

I

Author: Yukiya Murasaki
Illustrator: himesuz



LTNA

the Sword Princess

I



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ALTINA

the Sword Princess









This time, both sides closed the distance in tandem.
Jerome unleashed a stream of consecutive thrusts,
Altina angling her sword to deflect them one by one.

Seeing her slender arms effortlessly maneuver
the hulking lump of iron as though it were
a twig lacked any sense of realism—it was like
he was watching a badly-produced play.

ALDNOAH. the Story of Princess

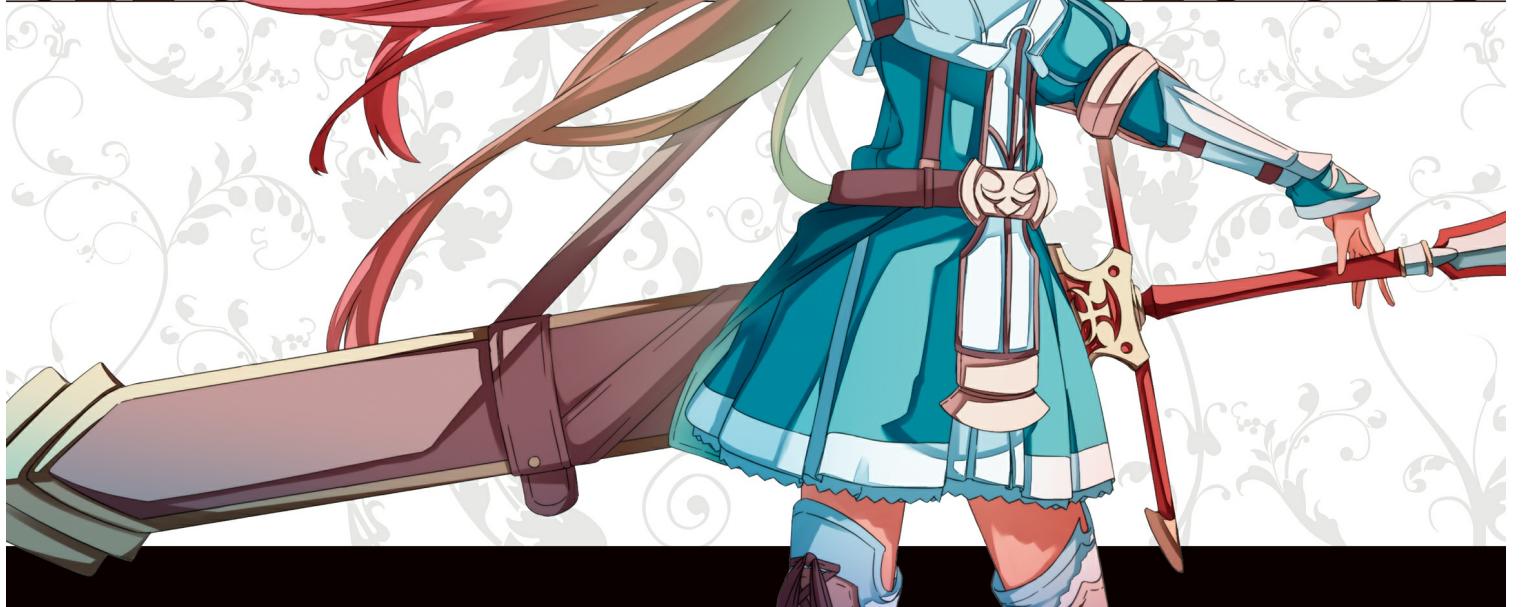




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Transfer Order



Regis Aurick
Fifth-Grade Administrative Officer

Dear soldier,

I hereby order your reassignment
to the border regiment of Beilschmidt.

Imperial Year 850, December 13th
General Alain Deux de Belgaria
Belgarian Empire First Army Commander

Chapter 1: The Girl with Red Hair and Crimson Eyes

The sky hung heavy with clouds the dull gray of lead. *Quite the familiar sight*, Regis mused. The same dreary atmosphere had loomed overhead on the day he received the decree banishing him to the border.

His eyes returned to the land. While the sky above had indeed been recognizable, the town ahead bore few similarities to the capital. He felt no lingering attachment to the marble, the brick and the streetlamps he had grown so accustomed to, but the narrow, walled streets ahead did bring a prison to mind.

This was the border town of Theonveil, over a hundred lieue (444 km) from the capital and a five-day trip by carriage. The streets were dim despite it being the height of noon, and the air carried a cold, stinging bite. This wasn't unusual for a town in the northern outskirts of the nation during the midst of winter, but Regis couldn't help but see the weather as an apt metaphor for the road ahead.

Am I a failure? he wondered. He had lost his lord, his standing and his future, and to add further insult to injury had been exiled to the front lines in the north.

"Can't complain, I guess... Life isn't all about promotions. I'll get more time to read out here."

The caravan arrived just as the church was ringing its afternoon bell. As his fellow travelers scattered in search of lunch, Regis made a beeline for one particular shop that couldn't have been further from an eatery.

Its windows were lined with books, and the wooden door gave way to rows of packed shelves which lined the building's stone interior. The faint scent of paper and ink lingered in the air.

"Ah, I am free where there are books, and such a place shall be my home." A quote from *Coillier Romeros' Travels Through Bourgogne*, he subconsciously

tacked on.

Regis would only go so far as to proclaim himself an avid reader, but he was more truthfully an insatiable book rat—*le rat de bibliothèque*. His eyes passionately traced over the shelf of new releases.

“H-How could this be...!?” his lips quickly trembled.

“Hm? Something wrong, soldier?” the bearded man behind the back counter called over. His muscular build and the scar across his cheek made him look more like an instructor from a military academy than the keeper of a bookstore.

Almost oblivious to his overpowering aura, Regis parted his lips again to speak.

“I can’t find Coillier’s newest work. In fact, I don’t see Count Ludosel or Professor Illue here, either... Are they all sold out? I know they’re awfully popular, but this selection is terrible.”

“Well, soldier, I take it you came from central.”

“Yeah, I just arrived from the capital...”

“Ah, then that explains your confusion. Those sorta books don’t sell out here, so we rarely stock them, if ever.”

“...Could... Could you please... repeat that...?”

Regis’s voice escaped gravelly as though he were stranded and pleading for water in the desert. His throat had dried up in the blink of an eye. This all elicited little more than a shrug from the storekeeper, and it became very quickly apparent that he wasn’t joking.

“This is a war zone. The only profit to be had is in tales of heroics and eroticism. Just have a look at our best seller.”

The title he pointed out read, “How to Write Your Will without Regrets.”

This can’t be happening! Regis screamed internally as he hugged his head.

“H-Hold on a tick... You don’t stock such famous best-sellers? Am I really still in Belgaria? Have I, by chance, taken a wrong turn into a barbarian settlement?”

“No, this is indeed Belgaria. Although it was only fifty years ago that we

belonged to the country one over.”

“Erk... And what’s the deal with these prices? This is more than ten times what it goes for in the capital...”

Having finally found a book that caught his eye, Regis had picked it up to have a closer look, but he was already on the verge of tears.

“Books are heavy and bandits are rampant—it’s a trial and a half just to get them here. Not to mention the tiny customer base... In these parts, books are just another expensive hobby for the upper class,” the bearded storekeeper indifferently explained.

“Dear Lord, why!?”

“Yeah, sorry about that...”

The shopkeeper reached to take the book from the distraught Regis, who hurriedly pressed it against his chest in a panic.

“Wait, wait, wait, I never said I wasn’t buying it!”

“Huh, are you serious!? By the look of things, you’re still a young recruit. I know it’s in my best interests to make a sale, but... Pardon me, would that not cost a whole week of your salary?”

“Ghhh... This is hell...” Regis groaned.

It was at that moment the storekeeper blurted out an awry “Oh!?” as his eyes shot open. Regis traced the man’s line of sight as he turned.

There in the doorway stood a girl, her form emblazoned by the light streaming in from outside.

She was a lovely-looking young woman with blazing crimson hair and red, ruby-like eyes. She had to be around thirteen or fourteen years old. While some immature features lingered on her face, she carried a charm that caught the eye and kept it—enough so that he was subconsciously taken in.



She raised her index finger in front of her lips.

Be quiet? But why? What could she mean?

To have another customer patronize the store was far from unusual, and yet Regis could feel a peculiar unrest.

The girl lowered her gesture before parting her lips.

“There are plenty of conscripts who lament the hell of the battlefield upon being dispatched to the front lines, but I reckon you’re the first to do so in a bookshop,” she said in a refreshingly clear voice. An energetic smile crossed her face before she continued.

“We finally meet! You’re Fifth-Grade Administrative Officer Regis Aurick, correct?”

“Huh? Oh, me?”

“Oh, are you not?”

“No, ah—yes, I am! I am Regis.”

“Excellent! I was starting to think I had the wrong person. I’m not too sure what I would’ve done had that been the case...”

Her relieved smile carried an innocence befitting her age.

Regis soon felt a strange warmth spread across his cheeks. The girl before his eyes was clearly so beautiful that— No, that wasn’t it. He was simply ashamed by how flustered he had acted simply because an evidently younger girl had called his name.

“Wait, my name... Why do you know my name?”

“When you’ve been sent to retrieve someone, it’s fairly crucial to at least remember their name, no? Please don’t regard me as though I’m some stupid child.”

“Oh, no, that wasn’t my intention at all. I see now, you’re here for me.”

Regis took another look at the girl. She wore a brown hooded robe, under which he caught a glimpse of leather pants and boots; common attire for a coachman.

“If you’re here from the fort, does that make you a soldier?”

“You tell me. Do I look like one?”

“No... probably not. You’re underage, aren’t you?”

“Correct. I just turned fourteen.”

The age of adulthood in the Belgarian Empire was fifteen. Barring extreme circumstances, minors were unable to enlist in the military.

“I see. Then you must be the driver of a hired carriage. I had planned on taking the public stagecoach. To have a personal escort, I must be quite the VIP.”

“Are you glad to receive such special attention?”

“It makes me a little depressed, honestly. It’s like they’re telling me to hurry up and get back to work.”

“Fufu, you’re surprisingly honest.”

“I’m not one to lie.”

“Is that so? But you’re... a tactician, are you not?”

The girl stared at him with her ruby eyes. Regis could feel an indescribable intensity from the girl four years his junior.

“...Well, there are some who would call me that... I only enlisted with the intention of working in the military library.”

“Sounds like an interesting story. How about we continue it on the road?”

“Sure...”

Feeling almost unable to breathe, Regis tugged at his collar in a feeble attempt to loosen it. Meanwhile, the crimson-haired girl was urging him outside.

“Come on, we need to go. The clouds are getting heavier; there’s a good chance it might snow soon.”

“You’re right. —Ah, I nearly forgot!”

Just as he was making his way out, Regis suddenly recalled his position and

returned to the shopkeeper. He placed the money for the book on the counter.

“I’ll be purchasing this. Hm? What’s wrong? You’re not looking too good.”

“No, I’m fine. Come again anytime, soldier.” While Regis couldn’t begin to guess the reason, the bearded storekeeper had lowered his head, one hand rested across his mouth. He seemed to be holding in words.

The girl once again approached, although this time with a visibly sour expression.

“Are you an idiot, perhaps!?”

“W-What’s this, all of a sudden...?”

“In these borderlands, books are far too expensive a pastime. Only the rich and the foolish would shell out such a fortune!”

“Well, not that I’d ever call myself a smart man... but the lust for knowledge is, to me, the most glorious aspect of human nature. It’s what defines us as human, and abiding by that base instinct through reading is what gives me purpose, no matter the expense. My funds may run dry but, the way I see it, giving up on reading is no different from giving up on life.”

Only after he’d finished did Regis shut his lips tight, ashamed he had gotten so worked up over a comment from a child. Her eyes were still fixed on him, her expression now serious to a surprising degree. She gave a low nod.

“The same as giving up on life... I see. I may be able to sympathize. I also...”

“You also...?”

“Ah, nothing! We need to go!”

“Oh, yes, of course.”

Regis wedged his freshly-bought book under one arm, snatched up his baggage and trailed the girl out of the shop. A small, covered one-horse wagon was parked under the eaves, from which a lean, dark brown horse peered at him.

The girl’s long hair fluttered as she nimbly jumped up onto the cabman’s perch which was at waist-height.

“C’mon, hurry up!”

“Sure... What’s your name, by the way?” Regis asked, looking up at her.

The look in her eyes sharpened. She lowered her voice, clearly enunciating each syllable to end all discussion.

“I. Will. Leave. You. Be. Hind.”

He hurriedly clambered up into the seat beside her. Now was clearly not the right time to ask.

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With a clitter-clatter, the wooden wheels stumbled their way across the earthen road. They passed through the northern gate of the town’s stone walls. Their destination was the frontmost line, Fort Sierck.

The girl sat in the driver’s seat with a firm grasp on the reins. To her right, Regis sat holding his baggage. There was a canopied wagon bed behind them that seemed to be loaded with lumber and brick.

“—So, you wanted my name?”

“Right. What am I supposed to call you?”

“Let me see...”

The girl touched the fingertip of a stiff-gloved hand to her shapely chin in thought. *Was there any need to think about that?* Regis doubtfully wondered.

Her tight lips finally loosened.

“Yes. You may call me Altina.”

“Is that an alias?” he asked thoughtlessly, given that she had taken so long to answer. But doing so was a clear mistake—the girl named Altina furrowed her brow.

“...How rude... It’s a lovely nickname, is it not? I was considering giving you special permission to use it, but perhaps I should take that back?”

“I’m sorry, beg pardon, I would be honored to call you Altina!”

“Very well then, I’ll allow it. ...If you insist.”

“I insist.”

“Hm... You’re not very soldier-like, you know that?”

“Haha, I’m aware.” As Regis gave a bitter laugh, Altina was led along into a smile of her own.

Farms of wheat spread out on either side of the road they traveled. With it being winter, these bore nothing but lines of small seedlings indistinguishable from the undergrowth. The world had become a bichrome of gray sky and barren earth.

Altina spoke with her eyes facing forward.

“Hey, you didn’t volunteer to come here, did you?”

“No, I was more than happy working in the military library. To be honest, I only joined because I was having trouble finding the money to live, let alone buy books. ...Come to think of it, does Fort Sierck have a library?”

“I get the feeling that’s what they’ll be calling your room, eventually.”

“Quite the novel observation...” he muttered blankly.

“Hm, was that an attempt at a pun?”

“Ah, n-no, I wasn’t—”

“Heh. What did you even do in your previous unit?”

“Eh? Have you started to doubt that I’m even a soldier?”

“Not quite. I’m talking about what you had to do to get shipped off to the front lines.”

“Ah. I believe it’s my punishment for losing a battle.”

“And you just accepted that? You’re a fledgling non-commissioned officer. Isn’t it strange for someone of your status to take such responsibility when you aren’t even in command of any troops? Did something happen?”

Regis cast his eyes into the distance, beyond the seedlings lining the wheat fields to the highs and lows of the mountains beyond the horizon.

“...He was a good man.”

“Who was?”

“My previous employer. I was never any good at swordsmanship or horse-riding; I was always behind everyone else at the military academy. Only Marquis Thénezay would employ a failure like me.”

“A failure? I’ve heard rumors that you were undefeated when it came to strategizing.”

“You’re surprisingly knowledgeable. I wonder who you could have heard that from... Rumors are always embellished, you see. Military stratagems may have been my one saving grace, but those were never real battles. It was more akin to playing chess.”

“But, if I’m not mistaken, Thénezay hired you as a tactician, not to play chess.”

“I was at the bottom of a rather lengthy totem pole. I was only fifteen when I left school and all; I was an apprentice, so to speak.”

“Bottom or not—apprentice or not—it’s still pretty amazing for a commoner to become a staff officer at such a young age... Were you dissatisfied with your position?”

“Perish the thought! The marquis may have hired me on a whim but, even so, I felt a deep debt of gratitude toward him. I still do.”

That was precisely why the corners of his eyes grew warm and wet when he thought back to their parting. Regis hugged the luggage in his arms tight, squashing the leather bag.

“...The marquis said he needed me. And yet... I... practically left him to die.”

His voice was so low it was hard to recognize as his own. Altina’s expression was steadfast.

“If I recall, it was during the summer campaign—”

“Yeah...”

She’s pretty in the know for a hired coachman, Regis thought. Did life on the front lines make her interested in the state of the war? Is she just a weirdo? Or is there a deeper reason behind her interest that I just can’t see?

“What do you mean you left him to die?”

“Well, this is little more than my opinion...”

“Then I want to hear your opinion on the matter. Not through rumors. I need to hear it directly from you. That’s why I’m... Hey. Just tell me.”

He thought for a while. There was still a long road ahead, and it was hardly something he could hide; he’d already divulged everything at the court-martial, and it was even in the imperial weekly paper.

About that summer day—the words cast and the expressions he witnessed would never leave his head and yet, when it came time to speak, he had no idea where to begin. He needed some time to put his thoughts in order.

“...During the battle... Marquis Thénezay implemented the chief tactician’s proposal. Well, I’ll spare you the details. They were going up against, at most, five hundred barbarians with an imperial army three thousand strong. Victory was a foregone conclusion, and, rather than the battle, the council discussion was turning more toward what wine would best accompany the duck for dinner.”

“They were throwing a victory party before the battle had even begun?”

“It’s not too rare. The imperial army is strong, after all. The problem was, we had absolutely no countermeasures for if the enemy flanked us and took our rear.”

“But the enemies were barbarians. Would they really attempt something so intricate?”

“Admittedly, with their lack of coordination, it would be difficult for them to pull off such complicated maneuvers successfully. That’s why they tend to prefer head-on collisions. However, there are records of barbarians attempting sneak attacks in cases where the difference in troops is just too great. We needed to be more wary—I advised them of this twice. But the chief tactician merely laughed me off as a coward, proudly telling the marquis that his only concern from the rear would be his obscured view of our victory...”

“And so you were driven from the war council.”

“Yeah...”

Regis recalled a similar exchange at the court-martial where he had felt as though he were being interrogated. Even now, he wondered what would have happened had he braved the inevitable harsh reprimand to advise them a third time. The surprise attack could have been prevented simply by placing someone on watch.

“Do you blame yourself?” Altina asked quietly.

“...I was so fearful of what punishment would come after my banishment... I couldn’t bring myself to intervene a third time.”

“That chief tactician was a noble, wasn’t he?”

“I think so...?”

“In that case, he couldn’t have upheld a commoner’s advice no matter how many times you tried. I’m sure Marquis Thénezay would not have done anything that risked soiling the name of the noble he had appointed to the position.”

“Ah...”

A commoner born and bred, Regis, who was quite unfamiliar with noble society, hadn’t realized the marquis was attempting to save face for the chief tactician. If only he’d given it just a little more thought. He had not been lacking in information, after all—their status and house relations had been no secret.

“Which means you don’t have to beat yourself up over it,” Altina consoled.

“No, now that you mention it, there were plenty of flags that should have tipped me off. It was my blunder to have not taken the reputation of nobles into consideration. If I had advised the marquis in private, rather than at the strategy meeting, then just maybe...!”

Regis grit his teeth. The pit of his stomach grew heavy and the corners of his eyes grew hot, his vision blearing.

“Regis Aurick!” Altina raised a dignified voice.

“Yes!?” Rather than the sudden mention of his name, it was the intensity of the voice that caught him off guard this time. He could hardly believe it had

come from a cab driver.

“It’s already said and done. You did your best, did you not?”

“...Yeah, perhaps. But I don’t want to believe the marquis died for something as worthless as a noble’s prestige. It was surely my thoughtlessness.” *A bit too late, I know,* Regis added to himself.

Altina nodded back. He watched as a small, white grain grazed her face from above, causing him to look up at the sky. A number of white shadows fluttered their way down.

“Snow...” she muttered.

Regis shrugged.

“Snow on my first day... Talk about a warm welcome. Ahaha...”

“You won’t be laughing when this becomes a blizzard.”

“...You’re right.”

“Have you ever lived in the north?”

“I’ve read about it in books.”

“...I see. We’re picking up the pace—hold on to something!” Altina let out a noise that blended anger and amazement as she cracked her whip at the horse.

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A wolf cried out in the distance. Its familiar howl was a symbol of fear for all travelers, and as it turned out, for the horse pulling the cart as well. It suddenly gave a grand shake of its head and veered off the road.

“Get back!” Altina tugged at the reins.

The horse neighed.

Regis froze.

The cart meandering down the snow-piled path gouged out damp earth as it suddenly slid and ended up at a diagonal. The wood and brick loaded in the canopied bed behind them took a noisy tumble that ended with the ominous sound of snapping wood.

An impact to the rear set Regis's body momentarily afloat.

"Waaaah!?"

"Bear with it!"

It was Regis who had screamed, Altina gripping his shoulder in an attempt to hold him down. He barely avoided falling from his seat.

The cart had come to a halt smack-dab in the middle of the road.

The horse came to a stop and brayed. It seemed to be aware of its mistake, its behavior almost anxious, like a child waiting to be scolded.

Altina jumped down from her seat, huddled up to the horse, and caressed its head.

"Are you okay? Are you injured?"

The horse answered with a chuff. Regis had no idea what it had meant but noticed Altina's subsequent concern over its right hind leg.

"Is it in danger?"

"...He'll run if you force him, but... if his leg worsens much more, he'll have to be put down."

Altina stroked the horse as she let out a sigh. She removed the harness to let it rest, though she made sure to fasten a rope to prevent it from straying.

Regis gazed at the hazy horizon beyond the snow.

"Is it far to Fort Sierck?"

"Around five lieue (22 km)... but we won't make it if we walk from here."

"Why?"

"A blizzard is coming. And we have no lantern, so the night will be pitch black. If we lose our path and wander into the fields, we could walk till dawn and still never reach the fortress. We could even fall into a ditch."

"Well, I'd rather not walk five lieue with my luggage to begin with."

"Are you really a soldier!?"

"Haha... I was always terrible at the loaded march. I would end up stranded

from the rest, and at that point it became more survival training than marching.”

Altina sighed again and pressed her fingers against her temples.

“What should we do?” Regis tilted his head.

“Shouldn’t the tactician be the one coming up with ideas here?”

“No, I may have some skill in moving troops, but... this is a job for a peddler, adventurer, or soldier.”

“You *are* a soldier!”

“Oh, right.”

“You really are something!”

“Hey, just stay calm, Altina. These things generally tend to work themselves out.”

“Oh, you’re right. I’m sure that, after the two of us have frozen to death in the blizzard, everything will be *fine*.”

