyes were moist, her face painted with a mixture of complex, passionate emotion—pity, affection, determination.

Slaine's burden was too heavy to carry alone. He wanted to cling to someone—he wanted to cling to the woman in front of him. He knew that he could trust her. Since the day that Slaine had accepted his role as crown prince, it was Monica who had stood the closest by his side. She had shown him absolute loyalty and total devotion.

"Monica," said Slaine. He sounded terribly weak and childish.

"Ah, my liege," Monica breathed, her voice heavy with emotion. She brought a hand to his cheek, still holding him close with the other.

She drew nearer and nearer, until it was as if there were no distance between them at all. Then their lips brushed together in a kiss.



•

Clearing the dead and wounded, enemy and ally alike, away from the battlefield. Classifying the social standing of each prisoner of war. Negotiating with the enemy emissaries regarding the treatment of prisoners. Strengthening defenses on the border of the empire, with which the kingdom had yet to reach a formal cease-fire agreement.

It would take several more days until these postbattle procedures had been settled.

The matter of the prisoners went more swiftly than anticipated, thanks to the quick and concise reply from the enemy messenger.

First were the conscripted prisoners, who numbered 817 in total. A few days following the messenger from Dubois, an emissary from Prince Florenz Meichelbeck of Galed arrived as well. This imperial messenger carried with him an impossible demand: the return of all prisoners, without compensation.

Naturally, Hasenvalia refused. Negotiations for the return of the prisoners broke down, and the crown concluded that the imperial conscripted soldiers in royal custody would be sold into slavery to a foreign nation.

However, the noble and knighted prisoners were of critical importance to House Dubois—the emissary of Dubois County provided written assurance that they would furnish sensible ransoms for those prisoners, as well as for any of the regular infantrymen whose families could provide the funds for payment.

With its head of household dead, House Dubois was sure to face a period of turmoil. The late count's relatives and chief vassals seemed to wish for the return of the territory's important people as soon as possible, so they acquiesced to Hasenvalia's rather hefty price and provided prompt payment for those captives' return.

The crown learned some details about the circumstances of the invasion from the late count's emissary, as well as from prominent county figures the kingdom held in captivity.

Prince Florenz had been the mastermind behind the declaration of war. In order to satisfy his own ambitions and desire for recognition, he had wheedled

permission to invade from his doting father and left the practical execution of the invasion to the warlike Count of Dubois.

However, Morgan had perished in the battle, and the county's core cavalry force had suffered a loss of nearly two hundred men, and even more wounded. Dozens of infantrymen had died or been wounded as well.

The county needed what remained of its strength to maintain political stability in the region—and to fulfill its obligations to support the imperial war efforts to the north and east. The heir to the seat of Dubois, Morgan's son, was not a warmonger like his father; the county decided to put its relationship with Florenz to the side and withdraw from the ill-fated war.

Florenz had never commanded great influence in the imperial court. He did not have support sufficient to be called a "faction," and with Morgan dead, he lacked a commander to head up his war. None among the imperial aristocracy was likely to climb into bed with Florenz now, not after the loser prince had suffered such an ignominious defeat in the very first stages of his own offensive.

It seemed that Florenz lacked capital as well, since he had declined to request the return of the thousand-odd conscripted men who Hasenvalia held in captivity. Even were the prince to attempt to recruit from among the commons again, he would have neither the means to command them nor the funds to maintain them.

At present, Florenz possessed only his standing army of about a thousand men. This army, entrusted to Florenz by the emperor, amounted to little more than a security force for maintaining the political stability of the imperial holdings in the west of Galed. It could not be deployed as-is in a proper war.

According to the empire's men, the likelihood that the emperor would provide large-scale support to his son was infinitesimal. However powerful the empire may have been, it could not afford to stage a war on three fronts. Perhaps the emperor would allow Florenz leave to act as he pleased, but it was difficult to imagine that he would provide the prince tangible assistance.

For the time being, at least, it seemed that Hasenvalia had no need to worry about another imperial invasion.

The crown elected to take direct control of the area along the Leuschner

Highway that had once been the buffer zone between the kingdom and the empire—soon Hasenvalia would establish a defensive line at the western end of the valley.

As part of the kingdom's defensive plan, five hundred troops would be stationed at the new field encampment at the border: one hundred royal army soldiers, one hundred soldiers from the various noble holdings to the east, including Cronheim County, and three hundred conscripts recruited from among both the royal and noble territories.

With a defensive line erected at the entrance to the Leuschner Highway, a natural bottleneck, the empire would not be able to deploy a large force to attack. This would go a long way toward compensating for the kingdom's numerical disadvantage. Should the kingdom's predictions be proven wrong and Florenz made an attempt to invade once more, this outpost would be able to defend itself for quite a long time—so long as the empire did not send an exceptionally massive force.

"I recommend that we entrust the initial command of this defensive line to Gostav," said General Sieghardt, reporting to Slaine. "I expect that with the viscount at the helm, we shall have no concerns."

"Then so be it," said Slaine. "Gostav, I will place the defense of our kingdom in your hands. We are depending on you."

"Understood, my lord. Leave the work to me," said the Viscount of Rustrem, offering a sharp salute.

Gostav had played a major role in the war, commanding the water sorcerers at the center of the prince's plan. He had continued on to lead the vanguard, fighting bravely. While General Sieghardt's shadow had eclipsed the viscount in peacetime, there was no doubt that the man was an excellent soldier with both skill and courage.

"I have one more point to report," said Sieghardt. "His Majesty King Oswald of Ignatov has made a proposal regarding the defense of our borders."

"What kind of proposal? Let us summon the king so I may speak with him about it," said Slaine.

At Slaine's command, the royal guard waiting within the prince's tent departed to fetch the king. Oswald arrived shortly after, fixing Slaine with a blank expression.

"Crown Prince Slaine of Hasenvalia," greeted the king. "As I informed the general, my kingdom comes with a proposal regarding the defense of your borders."

The king offered to furnish one hundred soldiers at the new defensive outpost —half of them cavalry, and several of them of noble lineage. Hasenvalia had precious few cavalry in its ranks, so this was a heartening offer indeed.

"Ignatov should like to forestall future incursions by the empire into neighboring kingdoms," Oswald continued. "It is no burden to us to provide to you that many men. All I require is your assent to my proposal. I understand that it is no easy decision to allow foreign troops to station within your country, but—"

"To the contrary, we welcome your proposal with open arms, Your Majesty," interjected Slaine, smiling.

Oswald stiffened, perhaps surprised by the prince's immediate response. "Truly? You have not considered the possibility that we may betray you?"