“That’s a little harsh...”

“So do you really not have any ideas?”

“Hm, let’s see... I guess I could give this a read.”

Regis took out the book he’d purchased in town.

“Ah, you bought a book for this very situation? I should expect no less from a top strategist.”

“Well, uh, this piece is about a fairy who appears before a young boy, making six beautiful women from his storybook come to life. It is a complete work of fiction, and—”

“Are you stupid!? This is no time to read such nonsense!”

“Nonsense? How rude. I believe you owe the author an apology.”

“If you freeze to death, you’ll never be able to read again! The closest you’ll get to a story’ll be the priest reading you your last rites!”

“That’s precisely why... I at least want to read the last book I bought.”

“You’ve given up way too quickly!”

“I’m kidding, I’m kidding. But panicking will get us nowhere; we should be level-headed in this situation. First off, let’s move to the wagon. The cover should be a slight improvement, at least.”

“...You have a point.” There was already snow piling onto Altina’s head and shoulders when she climbed into the wagon.

The skid had forced the loaded lumber and brick to one side. Regis lowered himself down in the now empty spot, and Altina took a seat nearby.

“You were right. We’re protected from the wind in here.”

“It’s still pretty cold, though.”

“We can’t do much about that. Once we get to the fort, I swear the first thing I’m going to do is take a hot bath.”

“A hot bath? That’s quite the luxury for a cab driver... Are you, by chance, acquainted with some higher-up at the fort?”

“Urp.”

For some reason, Altina was at a loss for words. Not too far off, he inferred.

“I guess I’ll find out once we reach the fort.”

“*If we reach the fort...*”

The snow and wind grew in strength, making for a genuine blizzard. It was fierce enough to reach the inside of the canopy. Altina’s shoulders shivered uncontrollably.

“Brr...”

Regis tried thumbing through a book in his memory.

“It’s best not to move in this situation.”

“Is that so?”

“Rather than wasting energy, we’re better off waiting for another carriage to pass by. How many people in the fort know about your absence? Would they forget about a hired driver? Do you have friends waiting for you?”

“I-I don’t know... I’m pretty sure they haven’t forgotten about me. They should be... worried. Probably.”

“Then there’s a high chance a search party will come before night falls. There’s only one road between the fort and town. They shouldn’t hesitate if they already know where you should be.”

“I see... You’re pretty clever.”

“I’m just using the information I’ve learned from other people.”

I’ve just read a similar tale in a book, Regis thought. That was all it was to him.

“Now that that’s settled, we need to use what we have to stave off the cold.”

Altina shot up.

“Ah, that’s right. I’ve got just the thing!”

“Mn?”

“We have a cloth with us... though it is rather small.”

Altina pulled a rough piece of cloth from under the lumber as she spoke.

“It really *is* small.”

“But it’s thick and warm. Use it.”

“Thanks... but I’d like you to use it instead.”

“Oh...?”

“I know I may not seem like one, but I’m still a soldier. Is it not a soldier’s duty to protect the empire’s citizens?”

“That is the official stance, at least...”

“I’m being serious here.”

“Hm. You’re an interesting one, you know that? All right then, how about this?”

Altina returned triumphantly with the cloth, sat on Regis’s left, and huddled up close to him. Her right arm wrapped tightly around his left.

“W-What are you doing!?”

“Voilà! Now one blanket can warm two.”

“Ah... I-I see.”

Her body heat far outweighed the warmth of the blanket, and before he knew it his heartbeat had accelerated something awful. He could even feel droplets of sweat start to form on his back.

Regis negotiated with himself. *Calm down, would you? She's a fourteen-year-old child—a minor by all accounts. She's definitely pretty, but to become so flustered over our intertwined arms is a disgrace. Are you not an adult?*

Altina's face drew near.

“Are you okay? Your face has turned somewhat red...”

“It's— It's nothing.”

“That so...?”

Then came the silence, broken only in part by Altina's breathing which was almost indistinguishable beneath the harsh howls of the wind.

“...Regis?”

“Yeah?”

“I think you're a very peculiar person.”

“Ha... I get that a lot.”

“That soldiers should protect citizens is an empty platitude. There are many who believe the soldiers are far more important and valuable.”

“Perhaps... but shouldn't those with power protect those without? After all, that's the very reason humans form societies. Just as an adult would protect a child, it's only natural for the strong to defend the weak. That's why a soldier should protect their fellow citizens. That's how I see it.”

“Which means the aristocrats should protect the commoners, and the emperor his populace?”

“In an ideal world. But now pointless wars waged by nobles expend both the commoners' lives and assets.”

“Is the war with the barbarians really pointless? It’s proven impossible to make peace with them, and to lose would mean the deaths of all of us.”

“...I’ll agree, the barbarians are terrifying. But if we earnestly wanted to protect our land and people, we would pull back to a more defensible position and build a long, sturdy wall.”

“Couldn’t they just scale it?”

“Maybe, but their cavalry and carriages wouldn’t be able to pass through so easily. It’d be enough to deter a large-scale advance.”

“Oh, you have a point... I wonder why the generals haven’t done that. Has the idea never occurred to them?”

“It’s not that. The strategies I propose have long been written about in books propagated through the empire a hundred times over. The elites refuse to take such preventative measures because war is their business. For one, grand victories against the barbarians raise the military’s reputation. Weapons and food are also required for war, both of which can go for a pretty penny. And there’s also the military academies where troops are trained, which are a source of income for aristocrats. While it may burden the nation as a whole, war brings considerable profit to those in power.”

“That’s unforgivable!”

Altina’s face closed in once more, practically snapping at him. Regis was forced to pull his body back, though their linked arms prevented his escape.

“C-Calm down, Altina... I never said everyone in the upper echelon was cut from that same cloth. In fact, Marquis Thénezay was different.”

“...Was he?”

“Yeah. He even sent a report directly to the emperor opposing the continued expansion of the empire’s territory. He wanted to instead focus on stabilizing the land we already have. He proposed the construction of walls during the aristocratic conference.”

“It’s a wonderful idea! If the war ends, both poverty and death should go down by a large margin.” Regis had gotten Altina’s eyes sparkling— And then

she went quiet. Her expression turned grim for an instant.

“...Could it be, that’s why...?”

“Mn? What’s wrong, Altina?”

“No, my mind wandered to something unimportant. Still, I see. There are various sorts among nobles as well.”

“Yeah, which is why we’re in serious hot water unless the emperor gets a grip,” Regis said bitterly.

Altina winced. It was a small motion, but one that was easily noticeable due to her close proximity.

“...Would you say the current emperor is... misguided?”

“I’d rather not be tried for treason on top of everything else that’s happened, but...”

It was possible he had already said too much. That being the case, they were trapped in a blizzard. His only audience was Altina and her horse. Regis loosened his tongue.

“The current emperor has been on the throne for too long. He’s grown too old to maintain his official station. By all accounts, he should have abdicated to the first prince five years ago, but the first prince is of feeble constitution, while the second has shown talent in both governance and warfare. It’s little wonder that the second prince is the one with the stronger backing, too.”

“It really is convoluted...”

While born first, the first prince was the son of the second concubine, whereas the second prince was mothered by the legal wife, the empress. As a noble, the empress enjoyed a much higher status, too. This had led to a problem of succession in the empire.

“A struggle of succession between two princes... is more so a power struggle between their backers. This has extended the withered emperor’s time on the throne, allowing the nobles to do as they please and causing a wash of decay across our nation.”

“What about the other imperial children?”

"There's a third prince but—well—he's still a fifteen-year-old student. I doubt he'll ever rise to rival his brothers."

"T-There's one more... isn't there?"

"Mn? Oh... Come to think of it, the commander at Fort Sierck was royalty, wasn't she?"

"Right! W-What about her!?"

Altina closed in a third time, causing Regis to retreat to the right. He was now on the verge of falling out of the wagon.

"The Arrow-Sparrow Princess, eh...?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It's the nickname of the fourth princess, Marie Quatre. Her real name is so long that no one remembers it."

"Well, I suppose it *is* a bit long..."

"I think it was Marie Quatre Argentina de Belgaria... I'm good at remembering stories, but I've always had trouble when it comes to long names."

"Don't push yourself," Altina muttered somewhat sarcastically. "I want to hear more about the 'Arrow-Sparrow Princess.'"

"I'm going to be under her command, so I wouldn't want it to be taken as slander... It's just what she's known as in the capital."

"Yes, but what does it mean?"

"I only know the details second-hand... but I suppose we've got plenty of time to spare. This is the tale of a pitiful princess sent off to the furthest border—"

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Fifteen years prior—

To further contextualize our narrative, let us begin with the tale of Marie Quatre's mother.

The imperial capital of Verseilles was ablaze in celebration with the grand

party to celebrate His Imperial Highness's fiftieth birthday. The court orchestra played a waltz and the tables were lined to the brim with extravagant dishes, all while the generals offered their congratulations with the war reports they had brought as gifts. A party so grand that it put all others to shame: they had invited not only influential aristocrats and notorious tycoons but even low-ranking nobles and their families.

Among the commoners at the foot of the table sat a breathtaking beauty. Her night-black hair and obsidian eyes were an avid contrast to her snow-white skin, making it appear even whiter in comparison.

And vying for the attention of this young woman going on sixteen was, of all people, the emperor himself, who had stepped down from the throne and parted the crowds to approach her.

“Would you care for a dance, mademoiselle?”

By the official record of the imperial scribe, Claudette Barthélemy gave a polite curtsey before replying: “With pleasure, monsieur. To whom do I owe the honor?”

There are a number of theories as to why she had asked the emperor's name. The theory that she just hadn't noticed who she was talking with seemed far too insulting to be true. That she had noticed but persisted with the proper etiquette drilled into her, or was rather a brazen woman who dared to joke with His Majesty, were much more convincing speculations. The truth of the matter was one saved for her alone.

The black-haired beauty reached out her hand, which the emperor accepted with a smile.

“How rude of me. I am Liam Fernandi de Belgaria. The people address me as Liam XV.”

“Please, call me Claudette.”

After a moment's hesitation, the conductor hailed as the best in the empire waved his baton, and the orchestra sprung to life.

This would later come to be known as the Claudette incident.

One year later—

Claudette, now seventeen, became the fourth concubine of the emperor. Her name was changed to 'Mary Claudette de Belgaria.' Rumors spread that she was pregnant even during the wedding.

Before the emperor greeted his fifty-first birthday, the concubine bore the empire's fourth successor. As the fourth child, she was given the name Marie Quatre Argentina de Belgaria. While she was officially a legitimate daughter of the emperor, the world at large saw her as a bastard child.

When the grand chamberlain reported the birth of the fourth child, it is said Liam XV asked, "Is his hair red?"

The first emperor of Belgaria bore the moniker *L'Empereur Flamme* (The Flame Emperor). He was a man of crimson hair and red eyes, with a particularly muscular body. He crushed the surrounding barbarian tribes with his greatsword and carved the very foundations of the empire.

Liam XV himself, while now frail, was tall with crimson hair and red eyes. His three sons shared his eye color, but they had inherited the blonde and brown hair of their mothers and could hardly be described as well-built. While Liam XV had grown distant from both military and political affairs, it pained his heart to see the first emperor's blood grow thin.

"Your Majesty, the baby does indeed have red hair, but she is a girl," the grand chamberlain responded with a reverent bow.

That was seemingly where Liam XV's interest in the fourth princess came to an end.

It was an unbearable disgrace to the prominent aristocrats that he would choose a mere peasant as his mistress. If Claudette's child was born a man, perhaps he would have been nipped in the bud. As a matter of fact, rumor had it the first prince's feeble body was the result of poison.

Fortunately for her, Marie Quatre was born female and thus grew up peacefully to the age of thirteen. While a princess, she studied swordplay and politics; her eccentricities did stand out, but they never escalated beyond a joke in the courts. Yet a problem was to arise when the time came for her to enter

the social world.

Marie Quatre possessed a striking beauty that exceeded even that of her mother.

Around that time, a honey-faced bard with a baritone was gaining attention and popularity in high society. The empress had invited said man to the imperial court, but alas—the moment he passed by Marie Quatre, the minstrel broke into song in praise of her beauty:

*"Oh, what a wondrous day it is,
A sun as bright as thee.
Thy rousing flames ensnare my heart,
And steal my words from me."*

This enraged the empress. The bard was immediately chased from the court and banished from high society.

But her problems did not end there. The empress's own son—Second Prince Alain Deux Latrielle de Belgaria—was a man whose wit was sharp as a knife. While he was only appointed to command the First Army, by the age of twenty-three he had gained de facto control over the entirety of the imperial armed forces in place of the elderly emperor and feeble first prince.

Latrielle offered a proposal to his withered father.

"If the beautiful princess takes command, it will raise troop morale. I propose we entrust her with the stagnant northern front."

With his decision, it was clear Liam XV's affection toward Claudette had fully waned.

Imperial year 850—

The old emperor sat on his throne, cold-smiling nobles lining both sides of the red carpet. Marie Quatre's mother, Claudette, was nowhere to be seen.

Marie's crimson hair flowed down her shoulders like a magnificent waterfall as she lowered her head.

"Long live the emperor."

"....."

Liam XV returned only a nod. The grand chamberlain unfurled the decree and read it aloud in the name of the emperor.

Regardless of the fact she was still a minor, Marie Quatre was appointed to take command of the Beilschmidt border regiment.

Snickers broke out among the nobles. No one who knew the princess's true mind was in attendance.

After the chamberlain stood down, the old emperor softly asked:

"...Do you desire a parting gift?"

It was customary to ask as such whenever a blood relative left the capital and, as per tradition, the expected response was, "Your majesty, your words alone are more than I deserve." However, Marie Quatre puffed out her chest to the contrary.

"Please bestow upon me the sword of *L'Empereur Flamme!*" she declared.

The hall was quickly astir with outrage, the nobles directing blatant eyes of disgust in her direction. Words of disdain flickered through the air, backbiting her as a 'panhandler' and an 'impudent wretch.'

The emperor, however, thought over her request.

"...The first emperor had seven swords. As you are my fourth child, I shall lend you his fourth sword. When you someday return to the capital, you are to return it to the treasury."

The fourth treasured blade. The soldiers carted in a double-edged sword of absurd proportions—it was the *Grand Tonnerre Quatre* (The Emperor's Thunder IV). The massive sword was made to complement the first emperor's imposing height, putting it at 26 palms (192 cm) long.

While Marie Quatre was indeed on the tall side for a girl, this slight advantage

was rendered meaningless before such a comical piece; to call the treasured sword bulky would be a severe understatement.

Vulgar sneers rained down from the nobles. Surely the princess would pathetically decline upon seeing she was unable to carry the sword—a great many could picture the sight.

The girl bowed. Gripping the large sword's hilt in her right hand, she supported its sheathed body with her left.

"I will graciously... borrow it...!"

Marie Quatre braced her whole body. The marble floor creaked and grated below her as she raised the sword.

The laughs that had suffused the room just moments ago faded into silent awe.

The princess carried in hand a massive sword taller than she was.

"...I accept the burden of my appointment."

She gave the old emperor another deep bow, rising to the cold expression of Second Prince Latrielle and the scornful glare of the empress.

One can only guess what crossed Marie Quatre's head at the time. She turned on her heels and left the silenced throne room behind her.

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"—And that's about it. How's that for a story?"

The blizzard pummeled against the canopy. No sooner had Regis wrapped up his tale than did Altina intervene.

"Hold on a second."

"Yes?"

"Just what part of that did the Arrow-Sparrow Princess nickname come from!?"

"Oh, that. The princess wears her massive sword on her waist, doesn't she?"

"What's strange about that? How else would she wear it? A sword that long

would drag along the floor if she tried to wear it on her back.”

“So you’ve seen it? Does she wear it like that at Fort Sierck, too?”

“Ahem. Well, yes... I’ve definitely seen it before.”

“Then try picturing it. When the peasants and soldiers see small Marie Quatre wearing her massive sword at her hip, they liken her to a poor sparrow speared by an arrow.”

“What!?”

Altina froze with her eyes open wide.

“Up to that point, rumors had focused on her beauty alone. After all, she rarely appeared before the people so there were no other noteworthy anecdotes. But it looks like the new nickname has overshadowed all previous praise. I must admit, I’ve never actually seen her—I was away on the battlefield when this all started.”

“Grr...”

“Are you okay? Your shoulders are trembling... Here, I’ll give you some more of the blanket.”

“That’s not necessary! And I’m fine! What reason would I have not to be!?”

“Please keep it a secret from her. The last thing I’d want is for her to hate me as soon as I arrive.”

“At ease, soldier. She isn’t so immature as to hate someone over the mere mention of a rumor.”

Regis shrugged.

“I hope so... Right, are you hungry? You haven’t had lunch, have you?”

“What have you got?”

“I was planning to eat as I read, so I left myself some bread...”

He opened his leather bag and brushed aside his sword. It took some searching but eventually, out came a hard-baked roll of bread.

“...Though what I’d really like right now is a spot of warm milk.”

“So you’ll share some with me?”

“I’ve already told you my principles. But I won’t force you to eat if you don’t want to.”

“...I want some.”

Regis smiled, tore the roll in two and handed one half to Altina.

“Here.”

“Thank you... Smiles come in all sorts,” Altina muttered, staring at her half-loaf of bread.

“What are you talking about?” Regis swallowed down a bite before asking.

“...I’ve seen many smiles a lot colder than yours.”

“Hm? Where might that be?”

“The court.”

Altina stuck her teeth deep into the crust.

At that moment, the horse brayed. It was sharp, pressing, like a cry for help. The duo swiftly poked their heads out of the tarp, looking toward the driver’s seat.

“W-What is it...?”

“Over there!”

Altina pointed in front of the cart, beyond the rattling forelegs of the horse.

Black shadows in the snow. Their yellow eyes gleamed in the dark. Five mouths, their sharp teeth stained with blood.

Regis felt as if a demon had seized his heart.

“...Wolves.”

“Gray wolves.”

“F-Fire... We need to throw a torch. Uh... Do you have a tinderbox!?”

“Calm down, Regis! If I had one, do you not think I would’ve mentioned it sooner?”

“Erk... Right.”

“Our horse is in danger unless we do something.”

“And we’re surely next in line... Gnn...!”

Regis withdrew into the covered wagon. He grabbed the sword he’d tossed aside, let out a sharp exhale and raced out the back of the cart.

Altina took a long hard look at him and sighed.

“So much for protecting the citizens...”

No matter what stuck-up words had escaped his mouth before, it was another story entirely once one’s life was on the line. Altina knew this all too well. *So he’s just like the rest of them*, she thought.

But Regis didn’t run away. Instead, he circled around in front of the cart.

He picked out the largest of the five gray wolves and directed his sword at it.

“Gnn...!!”

“W-What do you think you’re doing!? Gray wolves are vicious beasts! Even a knight would have trouble facing one head-on!”

“I know, but I don’t have any other options!”

Regis’s sword hand was likely not shaking from the cold alone. His stance was on the level of an amateur—no, even worse than that. His back was stooped, his hips weak; he looked as though he would keel over backward at any moment.

Even a child playing pretend would have adopted a more confident stance.

Altina held her head in her hands.

“Can you really win like that!?”

“Haha... I don’t mean to brag but, when it comes to sparring, I’ve never won once in my entire life.”

“You really aren’t bragging!”

“Altina, now’s your chance to escape. Take the horse and force it to run. You’ll both be wolf feed otherwise.”

“Are you serious!? You’re going to die!” Her yell approached a panicked shriek.

Regis smiled. It wasn’t an attempt to put her at ease, nor was it indicative of some miraculous trick he had up his sleeve. No, the smile had come to him naturally. He didn’t know why, either.

“That may be so... But to surrender my principles would be a fate worse than death.”

“...!?” Altina swallowed her breath.

Even Regis found it a mystery. Why was he smiling in the face of certain death? Was he deriding his own idiocy? No, that was far too pessimistic. With no other explanation, he tentatively accepted it as one last, inconsequential victory for holding true to his beliefs in a time of such desperation.

“I’m sure I... can buy you some time. A wolf will not carelessly attack a foe that stands his ground. It’ll discern the opponent’s strength first, and only approach once convinced of victory... H-Huh? Wait, are they approaching me already!?”

“Indeed. Your stance does look terribly weak.” Altina’s voice was now cheery for some reason, almost as if she was on the verge of a giggle.

The largest gray wolf approached. Its fang-lined mouth crept open, followed by a low growl.

While the wolf was still out of reach, Regis swung his sword to intimidate it.

“H-Hyah!!”

His body was dragged along with the weight of the sword. Its tip smashed into the ground; at the same time, a dull metallic thud sounded as the cross guard smacked into his own left knee.

“.....!?”

“Thank you, Regis... You have accomplished your duty. You have saved Altina the coachman.”

“Huh?” He turned to a delighted voice.

Altina's crimson eyes glistened as she began to drag something silver out from the covered wagon. Whatever it was, it let off a dazzling radiance even against the darkness of the blizzard.

Pushing aside wood and brick, the girl's slender arm finally pulled out what was hidden beneath.

It rattled. It clanked. The gentle hum of drawn metal punctuated the cold air.

Something impossible was happening. Something incomprehensible was happening.

It was heavy, thick, long and huge.

It was massive. Far too massive. So oversized that, despite its tell-tale shape, it took a second for Regis to truly grasp what the object was supposed to be.

Its full length had just barely allowed it to sit in the wagon—a clump of metal surely too heavy for any human to swing. Yet despite its size, there wasn't a blemish to be found on its well-honed blade.

Indeed, the sword's edge reflected like a mirror.

"...*Grand Tonnerre Quatre*." Regis's lips trembled as his words carried past them.

Altina's right hand hoisted the sword of conquerors.

The wind stirred up her robe, making it flow behind her like the mantle of a king. She combed aside her blazing red hair with her left hand.



“You’ve done more than enough, Regis. I can handle things from here.”

“What...!?”

“Does this sword look like an oversized arrow impaled in a sparrow? Or is it the legendary blade of an emperor!?”

Altina’s foot sank into the snow as she stepped forth, kicking hard against the ground beneath to press on.

The sword she held aloft wailed as it sliced through the wind.

“Hyaaaaaaaah!!”

It came down, the earth crumbling beneath it. The snow piled on the ground scattered in all directions. *That was closer to the blast of a cannon than a sword strike*, Regis thought. He swore he could still feel the tremors course through the ground. *A wolf would be helpless against such force—that is, assuming the blow was even able to connect.*

He was right. As the scattered snow cleared, it became apparent that the wolves had already retreated to a safe distance.