"I see not what you stand to gain from it," said Slaine. "I understand that you are a rational man. And forgive me for my impudence, but I already believe you to be a comrade in arms, and a friend who has stood beside our kingdom in our battle against the tyranny of the empire."

Oswald's expression turned bitter at Slaine's words.

"Am I mistaken?" asked Slaine. "If I have said anything overfamiliar..."

The king took a moment to respond. "You have not," he said.

"Well, then, I will reiterate that I view Your Majesty as a frie—"

"There is no need to repeat it again and again! I've not denied it," snapped the king, averting his eyes. "Listen—I offer you my recognition and the cooperation of my kingdom because in the face of a great imperial threat, you did not flee. To the contrary, you stood and fought—and even beat back your

enemy. It is for the benefit of our own kingdom that we offer you troops, understanding that you may defend our borders as well. Should this prove to be a miscalculation, know that we shall promptly withdraw our support."

"I understand," Slaine answered with a calm voice and a faint smile. "We will not disappoint your expectations. I am deeply grateful for your support."

Slaine's composure left the king abashed. He sat in silence for a moment before he said, "For the time being, I shall leave our fifty cavalry in place and summon our offered hundred troops from the kingdom to arrive as a permanent garrison at a later date. My sole condition is that you provide food for our soldiers and feed for our horses."

Oswald departed the tent without waiting for Slaine's reply.

"He's a nice fellow," Slaine remarked.

Sieghardt smirked. "He honestly is—though I'm sure he would loathe to hear you say it."

Oswald was a proud warrior—it was hard to imagine that he would ever tolerate the indignity of acquiring the reputation of "a nice fellow."

"Well, then, my lord—hereafter Lord Rustrem shall remain to command the garrison. Lady Estergren and I shall stay until the coronation as well—please leave the administration of the border defenses and perfunctory communications with the empire to us," said Sieghardt. "I suggest that you return to the royal capital for the time being. His Excellency the Marquess of Nordenfelt awaits your homecoming with bated breath."



On October 8th of the 77th year of the royal calendar, the royal army of Hasenvalia—apart from those who remained to defend the border—returned to Uzelheim.

Against all odds, the tiny kingdom had seized victory in its battle against an enemy three times its size. News had already traveled throughout the land. Subjects from the surrounding towns and villages gathered in the royal capital to bear witness to the triumphal return of the hero who had saved their country.

Slaine and his army made a procession down the main streets toward the royal palace, greeted by the excited cheers of his people. The conscripts of the army were dismissed at the gates to the royal residence, and when Slaine headed inside, he found his vassals and servants waiting to meet him. At the head of the group stood Sergey, the chancellor of the kingdom.

As the vassals and servants bowed, Sergey stepped toward Slaine.

"Your Royal Highness, Crown Prince Slaine of Hasenvalia," said the chancellor, his voice as sharp and powerful as ever—his age did not show in the least. "We are elated to hear of your safe return and great victory in battle against the empire."

Then, in a crisp gesture, Sergey lowered himself to the floor. Not on one knee, but two.

Surprised, Slaine exclaimed, "Sergey?"

"My lord, please allow me the opportunity to apologize," said Sergey. "I have taken a strict stance toward you—at times, I have even reprimanded you with scathing words in the presence of your vassals. I beg your pardon. Sire, you are without a doubt the rightful heir to the throne—the great man who shall lead and protect this kingdom. There are no words sufficient to expiate the way I have extended myself beyond my station as your vassal. I shall accept whatever punishment you see fit."

Then—in the view of all Slaine's vassals, servants, and soldiers—Sergey, the Marquess of Nordenfelt and chancellor of the kingdom, prostrated himself before his liege.

All present expressed their astonishment. It was clear that Sergey had informed no one of his intent.

Although it was certainly a shocking sight, Slaine understood what the chancellor meant to do.

Slaine had needed the chancellor's strict words to make the most of his potential. It was not enough to surround himself with gentle vassals who encouraged him with pleasant words—he needed those advisors who would speak to him in harsh, pragmatic terms, without mercy, keeping him grounded

in reality.

Had Slaine lacked such a person among his council, he would not have grown as much as he had. Perhaps he would not have developed into an incompetent and conceited man, but he would have had an inflated estimation of his own abilities—he would not have pushed himself with nearly enough stringency, and he would not have matured to a similar level.

Had he allowed himself to remain so naive, it was certain he would have made some manner of fatal error on the way. He might not have been able to seize victory in his battle against the empire.

It would not be false to say that Slaine had become the man he was today thanks to Sergey's guidance.

Nevertheless, it was true that Sergey had been exceedingly harsh with Slaine, even at times humiliating him in the presence of his subjects. And so Sergey had prostrated himself at Slaine's feet, offering his apologies with his forehead to the dirt. By inflicting upon himself greater shame than he had foisted upon the prince, he meant to restore Slaine's noble standing and prestige as the future king.

Sergey had humbled himself, clearly drawing the line between their stations. He had undergone the process he felt necessary to undergo. Now, Slaine thought, it was his turn.

"Sergey, Marquess of Nordenfelt, chancellor of the kingdom. Please lift your chin," said Slaine.

Sergey did as he was told.

Then Slaine spoke so that all present would hear. "I understand that you were harsh because you wished to see me grow. I have walked as far as I have because of your guidance—and because you have rebuked me when I stepped astray. You are a most loyal vassal, and the royal family of Hasenvalia takes great pride in your service," he said. "I could not possibly punish you—to the contrary, as heir to the throne of this kingdom, I thank you from the bottom of my heart. Please, I ask that you continue to offer your support to me as chancellor of the kingdom. You are indispensable to this kingdom, and to me."

Sergey took in the prince's words, his dirt-smeared face carefully blank. He remained silent for a few moments longer, trembling slightly. Then he climbed to his feet and bowed. "My lord, I offer you my sincerest thanks for your kind words. Now and hereafter, I shall devote all my energy to serve Your Royal Highness, the royal family, and the Kingdom of Hasenvalia."

When Slaine turned his gaze to the Nobles of the Robe who stood behind Sergey, he saw the relief on their faces. Was it because Slaine had accepted the chancellor's apology and offered him pardon? Or were they relieved to see that Sergey had finally recognized the prince's efforts and softened his demeanor?

Slaine looked back to Sergey, feeling the tension ebb out of the air. "Thank you. I look forward to your leal service," he said. "Forgive me, but I am rather tired from the battle and long march. I would like to rest for a while before we discuss the future."

Slaine expected that Sergey would wish to be alone for a time—he fashioned an excuse out of consideration for the chancellor.

"Understood," said Sergey. "Then we shall have further discussions at a later time."

As the army began to settle final matters and disband, Slaine departed from Sergey and entered the palace with Monica at his side.

## Interlude: Monica's Reminiscence

Monica Adrashelm was born the eldest daughter of the Baron of Adrashelm, head of a noble family established at the founding of the Kingdom of Hasenvalia.

Living on the salary afforded to the Nobles of the Robe, the baron and his family did not enjoy an extravagant life of luxury. But neither were they impoverished—Monica was raised and educated in aristocratic comfort.

When Monica was young, many labeled her a child prodigy. She learned to read, write, and calculate with great speed, quickly catching up with the academic accomplishments of her brother, who was two years her elder.

Although such exaggerated excitement about her talents settled down as she reached her tenth year, she was nevertheless recognized throughout courtly society as a very bright girl. As her father's status as a minister among the Nobles of the Robe afforded her free access to the books in the palace library, she read often and learned a great deal.

Her ability to quickly absorb material proved useful in other fields as well. Her father allowed her to begin learning self-defensive martial arts from her brother's tutor, a knight, and she swiftly progressed in her training.

As Hasenvalia permitted women to participate in military service, Monica enlisted in the royal army at the age of fourteen with the aim of receiving a knighthood, partly to challenge her own abilities. The royal army was in the process of expanding the scope of its structure at the time, and so it was actively seeking out well-educated individuals of solid lineage to serve as officers.

Monica achieved her knighthood in about three and a half years after enlistment, much more quickly than the five or more it ordinarily required. She was not a particularly strong soldier, but she put her natural aptitude to use in swiftly learning swordsmanship, riding, and military strategy.

She was showered with praise by her mother and father, blessed by her brother, and personally commended by King Frederick of Hasenvalia at her knighthood ceremony.

Although it might seem that Monica had walked a glittering path of success, there was always a coldness inside of her heart.

A number of paths to serve her kingdom and the crown were available to her: she could remain in the military and serve as an officer, put her knowledge to use as a civil servant, or marry into another noble family and support the kingdom's aristocratic society from behind the scenes.

All of these options were steady, peaceful, nice ways to live. But there was a ceiling to how high she could climb—and there was no way for her to know how things might change in the future.

Monica was the daughter of a baron, and she did not stand to inherit a title. If she chose to remain in the military, she would not be able to become a general, lieutenant general, or the commander of the royal guard. Even if she chose to become a civil servant, she would not be able to serve as a minister. Should she choose to marry into another noble family, her partner was likely to hail from a barony of similar standing. She would have little opportunity to put her skills to use and play an active role in society were she to be absorbed into another low-ranking aristocratic family.

Had she a peerage, her potential to ascend would have been much higher—but it was a fundamental societal tradition for the firstborn child to inherit the family title. And although her brother was not quite so exceptional, he was an adequate heir, and the pair of them had a perfectly amicable relationship. Monica had no intention of depriving her brother of his right to succeed their father.

And so Monica set out to walk one of the three predetermined paths of life that were available to her.

It wasn't that she was *dissatisfied*. She knew she would never go hungry. In a world where most human beings lacked any choice at all, she understood that she led a privileged life.

However, she also knew that were it not for the constraints of her position, she might have been able to engage in far more meaningful work.

She felt trapped in her boring life. Even as she smiled back at the admiration of those who surrounded her, it left some part inside of her cold.

But then everything suddenly changed.

King Frederick of Hasenvalia passed away—along with all of his immediate heirs—in an incredibly tragic accident.

The monarch and his royal family were the foundation of any kingdom's legitimacy as an independent state. And for those who served the crown, the family was the center of all life. To have all of them suddenly lost at once...

The palace fell into chaos. The Nobles of the Robe and their families, the bureaucrats and soldiers, and even the servants of the palace—everyone was saddened, shaken, and terrified.

The loss had an especially profound impact upon the youth. No one had imagined that the kingdom's tranquility—a peace which had been stable for several generations, and which young Hasenvalians had taken for granted—would be so suddenly shattered. It left all the people of the kingdom in despair.

Monica was no exception. She could not even begin to guess what difficulties might lie in store for her home. And as a woman of noble birth in a destabilized country, she was not sure what the future would hold for her either. While once she had been assured that she would lead a life of peace whatever path she chose, no longer was that so certain.

She was struck by how quickly the world had taken this unexpected turn for the worse.

While her life had often left her wanting, she had not wished for this sort of change. She realized what a luxury it had been to describe her peaceful existence as "boring." But that awareness did nothing to change the state of her kingdom.

Her heart did not brighten when she heard that the king's bastard would inherit the crown. It was not likely that the other nobles, civil officials, soldiers,

or servants were thrilled by the news either.

It was only natural. Though the king's blood ran in the boy's veins, the thought of a fifteen-year-old of common upbringing ascending to the throne did not inspire optimism.

But there was nothing that Monica could do to change the kingdom's circumstances. Although she possessed exceptional ability, she was but one person.

She was embarrassed by her previous preoccupation with finding "more meaningful work." Without a liege lord to serve or a patron house upon which she could rely, she was powerless.

A few days after the death of the king, Monica's father Walter summoned her to his office.

"I have been asked if you would be willing to serve as aide-de-camp to the future king," he said.

With a less than enthusiastic expression on his face, he went on to explain: The aide-de-camp was a servant assigned to the king or crown prince. It was an important role, with responsibilities that ranged from daily errands to assisting the crown in official duties. Usually, a particularly talented heir to one of the Nobles of the Robe would be assigned to serve in the position for as long as ten years, as part of his training to take the reins as head of his own noble family.

However, the Nobles of the Robe were discussing the possibility of entrusting the duty of assisting the new common prince to Monica.

Of course, expectations among the court regarding the new prince's ability were low—it was quite likely that the boy would continue to lack the necessary faculties to serve as a competent king for years after his accession to the throne, possibly even until his abdication.

The role that such an aide-de-camp would serve was, for lack of a better word, a minder—it was possible that the new monarch would require a guardian for an exceptionally long period of time. Naturally, the posting would demand a high level of ability.

In this respect, Monica was perfect for the job. Unlike other candidates for the position, she had no title to inherit, no present engagement to marry, nor any set plan for her future. And, of course, she was extremely talented. With her at the boy's side, the prince's advisors would be able to rest easy, knowing that his needs would be met for the years to come.

And that was why the Nobles of the Robe were willing to grant Monica the honor of serving in this coveted position, despite the fact that she was the daughter of a low-ranking aristocrat.