Altina took out the bread she had stuffed into her breast pocket and tossed it to the largest one.

“Here!”

The wind ferried it all the way over.

“You can have it! Go home!”

Wary as it was, the gray wolf sniffed the bread thrice before picking it up in its mouth and scurrying away. The rest followed, disappearing into the thick white fog of the flurry.

Regis slumped as the last remnants of strength left his knees. Altina thrust her greatsword into the ground and turned his way.

“Are you injured?”

“Hah... Well, my left knee hurts.”

“The one you hit with your own sword?”

“I was in a daze... I don’t quite remember.”

She gave a wry smile.

“Thank you, Alt— Wait, no. Princess Marie Quatre Argentina de Belgaria. Is that right, Your Highness...?”

“A bit late for that.”

“Hah... Talk about a sassy princess.” All he could do was sigh.

In an instant, an ear-to-ear grin had spread across Altina’s face.

“You really never noticed?”

“Well, I noticed your crimson hair and eyes. But Altina seemed a tad too long to be a nickname for Argentina...”

“It’s what my mother called me.”

“The princess was given the name Argentina after Claudette Barthélemy’s homeland. That land is lovingly referred to as Altina...”

“You knew that much, and yet you still didn’t notice?”

“It seemed so outlandish I immediately discarded the notion. The fourth princess is the commander of the fort I’m to be transferred to, and is of direct imperial descent. The very notion that she’d dress up as a cabman to greet some lowly officer on his demotion? I’m not nearly important enough for that.”

“I was walking on eggshells, thinking you’d found me out in the bookstore.”

“So that’s why the shopkeeper was acting so suspicious. Do you always do this sort of thing?”

“Dear God, no! If I did that, rumors would spread that the princess had lost her mind.”

“...I’m sure similar rumors are already going through town... There’s probably already some talk about the ‘Cab-Princess.’”

“Do you reckon it’s an improvement over the ‘Arrow-Sparrow Princess’?” She mulled it over in earnest.

Regis tilted his head.

“You said you don’t do this regularly... Then why do it for me? Do you have something against me?”

“Why would I have something against you?”

“No matter how you may sugarcoat it, I’ve committed blasphemy. My manners toward someone who had concealed their status aside, speaking out against the emperor is a heavy sin.”

“If you knew it was a crime, then why did you say such words?”

“Such conversations are almost as customary as everyday greetings among commoners.”

“Hmm.” Altina folded her arms and furrowed her brow. As any remaining tension dissipated, it became apparent their situation had only grown worse—the blizzard raged on, the sun was setting and the cold grew more severe.

“...Please don’t misunderstand. I have no resentment against you, nor do I intend to try you for treason.”

“Then why did you come?”

“I heard rumors you were a capable tactician.”

“You can’t be talking about me? I’m sure those rumors were embellished.”

“Possibly, but... I need the assistance of a scholar. Being talented isn’t enough; I needed to look into how he thinks and what he values.”

“And that’s why you dressed up as a coachman?”

“There are many things you wouldn’t say before royalty, are there not? I wanted to know your true feelings, Regis Aurick.”

“The only thing you learned today is that my enthusiasm toward military matters is almost nonexistent.”

“The same could be said about your skills with a blade.” Altina let out a playful laugh as Regis scratched his head in embarrassment.

All of a sudden, she cast her eyes to the distance.

“Ah... It looks like you guessed right.”

“About what?”

Altina listened intently. Regis strained to do the same, and after some time—He could hear the sound of horse hooves kicking up the snow-fallen path. *Her ears must be excellent to have heard that in the midst of conversation*, Regis mused.

“...Ah, but isn’t there a chance they could be bandits or barbarians?”

“I can hear the clinking of metal armor, so that’s quite unlikely.”

“Y-You can hear that clearly?”

Just as she had predicted, around five mounted, lightly armored knights appeared through the blizzard. They dismounted their horses before her and kneeled.

“Are you all right, Princess!?” This call came from a bald, black-bearded man.

Altina nodded in response.

“Thank you for coming to get me. I’m fine... but our horse is injured.”

“I understand. Then my horse shall pull your wagon.”

“All right, then I shall leave it to you.”

With a change of horse, the wagon was as good as new. The injured one would be led behind them as they returned.

Two knights lifted Altina’s sword and brought it to the wagon. As Regis watched them briskly carry out their jobs, Altina approached. She held out a pale hand to the slumped-over soldier.

“Come on. It’s time to go.”

“Of course, erm, Princess?”

“Give it a rest already. It’s too late for you to start addressing me like that.”

“Ah, but I thought you were a cab driver back then...”

“Keep this up and you’ll dampen my mood. I said I would entrust you with the honor of calling me by my nickname. Are you going to make me a liar?”

“No, I...”

Didn't you already lie by donning a disguise? he thought bitterly, but he couldn't bring himself to say. Regis could still feel the cold sweat on his back. He'd thought he was in for it when he was demoted to the front lines, but perhaps he had come to a place far more outrageous than he had anticipated.

He looked once to the heavens before resting his fingers on the small hand presented to him.

"I'm usually pretty good at reading the mood, but... are you sure about this, Altina?"

"Of course!" her voice bounded, "Welcome to my border regiment, Regis Aurick. I'll be working you to the bone!"

Chapter 2: An Oath at Dawn

Regis had fallen into a deep slumber.

He could hear a voice right beside him. It was impossible to separate dream from reality, but the voice definitely belonged to a young girl.

“He’s not getting up at all. You think he’s dead?”

“Fufufu... He’s just tired, Princess. Let him have his sleep. There aren’t any urgent jobs for him right now.”

“...Hmph. Very well.”

He was still far from waking. He listened to the chit-chat of the two girls... or at least, that was what he intended on doing before he was smacked awake by a deep, manly yell.

“Grr-ah!!”

“...Hrm?” He opened his eyes.

An unfamiliar ceiling rested above him—a plain, undecorated ashen ceiling of stone arches. Their gentle curves carried right along into the stone walls. *A cellar or a prison?* he thought absentmindedly.

Regis had been sleeping in a bed in the furthest depths of the room. He could touch the craggy stone wall just by reaching out his left hand.

A small window had been carved into it, which had been left wide open for the time being. Through it, sunlight poured in from outside.

He could hear the fervent cries of men from not too far off.

“Hrr-ah!!”

Were the soldiers training? He could hear the swish of practice swings and the thump of feet on the earth.

“Oh... That’s right...”

I was demoted and cast aside to Fort Sierck—Regis’s brain began its wake-up

procedure.

The soft bed was heaven compared to the carriage of the merchant caravan, and with the previous night's events still fresh in his mind, he was thankful just to be alive.

"...It's already morning," he groaned.

"Urr-ah!!"

The heavy cries again. Regis covered his ears.

"Is it... going to be like this every day? That's quite the harsh awakening..."

He slowly lifted his body. The previous night he had been almost frozen solid upon reaching the fort. He recalled being granted a bath to use and being told he could use this room, but had no recollection of anything after that.

He took another look around the room. It was wide enough to accommodate four beds with accompanying desks. There was a single support pillar in the center. If he had to take a guess, Regis suspected that the room could have housed ten rank-and-file soldiers, if necessary. At the very least, he knew it was enough for four low-ranking officers such as himself.

Despite that, there was only the one bed by the wall. Beside it, a splendid desk that made him question if someone had mistaken his rank, and beyond that, a luxury he'd thought he would never see again: a bookshelf. The stretch from the bed to the doorway remained empty, boasting enough space for another six large bookshelves.

This all made him more anxious than delighted.

"Are there open rooms because we're out in the country? But the fort doesn't seem any more spacious than the others... Don't tell me they really have mistaken my rank."

A fifth-grade administrative officer was ten spots from the top. Field marshal, general, lieutenant general, major general, brigadier general—those five ranks were the commissioned officers. The remaining officers were divided between administration and combat with first-grade, second-grade and third-grade administrative officers being senior non-commissioned officers. After that came

the junior non-commissioned officers, fourth-grade to sixth.

In short, fifth grade for an administrative officer put him second from the bottom.

On a side note, the ranks for common soldiers were trooper, trooper first-class and head trooper. Even the lowest trooper enjoyed decent treatment and wages in the empire's regular army. Conscripted farmers and underaged apprentices, on the other hand, essentially worked for free.

Therefore, concluded Regis, as second from the bottom, I was presumably issued this vast room by mistake.

"I need to get someone to lead me to my proper room... Oh, come to think of it, who's my commanding officer?" A senior administrative officer was supposed to direct him and show him the ropes. He hadn't met them yet.

Regis stripped off his pajamas. Despite the fact that he was indoors and in broad daylight, he could feel the unpleasant cold brush his skin—a stark reminder he had ventured to the northern front.

He passed his arms through the sleeves of the mint-condition uniform that had been left on the desk. While the Belgian army uniform consisted of a gaudy array of blue, red and white, the border regiment wore a much plainer deep green, closer to black. The thick material and numerous pockets made for quite a practical ensemble.

"I see they put some thought into it, as expected of the front lines."

And just as he had finished changing, someone came to get him— "...Or not. Looks like I should get to searching on my own," he said as he left the room.

Beyond the door, a stone hall extended to both his left and right. It was a narrow, gently curving corridor that could just barely fit two people walking side by side, regularly dotted with wooden doors.

He walked down the left passage for the time being and out into the courtyard.



"Frr-ah!!" The throaty voices cried out again.

Surrounded by stone buildings, the courtyard was a parade ground whose soil had been trampled until it was as hard as stone. Thirty-odd soldiers practiced swinging their swords in unison.

Before the lines of soldiers stood a conspicuously larger warrior. He was a burly man swinging a fauchard, whose hulking muscles shot sweat every which way with every flex. As far as Regis could see, he looked to be about forty and boasted a bald head and an abundant black beard.

It was so cold Regis was silently wishing for a scarf, yet this man had no restraint in showing off his scar-ridden torso, steam rising from his whole body.

Upon noticing Regis, the man broke into a broad smile.

“Mn! So you’re up, young one!” he boomed.

The robust young men training continued their cries of “Grr-ah!!” and “Urr-ah!!” They were similarly topless, sweaty, and letting off clouds of vapor.

The bald-headed man thrust out his polearm.

“All right! Come and swing this with us! Your spirits will shoot up in no time! Swing and swing and strike through the wind! Wa-hahahah!”

Regis winced. “N-No... I’m a civil officer, so swords and spears are a bit beyond me... But, that aside, you’re the knight who saved us yesterday, aren’t you?”

The man eagerly nodded in response.

“Indeed. I am Everard de Blanchard, first-grade combat officer. Knight captain of the Beilschmidt border regiment!”

“Regis Aurick, fifth-grade administrative officer. You have my deepest gratitude... You really saved us out there.”

“Wa-hahah! Just when I thought I hadn’t seen the princess in a while, I discover she’d gone off to town dressed as a cab driver. And with all the recent bandit attacks, too! Shaved a few years off my life, that did.”

“Hahaha... You’re telling me.”

To think the coachman would be the imperial princess and his commander.

“Of course, our princess would wipe out any bandits who dared cross her path.”

“Yeah... She’s strong.”

“She’s our goddess!”

Once Everard had finished, his men nodded, ringing out an enthusiastic, “Yep! She’s a goddess!” in response. Regis had no idea what was going on.

“I’m pretty sure she’s a princess...?”

“She’s a goddess!”

“...Oh, come to think of it, I remember reading about those in the north who believe in the Goddess of Victory, *La Victoire*.”

“Yes! Truly a goddess!”

“I see...”

Idolatry was strictly prohibited by the church, so such notions could only be entertained far out on the border. Perhaps the strict teachings of the holy church were unable to endure the 100 lieue (444 km) trek.

It certainly wasn’t surprising for the soldiers on the battlefield to see her small arms swinging that massive sword and conclude that something divine was at play.

“I hear she scattered a pack of gray wolves with a single swing! Splendid, splendid! Waah-hahah... Cough, hack hack!”

Everard laughed so hard he choked, his young subordinates showing off jovial smiles of their own.

“Wa-hahah!” they followed in a heroic chorus.

Thankful as he was, Regis wasn’t particularly comfortable with such brazen displays of masculinity.

“Haha... Well, then, I’ll just be off...” He attempted retreat when—“Hold up!” Everard called him to a stop. His large polearm against his shoulder, he slowly lumbered his way over. His breath grew rough as his face closed in.

“I’ll ask just in case.”

“What could it be?”

“You haven’t done anything strange to the princess, have you?”

The look in his subordinates’ eyes suddenly changed. A blood vessel surfaced atop Everard’s bald head.

“Strange?” Regis stepped back.

“She was acting funny yesterday. No funny business, eh!?”

“I didn’t do anything... Just a bit of chit-chat.”

“What kinda chit-chat are we talking here!?”

“Well, just some rumors from the capital and such...”

Bothered exchanges could be heard among the young men.

“Rumors of the capital, ‘e says.”

“Got to be rumors about that social world or whatnot.”

“Out here, the only rumors I get are about ‘ow many potaters were pulled and ‘ow the old cow ‘ad a calf...”

“That ain’t no rumor.”

“God dammit, those city slickers really piss me off!”

“The capital can go suck it!”

He felt as though his wellbeing was suddenly in great danger. Everard was growing ever so slightly closer, almost a hair’s breadth away from being close enough to plant a kiss.

“Hmm! She was acting as merry as my daughter after her first date! What did you do!?”

“Hold on, hold on! I just told her about Fourth Princess Marie Quatre’s reputation in the capital and the politics surrounding it. Like hell I’m going to hit on a child in the first place... I mean, I don’t mean to brag, but I’ve never even held a girl’s hand before!”

Silence.

The noise was gone. Nothing remained. It was all over.

Everard's lips twisted into a serene smile, like that of a saint from a painting. His trainees followed suit, bearing the faces of angels about to preach the sanctity of love.

"Stay strong, young man."

"It'll all work out someday."

"Keep fighting the good fight."

I don't need your sympathy, thought Regis. Turning his back to the unwarranted gentle encouragement, he felt for some reason like the remnant of a defeated army as he left the suffocating courtyard behind him.

Regis returned to the corridor, this time proceeding to the right of his bedroom.

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There was humming in the air.

"Hmm~♪ Hm, hmm~♪"

"Huh?"

The door leading to the noise had been left wide open. He peeked in to find quite a spacious room. There were eight long tables lined with roughly fifty seats.

"Is this the officers' dining room...?"

The rustic feeling of the stone walls remained, but there were vases in the corners decorated with fresh flowers giving him a sense of some consideration for elegance.

A lone maid wiped down one table with a rag. She was the one who was humming.

She was wearing a rouge maid dress with a white apron, and her brown hair bundled behind her head swung to the rhythm of the tune. She was around the same age as Regis; a charming woman whose hazel eyes left a lasting impression.

Both her hair and skin seemed a little too glossy for someone tasked to do the

dirty work.

“Mmm~♪ Hm-hmm~♪ La, lalalaaa~♪ The maid in cinders told the mice~♪ The castle has a ball tonight~♪”

She had broken into song, though it was obvious to the ears that she was more than a little off key.

She twirled, knocking food scraps off the table. It was hard to determine whether she was actually cleaning or just dancing.

Their eyes met. Upon noticing Regis standing in the doorway, she froze.

The song had stopped. Regis could feel the awkwardness building.

“H-Hey... That was a nice song...”

“Huh? Are you for real!? So it moved your very heart and soul!?”

“Wait, I never said it moved me—”

“It’s a huge hit. It’s really been gaining popularity lately.”

“Has it really? I’ve never heard it before... Where is it popular? In the town of Theonveil, or just this fort?”

“Eh? It’s popular in my heart!”

“So just with you!”

“I made it up just now.”

“Is this really what you’d call the latest trend!?”

Ignoring Regis’s retort, the maid started to explain the song with a smile.



"Ufufu... It's a story about a maid who receives terrible abuse from a vile master, when one day her fairy godmother shows up. Very romantic, you know."

I've definitely read that fairytale, Regis thought, nodding along.

"And then she uses her magic to let her go to the ball, right?" he asked.

"Eh? What are you talking about? She uses offensive magic to tear the vile master to shreds."

"Where's the romance in that!? That's a pretty conspicuous use of magic, too. Are you by any chance discontent with your current treatment?"

Magic was a product of fiction that only existed within the pages of books, so he gathered she was being facetious. That being said, he couldn't help but feel something dark lurking beneath the tale.

"Ahaha, you've got it all wrong. The princess is a good kid, and while war is scary the fort is pretty safe. I just don't have any hope for the future." She laughed dryly.

For a maid, she had a very sharp tongue.

"Let me introduce myself." She curtseyed politely. "I am the princess's personal maid, Clarisse. Please address me as 'Oi' or 'That wench.'"

"I definitely won't be doing that! Hah... Please pardon me in addressing you as Ms. Clarisse. My name is Regis Aurick."

"Oh, Regis! I've heard loads about you from the princess."

"You have? What did you hear?"

"You let her use the only blanket in the middle of a blizzard, you shared your only roll of bread, and you stood bravely against a pack of gray wolves. I think that's wonderful."

"Wow... You're making me blush. ...Anything else?"

"Your sword skills are worse than those of a child, and you are completely devoid of resource management skills to the extent that you'd spend your entire salary on books if left unchecked."

“Ouch. Sorry.” He regretted asking.

Clarissee smiled with seemingly no ill intent.

“So, do you have any business with me? I’m actually pretty busy, you know. ...Aha, just kidding!” She probably had no ill intent. Probably.

“...Do you know who my commanding officer is, by chance?”

“I don’t really get informed about that sorta thing.”

“I see... In that case, do you know where Altina—ah, sorry—where *the princess* is right now?”

“Fufu... I’ve already heard about the nickname, don’t you worry about that. Oh, but please be careful using it around people other than the princess and myself.”

“Is that how it works? As I thought... Is it rare for her to allow someone to use her nickname?”

I should be especially cautious around those knights in the courtyard, he thought.

“She’d probably grant me the privilege if I asked... The only other person I know of who uses it is her mother.”

That was even fewer people than he’d anticipated. Regis was more bewildered than delighted by the fact.

“But... Why—?”

“You’re asking why the princess has no friends? I’d say that’s down to her personality.”

“You really are virulent... That’s not what I meant. Why did she permit me to use her nickname? As royalty, perhaps she is unaccustomed to people asking for her name, but she should have been expecting it while dressed up as a coachman. I highly doubt I’m the first commoner she’s ever met...”

Clarissee tilted her head.

“I couldn’t tell you what goes through her head, but... don’t you think she thought of you as a confidant of sorts? Despite how she looks, she’s in a

surprisingly harsh position, after all.”

“A confidant...”

“Yes. The only other would be her mother.”

“D-Did I do anything to earn that level of trust...?”

Regis reflected on his meeting with the red-haired girl. She had declared he was an idiot when he spent a fortune on a book—did that have anything to do with it?

“Well, you make plenty of mistakes when you’re young.” Clarisse dismissively waved her hand with a laugh.

“Wait, did you just conclude that her placing trust in me was little more than a mistake of youth? I can’t really prove otherwise, but isn’t that a bit hasty!?”

“Just kidding, Mr. Regis! You react to every little thing I say, so I couldn’t help but see how far I could push your buttons!”

“Please don’t tease me...”

“Whenever I try and chat about her with Everard and his men, it’s always just, ‘Right! Truly a goddess.’ Talk about a boring answer.”

“Yeah, he did give off that kind of impression...”

Regis gave a wry smile as he recalled the topless knight commander shedding sweat in the courtyard. The image also made him realize how far the conversation had been derailed, so he asked again where he could find Altina.

“She went out, though she should be back soon,” Clarisse said with a glance at the clock on the wall.

“Outside the fort? I suppose she won’t be back any time soon if she went to town. Given her diligent attitude, I doubt she went off to play... Is she out hunting or on recon?”

“Something like that. By the way—everyone’s already had breakfast, Mr. Regis, but how about you?”

“I appreciate it. Truth be told, I’m so hungry I almost feel on the verge of collapsing.”

“Oh really? What a terrible situation you’re in. Such a pity, especially when there’s so long to go till lunch...”

“Was that not where you were supposed to offer me breakfast!?”

“Ahaha. Fine, very well. I’ll make an exception.”

While Clarisse appeared to do nothing but mess around, she was seemingly quite skilled at her job—it didn’t take long before she was back with food: soft bread and chicken stew. Quite luxurious, considering this was the front lines.

“This is a pleasant surprise...”

“Take your time.” Leaving with a smile, Clarisse returned to her own work. She hummed her tune while sweeping the floor.

Regis took his time, savoring the taste of his meal.

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Just as he was finishing his late breakfast, Altina popped her face into the dining hall.

“Oh, Regis. Looks like you’re still kicking. Good on you.”

“Thanks to you.”

She wasn’t dressed as a coachman today, nor was she carrying her treasured sword. She wore a white, fanciful one-piece dress, minimally armored with arm and shoulder guards. Her long red hair was braided behind her while a normal longsword hung at her waist.

She carried a snow-white overcoat under her arm, which her maid Clarisse took with a curtsey.

“Welcome back, Princess.”

“Thank you, Clarisse. Could you brew some tea?”

“Of course.”

After another curtsey, the maid made for the kitchen with almost silent steps. She was acting, surprisingly, like a proper maid.

Altina lowered herself down into the seat across from Regis.

“Hah, it was hopeless...”

“I heard you went out.”

“I was patrolling the highway. Bandits have been targeting our caravans for a while now.”

“Come to think of it, I heard about that a few times on my trip here. You’re more likely to get attacked the further you are from the capital.”

The worsening of public order on the highway was causing a steep increase in the price of goods near the border. A high cost was required to cover the value of missing goods and hired guards.

“We’re getting more complaints from peddlers and citizens.”

“Does this have anything to do with the rumor that some barbarians slipped through?”

“Who can say? We haven’t seen heads or tails of them. They could be anyone for all we know. Even if we utilized every soldier in this fort, it’d be impossible to guard every caravan.”

“And yet the commander herself is on patrol from this early in the morning, when you’d be the coldest and sleepiest? That should be the least desirable timeslot.”

“Precisely. Because everyone detests it, the commander should take the initiative.”

“Oh... You’re quite something.”

“Though it’s not like I want to do it, either. Those bandits can all go to hell.”

“Can’t disagree with that.”

After all, books would be significantly cheaper if the roads became safer to navigate.

Altina spent some time slamming her full range of colorful vocabulary against these shapeless bandits. Once the well had run dry, Regis changed the topic.

“On another note, I’d like to greet my direct superior. Do you know who that is? Has it not been decided yet?”

"Your direct superior... would be an administrative officer above yourself, correct?"

"That's right."

"Then you don't have one."

"Huh? You mean there aren't any who want me?"

"No, I mean there aren't any administrative officers in this fort. That is, apart from you."

At first, Regis failed to comprehend what she had just said. He was momentarily stunned.

"...Beg... your... pardon?" He finally managed to squeeze out some words.

"This regiment was originally under the command of General Margrave Jerome Jean de Beilschmidt and, half a year ago, he chased them all out."

"W-What is the meaning of this!? A war can't be fought with combat officers alone... Who's managing finance and logistics? Battle records and reports? Tax collection and submission?"

"The margrave's steward is taking care of it."

A steward was an employee tasked with managing a noble's territory. They took care of the taxes and the distribution of goods, along with employment and the salaries of servants. As their role often included fulfilling the duties of an accountant, it wasn't unusual to trust them with huge amounts of paperwork.

"But still, he must have quite the excellent steward. As expected of a margrave, I guess. Is the steward a former administrative officer?"

Military paperwork was uniquely convoluted. It had taken two years of military school for Regis to finally get it down.

While Regis was genuinely impressed, Altina shook her head.

"The reports are full of mistakes. We get angry letters back from the department every month. We've even had an inspector sent over."

"What!? Impossible... Is this really a part of the Belgarian Imperial Army?"

“It was originally Sir Jerome’s personal army, or so I’ve heard.”

“Come to think of it, I might have read about that in a book. I had some time to spare after my demotion, so I did a bit of digging.”

“...You really are strange. Normally, the last thing you’d want to do after a demotion is start looking into your new boss.”

“Is that how you felt?”

“No, I... have a goal...” Altina was at a rare loss for words.

He had sensed it yesterday as well; she seemed to be hiding something. However, the fact that she wouldn’t say what meant she had made the conscious decision to keep it secret. Regis wasn’t one to pursue the matter any further.

“I already knew about the legend of Sir Jerome through books and rumors... but I never heard anything about him chasing out administrative officers. Did something happen?”

“I did ask... but he wouldn’t tell me. Sir Jerome despises me, after all.”

“He despises you?”

Altina nodded weakly.

“If an amateur little girl became your commander as the result of a power struggle that had absolutely nothing to do with you, would you not harbor feelings of resentment toward her?”

“So that’s why...”

It wasn’t rare for a newly appointed commander to be at odds with the one who previously led the unit. Under normal circumstances, the former leader would be transferred elsewhere, but Altina was a novice, and Fort Sierck was a key strategic point on the northern front—her appointment may have been by imperial decree, but no military authority would do anything as stupid as removing Jerome from the base.

“If the regiment was operating normally and protecting the people, I would’ve taken a back seat, but...” Altina’s expression took a dark turn.

“Then it turned out there were no administrative officers.”

“Sir Jerome isn’t performing his role too attentively, either.”

The two shared a sigh.

Claris returned with a white porcelain teapot and two tea cups. She placed them on the table before filling one with a transparent red liquid. The tea carried a deep aroma that tickled the nostrils.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Princess. Shall I add sugar?”

Notwithstanding her casual use of it, black tea leaves, sugar, and fine china were luxury goods even in the capital. It was inconceivable that these were military-issued, so they had to have been from the princess’s private stash.

“Thank you, Clarisse.”

“My pleasure. What about you, Mr. Regis?”

“Oh, I would love some. Thank you.”

“Whatever do you mean? I was simply asking what you planned to do next.”

“Gah...”

The maid looked perfectly composed as she twisted her verbal blade.

“Ahaha, that is an important problem,” Altina said as she stirred her tea. What to do next was definitely a difficult problem, and Regis thought over it while holding his forehead.

“Hmm. First, I’ll need Sir Jerome to tell me... why he drove out the administrative officers...”

“That’s a good idea. But, before that, would you care to help me with my job?”

“What can I help with?” He recalled how Altina said she would ‘work him to the bone.’

“It’s a very important job—we need to find those bandits!”

“Come to think of it, you were on patrol.”

“Yep. Not only do they cause trouble for the merchants and citizens, but for

the soldiers as well. Could you think of a good way to deal with them? You're a tactician, are you not?"

"No... I'm not a tactician..."

"So you can't think of anything?"

"I said I'm not a tactician, not that I don't have a plan. How much time and how many soldiers are available?"

Altina nervously tapped the ends of her index fingers together. It was surely some sort of sign, not that he could figure out what it was supposed to mean.

"The time frame is as soon as reasonably possible. Bandit activity started increasing half a year ago, but we haven't been able to do anything about it, so we'll be glad so long as even some progress is made toward resolving the matter. The problem is the soldiers..."

"Are we low on available troops?"

"Can you make do with just me?"

"...Hah? What are you talking about?"

"I'm pretty confident in my sword arm."

"I know you're strong, but there are far too many bandits. In the time it takes you to nab a few, most of them will have run away."

"Ack... I know."

"Are you trying to catch them on your own?"

"That's not it... There just aren't too many soldiers who would listen to my commands."

She came out with a bombshell rather difficult to ignore.

"What do you mean?"

"Yeaah... I told you Sir Jerome despises me, right?" Altina's face was crossed by agony unbefitting of a fourteen-year-old. According to her, it was proving difficult to move troops by the word of a new commander who had provoked the ire of their former leader.

"That's a surprise. I met up with Knight Captain Everard and his men, and they seemed to adore you. 'Truly a goddess,' they said."

He thought back to his meeting in the courtyard. Their devotion was so great that he felt any further interactions with the princess would be a danger to his safety.

"The g-goddess part is embarrassing, but... a few do listen, and I'm thankful for that."

"Only a few? The majority won't?"

"In times of peace they might listen, but on the battlefield they'll likely only trust Sir Jerome's orders."

"...When lives are on the line, it's better to trust a veteran general than a goddess."

"Correct."

While there were soldiers who adored Altina, they mostly saw her as a princess. She had not earned their trust as a commander. Asking for more was unreasonable, as she had no previous achievements.

"As I recall, the Beilschmidt border regiment consists of about five hundred cavalry, five hundred artillery, and two thousand infantry."

"You really did your research."

"Around how many of them will listen to your orders? I think we'll be able to manage with three hundred infantry."

"A-Around thirty, maybe...?" Altina responded apologetically.

Regis crossed his arms and leaned into his backrest. His chair creaked ever so slightly.

"...Um, Altina, didn't you call this *your* border regiment?"

She faltered, her eyes a little teary.

"T-That's... For now, it might just be on paper, but... I'll do something about it eventually."

"Paper and incentive may be all that's necessary to gather soldiers, but their

obedience can only be gained through ability and achievement.”

“Only through achievement...” Altina repeated, like a student digesting a lecturer’s teachings.

“I may be inexperienced when it comes to swordplay, but I can tell you’re plenty strong. You’re just up against the wrong guy. There’s nothing we can do about that. Martial arts alone are not what makes a commander, but... being stronger than those around you is the simplest way to prove superiority.”

“So you’re saying that Sir Jerome is stronger than me?”

“I wouldn’t put it past him... He isn’t known as the ‘Hero of Erstein’ for nothing.”

“Hero?” Altina tilted her head, perplexed. The real surprise came from Regis.

“You didn’t know? Sir Jerome is an honored general who played a huge role in our battles with the neighboring empires.”

“He is?”

“I didn’t see it personally, but—”

Claris placed a teacup in front of him, as if urging him to begin the story. He let the wonderfully scented tea wet his parched throat as he summarized Jerome’s military history.

“Jerome Jean de Beilschmidt was born the eldest son of a viscount.”

He marched in his first campaign at the age of fourteen—not in the imperial army, but in his father’s militia. He’d left countless distinguished deeds in his wake ever since. The most notable engagement, however, took place on the plains of Erstein against the neighboring Germanian Federation.

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Four years ago—

Twenty thousand Germanian soldiers had marched across the northern border, confronted by thirty thousand men from the imperial army. They would meet on the eponymous plains of Erstein.

The Germanian Federation was a gathering of nations, big and small, assembled around the kingdom of San Preussen. They waged wars amongst themselves day in and day out, and it was for this reason that their territories were impoverished. But these conditions also meant their soldiers were superior, well trained and well equipped.

The enemy vanguard consisted of just under three thousand heavy cavalry. They painted their armor gold, a symbol of honor, their column charging like the thrust of a lance.

The Belgarian Empire's men were overpowered by their momentum. They had aimed right between the armies of two nobles, each intending to leave the matter to the other and flee—causing the empire's front to crumble like curdled cheese.

Once their formation was breached, their main camp was laid bare for all to see. Not only that, the enemy could now pincer the main force from the front and back. When that happened, the troops would lose their solidarity and rout. The Belgarian army was on the brink of defeat.

The enemy column only gained force as it advanced, with nothing to impede it save for one brigade adorned in pitch black. Jerome's own troops—only five hundred cavalry. It was the young viscount himself leading the charge.

Those who watched him wondered if he was buying time for the main force to regroup, laying down his life for his nation, but that could not be further from the truth.

The Black Knight, Jerome, took down heavy cavalry one after another. With their valorous general at the lead, the black troops pressed straight down the length of the enemy column, thoroughly dismantling it along the way.

While the Federation's army frantically called upon their left and right wings to defend them, they could not make it in time to stop the cavalry charge.



“—And thus, Sir Jerome's charge continued straight to the enemy camp. He led the Belgarian army to victory and became the ‘Hero of Erstein.’ His achievements in the battle saw him promoted from a first-grade combat officer

to a brigadier general. This all happened when he was twenty.”

“N-No way, he was that incredible!? I find that hard to believe...”

Altina furrowed her brow, a conflicted look across her face.

Clarissee, on the other hand, remained expressionless. “He doesn’t look like that sort of person. Not anymore, at least,” she offered.

“Really? What’s he like at the fort? I haven’t met him yet, but I hear he’s elegant, handsome, and terribly popular among the noble ladies...”

Clarissee stayed silent and Altina let out a groan.

“Gahh, you’re probably better off seeing for yourself.”

“I see, so he’s not doing great... Well, his fortunes did wane once he received his commission.”

“What happened?”

“Those who progress through the ranks because of their own skill are naturally envied and scorned by others who bought their way into such positions. It took less than half a year for those who once revered Sir Jerome as a hero to grow anxious over his repeated accomplishments. He was given the title of margrave along with this northern territory... to send him far, far away from his homeland, the capital.”

It was officially recognised as a “reward,” a great honor that even included the renaming of the land to Jerome’s surname, Beilschmidt. However, the prestige granted to him was clearly meant to curb his streak of achievements. The name of the hero Jerome soon faded from the public’s mind.

Altina downed her now-lukewarm tea.

“I see... A common tale...”

Had she compared it with her own circumstances? Her finger traced the edge of her cup as she sunk into her thoughts.

“...You really didn’t know?”

“I didn’t. I could tell he was strong, but Everard and the others won’t tell me anything about him.”

“...Princess, you’re quite treasured in the fort, so you’ve been distanced from any stories that might upset you,” Clarisse delicately stated as fact.

“Are they really showing such consideration? I may not get along with Sir Jerome, but an old story isn’t going to ruin my day.”

“You might see it that way... However, Princess, the soldiers see you as a dear guest, not a comrade.”

“Oh, Clarisse. We may not be on the closest terms, but we can’t be that distant. Surely.”

“Do you think so? That story Mr. Regis just told... I’d already heard it from the soldiers, you see.”

“Excuse me, what!?” Altina raised her voice, aghast by the bombshell Clarisse had so nonchalantly dropped. The maid returned a sickly-sweet grin.

“I’m easy to get along with, after all.”

“Wha—!? You make it sound like I’m completely unapproachable!”

“Perish the thought. You’re a princess, Princess. Not anyone nor anything else.”

“Err... That’s true, but... Umm?”

“Rest easy. Even if the fort’s soldiers keep you at arm’s length, you have me. I’m your only ally, Princess. You’re my princess and mine alone... Ufufufu.”

“Y-Yeah. Thanks... I guess?”

Clarisse had dispelled Altina’s steam as if by magic. While Regis was sure he had heard some pretty off-putting statements mixed into her response, given this maid, it was possible that they could have been jokes.

He took back control of the conversation.

“...Well, that’s about all I know of Sir Jerome. It’s only natural for the soldiers to trust him over you. He was originally a general who should be commanding a division or an army, not a small border regiment.”

“Guh... I get the picture. Even I don’t think I’m more trustworthy. But I’ll change that soon enough!”

“An excellent retort. In the books I read, it’s often said by throwaway characters, but...”

Altina stared at him with a sullen face.

“We’re dropping this issue. Just think about how to deal with the bandits.”

“Yeaah... We’ll need a number of troops just to take the bandits in. If possible, I’d rather use foot soldiers than knights. And to do that... it looks like I’ll need Sir Jerome to give the order.”

Regis dropped his gaze to the floor. Given his relationship with Altina and the fact he had driven out all the previous administrative officers, he would undoubtedly be a difficult man to deal with. Honestly, he didn’t have much hope.

“This is a good opportunity! Let’s have a firm talk with Sir Jerome.” Altina shot up from her chair. “I’m sure he’s not satisfied with the status quo either.”

“You’re optimistic.”

“Of course! It’s better than getting yourself down,” she said with a smile.

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Altina led Regis from the officer dining hall on the first floor of the central tower to Jerome’s personal room. Clarisse remained, saying she had other work to attend to.

Walking down the stone corridor that echoed with each step, Altina eagerly struck up conversation.

“You’re quite liked, you know.”

“By what demographic?”

“By Clarisse. You couldn’t tell?”

“You sure you’re not mistaken? She was one-sidedly teasing me.”

“She only jokes with people she feels comfortable around. It’s proof she’s in a good mood. Clarisse is usually silent and hides in the back whenever she’s not called for.”

“Silent!? Hides!?”

“That’s right. She never even smiles. She’s like a doll.”

“...Was the person I spoke to a different maid who shares her name? Or are you in cahoots, teasing me too? I can’t trust anyone anymore.”

“Ahahah!” Altina laughed like a child as she ascended the spiral staircase.

They arrived at Jerome’s room on the third floor of the center tower. Altina knocked on the undecorated wooden door several times—to no avail.

She sullenly tapered her lips.

“Looks like he’s out.”

“If he’s effectively the commander, he must be a busy man.”

“Mnn, I doubt he’s that enthusiastic about his job, but... so be it. I’ll show you around the fort as we search for Sir Jerome!”

“That would be a huge help.”

“This way, Regis! C’mon, hurry up!” Altina raced off.

She boarded the stairs again, climbing all the way up to the top floor.

Regis gasped for breath.

The top floor was a conference room with a black table. Given the map on the wall, the imperial flag, and the bare stone floor... this was a room steeped in the air of war. The wear and tear of the conference table from a lifetime of good use served as a stark reminder that this was the frontmost line.

“Over here!”

Altina cut through the room to throw open a large window, the shutters slamming open with a loud thud. The wind that flooded in caused the map and flag to flap wildly. The outside of the conference room jutted out into a balcony.

Altina’s hair fluttered behind her as she stepped out, glimmering as it bathed in the sun’s rays.

“Here, look!” She pointed off into the distance.

“I’m not good with high places...”

“Oh yeah? Then how would you fancy being shoved off of one?”

“Yeah, yeah...” He followed her onto the balcony.

Regis’s hair was swept back by winds that carried a distinct, earthy aroma. He swallowed his breath at the scene spread out before him.

A cloudless blue sky and white snow-capped mountains wove together into a spectacle of grandeur. The sun calmly, quietly illuminated the world beneath.

Both the sky and the mountains seemed to be within arm’s reach, almost as if he had become a bird soaring through the heavens.

“Amazing,” he muttered.

Altina nodded triumphantly.

“Isn’t it remarkable?”

“—I braved the storm to distant lands and there I found an unspeakable treasure. It would not fit in my pocket, but would never leave my heart. Even now, I close my eyes and remember that sky.”

“What’s that?”

“A quote from Frenson’s autobiography. He was an artist who worked in the capital but, in his youth, his pieces never sold, so he worked as a porter carrying boxes for a caravan. At the end of a job where a heavy storm tormented the crew, his heart was impassioned by the beautiful sky as the clouds cleared. His soul’s hesitation and fatigue disappeared, and he wrote of how he could do naught but shed tears. After that, he would paint nothing but the sky. Eventually, ‘Frenson’s Sky’ would become a highly acclaimed masterpiece.”

“I see. So the moral is, you can’t do good work cooped up in the house!”

“Eh? No, it’s just a story about a guy who was inspired by his scenery...”

When he focused his gaze, he was granted an unbroken view of the fortress’s interior. This was the balcony’s intended purpose; it was an observation platform built to grasp the situation of a battle to allow for accurate command.

Fort Sierck was built halfway up a mountain. A hexagon of stone walls constructed on a gentle north-facing slope, with watch towers on its four cardinal directions.

In the center of the fort was the central tower used by command and staff officers, and this was where Regis stood on the top balcony.

Be it the officers' facilities in the east or the soldiers' quarters in the west, they were all crude rectangles of stone. That said, the west area was rather developed for a fort, consisting of twenty longhouses constructed in a line.

The courtyard Regis met Everard in was situated between the central tower and the eastern block. The main gate and plaza were situated on the north side that faced foreign lands. While he could not see it from the balcony, according to Altina, there was also food storage, an armory and a stable on the opposite south side.

Regis's eyes stopped on the wooden scaffolding surrounding a portion of the outer wall.

"Is that area under repair?"

"Yeah, that's right. Three months ago, the grand duchy of Varden invaded and knocked it apart with cannon fire. It can usually withstand such attacks, but it seems our opponents prepared quite a powerful cannon, so the walls were somewhat breached."

"A powerful cannon? Please, tell me more."

"Err... I had just taken my post and was in the back room when it happened. They told me I couldn't come out, so I didn't see."

"When you're supposed to be the commander..."

"I mean, I had only risen from my seat when they shouted, 'Princess, please leave this to us!' and escorted me back!"

"That's no surprise. Are we attacked often?"

"Generally once every three months. It's hard to cross the forest in the winter, so they probably won't come again anytime soon."

The grand duchy of Varden was about 30 lieue (133 km) away, but a vast sea of trees rife with hidden barbarian settlements resided in their path—Regis had read this in a book.

"What about the barbarians?"

"I've never seen them myself, but I heard they climbed the wall when they attacked in the summer. It was quite an intense battle."

Despite them being insufficiently equipped, there were no guarantees of a combat advantage against barbarians—indeed, the tides of battle often turned quite ferociously. The empire's cavalry could overwhelm them on the open plains, only to then receive a sharp counterattack in the forests. There were even reports of savages barehandedly scaling a fort's outer walls. They were a foe one could never underestimate.

Altina twirled around.

"That's about all there is here. Let's move on."

"Yeah, thanks. It's a lovely sight."

"Glad to hear it. Still, I wonder where that man went."

Jerome was nowhere to be seen in the central tower. After checking the plaza and east offices, Regis turned their search south.

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The pair reached the stables, a low structure where the horses were kept. Putting together their cart horses and warhorses, the fort cared for close to six hundred.

Regis was struck hard by the stench of the animals.

"This is a surprise..."

"What is?"

"The fact that you're fine with this... even though you're a princess..."

"I prefer fencing and riding over song and dance. I'm fully capable of taking care of a horse."

"That's pretty neat."

Altina raced over to one of the horses.

"Hello, good afternoon! How are you holding up? I'm so sorry about yesterday."

The skinny horse brayed in response. Regis was having a hard time telling the others apart, but he could recognize the horse that had been pulling the wagon. There was a bandage wrapped around its right rear leg.

Altina stroked the horse's neck as she fed it some vegetables. The assorted vegetables were considerably larger than any he ever remembered seeing at the capital, making the scene of them being pulverized between the horse's teeth unnecessarily intimidating.

"Cute, isn't he? Want to give him one?"

"No, I feel my hand will go along with it, so I'd rather not..."

"Ahahah, he won't do that—not this kid. Horses are smarter than you give them credit for."

"In that case, I must be fated to be hated by horses. I would always fall off during riding training."

"Really? You can't ride?"

"I don't mean to brag, but I've never so much as gotten a horse to walk before."

"You really aren't bragging." Altina smiled cheerfully.

Regis had a bad feeling about this.

"In that case, I'll teach you!"

"I respectfully decline."

"Which horse would do? You'd prefer a small, docile one, wouldn't you?"

"H-Hey... Do I have no say in the matter? I have the right to oppose unreasonable orders, you know. In the first place, it's said that a linear hierarchy exists to curb violations of orders, and..."

Altina continued walking down the stable as if she couldn't hear Regis's voice. She came to where the mounds of hay-fodder were kept.

All of a sudden, a woman appeared from the shadows.

An individual just a little out of place in the stables. She wasn't wearing a military uniform, nor was she dressed like a servant. She wore clothes that

closely resembled those of a lower class townswoman, gripping a basket of apples in her hand.

Once she noticed them, the woman's eyes opened wide in surprise.

"Ah, Princess!?"

"That's me. Who are you?"

"I'm... Umm... E-Excuse me!"

She had started running before she could even finish the sentence. Altina watched her back gradually disappear, dumbfounded.

"...Who was that woman? She looked like a civilian to me."

"A peddler, perhaps?"

"Maybe you're right. She was carrying apples."

"Yeah. But it's still bright out... so I doubt she's a courtesan." Regis's tongue slipped as he casually replied.

"What's that?" the girl beside him asked back.

"Pardon?"

"What sort of person is a 'courtesan'?"

It was clear from a look at Altina's expression she was neither joking or attempting to play off her embarrassment. This princess apparently did not know what a courtesan was.

He had been careless. She was a minor.

No, she could be legally married at fifteen, so it wouldn't be strange for her to possess such knowledge at fourteen.

But, on the other hand, she was royalty, and was likely not allowed to keep any crass friends or adults around.

How could this be—Regis's spine trembled—at this rate, I'll be one of those bad adults imparting an innocent young girl with unnecessary knowledge.

Altina closed in. "Why are you keeping quiet, Regis? Hurry and teach me."

"Yes... Well... that's... In short... the term refers to a female peddler who

works the night..."

"Hmm? Come to think of it, shops do only open their doors during the day. Is it a special service?"

"You could say that."

As the two of them were speaking, a man walked out from where the peddler girl had come from, following an apparent rendezvous.

He wore the uniform of a commissioned officer. Sturdy muscles showed through the gap in his unbuttoned collar. He was tall in stature, with wide shoulders.

His black hair, which was on the long side, was swept back, and he sported unshaven stubble across his chin. Age-wise, he seemed to be in his early twenties.