"Of course, if you do not wish to accept the position, you may refuse," Walter said. He spoke with a rather bitter look on his face, as if he were displeased with the thought of his exceptional daughter being reduced to a glorified nanny for an upstart common boy. "It will not affect my standing, so there is no need to concern yourself with my reputation."

"I will accept. Serving as aide-de-camp to the heir to the throne is an incredibly prestigious duty," answered Monica.

It was true she wished to avoid bringing inconvenience upon her father and family, but the better part of her was resigned to her fate. There was nothing else that she could do, nor anything else she wanted to do. And if that were the case, why not devote herself to looking after the future king?

She had been allowed a special exception to ascend to a position that would ordinarily not be available to a person of her standing. She had never imagined that it would come to pass in such a way.

Monica had tired of her life and spent her days wishing something would change—but now that it finally had, she'd resolved to dedicate herself to restoring that same status quo. It was almost funny, in a way.

Resigned to her lot, Monica's heart grew even colder.



Her feelings did not change when she first met with the new crown prince, Slaine.

The young man seemed rather timid and unsure of himself. He lacked his father's kingly majesty—especially compared to the late crown prince Michael,

who, in spite of the fact that he had not yet even come of age at the time of his death, projected far more dignity than his bastard brother.

This was inevitable—Slaine had not been raised or educated as a royal. It was unreasonable to expect a common boy to possess the same qualities as King Frederick or the rest of the royal family.

What was more, the boy had coincidentally lost his mother on the same day that Frederick had passed away. What an unlucky hand he had been dealt. He bore no culpability for any of it.

Monica was to stand by the side of this timid, frail-looking young man as he ascended to the throne—and, somehow, help to mold him into a king that could handle his duties and maintain the institution of the crown. Together, they would strive to prevent the battered foundations of their kingdom from crumbling into ruin.

How long would she need live this way? Ten years? Twenty? Or would she be yoked to his side as his aide until the day he abdicated the crown?

But it was too late to worry about such things. She had already accepted the job, knowing full well what lay in store for her—she had chosen her fate.

When the Nobles of the Robe prostrated themselves before their new prince, Slaine fled the audience chamber—and Monica followed without hesitation. Out of a sense of duty as his aide, she listened to his feeble complaints and offered him words of comfort. Monica brewed him a cup of tea, feeling as if she were tending to a child.

But after hearing the words of Sieghardt, the Count of Vogel, Slaine displayed a resolve that shocked her.

"And so, that is why I...I will ascend the throne. And—I will strive to meet your expectations of me, my lords. I will try to be a good king. I beg your continued support and guidance," Slaine said.

Just like Monica, he had reluctantly resigned himself to his fate. She could see it on his face.

But there was no darkness in him, as there was in Monica's heart. He had not just accepted his lot, but pledged to look to the future and strive for greatness

of his own free will.

So he won't merely sit on the throne—he wishes to be a good king, Monica thought, carefully inspecting the boy's profile.

He had accepted the harshness of the world, but also resolved to make it a better place. He had chosen to confront the challenges of this shattered peace.

Perhaps if he was successful, the people of Hasenvalia could overcome this tragedy that threatened the kingdom, and protect its history and independence in the future. Perhaps there was even potential that Hasenvalia would flourish.

And if Monica could contribute to the kingdom in this way—serving the sovereign and his royal family as a true aide-de-camp, not a mere minder—then she could consider her role to be meaningful work. A position she could not have obtained under different circumstances.

It was just a dream, but to Monica this hope felt like salvation. Slaine had been thrust into a position even more difficult than hers, but he had not been crushed by the weight of it. To the contrary, he displayed tremendous potential.

Slaine was the only one who had the ability to change these dark times for the better—to give Monica's life great purpose. Maybe he could create hope for all of them.

And so Monica decided to support this boy who might yet prove to be their savior.

From that day forward, she stood by his side, assisting him with all her strength. She encouraged him and spent every night assiduously preparing materials for her lectures, so that he would quickly understand what he needed to learn from the next day's lessons.

Monica nonchalantly explained to him the circumstances around his selection as crown prince so that he might guess for himself the political forces at play behind the curtain. Not wishing to become a decorative figurehead, Slaine resolved to work harder and harder. Monica, in turn, strove to support him even more diligently.

Day by day, steady but sure, Slaine grew into his potential. Although at times he stumbled, he never stopped moving forward. And he did not merely improve

himself—he displayed shrewd aptitude by proposing a brilliant idea for improving the food self-sufficiency of the royal domain. Even Monica was surprised.

Slaine seemed to sparkle brighter and brighter with each passing day, radiantly striding forward with single-minded determination. Monica was truly happy to have the opportunity to support her savior, closer to his side than anyone else.

Although she understood that it did not reflect well upon her character, Monica had come to embrace feelings for Slaine that exceeded what would be expected of a prince's retainer. But after spending so much time together with him, she couldn't help it. She saw him as a man, and followed behind him as a woman.

When the two of them tumbled to the grass together in the midst of their martial training, Monica felt her heart flutter. She couldn't help but smile.

But Slaine showed no response to it at all. The prince viewed her merely as one of his vassals, and no more—or so she thought.

Before she met the prince, Monica had never been in love with another person—but she understood that unrequited love would oft tear a relationship to pieces. She was afraid.

She was his aide-de-camp—he relied upon her, placed his trust in her. She was scared that he might recognize the feelings that she felt for him, and was terrified at the thought of even the slightest change.

And so Monica did her very best to conceal her feelings as she stood at his side, the dependable aide. She, too, pretended to see him only as her liege, though she admittedly savored the closeness her privileged position afforded to her. She enjoyed drawing close and wiping the sweat from his brow when he returned from his runs with the royal army.

Each day she advanced together with him, hoping for a better future, supporting him with her secret feelings held close to her chest. They were the most fulfilling and happy days of her life.

She wished that it could go on forever. She hoped that one day, just maybe,

they might be able to know each other as man and woman. It didn't matter to her if he wished to take her as a concubine or mistress.

Monica lived each day with such naive, childish thoughts in her heart. However belatedly, it felt as if she were blossoming into her womanhood for the first time.

But although Slaine displayed remarkable growth, on the eve of his coronation he—and the kingdom itself—would be faced with a terrible challenge.



Monica was as shocked as anyone when the Great Empire of Galed attacked.

Although recent events should have taught her well how fragile the peace of their world was, she had remained convinced that the western kingdoms would never bear the brunt of full-scale war. The empire's declaration came as a total surprise.

As Slaine and Monica listened to Sergey, the Marquess of Nordenfelt and chancellor of the kingdom, she was certain that her happy days had come to an end.