Tanned skin; sharp eyes.

While his rustic charm might have split opinions, even a fellow man like Regis had to admit he was quite attractive.

But he was drunk.

He held an apple in his left hand, a bottle of wine in his right. Each breath that escaped his lips carried the strong smell of liquor.



“Hmm... I was wondering who I’d find... and it’s just the little lady...”

“Instead of going on patrol, you’re in a corner buying apples from a peddler? Do your work seriously, Sir Jerome!”

Regis was taken aback.

“This bloody drunkard is Sir Jerome!? Margrave Jerome Jean de Beilschmidt!? The famed Hero of Erstein!?” He unintentionally raised his voice in surprise and ended up pointing in disbelief.

The man tilted his bottle, gulping down the amber liquid that poured through its neck. His sharp yet stupored eyes locked onto Regis in a glare.

“Hm... Who are you?”

“My name is Regis Aurick... fifth-grade administrative officer.”

“Get out.”

“Very well, I’ll draft up the transfer papers at once. You just have to sign them.”

“Regis!?”

“Just kidding. Pardon me, sir, but the right to reassign me lies with Her Highness.”

He was in front of Jerome, so he tried to be careful with his words, despite his restraint having slipped right off the bat.

“Y-You shouldn’t joke about that!” Surprisingly enough, Altina seemed genuinely worried.

Having never felt any importance in his own existence, Regis struggled to comprehend. Did she not want to let him go? Come to think of it, he was still in the middle of helping her capture the bandits.

I see. I haven’t yet finished the job she assigned me, Regis readily concluded.

“Well, you heard her... Unfortunately, the princess does not approve of my transfer, so it doesn’t look like I can return to the capital.”

“Hmph... I have no food to spare for a useless admin officer. Eat hay and

leave.”

“About that. I have a question... Could you tell me the reason my predecessor was driven out? I wouldn’t want to make the same mistake.”

“Don’t say a word about what I do. Then we’ll be good.”

“Understood. I hear a servant of your house is handling the paperwork... Would you like me to assist? It must be difficult for one person to handle everything from finance to taxation; I’m sure the help would be appreciated...”

“Sod off. I’ll use you however I want, whenever I want.”

At that point in the conversation, Regis felt something off. More so, Jerome’s conduct was practically ordering him to notice...

Altina, meanwhile, looked on blankly and uncomprehendingly.

“Umm... Could it be the reason my predecessor lost his seat is because his opinions on the use of military funds clashed with your own?”

“Kukukuh... Now you’re getting it. ‘Don’t use empire money on booze,’ ‘don’t gamble it away.’ He was getting noisy, so I sent him packing.”

“Dear Lord, this is embezzlement...” Regis looked to the heavens.

This was quite the daring declaration of crime. The man could even be put to death by a military tribunal.

“What’s so wrong about it? The barbarians and those Varden bastards can’t invade as long as this fort stands. The money is sent to ensure that. I should be free to use it as I please.”

He gulped his drink once again, then took a bite of the apple.

“Hey, Regis...” Altina looked at him with a confused look on her face.

“What is it?”

“Is Sir Jerome right? He’s free to do as he pleases so long as he protects the country? Is that right?”

“Naturally, the answer is *non*—the empire’s ministry of finance allots twenty percent of its revenue to military expenses. The money is collected as a necessity to protect the country; using it on unnecessary entertainment runs

contrary to the agreement with the taxpaying citizen.”

“It’s obvious when you think about it—Sir Jerome can’t be right.”

Altina criticized him. However, he simply lifted the corners of his mouth into a cynical, menacing smile.

“Hmph, bothersome admin officer. You put up a stiff front, but in the end, you’re the same as the rest, aren’t you?”

“...What do you mean?”

“Kukukuh... Now that you’ve heard that, you’ll say, ‘Give me a cut and I’ll look the other way.’ You’re all the same, each and every one of you.” Jerome raised an uncanny laugh.

Regis found himself praying again.

“Ooh... Not only extortion, but intimidation and coercion. This is... terrible...”

“He’s lying! You would never say that, would you, Regis?” Altina directed him a worried glance.

It is often said the honest lose out, but at the moment he was glad to be an upfront person. He didn’t have to disappoint her.

“I have no interest in your corruption,” he plainly informed Jerome.

“Oh, really? You don’t want money? Kukukuh... Don’t talk nonsense. I’m sure there’s something you desire. Something money would get you.”

Regis did have his desires. Of course he did. But this and that were completely unrelated. For a moment, the price tag at the bookstore crossed his mind, but that was a weak persuasion in the situation at hand.

“...Yes, but I don’t cheat to get it. Doing so would be the same as throwing my very life away.”

“Hahahah! Scared of the little lady? Don’t worry, there’s nothing she can do.”

“Gnn...”

Altina pouted, but continued to leave things to Regis.

“It looks like you’re misunderstanding something, Sir Jerome.”

"And what would that be?"

"...It doesn't matter who's here. You are the watchman of your own life."

"Hah! What are you, a priest!?"

"No, we're talking about loss and gain—immoral deeds inevitably cause hardships and place these burdens on others. This is inexcusable, and he who intentionally gains from such misdeeds will never truly escape the guilt. No matter what luxuries are to be gained, his heart shall never see another sunny day. What a miserable life that must be..."

Jerome fell silent. Altina listened in with a serious face as Regis continued.

"...So long as they are acquired justly, even the smallest indulgences may be enjoyed from the heart. However, those who work ill deeds will be tormented by guilt no matter how extravagant the luxury. Sir Jerome, you've heard me out to the end, so I have one question for you—between just and unjust, which do you think will obtain true happiness?"

"....."

Jerome grit his teeth so hard it was almost audible. The animosity in his eyes pierced Regis like a spear, so foul it drew associations to a beast of legend whose gaze could turn a man to stone.

He thought his heart might stop, but he continued to hold his ground, desperately containing the urge to run.

Altina, on the other hand, coldly returned the glare.

"Can't answer, Sir Jerome?"

"Tsk... Your dull lecture ruined the damn wine."

He tossed his bottle aside, and with that same motion reached his hand toward a pitchfork that had been stabbed into the hay. The fork was a farm tool about the size of a spear—merely an implement used to gather and carry hay to horses.

Yet in Jerome's hands, it seemed more like a trident.

He barely caught the sound of something slicing through the wind, when—

An apple was impaled mid-air, right before his eyes.

The pitchfork's sharp metal prongs stopped just short of Regis's nose.

"Woah!?"

"Kukukuh... You talk all high and mighty, but that's it. You're nothing but talk!"

"Guh..."

Regis adopted a defensive stance, though it served little purpose. The disparity in ability was much too great. Even without a weapon in hand, this man could kill him with no effort whatsoever.

He felt a bead of sweat trail down his spine. Had he made a grave mistake? While Jerome showed off a wild attitude, Regis had appraised him as someone who could hold a conversation.

No, he had already discerned it from their exchange. This man was not someone who would use violence without reason. In which case, what was he trying to achieve? Regis's mind thumbed through the books he had read before. There were a number of possibilities, and as he hesitated over which course of action to take, Altina moved.

The young girl now stood between them, protecting Regis like a shield.

She brushed aside the pitchfork with her left hand, and cast her right on the hilt of her sword.

"Quit acting childish, Sir Jerome! Is losing an argument enough to make you resort to violence?"

"You think I lost!? You say I'm a loser!?"

Jerome spun the pitchfork. The wind howled.

The next thrust shot out toward Altina's chest.

Something white went flying with a resolute snap. It was one of the buttons decorating the front of her dress.

"Gnn..." Altina frowned.

"Kukukuh... What's wrong, little lady? If this were the battlefield, you'd be

dead."

"If you had any real intent to kill me, that is."

"...Hmph."

The two glared at each other, unmoving.

"Did you think I'd run and cower?"

"Hmph... Never at a loss for words, are you?"

While his attempts to intimidate Altina were unmistakable, it was also clear that Jerome had no intention of causing any damage.

Regis observed silently.

He's not the sort of man who would hurt a little girl over heightened emotions. If such was in his nature, things would have turned violent much sooner. He may be putting on airs of hostility, but he's still carrying a rational conversation with us.

If he cared for his reputation, he would have at least made his drinking and wallowing more discreet. If he was driven by continued financial gain, he would have tried to cover up his embezzlement.

Yet he did neither.

In which case, did he no longer care? Had he thrown all apprehensions to the wayside? It was possible, given his circumstances, but... had he really been someone so apathetic to consequence, he would have ended the conversation long ago.

Jerome evidently had some reason to endure this annoying sermon to the end.

"...Are you testing us?"

"What?" Jerome's eyes sharpened.

Regis carefully chose his angle.

Rather than discerning the margrave's character, he was better off prioritizing his initial objective. He had stumbled across a bountiful thicket, but lacked the preparation to handle the snake coiled within.

He quelled the beat of his heart and steadied his breath.

“Princess... My business here is done. I now understand why this fort has no administrative officers.”

“I see. Well, I didn’t come here to glare,” Altina nodded.

Jerome looked at them dubiously.

“Was there something else? You think you can order me around?”

“It’s about the bandits. I think our current methods are incapable of solving the problem; we need a different strategy. I want you to mobilize the troops to carry it out.”

“A different strategy?”

“I was originally looking for you to ask about that.”

“...Hmph. Ridiculous.”

“What exactly are you calling ridiculous?”

“I don’t know what foolish song that admin officer charmed you with, but it’s a theory that’ll only work on paper. No matter what you do, you’re not going to catch such elusive bandits! Just leave it be. The merchants’ losses aren’t our concern; it’s their job to hire guards.”

“What are you talking about!? Protecting citizens is an army’s duty!”

“Enough with your lofty ideals, little lady. You know as well as I do, it’s impossible with the number of soldiers at this fort. Don’t drag my soldiers around on some wild goose chase!”

Jerome cast down the pitchfork and turned on his heels.

Altina released the hilt of her sword.

She’d never drawn it in the end. Perhaps she had merely succumbed to his pressure, but... with Regis’s lack of close combat acumen, that was not something he could say for sure.

Jerome was halfway out the door when Altina called him to stop.

“Where do you think you’re going!?”

“To town. The casino is just what I need to forget about your nonsense.”

“I see... Then order the soldiers to obey me.”

“I refuse. I don’t want to lose any troops on a hopeless endeavor.”

“It’s not hopeless!”

“Kua-hahahah! Hopeless, hopeless, hopeless! You’re not going to find them. I’ll bet on it.”

“T-That’s not true... We have a tactician right here!”

Her expectations of me are almost unwieldy, Regis cursed as he made a bitter face. Jerome took a glance at him.

“Hmph... You’re going to rely on this greenhorn admin officer? Even more reason not to lend you my men.”

“You’re judging a book by its cover—at least hear him out!”

If he kept quiet, Jerome would disappear off to town. Worst case scenario, their next meeting would actually erupt into bloodshed.

It was unavoidable.

He truly detested acting out the part of tactician, but it was about time for him to do his job. Regis had kept his silence for long enough; it was time to wrap things up.

“So, Sir Jerome is off enjoying the nightlife without a plan... and the soldiers will patrol the highway for yet another cold night. I pity them.”

Jerome’s face turned grim at his words.

“What did you just say? That I have no plan? That my soldiers are pitiable? You think they’re pitiable for being under my command? You’ve chosen your words poorly, fool... Try saying that again. I’ll snap that flimsy neck of yours.”

The horses nearby began to whinny restlessly.

Jerome had a scary look in his eyes. The sudden seriousness behind his intimidating air made him seem like a completely different person.

Was this wrath? Bloodlust? Malice? Whatever it was, the fact he had only

been playing when swinging around the pitchfork was now fearfully apparent.

As Jerome slowly made his approach, he was stopped by Altina.

“Hold it, Jerome!”

“Hmph... These are the front lines. Another two deaths would be nothing unusual.”

“If you’re serious, then I’ll have to—”

Regis reprimanded himself. *Don’t be intimidated by his aura! You need to stop them!*

While he was terrible with a sword, couldn’t ride a horse, and was no good in a fight, he couldn’t allow himself to go weak and freeze up here, of all places.

“Sir Jerome... There are any number of ways to capture bandits. Instead of exercising any of them, you persist with patrols that have proven ineffective. Do you not see these men as pitiable?”

“...Hmm... Kukukuh... Any number of ways?”

“Yes.”

Jerome nimbly approached him. That terrifying aura he exuded only a moment ago had vanished—or so he thought, only for Jerome to roughly hoist him up by the lapels. Regis could hardly breathe.

“You bastard! Are you betting your life on those words!?”

“I wouldn’t dream of it... This will not make for a bet. Because it will one-hundred-percent succeed.”

Altina stepped in between the two and tore them apart.

“Cease this violence immediately.”

“Hmph.”

“Hack, hack...”

“Are you all right?” Altina asked cautiously.

“...I know I’m not... the sort of tactician... you’re hoping for...” He took a sharp breath, and oxygen once again entered his lungs. “But you don’t have to worry

about this matter. I already know we'll pull it off."

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On Jerome's order, the soldiers gathered at the square in front of the gate. Six hundred, for the time being.

Regis stood before the troops, Altina and Jerome beside him.

Jerome raised his concerns. "Hmph... Is this really enough? There are no cavalry here, only foot soldiers."

Regis nodded in response. "Yes, this mission doesn't require cavalry... But I never thought they would assemble so quickly on a single order. Their discipline and solidarity far exceeds that of any unit I've seen before."

"Spare me the flattery. It means nothing. This is why I can't stand admin officers."

"I-I see..." It was a genuine compliment.

Jerome had been drinking in broad daylight, putting his soldiers to work with no overall strategy. Regis feared he may have lost his popularity, but that was a needless concern. The deeds that earned him his title, his martial arts that were still in top form, or perhaps even his concern for his subordinates—whatever it was, he maintained incredible control over his men.

"...Isn't it just because they're scared of what'll happen if they don't listen to him?" Altina whispered quietly.

"Haha..."

That would mean they're almost like tamed animals—a thought Regis found ridiculous yet couldn't fully refute. The terrifying Jerome himself was glaring at him, after all.

"Oi, just so we're clear: Screw this up and you're dead. You'll be at the vanguard next time the barbarians attack. It's a high honor to lead the charge and die an honorable death."

The head of the assault was a valorous and coveted position. The battle would always begin with a clash of the strongest warriors each side had to offer.

With Regis's unmistakable shortcomings, he would likely be unable to keep up with the charge. He could already see himself falling over and being trampled to death by his allies behind him.

"How scary... Incidentally, what happens if we succeed?"

"Kukuku... Look who's talking... If we succeed, I'll recognize you. You'll be allowed to live."

"What an appealing reward..."

And so, Regis explained the plan to the troops. It wasn't a terribly complicated one. The way he saw it, a complicated strategy would fail before it even began. When so many were participating, brevity was the top priority.

The explanation concluded. He was sure everyone understood.

But, precisely because they understood, a majority of the soldiers looked perplexed.

"Y-You want us to... pretend to be caravans?"

"Yes, that's right. But I don't think "pretend" is the right word—it's a disguise."

"I've never heard of that ever working before!"

"Let's pray the bandits haven't either. I will have you all lead wagons and walk beside the horses. Do not wear any armor; make do with what you can hide under your clothes. This will put you at a disadvantage in combat, but it should be enough to win against bandits—they can handle that, can't they?"

He directed the last few words at Jerome, who raised his voice proudly in response.

"They damn well can! Armor is just decoration. Even if you're left barehanded, I won't forgive any man who lets a bandit do them in. And if anyone wants to even humor the possibility of failure, step forward. I'll snap your bloody neck and send you home in a coffin faster than any bandit ever could!"

"Sir, yes sir!"

The soldiers voiced the affirmative in unison. They sounded reliable enough.

The terse atmosphere here was one that had been absent from Regis's time serving under Marquis Thénezay. The soldiers there were usually protecting the capital or an aristocrat's estate; they were proud men. Noble. Elegant, even.

After the marquis passed, a large majority were apparently hired by other nobles. Were they doing all right? Regis was hit by a longing for his homeland, but shook it off to return to the level-headed mindset required of his work.

He needed to impart these soldiers with detailed instructions.

"...The important part is to look indistinguishable from a normal caravan. While we're at it, it'd be nice to give off the impression we're carrying something valuable, so wooden crates will do nicely. If the load is too light, the speed of the carriage will give us away, so please load them with rocks, or something similar. Hide your weapons in the wagon."

There were soldiers among them who placed particular emphasis on their reputation. It was for this reason he had not called the knights, who were themselves an order of nobility. But many powerful faces still stood before him —after all, it took all sorts to make an infantry.

"This is hard to believe! Carrying stones? You're literally sending us on a fool's errand! What of the honor of the soldiers of the imperial army!?"

"Yeaah... I'm not forcing anyone to participate, but... between a soldier who keeps up appearances but can't catch a bandit, and one who dons a disguise to bring peace to the highway, which do you think should be honored?"

"Urgh... Gnn... But, still..."

"The notion is the same as hiding and waiting for the opportunity to launch a surprise attack. Is it honorable to loudly name yourself when you've gone to such great lengths to hide?"

"There is no need to consider it. Any idiot who risks exposing our position during an ambush will be silenced by me with a single blow through the heart!" Jerome answered in place of the now-silent soldier.

"I see. I appreciate your way of thinking. Dying in battle is an honor, no matter

the reason.” Regis didn’t even feel like arguing with him at this point.

In any case, once Jerome had given the order, the soldiers had no right to refuse him.

“And then what? What do you want me to do?” Altina asked.

“Pardon?”

“Do you want me to act as a coachman again?”

“...Princess, your hair, eyes and face are far too conspicuous. I’ll need you to watch and wait.”

“What!? You want me to wait!?”

“Hm, let’s see... No, actually.”

“Ah, then what should I do!?”

“We wouldn’t want the bandits sniffing out a change in plans, so please keep up your patrol.”

“Oh... You want me to patrol, even knowing that doing so is pointless?”

“That’s right. It’s an important job, defending the secrecy of our plan. We wouldn’t want the civilians to think the military is slacking off, either.”

“Mm... Fine...”

While she reluctantly accepted, it must not have been the position she was hoping for—she was now very clearly sulking.

Group by group, the troops who finished their preparations departed from Fort Sierck. Following their lead, a number of false caravans began their journey down the highway.

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It took only about a week for results.

While Jerome had been skeptical about the plan, to Regis’s surprise, he actually donned a disguise to take part himself. Did he feel some responsibility?

He put on the robes of a porter, pushing a laden cart beside the wagons.

And luckily—unluckily, for the bandits—it so happened to be his caravan the

bandits set their greedy sights on.

It turned out just as Regis had predicted. He would later hear the group seemed to be a band of mercenaries who had fallen on hard times.

“Gua-hahahah! Hand over all your cargo! Do what I say, and I’ll make it quick and painless!” The brigand let out another thunderous laugh.

He thrust out his spear. Its end, however, was caught by a mere pinch of fingers.

By a man dressed as a porter.

“Think you can do whatever you want on my land... you godforsaken parasites!?”

The brigand’s eyes opened wide in shock and terror. This porter was none other than the Hero of Erstein, Black Knight Jerome.

The other members of what was supposed to be a merchant troupe drew swords from their wagons. The shrieks were drowned out by a war cry.

It was one-sided from there. From what Regis was told, it couldn’t even be called a battle.

Jerome and his men were showered with applause at Theonveil and returned to the fort triumphant.

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That night—

“Gua-hahahah! You have my permission! Eat all you want, drink all you want!” Jerome roared with laughter, a bottle of booze in one hand.

In the officers’ dining room, the prominent senior officers gathered for a toast.

Altina was present, for what it was worth. She didn’t perform any conspicuous deeds this time around, so she sat at the foot of the table, but she seemed delighted from the very bottom of her heart that the plan had succeeded.

I'm glad I could make her smile—Regis breathed a sigh of relief.

Apart from her, he recognized the mass that was the knight captain, Everard. Despite his noble status, he dressed like a merchant and had assertively helped out.

The drinking bouts began. Brawny men cried out, laughed, and prattled a merry storm.

In the plaza around them, the rank-and-file soldiers who took part in the mission were surely sharing their tales of heroism with the others.

By all accounts, Regis was a junior officer who was meant to be in the plaza with them. However, as the one who proposed the plan, he was called to the dining hall for senior staff.

Not only that, he was seated at Jerome's table where the most important faces assembled. The fact his seat was far from Jerome's and that Altina was next to him provided some salvation, but his heart was that of a small dog that had wandered into a pack of wolves. Lonely and discouraged.

"Hey, Regis!!"

"Err... Do you mean me?"

"There's only one Regis in my regiment!"

"Oh, that's good to know... By the way, I'm technically in the princess's regiment..."

"He's right, you know," Altina nodded beside him.

"Oh, just shut it."

"....."

He was as unreasonable as ever.

"Hey, Regis... How did you think up that plan?"

You just told me to shut it, so why should I start speaking now? A childish counterattack did cross his mind, but he would surely die if the joke went misunderstood. He could never be the sort to stake his life on a quick laugh.

"...I once read about it in a book."

“Oh? So they write books on catching bandits these days?”

“No, I’ve never seen a report on such a method being put into practice. Those who go as far as to write a book on their own strategy might have a stronger fixation on keeping up appearances—I doubt they are the sort to use such an underhanded plan. Rather, the book that gave me the hint was about pirates. Pirates often fly the flags of merchants, deceiving ports and other small merchant ships into dropping their guards before launching an attack. There are innumerable stories of victories earned through deceit. This might be a bit old, but a classic example is—”

“Yeah, we get it. Shut up.”

“Eep.”

As he hadn’t spoken about books in a while, he had forgotten his circumstances and inadvertently droned on.

Jerome had a pensive look on his face.

It was at that moment that the maid, Clarisse, brought in a plate piled high with thick slices of meat.

“.....”

She really was silent now, and her face was completely devoid of a smile. As she placed the large plate on the table, the robust men cheered her on.

“Thank you kindly, Clarisse.” Altina spoke almost apologetically to the maid, who curtseyed and returned to the kitchen without a word.

That must’ve been a stranger who happened to look just like her—Regis had to doubt his eyes.

Jerome loudly gulped as the liquor passed down his throat.

“Hmph... Whatever. I reward success, no matter how much I can’t stand the recipient. Yes, even if he is an admin officer.”

Was that supposed to be heartwarming? Regis still felt he was being insulted.

“Hey, Regis! You scamp, don’t tell me this plan is the end of your bag of tricks! If you can’t think of anything else, you’re as good to me as a chicken who can’t

lay eggs."

"Oh... New plans? Whether I have a good idea or not will depend on the situation..."

"The best chickens give eggs even through the winter."

"But there's no need to strangle a bad one in fair weather."

"Kuh, kua-hahah! You've still got some spunk in you, kid. All right, I'll permit it. You can live another day."

"Is that so? Thanks...?"

Jerome didn't address him after that. However, the senior officers who had been practically ignoring his very existence got up to engage in a bit of small talk, a glass in hand.

As the night progressed, it was Altina who seemed to have no place; she timidly narrowed her shoulders.

❖ ❖ ❖

Regis finally managed to return to his room just as dawn was about to break.

He stripped off his coat and hung it on the back of his chair.

"Good grief, look at the time..."

The scent of ale had stained his hair. It would likely take more than a damp cloth to fully drive it out.

"Yeaah, well... I can take care of that when I wake up. Not that I have long to sleep, anyway..." he muttered before giving in to a deep yawn. He stretched out onto the bed and closed his eyes.

Almost immediately after, a knock came from his wooden door. It was quite a reserved tap.

Who could it be? He really wanted to sleep. As he hadn't engaged the lock, he prayed whoever it was would just open the door and let themselves in.

As he hesitated over whether to sleep or get up and answer the door, the knock sounded again.

All right, fine. Regis dragged himself out of bed, trudged over to the door and opened it before it could be knocked on a third time.

There stood the girl with the red hair and crimson eyes.

He wondered whether this was a dream. She wore a fancy one-piece dress that would fit in at a ballroom, but had not put on her arm guards. It would have made quite a din had she knocked with those things equipped.

“...U-Um... Good evening, Regis. Or perhaps I should say good morning?”

“Altina...? Am I dreaming?”

“I don’t think so. Hey, can I come in...?”

She warily surveyed the corridor stretching out on her either side. Regis didn’t know why she had come by, but he had no reason to turn her away. He let her into the room.

“What are you doing here so late at night? Or, uh, so early in the morning?”

“It’s already light outside. If you’re sleepy, I’ll come back later... But, it is a very important matter to discuss...”

“It’s all right. Drowsiness may have been in attendance a moment ago, but the shock of seeing you at my door sent him packing.”

“Yep, there’s the usual Regis. Pedantic and always beating around the bush.”

“You’ve barely gotten to know me, and you’ve already come to whip me into shape?”

“That’s not what I meant... If we’re going to talk about this, the last thing I’d want is for you to be drunk or half-asleep.”

“I didn’t drink that much, I’m fine. So what’s this important discussion?”

“...Regis, do you remember what we talked about in the carriage when we first met?”

“I thought you said you wouldn’t charge me for treason.”

“This isn’t a joke.”

Scant rays of morning light streamed in through the window. The girl’s

crimson eyes, revealed by the faint light, gave off a true sense of urgency.

Regis placed the room's only chair beside his bed. He offered it to her, taking a seat on the edge of his covers.

"...Does this work?"

"Yes. Thank you."

Considering their status as princess and commoner, perhaps he should have sat on the floor. But that wasn't the relationship Altina wanted to build. Otherwise, she wouldn't have dropped by his room without her maid.

For a woman to sneak into a man's room—if this were one of the works of fiction gaining popularity in the capital, the next scene would require him to make sure there were no prying eyes.

He inadvertently found himself fixedly inspecting her.

Altina stroked her cheek.

"Mn? What's wrong, Regis? Is there something on my face?"

"...No, I simply had an absurd thought that I had to immediately discard."

"Oh, but what if you aren't wrong?"

"Wh-What!?"

"Speak your mind."

"No, but... that's... definitely not going to end well... You're a minor, and..."

"Age has nothing to do with it. I'm being serious."

"Hah!?"

"I've already made my decision. Whatever obstacles I face... even if I am still lacking, I want to do this."

"Do— Do what?"

He was more confused than ever before. He could feel his heart speed up. Altina hesitated before she continued on.

"W-When the wagon wouldn't move, you told me the nobles continue waging their pointless wars, expending the commoners' lives and assets."

"That was close! I knew I had things all wrong. I-I mean, yes, you're right! Politics, of course. I remember the whole exchange."

"Do you still stand by those words?"

"I do."

He was finally seeing where this was going. Regis calmed his heart and returned a nod.

"And are you still frustrated with the aristocracy?"

"Of course... This fort has the hero, Jerome, so the barbarians won't launch any thoughtless attacks, but there are lands that have it far worse. Losing land from a battle, invading to take it back; the process leads to an ever-increasing number of casualties. In just three years, half of my academy classmates who had been dispatched to the front lines died in the line of duty. They were all... good guys..."

It was no lie that he felt a problem with the empire's current policies.

"...I also don't think the current empire is a just one. The royal line and the nobles who should be thinking about the people do naught but embroil themselves in an unsightly struggle for power."

"Right. I feel a bit better hearing those words from a royal like yourself..."

"Why so?"

"Under the current system, it's difficult for the opinions of the masses to be reflected in the empire's laws. I hear there's a certain country where policy is decided by the vote of each and every citizen, but..."

"That sounds interesting... Would you prefer it if this became such a country?"

"No, it is too early. As the populace is largely uneducated on matters of law, military and finance, there is a high chance their word would steer the country in the wrong direction. You cannot hold politics in a bar."

"That certainly is worrisome."

"That is precisely why those in high places, like the emperor, need to think

about leading us in the right direction. That's all I ask for as a citizen."

"Do you think there really is a right direction?"

"For the majority of people, at least. I find it strange that a royal like yourself shares that opinion."

Altina's sense of values seemed normal from the point of view of a commoner, but was quite a curiosity considering her status. Those of the upper echelon were generally prideful, discriminatory, and saw themselves as the chosen people.

"My mother would often tell me stories of what it was like to live as a commoner."

"Oh, right, Imperial Concubine Claudette was a commoner by birth. Is she also working to reform the empire?"

"No. Mother doesn't think about that sort of thing. She takes in all the pain, the sorrow and the hardships, enduring them and remaining complacent. She doesn't have nor act toward a greater goal; she's a normal person."

"That definitely is normal..."

The empire still existed precisely because a large majority did not voice their objections toward the increasingly unequal system of aristocracy.

Altina's expression clouded over. She firmly clenched the hand rested on her lap.

"I want to change the empire... but, at this rate... it'll end without me having accomplished anything..."

She painstakingly squeezed out the name of a certain man. Second Prince Latrielle.

"His backing is great... it won't be long before he corners First Prince Auguste into abdicating his right to succession."

"At this rate, you're probably correct."

"He'll become emperor. When that happens, he will be the one deciding my future... A man as cunning as he would never grant freedom to any of imperial

blood. I will undoubtedly be married to some high aristocrat of the empress's faction."

"...That also sounds likely."

The girl could see her own end. Unfortunately, she would likely never be granted the opportunity to voice these opinions about the empire.

"It will be no different from a prison."

Altina grit her teeth. She wished, she prayed, to change the empire. However, her freedom would be stolen away the moment Prince Latrielle became emperor.

"I understand how you feel. Even I hold my resentment... but, even if such is the case, what can we do? A commoner has but a commoner's life to live. The fourth princess must live as the fourth princess."

"That's right. It's already been decided... If I continue to wait, nothing will be accomplished."

"That's life for you."

"Even so... I want to change the empire. I can't just be complacent until I'm standing at the prison gates."

Regis contained her just before she could get too worked up.

"Calm down, Altina... Prince Latrielle becoming emperor, your future, it's all been decided by the unstoppable current called the empire. Are you telling me... you mean to oppose it?"

"...If I have to."

While her tone was calm, her fiery passion was still clear for all to see.

"That's reckless." Regis shuddered. "At times, passion can narrow your field of vision... If you go through with this, you will very likely lose your life."

Yet there was no hesitation in her crimson eyes. Her expression told the worrying tale that she had already made her resolve.

"I will change the empire. That is my goal in life. To give it up would be no different from giving up on life."

"Ah..." Regis swallowed his breath. He never thought he would reunite with his own words here, of all places.

Why had Altina seen Regis as a kindred soul? He was finally beginning to see it.

"And to pursue these feelings, I must move forward."

"Don't be rash, Altina... You need to give it some thought..."

"I've already thought about it too many times to count, and in that time a great many people have suffered. There are countless things I'm lacking if I want to change the empire, but time is in short supply, and I can't afford to waste any more!"

Regis stooped his shoulders. He knew he would never be able to stop her. The whole situation was a tragedy that pained his heart.

"Aah, Altina... You are too wise... You would have been able to live a far more comfortable life had you only been a fool. With your looks and lineage, the man who becomes your husband would shower you with all his affection. Enjoying wonderful songs; tasting expensive wine; immersing yourself in opera; visiting the hills in spring, the rivers in summer, the forests in fall, the castles in winter; adoring gemstones; dressing up in tasteful gowns. You would lack nothing to enjoy the happiness of a noble lady."

"Yet no matter what luxury I live in, I can never escape from the sense of guilt that such a life has been squeezed from those suffering under tyranny."

"Hah... I do remember saying something like that..."

"You gave an answer to the doubts swirling in my heart."

"Good grief, I'm... the worst. 'Knowledge does not bring happiness'—such is a quote from my favorite book." At this point, Regis could do little more than watch her expression.

The resolution on her face was far too beautiful, far too dignified, clearly revealing the firmness of her determination.

Her faint pink lips parted.

"I will become empress. I need your wisdom."

Regis forgot to breathe as he burned the form of the red-haired, crimson-eyed princess into his mind.

A declaration too heavy to bear for a fourteen-year-old girl. Far too many obstacles stood between her and her destination. Yet she said she would press on, fully aware of them.

Was this the emotion those around him felt when the first emperor of the Belgarian Empire proclaimed he would thoroughly crush the barbarians and form a nation?

If these hands have enough power to change the world, I want to grant her wish. He knew this from the bottom of his heart.

“But... Altina... I don’t think I’m the talent you’re hoping for.”

“Regis, I heard a rumor about you three months ago.”

“You mentioned... What was the rumor?”

“That you are an excellent strategist; an intellectual with rare insight.”

Who could have possibly said that? Regis was so embarrassed he wished for the floorboards to swallow him up.

“As I said then, rumors are always embellished, and in this case even aggrandized. The only other explanation is that you must have the wrong person.”

“Your timid parts included. When I met you, my hopes changed to certainty. Of course, I won’t say I understood everything, but I knew you were someone I could trust. Your ability, your personality and your ideology.”

“Such a hasty conclusion...”

“It wasn’t a hasty conclusion. Why do you think I went so far as to dress up as a coachman to hear your true thoughts? I had my own share of troubles.”

“I suppose that did happen.”

“I have my reasons for believing in you. Besides, wouldn’t you say that trusting another depends on more than just rationale?”

“Is that how it works?”

“Of course it is!”

“Yeaah... Still... You know...”

Regis didn’t know what to say.

Silence followed. For a while, the room was suffused with no more than the quiet whistle of the wind outside—until a violent knock shattered the serenity. It came in concert with a yell.

“Hey, Regis! Are you up!? We need to talk!”

“Sir Jerome...!?”

“Wha!?”

Altina went pale. She had just confessed a secret that put her own life at risk. With various forms of anxiety overlapping each other, she could no longer keep her cool.

Regis leaned in, lowering his voice so no one outside could hear.

“...Calm down, Altina... You need to hide.”

“...Do... Do you... think he heard...!?”

“...If he had, he wouldn’t have knocked.”

“...Ah.”

“More importantly, it’ll be dangerous if anyone finds out we were alone together at this hour. More specifically, my life will be in danger.”

“...Eh?”

“Don’t worry about it. Just hide.”

“...Hide where!? There’s no space behind the bookshelf or under the bed.”

“...It-It-It doesn’t matter where.”

This was followed by another harsh knock and a louder shout.

“Oi, Regis!? Hey! I’m letting myself in!”

“Aah, wait! Please wait. I was in the middle of changing so I’m buck naked, and...”

“Hah! Who cares? I’ve no interest in your twig of a body. I’m coming in!”

The door slammed open.

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When Jerome entered, Regis was in bed with the blanket pulled up to his chest.

“Err... Sorry, but... I get shy easily...”

“Hmph. Do whatever you want. No matter whether you’re in the middle of eating or changing, you’ll be fine so long as you listen to me.”

“Oh, really... Erk...”

Something wriggled under the blanket. He could feel warmth press across his thin undershirt.

“Hah...”

He could feel strained breathing. Regis broke into a cold sweat as he lay face-up on the bed.

Altina was under the covers.

To prevent her shape from standing out, she clung tightly to Regis’s left—the opposite side to where Jerome stood.

By doing so she was just barely able to hide, but Regis’s heart rattled like the bell on an alarm clock.

Her left arm rested on his stomach, her right tunneled under his back. Her head was buried into his flank. The bulge there would definitely give them away, so he had taken his largish book and placed it open across his chest.

It was a somewhat unnatural position, but—

Jerome didn’t question what such an arrangement could be hiding.

“Hear me out, Regis.”

“Yes...?”

“I— See, I can’t stand you. I think admin officers are useless piles of trash. They’re all talk.”

“I-Is that so... Do you want me to return to the capital?”

“You wouldn’t go even if I told you to.”

“I am the princess’s subordinate, after all... Erk...”

Altina’s squirming leg tangled with his own. He knew she was trying to stick as close as possible to hide, but this was bad for his heart.

The sensation of her soft thigh was conveyed to his own. On top of that, a girl’s leg rubbing his inner thigh was a sensation he had never experienced before.

Regis’s left leg was now sandwiched between both of Altina’s. His pulse hastened to such an extent he feared what it would do next. Perhaps it would stop entirely and he would die right then and there.

—Not a bad way to go... No, no, that’s way too miserable! His mind had fallen into a tumultuous panic.

Jerome closed in.

“Ah, wait, Margrave... Please wai—”

“Listen!”

“Yes, sir.”

Jerome slammed his right foot down onto the seat of the nearby chair—without removing his shoe, to boot. He placed his right elbow on his now-raised knee and leaned forward. His left hand pressed against his hip.

“You’re trash. But, you’re useful trash. My principle is to use even trash, so long as it has some value.”

“I-I see...”

“But a kid who doesn’t obey my orders isn’t one of my men. You get me?”

“...To summarize, Sir Jerome, you are dissatisfied that I do not obey your orders?”

“Yeah, of course I’m dissatisfied! Real dissatisfied! It’s irritating just hearing you say you’re that little lady’s subordinate!”

“Umm... You’re technically the princess’s subordinate, too...”

“That’s the part I can’t stand the most!!”

“As I thought.”

“And that’s the thing. Go tell the little lady to make me your direct superior.”

“Oh, I see...”

The margrave practically wore his disregard for military regulation on his sleeve, but if the need arose, he was apparently capable of going through proper procedures. Following through with his proposal would not change the fact that Regis reported to Altina, but... Jerome needed it to be true that the princess’s subordinate had chosen the margrave over the princess.

“Kukukuh... Become one of my men, Regis.”

“A-About that...”

The girl under the covers squeezed his flank in protest. *I get how you feel*, Regis cried out internally, *but he’s going to see!* He promptly dropped the corner of the book on her small head from over the covers.

It shouldn’t have hurt too much, but she went quiet. He hoped this had settled her down.

For once, Jerome began speaking calmly.

“...I... don’t plan on freezing in these northern lands forever.”

His rebellious heart was fully justified. Even so, the empire was such a large structure that any opposition was difficult.

“Do you have a plan?”

“Naturally, I’ll... No... Whatever I do’s got nothing to do with you. Don’t get conceited, fifth-grade admin officer.”

“Well, that sounds about right.”

“I’m going to need all the hands I can get, so I’m saying even someone as worthless as you has value to me. Be grateful.”

“I’ll work for what I’m paid. If you want to transfer me, please bring it up with

the princess..."

"You're choosing the little lady over me?"

"T-That's... I can't decide immediately."

"Very well. Think over it seriously. Not that there's anything to think about."

Jerome removed his foot from the chair and turned to the door.

"If I decline your proposition... what happens then?" Regis asked cautiously.

"I am a merciful man. Your death will be a painless one."

A twitch came from Altina, who was still pressed tightly against him. Regis discreetly placed a light hand on her head.

"...That is... most generous."

Jerome left the room with a smile, convinced there was no way Regis could decline.

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"Phew!"

When he lifted the blankets, Altina sprung up. It must have been quite hot down there, as her cheeks were bright red.

"Are you all right?"

"Hah... Hah... I'm not all right!"

"Q-Quiet down."

"Guh."

Altina's face shot up to his. She mounted Regis as he lay on the bed, making for quite the bold situation.

I-Is she not aware of the situation?

Presumably—or, at least, going off her lack of other relevant knowledge—she didn't get it.

He felt her weight press down on his stomach. Regis was seemingly alone in his embarrassment as his face flushed red.

“N-Now look here, Altina... For starters, how about you calm down and get off the bed before we talk...”

“You want to become Jerome’s subordinate!?”

“I wouldn’t dream of it!”

“I mean, he said he’d kill you if you refused.”

“That was just an empty threat...”

“But... You didn’t refuse...”

“No, that’s because you were there...”

If Regis had declined the proposal, it was possible he would have used violence as his next mode of persuasion. If it came to that, he would have definitely found her hidden under the covers.

The fact her thoughts hadn’t reached that point meant she had definitely lost her cool. Altina grabbed Regis’s shirt.

Her crimson eyes wavered.

She was on the verge of tears.

No ruby could ever match this beauty—a misplaced thought crossed Regis’s mind.

A transparent dewdrop traced the length of her pale white cheek.

“Help me...! I need you!”



“...!?” Regis swallowed his breath.

She stared at him with a deadly seriousness. He could feel his own face grow hot.

We need to cool off—both of us. Regis took a deep breath.

“First things first, Altina... The reason I didn’t decline the margrave’s request was to avoid the risk of you being spotted.”

“Ah... You’re right. I’m sorry.”

“And, as I said, the threat to my life was an empty one... I think I’ve got a pretty good grasp on his personality.”

“Even though it’s hardly been a week since you arrived here?”

“He took more time to get down than most. He’s quite the capricious one.”

“Really? What’s my personality?”

“...I don’t have a good grasp on you yet.”

“What’s with that... Are you lying to avoid the subject?”

“I don’t lie.”

“Oh, that’s right. You’re against lying. Then answer me honestly... Will you still help me?”

Her expression was an amalgamation of anxiety and expectation. She was close enough for each breath to be felt. So close he could make out every detail of his own face in her large, crimson eyes.

No one had ever needed him this much before. No one had recognized him like she had.

And so, Regis had no confidence.

“...Let me be honest... What you are attempting to do is treason against the empire. You will make an enemy of a majority of those in power. They will presumably ignore even the empire’s will in order to crush you. You may have the right to succeed the throne, but... the populace aside, the large noble houses would never back you.”

“You refuse to lend a hand to such a dangerous situation?”

“The opposite. Precisely because it’s a difficult dream to reach, I want to lend you my aid.”

“Really!?”

Altina’s expression brightened up immediately, much to Regis’s concern. He attempted to restrain her excitement.

“Please, wait a minute. The thing is... I can’t even imagine myself being of use to you.”

“Why’s that? You’ve proven your worth in advising Marquis Thénezay, in persuading Jerome, and in capturing the bandits. And I’m sure you have many other achievements from before, too.”

“But that was all just surface knowledge I learned from books. If I were to fall into an unfamiliar situation, I’m certain that my expertise wouldn’t be of any use. It’s far too reckless to place this much trust and ambition in such a half-baked excuse for a strategist. I’m aware of my shortcomings, and that’s why I’m so reluctant to take on this position. What if I mess up in a critical situation? What you’re trying to do here is a game of life and death—there are no second chances. That’s why I think you should take more care with your personnel selection—not that I don’t appreciate having met you. What I mean is, you might come across a real tactician someday. I just happened to be the first you encountered, and—”

Altina’s shoulders dropped. As she hung her head, her forehead smacked into Regis’s with a cushioned thump.

The sudden impact forced him to take a breath.

Her lips were so close.

“Regis...” She exhaustedly called his name.

Had she finally gotten sick of him? He couldn’t blame her.

“Altina...?”

“...Do you want to become my tactician or not?”

"The tactician part aside, I do want to help you... I just have no confidence I can do the job well."

He felt the heat across her forehead. She was just a little warmer than he was.

"Then how about we do this? I'll put as much trust in you as you refuse to put in yourself. Then you should have enough trust for one person."

He felt some sophistry at work. But, rather than himself, he might have an easier time believing in Altina.

"...So you'll believe in me... and I just have to believe in you?"

She lifted her body. The sensation of their touching foreheads lingered for a short while.

But the only part that had separated was their foreheads; she was still sitting on Regis's stomach.

"Yes, believe in me—is what I'd like to say. But I'm aware that's impossible as I am now."

"Why?"

Quite a sudden change of heart. A moment ago, she so strongly declared she would become empress.

But her eyes showed no colors of defeat. There was resolve in her expression.

"Sir Jerome said he wanted to make you his subordinate..."

"Yeah..."

That was the only noteworthy thing that took place between now and her proclamation that she would become empress. She had likely compared herself with Jerome.

It really was a tough gap to bridge.

"A majority of the soldiers believe in Sir Jerome over me. To ask you to be the only one who believes in me—I can't ask for something so selfish."

"I think Sir Jerome's closer to success. He might make a comeback in the empire."

“You reckon he’ll be emperor?”

“No...”

Usurping the throne would be difficult. Even if Jerome himself boasted peerless strength, for each soldier working by his side, a thousand from the empire would oppose. Not to mention the First Army defending the capital was a unit gathered from the strongest men of the country with top-class equipment.

But, above all else, just winning battles wasn’t enough to win hearts. To garner enough support, a war needed a just cause.

Regis cut the rails to that train of thought there.

“It’s hopeless. I can’t support him... Even if Sir Jerome becomes ruler, I doubt the war will end. Our territories will expand even further, and little else.”

“Right,” Altina agreed, “I can’t entrust the future to Sir Jerome. If I want to realize my ideals, I need to make the change myself.”

“I see... So you haven’t given up yet...”

His statement made her bare her fangs. She snapped at him.

“That’s a bit rude, don’t you think!? My heart was racing so fast I thought it would stop when I told you my ambition! Did you think my feelings were so light that I’d give up at the slightest inconvenience!?”

Altina stretched, deliberately shifting her body weight. A sudden great deal of force pressed down into his stomach.

“Urp!?”

“A. Po. Lo. Gize.”