A hopeless fight, or an equally hopeless exile. It was painful to watch Slaine waver in the face of such a cruel choice.

Monica wished that she could pull him into her arms and hold him close, but all she could do was steady his trembling shoulders.

When he rushed from the audience chamber with an ashen face, Monica followed. As she watched him stumble through the palace on unsteady legs, she thought, I shall remain at his side until the very end.

Slaine had given Monica glorious hope. He had shown to her that a better world was possible.

Even if their time together was short, Slaine was Monica's savior. That would never change, even if their kingdom was fated to ruin—even if her happy days together with him had come to an end.

If he fights, I shall fight together with him. We will meet our end together, our

bodies pierced by the invaders' blades.

If he seeks asylum, I shall leave together with him. Even should the worst await us, even should we waste away with nowhere to turn, I will stay at his side to the very last.

Standing at the gate to the castle as Slaine's subjects clung to their prince, Monica resigned herself to such miserable thoughts.

But before Monica's very eyes, Slaine said, "Everything is going to be all right." Gone was his uncertainty, his tone surprisingly steady. "It's all right. I am your crown prince. I am your future king. I will protect you—I swear it, I will protect you," he said. "There is no reason to worry. Place your trust in me. Work together with me. Those of you who will fight together with me, please, follow me. I will lead this kingdom to victory."

Slaine's voice was calm and gentle, but full of strength.

His words resonated with Monica. Although she had no reason to believe it, as she listened to him speak from behind, she came to believe that he would lead the kingdom to victory.

Monica felt ashamed that she had embraced defeat so easily. She was Slaine's aide-de-camp—she loved him, and had pledged herself to support him. Why had she accepted such a pathetic, selfish fate so readily?

Slaine was far greater a man than Monica had realized. He held a strength inside of him that he had never before revealed, but she could see it now.

When Slaine was finished addressing his subjects, he turned back to Monica.

"Let's go back," he said, a slight, shy smile on his face. "We must prepare for battle."

Monica let loose a sigh, so soft that no one would hear it.

He really is our savior.

Slaine performed with tremendous grace. As the leader of the kingdom, his level, confident demeanor was a great reassurance to his vassals, soldiers, and subjects. He made decisions when need be, and deferred the rest to his vassals.

In the blink of an eye, he carried out the preparations for battle.

Based upon his understanding of the tactics the enemy general was likely to take, he swiftly devised an unusual scheme to reverse the Hasenvalian army's steep disadvantage. Then he moved quickly to implement it.

Although Slaine had accrued a reputation as a clever but mild-mannered and weak prince, the crisis of the imperial invasion awakened something within him. Rather than raise his voice to show his bravery, he displayed his aptitude to serve as a strong and wise monarch through his calm and level tone.

As Monica worked at the prince's side, she felt overwhelmed by his presence. It was exhilarating to stand at the center of it all, watching him and his vassals and soldiers and subjects all united as one, striving toward victory.

Just gazing upon his profile took her breath away. Just walking behind him made her heart race.

Although she knew she was in the midst of her military duties, when she slept by the prince in his tent, she felt as nervous as a little girl. Her heart fluttered. It was terribly difficult to hide away all she felt.

Slaine seemed a bit nervous to share a tent with her as well, which was only to be expected. When she appeared before him in lighter dress than usual, his eyes wandered over her body—it made her happen to think he might see her as a woman after all.

Slaine fell asleep first, and Monica found herself lingering at his side, staring into his peacefully sleeping face. It became more and more difficult to control the way her heart was beating, all but overpowered by her desire to kiss him.

With Slaine at the command, Hasenvalia's royal army marched forward in high spirits, advancing toward its decisive battle with the imperial army. The prince's strange plan was a brilliant success. The army was able to seize complete victory against an enemy more than three times his army's size.

It was a glorious triumph, sure to go down in the annals of history.

The crisis was over. Monica was relieved to be able to return to her happy life at his side.

However, the prince's final challenge would come in an unexpected form.

Slaine faced the soldiers who had died in battle. He had no choice but to confront the cruel reality that many of the people he was meant to protect—even a few with whom he had exchanged words—had died under his command.

When Monica had served in the royal army, General Sieghardt had told her that this was an ordeal that none in a position of command could avoid. Fortunately, Monica had never been forced to contend with such tribulations during her time as an officer, but as Slaine was obliged to serve as commander in chief in every battle he might face, his situation was different.

The crown conferred great power, but with it carried a great burden of responsibility. The sacrifices of those who gave their lives in battle all lay at the king's feet.

Monica felt her chest grow tight as she saw him pale, trembling, and fighting desperately to accept the cruel reality before him.

This is what it means to be a king, she thought.

Monica had never truly understood the weight that rested upon his shoulders. She had looked up to him as a savior with a naive and simple mind, foisting all manner of expectation upon him. She'd hoped that he might change her life, and all the world, for the better—without once considering how much the man himself might suffer and hurt because of it.

Monica was ashamed of herself. She felt helpless.

He was in so much pain. His body, thinner and smaller than her own, was trembling. He clutched his hand tight enough to draw blood, desperately enduring the misery.

Faced with such a piteous, pathetic sight, Monica could not hold back any longer.

"Prince Slaine, my liege," said Monica.

Before she realized what she was doing, she laid her hands upon him and drew him close. She told him how she felt, tears blurring her vision. But she

wanted to look him in the eye and really tell him everything, so she did her best to hold herself back from crying.

He was her savior. She wanted to be there for him. With all her body and soul, she wanted to support him. Even if only a little, she wished to ease the weight of the burden he shouldered. She wished that she could be the one to whom he turned when he was tired. She would have done anything for that.

It was what she wanted. It was how she wished to live. It offered her not just the satisfaction of utilizing her abilities to the fullest, not just the joy of a meaningful life—it was a love she could not put into words. She felt like she had been brought into the world for this very purpose.

"Monica," he said, his voice so very weak and childish.

When he turned to her with tears in his eyes, clinging to her body, she knew that he had accepted her feelings.

"Ah, my liege," she exhaled.

She wanted to do whatever she could to ease his heartbreak through this love they shared. Holding him close, she kissed him on the lips.

Their relationship changed after that.

Monica began to support Slaine not just in her official duties as his aide-decamp but as a woman—out of the public eye, of course.

She was able to hold and kiss him every night, soothing his fatigue, stress, and pain from both the battle and its hectic aftermath.

And on the evening that they returned to the royal capital of Uzelheim, they lay together for the first time. Slaine accepted Monica's advances, confessing his own love for her.

The days that followed were wonderful. Happiness did not suffice to describe it—it was as if she were in a dream. From the moment she woke to the moment she fell asleep—no, even as she slept—she was at his side. Everything had meaning. Every minute of life had value.

Slaine had grown, overcome crisis, and triumphed over adversity. He had all

the strength he needed to become king. All that was required for his future lay within him.

And today, he would be crowned king.

## **Final Chapter: The Crown of Rutile Quartz**

Although Slaine was meant to be crowned in early October, his coronation was rescheduled to the end of the month on account of the war.

When Hasenvalia informed the surrounding states of the news, there was no complaint. The other kingdoms were surely busy with their own security preparations, due to the state of emergency that had shattered the peace among the western kingdoms.

Slaine sent Florenz an invitation to his coronation. It was both an ironic jab and an olive branch toward a formal cease-fire and end to the war—were such a thing possible. Florenz did not reply.

Life was peaceful in the days leading up to the coronation. There were no imminent signs of a second imperial invasion. A strong defensive line had been erected along the Leuschner Highway, and the Eldecio Mountain Range provided a natural barrier preventing the empire from crossing the border in any other location. A surprise attack was exceedingly unlikely.

The prisoner exchange with Dubois County was proceeding without incident, and plans for the restoration of Cronheim County had already begun to move forward.

The potato harvest had wonderful results as well.

And that was not all. The ministry of agriculture decided to gradually expand cultivation in the farmlands surrounding the royal capital, so that the effects of rotation with other crops and crop failures could be studied. But even this first successful harvest allowed Slaine to stake claim to a clear domestic achievement ahead of his coronation.

Slaine's own personal life was stable as well. He had fully developed his potential through this time of great crisis, and had emotional support at his side as well—his relationship with Monica had changed a great deal. Now, Slaine had nothing to fear.

Everything was perfect. He was ready to ascend to the throne.

The Grand Cathedral of the Eynthian Church of Hasenvalia was a deeply solemn space. Sunlight poured in through its stained glass windows, bathing the stone-wrought sanctuary in glittering light.

The state funeral had called forth a great crowd, but even more people had gathered for Slaine's coronation. Representatives from all twenty-two of the western kingdoms were present. Among those states, ten had sent their monarchs to attend in person.

Some had sent their kings for the state funeral but, perhaps viewing Hasenvalia as unsafe following the imperial invasion, sent proxies in their stead to the coronation.

Other monarchs, meanwhile, had sent representatives to the funeral, but attended the coronation in person, perhaps curious to learn more about Hasenvalia's young new king, a former commoner who had defended his country against a mighty empire.

Standing closest to Slaine in the line of representatives from the various attending countries, in the place of honor, was King Oswald of Ignatov—the only ruler who had answered Hasenvalia's plea for aid in battle.

All the heads of the Hasenvalian noble families were in attendance as well.

In their row, beside Richard, Count of Cronheim, was an open place—dedicated to Eberhard, who had sacrificed his life to save his kingdom. After the coronation, Slaine intended to bestow an honorary marquessate upon the late count.

There were many commoners in attendance as well: Benjamin and other prominent merchants, renowned artisans with close ties to the royal family, and representatives of the water sorcerers who had played a key role in the battle against the empire. And it was not merely those important figures—there were also dozens of ordinary subjects in attendance to witness the birth of the new king, selected at random from among all regions of the kingdom—though the crown had been careful to screen the attendees to ensure they were capable of remaining quiet through long ceremonial rituals.

Only one of those common attendees had been nominated personally by the future king: Erwin. Slaine had wished for his old friend to witness his coronation.

As the commander of the border's defensive line could not leave his post, Gostav, the Viscount of Rustrem, was the only prominent noble not to attend. The date and time of the coronation had been widely reported, so the viscount was likely gazing toward the capital now, postured just like the rest of the vested nobility.

Of course, there were also the direct servants of the royal family, such as the Nobles of the Robe and the royal court mages. They lined up at Slaine's sides, while the other attendees were seated to his rear.

Ordinarily, only the heads of each noble family, their consorts, and the Nobles of the Robe were permitted to stand alongside the future king. However, Monica's position as aide-de-camp to the crown prince allowed her, the mere daughter of a baron, to occupy the position farthest from the seat of honor.

And in front of these attendees who hailed from all walks of life, Slaine received God's blessing.

"God is our father and our mother. God sees all. God loves all," said Bishop Arthur. "Our one and only Lord has chosen him who offers obeisance here today as protector of this land..."

The way the clergy speak is awfully strange, Slaine thought as he took a pious bow.

While the voice reciting the Eynthian blessing certainly belonged to the bishop, as his chant reverberated through the hall of the stone cathedral, it felt as if he spoke together in concert with all the believers in time—the voice of history itself, carrying God's teachings down through the generations.

The prestige these rituals projected was why, despite the fact that the political influence of the church had long waned, the people of Hasenvalia still wished to preserve this religious tradition.

"Accordingly shall this man bear the title of king, sovereign of this Kingdom of Hasenvalia. Here and now, I bestow upon his head the crown that shall give

proof to his rule," said the bishop, gently placing the crown atop Slaine's head.

At the center of the silver and iron crown was embedded a stunning gem of rutile quartz—a symbolic fusion of the national stone with the jet-black color of a crow, the Hasenvalian national bird.

Having completed his duties as a servant of God, the bishop kneeled before Slaine as a servant of the king. In a reverent tone, he said, "May God be with His Majesty the King, Slaine of Hasenvalia."

Blessed and crowned as a believer, Slaine rose to his feet as a king. Then, slowly and calmly, he turned to face the attendees of his coronation. His lustrous black hair was now streaked with dyed gold, like the rutile quartz itself —a symbol of Slaine's determination to become a symbol of his nation.

"All hail His Majesty the King!" shouted Sieghardt, Count of Vogel and general of the royal army. As he bent a knee, all Slaine's vassals and subjects followed suit.

"Rise," said Slaine, projecting his words with stately solemnity. Though his voice was still high as a boy's, it felt as if the hard-fought battle had aged his tone.

His subjects followed his command and stood to their feet. All present in the hall waited for Slaine to speak.

He took his time to look over the faces of those gathered before him.

"I had a father," he began. "But I did not know his face. I never even met him in the flesh. It was only after he had departed this world that I learned he was my father—but he was my father all the same. And his blood—the blood of the royal family of Hasenvalia—runs in my veins."

Slaine's voice was the only sound that could be heard in the cathedral. It echoed off the stone walls.

"He was not only my father, but the king of this country—a great king. My mother was a commoner. Like my mother, I was raised as a commoner, and now I am a king like my father," he went on. "Though I never met my father, he watched over me from afar. He loved me. And though I was not raised as royalty, my mother taught me many things—her tutelage is why I stand before

you today. I am at once the son of the king and a son of the people, and today I have been crowned as such."