She loosely rocked her body back and forth. Each time, a terrible strain washed over his stomach. The bed creaked beneath them.

“It’s coming out, it’s coming out, everything I ate at the banquet, I’m gonna throw— I’m sorry, I’m sorry!!”

“Good.”

Her vicious attacks stopped. She let out a long sigh.

“Believing in others is an inevitable part of my job. I’m just glad I got to confirm how you felt.”

“I feel nauseous...”

“Not those kinds of feelings.”

“...What will you do now?”

“A tactician has no means to display his ability without troops, correct?”

“Normally...”

“I’ll do something about that. Leave it to me.”

“Altina... I’m against you doing anything rash.”

“Is that your advice as a tactician? As a comrade who shares my ideals? As a friend? Oh, or maybe...”

“Um, well... as a fifth-grade administrative officer.”

“Right.”

She slowly reached out a hand and pinched Regis by the nose.

“Nn!?”

And as she released her grip, she simultaneously climbed off of his body.

She jumped off the bed as nimbly as a cat. Before his eyes could even register it, she was already at the door.

“Good night, Regis.”

Just like his previous visitor, she left with a smile convinced of something.

The door shut, and—

Silence.

Regis—who had now slightly raised his torso—felt the strength drain from his body as he powerlessly entrusted himself to the bed.

He felt as heavy as lead. He could hear the small birds chirping outside the window.

So many outrageous events had come in succession to rob him of his sleep.

“What is... all of this...”

Through the bandit incident, Regis had come to grips with the state of the border regiment, and there was one thing he was convinced of.

What he needed next was a unification of the power structure. Normalizing Altina and Jerome’s crooked relationship was the top priority.

The ideal would be if Jerome recognized Altina as commander. If that proved impossible, the second best thing... would be for Altina to accept her position as a decorative figurehead.

However, Regis’s own words, of all things, had set her off on her quest to become empress. She would not accept being a decoration, even if this refusal meant the death of her.

What’s more, such a careless administrative officer was desired by both sides—a preposterous occurrence. Jerome only wanted to use Regis as a slight to Altina, but this was developing into a distinct clash of interest.

“...What’s all this, then? Don’t tell me I’m the one behind the worsening of the situation? How could this be? I just wanted to read my books...” He felt like crying.

Ah, that’s right. Let’s read.

His nerves were so on edge, he was certain he wouldn’t fall asleep in a hundred years.

Regis picked a new book from the bookshelf and began flipping through the pages.

“Books sure are nice... I can forget about everything when I read...”

Or at least, he was supposed to forget. His eyes were merely skimming over the words as his head swam with thoughts of other things.

Mending Altina and Jerome’s relationship was probably his responsibility, as he was likely the one to blame for its current state.

An army with two commanders—one in name, the other in practice—was already, in itself, a disaster waiting to happen. He couldn’t think of the right way to handle it.

"And just look at that... I really am incompetent..." Regis lamented as he drifted off to sleep, almost swooning over his open book.

Chapter 3: Altina's Determination

The day Altina proclaimed she would set her sights on the seat of the emperor, the situation took an unanticipated turn.

The ministry of military affairs issued an order to the fort requesting documents be properly filed and submitted. Regis could not help but see this as a precarious situation, one that threatened the continued existence of the regiment. But Jerome, the very cause of these worries, paid the instruction no mind at all.

"Hmph... If they're going to raise a ruckus over the likes of paperwork, they can just protect this fort themselves. They have no unit daft enough to march to these northern lands."

"Is that your reply? I can't send back something so incendiary..."

"If you don't like it, you do something about it."

"Hah..."

The matter was entrusted to Regis.

Altina apologetically stopped him in the hall once she'd heard about it.

"When I came here three months ago, I knew it couldn't go on like this. I did what I could."

"But the situation hasn't changed..."

"You think so? I brought you here, did I not? I even put in a special request to the ministry's personnel department to do so."

"I see. I finally understand why the ministry wouldn't answer any questions I had about the situation at my new post."

Perhaps he would have disputed his deployment had he known he would be the only administrative officer.

"Did I do something I shouldn't have?" Altina asked worriedly.

“No, my reassignment was going to happen regardless, and there are plenty of worse places to be. This isn’t so bad... though me being the only administrative officer *is* a problem.”

“Is this too much for you to handle alone?”

“I don’t know yet. Well, I can’t just ignore the problem and hope it goes away. I’ll do what I can.”

And so, Regis became swamped with administrative busywork.

If Altina strove to be empress, Regis wanted to help her. After all, he himself embraced a desire to change the empire.

However, the reality of the situation proved quite similar to the snow piling up on the roof above—cold, heavy, and likely to bring the whole place crashing down if unattended to.

The work laid out before him wouldn’t wait.

As Regis spent his time surrounded by mountains of paperwork, he was unable to notice Altina’s decision.

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A week later, early morning—

When he had first seen it, Regis had thought his room so vast it must have been a mistake. But now it was crammed with mountains upon mountains of documents, leaving nowhere for him to even stand.

The desk that had once seemed disproportionately large for someone of his rank now felt cramped and uncomfortable.

He glared at the report in his hands.

“...I see. So that’s what’s happening.”

There were a number of points that caught his interest, but he continued his work indifferently for the time being. He placed the report on the mountain of papers he had already gone through.

The candle on the desk wavered in the wind, drawing the surrounding

shadows into an eerie dance.

Oil lamps were more mainstream in the capital, but as the oil that fueled them was liquid, they were harder to transport than solid candles. This inevitably meant that candles were used more often than not near the border.

Regis reached for the next document.

It was then that the door let off a reserved tapping sound.

“Mn? Yes, who is it? The door’s not locked...”

“Good morning, Mr. Aurick.”

The door was opened by a black-haired woman with equally dark eyes, her skin as brown as a healthy tan. She wore the black uniform of a maid, and looked just a little older than Regis.

She entered the room following a polite curtsey. Regis made sure to bow in return.

“Good day, Elin. You’re early today.”

“I have to go to the marketplace today, so I thought I would stop by before that. I was worried I might wake you, but it seems you are an early riser, Mr. Aurick.”

“No... not exactly.”

He had barely gotten any sleep, having effectively pulled an all-nighter. It had been like this every day for the past week.

Elin was a maid who served the house of Margrave Beilschmidt. After the previous administrative officers were driven from the fort, the people in charge of the residence’s finances were apparently ordered to handle all the paperwork of the regiment.

While Elin hailed from a foreign country, she was an eager learner who studied Belgarian after arriving at the margrave’s residence. She could now fluently read and write the language.

Another person appeared beside her—

A youth dressed in a butler’s coat. He shared the same black hair, black eyes

and tan skin. He carried a large wooden crate in his arms.

“Hey, I brought it.”

He crudely tossed the box on the floor and brushed away the wood splinters stuck to his clothing.

Elin bumped a prompt knuckle down on his head.



“C’mon now, Gösta. Mind your manners.”

“Oww... Don’t hit me, sis... Isn’t this supposed to be a soldier’s job? Why do we have to help out, anyway!? And this guy’s just a commoner, a fifth-grade admin officer, he’s not that— Oww!?”

He was hit again.

“What are you saying!? Your rudeness may bring Sir Jerome’s very character into question! My apologies, Mr. Aurick. Please don’t take his words to heart. My brother is still new to his trade.”

“I don’t particularly mind...”

“Sis, I’m already sixteen! I’m a full-fledged steward’s assistant! I’m not new to my—”

“Shut it, you!”

Gösta was the younger brother of the maid, Elin, and was currently assisting the margrave’s house’s steward with his duties. As a steward’s job covered so much ground, he seldom had the chance to leave the manor. Thus, it had become one of the boy’s duties to maintain contact with Regis.

Though, Regis couldn’t understand why Elin always accompanied him.

He browsed through the fresh paperwork brought in, carefully counting the amount of new tasks to do.

“Gösta hasn’t said anything out of place... I am neither your employer, nor am I a client,” Regis reservedly conceded.

“Don’t be silly. Being a military officer is already plenty important. You ensure the peace of our everyday lives, don’t you?”

“Sis, this guy’s administration. He’s got nothing to do with war.”

“Quit it, would you!”

“Haha... He’s right. I may be enlisted, but swords and spears are beyond me.”

Regis was abysmal when it came to receiving praise.

Despite that, Elin directed an impassioned glance in his direction.

"You are very modest, Mr. Aurick... I think being on the intellectual side is a wonderful trait."

This was an era where strength was required to live. The majority of women fell under the mindset that a man's worth was decided by his muscle, so was Elin a little strange? Or was flattery just a part of her job?

It must be the latter, thought Regis.

He felt ashamed to have misunderstood the intent of simple social courtesy. *I should get back to work; no unnecessary thoughts*, he decided as he got the papers in order.

"All right... I should be able to manage this much. I'll have a good look over the details later. Thank you. I have some suggestions regarding my future work, so I wrote up a letter. Could you pass this to Mr. Maclen?"

"Certainly."

Elin courteously accepted the letter. Beside her, Gösta muttered "What a pain," only to be hit on the head yet again.

It was impossible for Regis to handle the entirety of the regiment's paperwork on his own, so he continuously requested the assistance of the servants of the margrave's estate. Among them was the steward, Maclen—a fifty-year-old veteran in taxation and trading documentation whose work in these fields was always error-free, which was a huge load off of Regis's shoulders.

His work on military reports and supply requisition forms, on the other hand, was not quite so flawless. These papers relied on conventions unique to the military that, when not followed to a T, were quickly followed by letters of reprimand from the ministry. Only by checking and correcting them before they went out, often writing up the difficult portions himself, could Regis make these just barely presentable enough to avoid complaint.

"I'd like him to take care of these documents this week. They are a tad numerous, but there shouldn't be too much writing required," he said as he stacked the requested documents into the box.

Gösta had a blatantly reluctant look on his face. "This many? They're quite a hassle, you know? Mr. Maclen still has to do his job at the manor!"

"And I'm very grateful for his assistance. Please think of it as helping out Sir Jerome."

"H-Hmph! I don't need you telling me that!" Gösta picked up the box as he spoke.

A wooden crate filled to the brim with papers was surely quite heavy, but he had physical prowess unbefitting his wiry frame—as expected of a butler.

Regis extinguished the candle on the desk, carefully making sure not to disturb the precarious mountains of documents as he made his way to the door and opened it.

"...I'll see you to the carriage. I was just about to leave the room, anyway."

While Gösta was silent, Elin offered a smile.

"Thank you, Mr. Aurick."

"I'm sorry I can only see you off."

Regis intended to procure some coffee at the dining hall.

Coffee was a drink about as cheap as wine or beer that even a commoner could stock up on—a miraculous drink that could keep him operating a while longer. Truth be told, he needed sleep far more, but there was little to be done when he had papers he needed to file by noon. The postal service that carried packages and letters to the capital only came by once every two weeks.

He walked out into the corridor. It was dark.

It wasn't yet an hour where any significant light would come in through the windows, so a corridor of stone walls became almost an inky-black darkness. Any aristocrat's manor in the capital would at least have candlesticks placed on the walls.

However, Regis had finally grown accustomed to feeling his way through the fort.

Their footsteps echoed.

"...Is your carriage at the south gate?"

"Yes. I would not want anyone to have to go to the trouble of opening the

main gate."

"Understandably."

The large front gate, made so an army could pass, required a great many people to open and close, while the south gate on the opposite side could be operated with only two guards. It was only just barely large enough for a wagon to enter, but if one wanted to reach town quicker, the south gate was their best bet.

Jerome's manor was situated in the town of Theonveil, where the streets were abundant with an ever-changing stream of people, goods and information. To manage such a territory from within the fort would have been near impossible.

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They left the central tower, made for the south gate and, just as they reached the back yard where the carriage was parked, they ran into another maid.

She had brown hair and hazel eyes, and wore a familiar rouge-colored maid gown. She had come out of the food storage with a jute bag on her handcart.

It was Clarisse.

"....."

She curtseyed expressionlessly. It never ceased to amaze Regis how silent and stone-faced she was when other people were around.

Gösta stood up straight with the box in his hands.

"Aah!? C-C-Clarissee! P-Pleasure! Good morning!"

"...Good morning."

"W-What lovely weather we're having today!"

Upon hearing that, Regis and Elin quizzically looked up.

The sky was just beginning to light up from the east, but was almost entirely clouded over.

"Certainly," was all Clarisse replied. It seemed she didn't have anything else to say.

“...Isn’t Gösta acting a little strange?” Regis whispered to Elin.

“...Oh, yes, it seems my brother has quite a thing for Clarisse.”

“...Huh?”

While Clarisse was a maid all the same, she was essentially the retainer of the imperial princess, giving her a sense of refinement absent from the servants in these outskirts. She was pretty enough, and it wasn’t strange that someone might find her fair hair and skin alluring. To add to that, her figure was shapely enough to make out over her apron.

And yet, when it came to Gösta, her expression was as unchanging as that of a doll. Her entire vocabulary seemed to consist of “yes,” “certainly,” and “really.”

This was a time where beautiful yet unsociable women carried a low reputation—just as one tended to keep distance from a fast but temperamental horse.

Elin leaked a sigh.

“...My brother’s tastes aren’t quite conventional. He’s a bit of a weirdo. It really is a bother.”

“...Yes, well, I’m of the mind that it’s best to respect his preferences.”

“Personally, if I were to marry someone, he’d have to be intellectual and kind, with a stable occupation that doesn’t risk them dying on the battlefield.”

“Hmm, I see... Having a stable job that doesn’t kill you is always a plus.” Regis nodded.

Elin gazed intently at him. There was a heated curiosity in her eyes.

What’s gotten into her? Regis wondered.

Clarissey politely lowered her head.

“I have work to attend to. I must take my leave.”

“Y-Yes, of course! I apologize for keeping you!”

“.....”

Unfortunately for Gösta, the chances of Clarisse returning his affection

seemed hopelessly slim.

She had only just cut off the conversation when she turned to Regis with a dazzling smile across her face. She was like a completely different person. He had to wonder if a forest spirit had possessed her.

“Good morning, Mr. Regis.”

“Eh? Yeah, morning.”

“Are you going somewhere?”

“No... just seeing them off. There are still documents I need to draft up.”

“Is that so? Would you care for some coffee from the dining hall?”

“Coffee? Why, I was just about to ask for some...”

Regis was bewildered by Clarisse, who was acting kinder than she had ever been to him before.

“Ufufu, then that works out perfectly. We had a fresh order of coffee beans arrive this morning. Please, allow me to brew a delicious cup for you at once.”

She pointed toward the jute bag on her cart.

While he was thankful for the coffee... Gösta’s stare pricked him all over. Even Elin was now pouting, a scary expression brazenly spread across her face.

Regis dropped his brow, asking Clarisse in a lowered voice:

“...Hey, Miss, are you plotting something?”

“My, my, what ever could you be referring to?”

Clarisse’s glimmering smile remained so unchanged, he wondered if she was wearing a mask.

Gösta grit his teeth almost audibly. His arms carrying the documents trembled, the wooden crate letting off quiet grating sounds.

He was displeased, by all accounts.

Regis broke into a cold sweat.

“...Clarisse, could you please refrain from worsening my work conditions?”

“Oh? I have absolutely no idea what you’re talking about.”

“You’re definitely doing this on purpose.”

“Ufufufu...”

In the end, Gösta left with a resentful, “Don’t think you’ve won!” and raced into the carriage. Elin was smiling as she gave her goodbyes, but her eyes shone with a conflicting intensity.

The carriage left through the south gate. Regis saw it off as he had promised, however— “Hah... Clarisse. Please quit it with the jokes. I won’t make any further progress with the paperwork without their cooperation.”

“Have you taken a liking to Ms. Elin?”

“Mn? What are you talking about? It’s Gösta who... Err, well, that’s not my business to speak on.”

“...She looked all too eager to work her wiles on you.”

“Hah?”

“No, it’s nothing. Mr. Regis, coffee alone isn’t enough to fill your stomach, is it? We received ham and cheese as well—would you care for some breakfast?”

“Oh, that sounds like a plan.”

“So you want to eat, yes?”

“Yeah.”

“That will require three round trips from the storehouse to the kitchen~♪”

“...Can’t say I didn’t see that coming... Good grief.”

❖ ❖ ❖

And so Regis helped Clarisse transport an army’s worth of food.

At a noble’s mansion, a team of maids would carry out all the housework. They would make breakfast before the sun rose, then spend their time cleaning and doing laundry before preparing to make dinner in the evenings.

However, the fort’s chores were done by soldiers on rotation, and the number of actual maids was low enough to count on two hands.

Among them, Clarisse, as the princess's maid, seemed able to act with relative freedom.

While the other servants prepared breakfast for the senior officers, she cut and lined up ham and cheese for Regis alone.

Regis feasted on an early breakfast in a corner of the officers' dining hall.

"...Am I causing you any trouble?"

"Why do you ask, Mr. Regis?"

"Normally, the officers' dining hall should only be used by senior officers... I'm far from anything of the sort."

"It's a bit late for such concerns. How many times have you used this hall so far? Neither the princess nor the margrave have raised any complaints over your presence. In short, no one cares. Eat where you want."

"I suppose... Even if that's true, Ms. Clarisse, don't you have your own job to do?"

To take time out of her busy morning to prepare breakfast for him—he didn't know whether he should feel thankful or apologetic.

"My only real job is to look after the princess. I'm just helping out with everything else."

As the imperial princess's exclusive maid, her position was closer to an attendant than a housekeeper. Regis felt some sympathy.

He cut a cross in front of his chest before reaching for his first piece of cheese.

"...Sounds like you have it hard."

"That's a surprise. Aren't you supposed to think, 'Now that's status for you, that bitch. To think she actually gets paid for this,' as you spit at me?"

"I would never even think of doing something so terrible! But, well... there *are* quite a few people who think that way. That's why I think it's hard for those who earn such seemingly advantaged positions. Envy and jealousy are some of the most terrifying things imaginable."

"....."

Clarissee looked at him skeptically.

I'm getting a lot of looks today. Do I have ink on my face? Regis inspected himself for anything that could have caught her interest. He abruptly looked down at the item in his hand.

"Mn? Did you want some cheese?"

"Gladly."

Clarissee nimbly pinched the cheese straight from his hand and stuffed it into her mouth.

There had been plenty of pieces still on the plate.

Quit messing with me, thought Regis as he picked up another.

Both ham and cheese were processed in order to be stored, but regardless, they certainly tasted their best fresh.

The coffee was also better than he'd expected.

"Mr. Regis, have you considered it yet?" Clarisse asked.

"Hmm? Con-Considered what...?"

Altina immediately came to mind. What could he do to help her become empress? When he hadn't the confidence to work as her tactician, she had told him, "I'll put as much trust in you as you refuse to put in yourself."

Those words weren't the only reason he had accepted the role, but... was there nothing he could do for her? He had weighed this question over in his mind too many times to count.

"Yes, but consideration alone is meaningless. I know that, and yet..."

"So you plan to take action?"

"That... That's... I refuse to accept it as little more than a fairy tale."

"I know you don't have much confidence in yourself, but to think you'd compare the very idea to a fairy tale..."

"It's simply too big a change for me to fathom. We stand at the very crossroads of history."

"It's that important?"

"I have no doubt about it. Foreign powers will feel the impact—an event that will go down in ten thousand books."

"So it's going to be amazing."

"Yeah, at least, I *think* it's going to be that significant."

"Your wedding..."

"Right, my— What!?"

Regis inadvertently sprung from his seat. Clarisse's eyes narrowed.

"All I asked was, 'Have you considered it yet?' What were *you* talking about?"

"Erk... Damn..."

He had let his guard down, thinking of her as Altina's trusted retainer. He would have to be more cautious not to say anything unnecessary.

"You don't plan on getting married, Mr. Regis?"

"...Why, marriage... There's no way that'll ever happen."

"You're an adult at fifteen. Don't most people get engaged before twenty?"

"Certainly, my older sister married at nineteen. ...Oh, I guess I'm going to be that old soon... You got me there."

"You have an older sister?"

"Yeah, she married three years ago and settled in Rouenne. She's already got two kids, apparently."

"Apparently?"

"I haven't seen them yet. She got pregnant right after she married, and it'd be too dangerous for her to travel such a great distance with a young child. I should have made the journey myself, but I'd just been employed as a staff officer in a noble's army. There was no way I could take an extended holiday as an apprentice."

"But nobles often travel with their armies. With your position, I thought perhaps you would've had a chance to meet. Rouenne isn't far from the capital,

after all."

"Ah, you see... Marquis Thénezay was getting on in years, so he refrained from making any unnecessary excursions."

"I see."

"We still exchange letters, though. Ah, come to think of it, I promised to send her one when I arrived at the fort... This isn't good."

"You still haven't sent one? It's been nearly a month since you got here..."

"H-Haaalf a month, at best... I'll send one today."

"That's probably a good idea. What sort of person is she, your elder sister?"

Hm. Regis spent a second reminiscing. His sister was a woman who gave off a composed, mature air whenever she sat and stayed quiet. The problem was that she only ever stayed quiet when she was fast asleep. At least, that was the impression he got as her brother.

"Well... I'd say she's the type to take the initiative. Three years ago, my sister and I were living in the suburbs of the capital..."

"Back when you were a student, correct?"

"Yeah. My sister was working as a maid, commuting to an aristocrat's estate. One day, a blacksmith from Rouenne came to the local marketplace to sell his pots and knives, so she went and married him."

"A maid in the capital, and a blacksmith from Rouenne... I fail to see the connection."

Clarissee seemed deeply intrigued. For perhaps the first time, she was speaking genuinely, without a trace of mockery.

"The madam sent my sister to buy a replacement for her sewing scissors that had worn down. That's when she met him."

"Even then, that just makes them customer and seller. Isn't that usually where such relationships end?"

"Normally, yes... but my sister proposed on the spot."

Clarissee's eyes shot wide open. That was simply how extraordinary the action

had been.

“That caught me off guard. And I’m sure the blacksmith must have been surprised as well... It’s only good sense for the man to be the one to suggest marriage, and even then, only after the two have become adequately acquainted.”

“Haha... He really was surprised.”

“But he didn’t turn her down, right?”

“At first, he suspected it was a joke or a scam...”

“I can’t blame him.”

“So, in order to prove her sincerity, she brought the blacksmith right back with her to the manor. The madam was terribly surprised as well.”

She was sent to buy sewing scissors, only to return with a blacksmith and groom.

“She must be quite the forward woman.”

“Yeah, once she sets her sights on something, she refuses to see anything else.”

“Like sister, like brother.”