Amidst the silence, Slaine heard a slight breath from his side.

When Slaine turned his head, he found Monica staring back at him as if she were in a trance. He offered her the faintest smile, so that only she would see.

Then he returned his gaze to the fore.

"I am king. And as king I shall follow in the footsteps of my father—but so too will I walk together with the common people, like my mother. I shall be a king of the people—I will protect this kingdom and the people who reside within it. With God as my witness, and this crown as proof of my pledge, I shall live my life forevermore by these principles."

When Slaine was finished speaking, he lifted his chin. He gazed into the hollow, showing his face to all.

And then, at that very moment...

The angle of the rays shining through the stained glass windows aligned in perfect harmony with the gem in Slaine's crown. The rutile quartz dazzled in the sun's light, filling the cathedral with a fantastical, glittering radiance.

It was as if God Himself had offered His blessing to Slaine's coronation, with Frederick and Alma at His side in Heaven.

A single clap rang out through the hall.

It was Monica's hands. The sound echoed, reverberating once and then twice through the cathedral.

Sieghardt followed, and then so too did Elena, and Victor, and Blanca, and Walter, and finally Sergey.

Soon applause filled the nave of the church. The echoes of countless hands, ringing in the new era, heralding the birth of a new monarch.

On that day, Slaine of Hasenvalia became king.



## Side Story: Skin to Skin, Heart to Heart

On September 30th, year 77 of the royal calendar, after their victory over the Great Empire of Galed, Slaine and Monica's relationship radically changed.

Until then, they had merely been liege and vassal. Whatever their innermost feelings, their only connection had been their public relationship.

She was his faithful aide-de-camp, and he her liege lord. Monica stepped over this clearly defined boundary between them to support Slaine's wounded heart—and Slaine accepted her readily. He allowed her inside the lines that had been drawn between them, and clung to her with all his might.

And then they kissed.

From that night onward, Slaine began to sleep together with Monica in the room provided to them in Cronheim County. And together in Slaine's tent on the road, when they departed for their return march. Instead of merely sleeping together in the same place, they piled together on the same cot, and he rested there against her chest, in her arms.

Bit by bit, it helped to ease the heaviness of his heart. Though the weight of his responsibility had not changed—and as king, he would never forget it—she helped take his mind away from it.

It was all thanks to Monica. With her at his side, he felt confident that he could face all of the challenges that lay ahead for him as the ruler of this kingdom. Her constant presence was a great relief and comfort.

"My liege, are you sure you can breathe?" Monica asked, cradling Slaine's head against her breast.

They would reach the royal capital of Uzelheim tomorrow—it was their last night on the road. "Yes, I'm just fine," Slaine said, exhausted from their long march. "I feel so relaxed."

He looked up and met Monica's gaze. She looked back at him with the most adoring expression. "I'm glad," she said, exceedingly warm. They were so close.

When she leaned in, Slaine met her advance, pressing their lips together. She responded in kind, and their kiss deepened, tongues brushing together. After a short while, they reluctantly parted.

"Good night, Monica," said Slaine.

"Good night, my liege," she answered.

Slaine buried his face in her chest like a spoiled kitten, soon falling into a deep slumber.

The next day, the royal army—with Slaine in the lead—made its triumphal return. Time passed in a chaotic blur after that. It was not until dinner that things finally began to settle down.

Both tired from the long campaign and relieved to be back home, Slaine finished his meal. He'd asked the chef to prepare a portion for Monica as well, and they sat around a small table to quietly celebrate their safe return.

Like usual, Monica brewed tea to enjoy after their meal.

"My liege," Monica began, her voice a mumbled murmur. "If you would allow it, I..."

As Monica trailed off, Slaine turned to face her. She gathered her resolve to look straight at him.

"I should like to be with you tonight," she said. "In your room, at your side. Until the morning comes."

Slaine swallowed, a little nervous.

Though Slaine and Monica had slept together every night since the war had been won, sleep was all they did. They kissed and held each other in their arms, but they had yet to cross that final line between them as man and woman.

Although the battle was over, Slaine felt it rather unseemly for a commander in chief to make love to his subordinate on the battlefield. And he had heard that a woman's first time could burden her body, so he did not wish to discomfort her in the midst of her military duties. She was still pure, after all.

And more importantly, if he was to take that purity from her, it seemed only

proper that he do it in a place that afforded her the dignity she deserved. Not in a borrowed guest's room, or a tent on the road—it should be in his own royal chambers, back at the palace.

Monica seemed to have been of the same mind, as she had not attempted to initiate anything further than a kiss or a chaste embrace.

And now, the day that they had finally returned home, Monica made this meaningful request. Slaine was not so obtuse a man that he did not understand the implication of her words and what she wanted.

"I understand," said Slaine. "I'd like to spend the night with you as well."

Monica broke into a smile at his answer.

"But," Slaine said, tilting his head with a bit of a troubled expression, "how will we explain to the others why you're staying in my room instead of heading home?"

It had been easy enough to hide when they were on the road, as Monica had been assigned to sleep in Slaine's tent already. In their guest room in Toriet, Monica had made a show of going to sleep in the attached squire's room—but when they were out of sight, she'd secretly climbed into his bed for the night.

But back at the palace, they couldn't continue the same ruse. Monica returned to her father's mansion several times a month, and after a long period of military service, she was surely expected back tonight as well. If she didn't return, then Walter and the rest of her family would naturally become suspicious.

And if Monica went to sleep in the prince's chambers, rather than her own room in the palace, at the very least the guards and maids would notice something had changed between them.

"I already let my father know I wouldn't be home when I greeted him upon our return," said Monica. "I told him that since you have many duties, and are sure to be tired both physically and mentally from battle, I must stay at the palace to see to your needs. My father was understanding, and said he would explain things to my mother as well."

"Don't you think Walter will guess, if you put it like that?"

The noble district of the capital was right beside the royal palace, so it would be easy for Monica to return home after Slaine's dinner and be back for work the next morning.

And yet Monica had insisted she must see to his needs. It was hard to believe that a bright man like Walter hadn't inferred exactly what that meant.

But Monica just laughed at the question. "Perhaps he will, but there's no need to worry. My father would not be angry to learn I've received your favor," she said. "To the contrary, he would be *delighted*. He is an aristocrat, after all."

"Then what about the maids and guards?"

Just then, a serving maid entered the room to clear their empty cups of tea. Slaine clammed up, but Monica continued without concern for the maid's presence.

"That will not be a problem. The ladies here are loyal servants of the royal family, and my colleagues and friends with whom I speak often," said Monica. "Were I to share your bed, my liege, they would not carelessly spread rumors."

The maid in the room gave no response to Monica's words at all—Monica spoke the truth, it seemed. She continued, "The same can be said for the guardsmen. They are your royal shield, my liege. Even were the sky and earth to switch places, they would never divulge your secrets."

Slaine gave it some thought. Her argument was reasonable enough. If these men were so loyal that they were willing to give their lives for the royal family, then of course they would not easily betray him with idle gossip about how he liked to spend the night.

"So please rest assured, my liege," Monica said, placing a hand over his in a coquettish gesture. Her feelings were plain on her face. "You may take me to bed tonight without fear."

Slaine took his time in the bath before he headed back to his chambers for the night.

As he sat alone in his spacious bed to wait, he felt his heart race with nervous excitement. Not a long while later came two light taps on the door.

"Your Royal Highness," called Monica. "May I enter your chambers?"

"Yes, come in," said Slaine.

Monica quietly stepped inside the room. After shutting the doors behind her, she shrugged off her robe to reveal the white nightgown she wore underneath. The dress was neat and elegant, but the thin fabric clearly revealed the graceful lines of her body.

As Slaine gazed upon her like that, her cheeks flushed pink, a little shy.

"Come to my side, Monica," he found himself saying.

"Yes, my liege," she replied in a voice as clear as bells, a happy smile on her face. She made her way across the room with light steps.

She climbed up onto the bed and settled in beside him, turning to face him, and Slaine took both her hands in his.

"First, there's something I need to tell you," said Slaine, a serious expression on his face. "Tonight, we will lie together—but I don't wish to take advantage of you. I love you as a man. I want to be one with you."

Slaine was the heir to the throne, and as such his consort would not be decided by his choice alone.

Of course Slaine wished to be with Monica for the rest of his life, but he could not promise anything tonight that he was not certain that he could keep. It would have been irresponsible to propose marriage before he had received the approval of his advisors to do so—their difference in status and the various ties between the royal family, the Nobles of the Robe, and the various aristocratic families might well prove to be obstacles.

But at the very least, he could make his feelings known. He did not wish to trap her in an ambiguous relationship. It must have taken considerable courage for Monica to have hugged him tight on that day at the camp. She deserved to hear a clear declaration of his love before they slept together.

Monica's eyes widened at Slaine's confession. Tears welled up in the corners of her eyes, so moved that she brought a hand to cover the sob that spilled from her mouth.

When she brought her hand back away, Slaine could see the joyful emotion overflowing from her face. Her tears were happy ones.

"I love you too, my liege," she said, her answer just as clear. "I love you with all my heart. My love, my body, my soul—it all belongs to you."

Hearing this made Slaine unbelievably happy. He smiled, feeling as if he were at the top of the world.

"My liege," Monica said, opening her arms to pull him into her embrace.

Slaine wrapped his arms around her in turn, holding her tight. They looked at each other, smiling, faces so close their noses brushed together, and then fell into a deep kiss.

Smaller and shorter than Monica, Slaine easily toppled over beneath her onto the bed. Their arms and legs and lips intertwined, her body covering his.

"Ah, Monica," Slaine breathed, breaking free of their kiss. "When we're alone together, I'd like it if you'd call me by my name."

Hearing his words, Monica smiled with all her love clear in her eyes. Then, in an elegant motion, she disrobed, exposing her beautiful body to his eyes.

"Slaine," she exhaled. "Please, have all of me."

### **Afterword**

Nice to meet you. My name is Surume Enoki.

Well, everyone, is the connection between parent and child a bond—or is it a curse? Could it be both, shifting in proportion depending on the person? Or must it be only one or the other?

Will peace last forever? Or if it shatters, will it fall apart all at once? And if it does, when will it happen?

We do not have common answers to all these questions—neither for the small, personal ones, nor for the large and extraordinary ones. The answers change from place to place, from era to era, and from person to person. There is no absolute truth shared by all.

This is why we sometimes clash and sometimes empathize with each other's interior thoughts. This ambiguity is at once the boundary between humans and the world, and a source of potential. We may choose either to resign ourselves to our lot, or to see hope in it.

In any case, I did not begin writing with such grandiose ideas in mind, but when I reflect back, I can see these themes in the text of this story.

Truth does not exist, and the world and humanity are both terribly ambiguous. This is why we consider these questions desperately, and decide on the answers for ourselves: to resign ourselves and accept reality, to find hope in reality.

So, too, did Slaine of Hasenvalia. He suffered, but decided on his own how to accept his fate and move forward.

It would be my greatest joy as an author if you can relate to the story of *The Crown of Rutile Quartz*.

My acknowledgments:

To ttl, for giving Slaine and his companions shape and expression, as well as bringing the setting of this work to life.

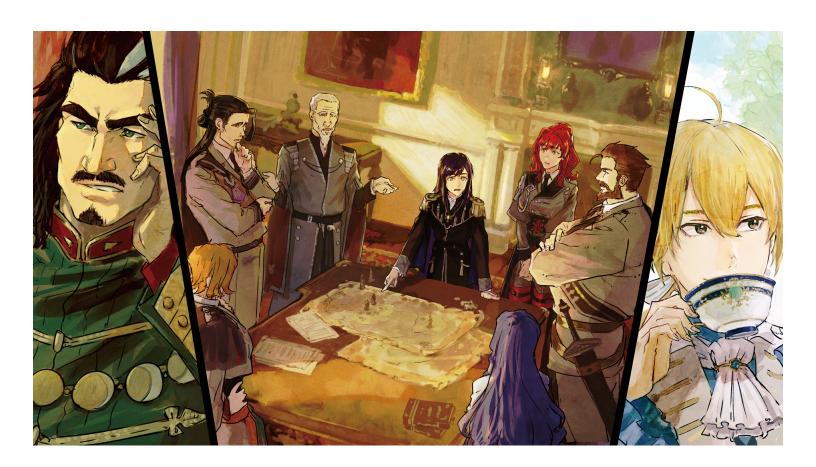
To the editors who worked tirelessly to refine the story and perfect this work to the fullest extent possible.

To the designers, proofreaders, and all others involved in this work.

And to those of you who have supported this work from the serialization of the web version, as well as those of you who encountered this work from the book publication. To all of my readers: I thank you all from the bottom of my heart.

Well, then, everyone: I hope you will continue to follow Slaine as he embraces his bond and his curse, holds on to hope within resignation, and takes the first step in his life as king amidst a most turbulent era.







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