“...What do you mean? I’m a man of common sense. ...Anyway, my sister married in Rouenne and the skilled blacksmith became my brother-in-law. I did make the trip for the wedding. He’s got a large workshop and five apprentices.”

“I see... She lucked out. Perhaps I should take a page out of her book.”

“Her method was a bit crude, but I doubt anyone would detest a genuine proclamation of affection.”

Clarisse nodded.

“...I love you... Please marry me, Mr. Regis,” she confessed in a fevered tone.

“Now I truly understand why my brother-in-law was so skeptical. But I can declare with conviction that this is little more than a joke.”

“You’re terrible. Just as I shook off my worldly common sense to make a

serious proposition..."

"Maybe it really *is* weird for the woman to propose..."

Though Regis often found himself envious of his sister's initiative.

"I think that depends on the person. In this case, wasn't the real nonsensical part that *you* were proposed to, Mr. Regis?" Clarisse said with a virtuous smile.

"So you're saying it's absurd that someone might want to marry me? I may not have much confidence in the field, but when you put it like that..."

"I'm not such a bad choice—is that what you just thought?"

"...I think I'll need some savings before I even consider it." Regis raised the white flag with a sigh.

"I wonder why your sister didn't leave even a tenth of her assertiveness to her younger brother," Clarisse said as she made off with another slice of cheese.

"I couldn't say..."

"Why don't you try acting emphatically from time to time?"

"I get pretty heated up over my paperwork."

"...Looks like the princess isn't getting up. It's about time for someone to go wake her."

She glanced at the clock on the wall.

Come to think of it, Altina usually woke up early and ate her breakfast before the dining hall got crowded.

"Isn't waking Altina up part of *your* job? You're not thinking of sending me to the princess's bedchambers, are you?"

"Oh, woe is me. As I have just received this unforeseen task, I am so terribly busy."

"You said your other chores were just you 'helping out'..."

"Fine. Then I'll have to tell the senior officers that breakfast is late because I had to make a special serving for Mr. Regis."

"You were plotting that from the start, weren't you!?"

Complain as he may, Regis had no choice but to accept his loss. He stood from his seat, which earned him a satisfied nod from Clarisse.

“I’ve heard that only the kiss of a prince can wake a princess. Want to test it out?”

“Are you trying to get me sent to the gallows? Not to mention, I’m as common as commoners come.”

“Then, from outside the door—”

“Yeah, I’ll just call out from outside.”

“The proper wake-up call is ‘Allie-poo~♪’”

“That’s definitely *lèse-majesté*, no matter how you slice it! What do you have against me!?”

With a bitter glance at the lady happily waving him off, Regis left the dining hall behind him.

The third floor of the central tower.

The corridors were wider than those Regis had grown used to. The windows positioned much more frequently along the walls bathed the space in a warm light, only further punctuating the contrast to the dark, narrow passageways two floors below.

At the very end of the hall was a door set with intricate reliefs. This was Altina’s room.

Regis took a nervous breath, then knocked.

To his surprise, there was almost an immediate response.

“Ah, sorry, it looks like I overslept a bit. Actually, you came at just the right time—could you help me with this?”

Was she telling him to come in? Regis hesitated. If possible, he wanted to settle his business here without having to step into the room...

But sound carried well through these stone corridors, and Jerome’s quarters were also on the third floor.

If a heated discussion were to arise here over whether he should enter or not,

rumor he had paid a visit to the princess's bedroom would certainly spread. That was something he had to avoid at all costs.

"...Very well," he muttered under his breath as he opened the door.

He stepped inside.

There was a large bed and a number of wardrobes.

With her back toward him, Altina lifted her voluminous crimson hair in her right hand.

Her skin, a dazzling white, was laid bare from her nape to halfway down her back.

The girl was in her undergarments, a corset—a piece of underwear commonly worn by noble ladies—hugging her midriff.

The back was threaded with lace that, when tied, tightened the corset like a shoe.

She had been in the midst of fastening it, her other hand pressed against her chest to stop the corset from bursting open.

Regis's eyes leapt frantically between the shoulders, arms and thighs usually hidden under her dress.

"...!?"

Unable to comprehend what was happening, he stood stunned on the spot. Altina continued to speak with her back to him.

"I'm a bit concerned, this feels tighter every time I wear it. Do you think I've gained weight? I'd like to think it's because I'm still growing but this is ridiculous, I could barely get it on. Could you tie this for me?"

"The c-corset!?"

"...Eh!?"

Altina finally realized the one who had come to wake her wasn't her usual maid.

She frantically turned, her eyes wide with terror. It was as if she had been struck by lightning.

Regis, in a similar state of shock, was too overwhelmed to piece a coherent sentence together. Only the terms indecency, trespassing and *lèse-majesté* cycled through his head.

“Err... No, this is... I just... came to... I didn’t—!”

“Kyaaaaaaaah!!”

She let out an ear-piercing shriek.

So this is it. This is where my life ends.

In no time, the heavy sound of countless footsteps echoed through the corridor. The raised voices of countless men could be heard outside the door.

“What happened, Princess!?”

“An assassin!? We’ll ‘ave ‘im slaughtered!”

The only future he could see was one where he was torn to shreds by brawny soldiers. Impaled, stoned, burned at the stake... If possible, he wanted to go quickly and painlessly.

He only hoped their malice wouldn’t reach his older sister across the nation.

Altina spoke up.

“M-My apologies. I was just startled by a bug in my wardrobe! A big one!”

“A’ight! We’ll kill it!”

“You’ll do no such thing! I’m in the middle of changing—yes, right now—so if you dare come in, I’ll have you all for indecency, trespassing and *lèse-majesté!*”

“C-Changing... A’ight! We won’t come in!”

“Please allow us to stand guard outside!”

“It’s fine! I’m fine! This is just embarrassing, please return to your stations this instant!”

“...Yes, ma’am.”

“C-Changing, huh.”

“Let’s hurry back.”

“A’ight.”

Their slow footsteps gradually became more distant.

Regis had journeyed from shock to despair only for something even less comprehensible to happen, further paralyzing his ability to think. He could do nothing but stare at her blankly.

“...W-Why?”

“Idiot! Don’t look at me!”

“Ah, sorry.”

He quickly turned his back. His hand reached for the doorknob, then froze—perhaps some soldiers were still about.

“I went and screamed, but... thinking back, I was the one who asked for help without checking who was at the door,” Altina mumbled in self-reflection.

“It never occurred to me that you would be changing.”

“I’m sorry... Did you need me for something?”

“Ms. Clarisse told me to wake you.”

“Kuh... That little... She knows I often ask her to help me change...”

“You do?”

“From time to time. Like when I’m in a rush, or the corset is— Ah, it’s nothing! These are women’s secrets!”

“...Oh, right, you did say something about gaining weight...”

“Should I call back the guards?”

“Eeh!?”

“Erase everything you heard from your memory or face the consequences.”

“Ah, um— What are you talking about? I didn’t hear a thing.”

“Good!”

Altina wasn’t one to readily wield her authority over personal matters, but it seemed this matter was something else entirely—women’s secrets were indeed

something to be feared.

Altina wrapped her arms around her figure in an attempt to conceal her chest and hips, her cheeks growing redder with every passing second.

“Why are you looking this way!?”

“Oh, no, no, I’m sorry! While we were talking, I just wound up...”

“You really entered unaware, correct!?”

“Swear to God.”

“You haven’t been to mass once since you came to this fort.”

“...I did give my passing regards to the priest one time.”

“To swear to someone you have such a loose connection to... Just turn around this instant. *Comprendre?*”

“*Compris.*”

Regis focused hard on the knotted grain of the wooden door. From behind, he could hear the sound of soft breathing and the rustling of fabric.

Back and forth. Back and forth.

Soon the somewhat pained breaths disappeared, replaced by the swishes of frenzied dressing. The occasional clink of metal on metal told him she had equipped her arm and shoulder protectors, too.

“All right. You can look now.”

“Phew~”

Regis wiped the cold sweat from his temple.

Altina was wearing her usual armor over a dress.

And yet, Regis’s face still grew hot, the sight of her undergarments and dazzling white skin burned into his mind.

While her expression was a composed and dignified one, she quickly turned red to the ears.

“Urgh...”

“Wh-What is it, Altina? What’s wrong?”

“This is just getting stupid.”

“I didn’t peek on purpose. It was one of those so-called accidents.”

“I know that. If you had done so intentionally, my *Grand Tonnerre Quatre* would have cleaved you in twain!”

“That would surely be history’s least worthy use of the treasured sword. I humbly decline.”

“Hah... I thought I’d finally be able to have a serious consultation with you today. Now you’ve made it so I can barely look you in the eye.”

“Did you want to discuss something embarrassing?”

“That’s not what I meant!”

“It seems this is something we’re both better off forgetting.”

“...I probably won’t forget this for as long as I live.”

“...I’m sorry.”

Once the blush eventually drained from her face, Altina decided that, while she was a little behind schedule, she would head for the dining hall. She made the first check outside before Regis stealthily made his exit.

How very adulterous, he thought.

The two were now finally walking down the corridor.

“Hey, what did you want to discuss? You don’t have to look me in the eye, just speak your mind.”

“All right... You saw how urgently they came to save me just then, right?”

“Hm? Oh, the soldiers?”

“They all treasure me. But only as a princess.”

“That much is clear.”

“As I told you that night, unless I obtain command rights, I can’t call myself a real commander.”

“Sad but true.”

Altina turned to face straight ahead. It was true she was too embarrassed to look at him, but that wasn’t her only reason for doing so. Her steadfast gaze was metaphoric of something greater—her unwavering course toward a particular goal.

“To be accepted as the commander of this border regiment, I need to be more trustworthy than the Black Knight Jerome. Isn’t that right?”

“Yeah... Hey, what exactly are you planning to do? I can’t seem to shake this terrible premonition coming over me...”

She said nothing, and instead walked for a moment in thought.

“If I told you, you’d advise against it. So I won’t say.”

“Altina... Are you going to do something I’d object to? I must advise against that.”

“See? But it’ll definitely be effective. I mean, you already guaranteed it’d work.”

“Did I run my stupid mouth again?”

Without answering his question, Altina flashed him an undaunted smile. She no longer turned red when she looked at him.

❖ ❖ ❖

When they reached the dining hall, Clarisse was sitting in a chair, lounging around. A majority of the seats were empty. The place was practically vacant.

Regis double-checked the clock on the wall.

“It’s breakfast time... isn’t it?”

Unless there was a fault with its mechanism, that was definitely the case. The room would be packed full with officers under normal circumstances.

Claris rose from her chair and curtseyed.

“Good morning, Princess.”

“Yes, good morning, Clarisse. You sure pulled a fast one on me.”

“I heard that cute scream of yours... What happened? Please don’t spare me any details.”

“Erk... N-Nothing at all.”

“Oh, is that so?”

Altina quickly changed the subject. Clarisse could easily gain the upper hand in a war of words.

“Has everyone overslept today? Or are we the late ones?”

“In a certain sense, it’s the latter.”

“What happened?”

For a brief moment, Clarisse’s expression turned pensive. While only a subtle change, it was rare to see her hesitate in Altina’s presence.

“The recon party returned a moment ago.”

“Eh?”

“By recon party, you mean the scouts from the north?”

Altina gave a sharp nod in response to Regis’s query.

“All reconnaissance carried out at this fort is on enemy forces to the north. Our main duty is monitoring the situation of our neighboring countries and barbarians. We send recon parties into enemy countries at approximately one-month intervals...”

The Beilschmidt territory shared their northern border with the grand duchy of Varden.

Varden was a nation belonging to the Germanian Federation. It was constantly embroiled in civil war with some federation country or another, and had initiated hostilities with Jerome’s border regiment on a number of occasions.

Moreover, in the sea of trees that lay between the two countries were a number of barbarian settlements.

They varied in size from small tribes of a hundred or so to larger congregations of a thousand strong. Many in their numbers were the region’s

aboriginal people, but tales had also spread of citizens abandoned by the empire and federation slipping into their midst.

Both were foes the border regiment needed to be cautious of, and, had the results of northern recon indeed come in, this was an important matter of which every last detail needed to be reported to the commander.

Altina tapered her lips.

“...Sir Jerome is the one receiving the report, isn’t he?”

“Yes. A soldier came here to inform him of the party’s return. Once he learned of the margrave’s absence, he headed for his bedchamber to retrieve him. The officers made for the plaza to hear the report, too.”

That soldier had not come to Altina. Her room was just down the corridor, and yet she had been bypassed entirely.

While a torrent of rage consumed her heart, Altina managed a composed expression.

“Breakfast can wait.”

She was off for the door before she had even finished.

Clarisse gave a deep bow behind her, Regis hot on her heels as she hastened to the plaza.

✧ ✧ ✧

There were a great many officers gathered before the front gate at the plaza, the rank-and-file soldiers forming a circle from which they observed at a distance.

Standing at the very center of the sphere of people were Jerome and five men.

The margrave stood straight with folded arms as he listened to the report. The men crouched before him wore cloaks and shouldered swords, giving the appearance of wanderers seeking adventure. Their faces were gaunt and unshaven, completely devoid of spirit aside from the faint glisten in each man’s eyes.

They were the recon party, the man speaking its apparent leader.

Beer and raisins were presented to honor their work, but they went untouched. These men had spent a harsh month-long journey in enemy territory for this report, and that alone had been their driving force.

“—and that is everything to report about the grand duchy of Varden.”

“Hmm... So they’re gathering soldiers.”

“So it would seem.”

“Are they going to attack again? Or is it another civil war... Mn?”

Jerome’s eyes flitted toward Altina as she parted the crowd to approach.

Regis, meanwhile, had to stop outside the flock. He very much wanted to avoid trudging behind her like a faithful attendant and inviting any unnecessary hostilities.

Those of the recon party made grim faces upon Altina’s arrival. Overlooking her as little more than a decoration, they had begun their report in her absence; but she was their commander by title, and was as high-born as they came. Rubbing her the wrong way could bring down imperial wrath.

The commanding officer stepped forward.

“Commander... let me start my report again—”

“That’s quite all right. Carry on where you left off. As long as Sir Jerome heard, I’m sure he’ll report the matter to me in detail.”

“Gaha! I’m reporting to you? Go back to the dining hall and chew on your ham.”

“...I’ll settle that matter with you after hearing the recon report,” she stated firmly.

Altina’s spirit did not waver in the face of Jerome’s intimidation. They were like two swords, scattering sparks as they clashed. Even the intrepid recon party members swallowed their breath.

The report continued on Altina’s urging.

“Ahem... Next is on the barbarians of the forest... There was a large-scale,

inter-tribal war going on when we were conducting reconnaissance.”

This caught Jerome’s attention.

“Hohoh, among barbarians? Small skirmishes between tribes are common, but large-scale warfare is quite rare.”

“Yes. Furthermore, it seems at least three tribes have united to form a coalition.”

“Those barbarians, who only know how to kill and steal, have learned to speak politics? Are they really barbarians?”

“I would have to assume so from their equipment and how they fought. Among them was a conspicuously strong warrior who moved like a monkey, leaping from foe to foe and offering a swift end to each. Such strength alone was enough to change the tide of battle.”

“Hohoh...”

Jerome smiled bravely at the appearance of such a troublesome foe. Was this characteristic what had earned him his title as hero and the adoration of his soldiers?

Altina listened silently. If she interjected as freely as Jerome, the report would hardly progress. He asked a few questions, almost all about the barbarians, considerably interested in this monkey-like foe.

Once the report had come to its conclusion, Altina finally spoke up.

“...There were twelve of you when you set out.”

“Y-Yes.”

“How did they pass?”

“We lost three to barbarians, two to illness, one lost his footing on the mountains, and another strayed into a blizzard.”

“I see...”

Altina nodded and closed her eyes. A moment of silence for the dead.

Both the officers and soldiers radiating outward from her position quickly fell silent as all sound vanished from the fort.

Eventually, she opened her eyes.

“...Thank you for your service. Please have a good rest.”

“Yes... Your Highness... Snff...”

The five surviving men all shed tears as they were swept by waves of remembrance, looking back on their journey and their comrades lost. They gave a deep bow before receding into the crowd.

The surrounding soldiers welcomed them with uncontested praise and congratulation.

Information from reconnaissance operations was as valuable as a lantern shining through the darkness. Would the enemy army conserve their power while the snow fell, or would they take advantage of the blizzard to attack? The patrols, troop preparations—it would all be affected.

Jerome turned on his heel to return to the central tower.

“Hmph... Looks like a moment of silence is the one thing you’re good for, little lady.”

And while he scoffed—

“Hold it right there.” Altina was fearless in her response, one hand gliding to the longsword at her waist.

Regis’s eyes widened as he watched.

The *shing* of sliding metal. With no time for anyone to stop her, she had drawn her sword.

“Wha!?” cried Regis.

Unrest broke out among the crowd—the soldiers were evidently just as surprised. It was not long before the ring of people spread out away from her.

Altina was five steps from Jerome. For a hero like him, this was a gap that could be closed in an instant. Now that she had drawn her blade, it would be no surprise if she were killed.

And yet, she remained calm.

“You have no intention to recognize me, no matter the circumstances. Do

you, Sir Jerome?"

"Hey... Little lady, if this is some kinda joke, I ain't laughing."

"I'm being serious. And you should be, too. You detest the fact there's a royal running around calling herself commander, don't you? Isn't it about time we set the record straight?"

"Hmph, it's already straight as an arrow. This regiment belongs to me."

"A declaration made like the king of a Germanian nation. This regiment, its soldiers, its knights, and even you are a part of the Belgarian Imperial Army, and I have been appointed your commander."

"Yeah, that may be true. But empty titles don't move men, little lady. This isn't the palace. In the heat of battle, no soldier would trust their life to a decoration piece."

"I know that all too well. I've learned it on many an occasion in these past four months. That is precisely why I must prove my worthiness as commander."

"Kukukuh... Did you send for the emperor's permission for this?"

"Now who's joking?"

Altina's gaze drifted ever so slightly. Regis could feel her eyes rest on him momentarily.

Her expression had no traces of anxiety or doubt. On the contrary, it was clear and brimming with self-confidence—an undeniable sense of certainty also shone through the stillness with which she aimed her sword.

She returned her sights to the man standing before her.

"Jerome Jean de Beilschmidt, I challenge you to a duel!"

If this is a nightmare, someone please wake me up, Regis prayed.

Around a tenth of the soldiers were surprised, an equal amount absolutely dumbstruck. But most saw the situation as a joke, some among them even breaking out into laughter.

Even Jerome, the man who currently stood at the end of a sword, couldn't take the situation seriously.

"Hey now, little lady..."

But following her next words, all traces of amusement faded from the spectators' faces.

"Should I win, you must acknowledge my position at this fort. First, you will address me as your commander and follow my instructions. Second, you will serve under me as my general, and carry out your duties to the best of your ability. This is no joke, so do not take my words lightly. Continue to treat it as such, and I shall assume you have run from my challenge."

With so much now on the line, Jerome could no longer brush the confrontation aside.

The faint grin faded from his face, an unbridled, intimidating aura now enveloping him.

The soldiers cowered at his sheer murderous air, some even trying to push back through the crowd in a vain effort to escape.

"Gnn... You'd better not regret this, little lady. I have no interest in holding back, not even if my opponent was the emperor himself."

"I don't doubt that. If you had any consideration for status, you would've been willing to obey me when I first arrived."

"You talk as though you have this all figured out. Have you prepared a proxy to fight in your place? The only knight in this fort who would even stand a chance is Everard..."

He glanced over to see the knight captain in the crowd, confusion plastered all over his face.

While he was loyal to Jerome, he doted on Altina as if she were his daughter, granddaughter or even a goddess. If she asked him to be her proxy, he would no doubt be between a rock and a hard place.

Altina swiped her sword to the side.

"There will be no proxy. Your opponent is right here. I'll say it again—if you don't accept, I'll see it as you running away!"

"Kukukuh... Very well. You're no more than a has-been princess who lost the

imperial power struggle. What a fitting end to your tale.”

Altina grimaced.

The Has-been Princess. Of her various nicknames, he had to pick one of the most offensive. It was more of an insult than a nickname.

“If I win, you’ll acknowledge me as commander?”

“Naturally. And not only in name, either. I’ll recognize you as a real commander. If you win, that is! ...And if I win, what’s in it for me? Duel or no duel, I’m already the commander of this regiment. Ah, how about you return the title to me?”

“You’re asking me to defy a direct imperial decree.”

“Can you?”

“Even if I passed your request to the throne directly, it would do little more than line the bin of Prince Latrielle.”

“Hmph... Then I have no motivation to accept your duel.”

Altina nodded. It seemed as though she had foreseen this part of their exchange.

“I thought you might say that. If you have nothing to gain, then this duel holds no merit for you. I’ve spent the past few days thinking of ways to resolve this issue. The result would be worthless should the soldiers believe you held back because you had nothing to gain.”

“Hah. Then what do you propose?”

“The commander-in-name will resign, and in turn bring new honor to the house of Beilschmidt.”

“Impossible.”

“I am, of course, referring to those high aristocrat generals who forced you from center stage. You haven’t forgotten about that, have you?”

Jerome grit his teeth.

“Little lady... Those words have placed you on dangerous ground. Should you make some ridiculous proposal, there will be no need for this duel. I’ll make

sure, here and now, that no sound ever passes your lips again. Consider that before you speak. What are your terms?"

There was no way to ease the heavy atmosphere that bore down upon them. Would there be a way for Regis to stop the duel if he jumped in now? The answer was a resounding "no." His actions would only result in the further deterioration of Altina's reputation. A commander who needed a lowly fifth-grade administrative officer to stand up for her would be a complete laughingstock.

All he could do was watch the events unfold before him.

Even so, Regis was so overwhelmed by his urge to rush in that he didn't know what to do.

A means to annul an imperial decree, take a woman out of military affairs, and raise Jerome's status as a noble.

"...You have to stop this," he tried to assert, but the words barely escaped the back of his throat.

Regardless, they had been swallowed by the surrounding clamor; his voice never reached her.

Altina directed the tip of her sword toward her opponent, his bloodshot eyes fixed on her like those of a wild beast, and made her declaration: "If you win, you may take me as your wife."

Jerome froze.

"...That... really isn't a bad deal."

"You see?"

In the case she married into another house, Altina would no longer be considered an imperial princess, which would make void the prince's reason for appointing her commander in the first place.

And while the peerage of the Beilschmidt clan would not officially rise, marriage to a woman of imperial lineage would undoubtedly increase their prestige.

Objectively speaking, Jerome now had more than enough reason to take this

duel seriously.

"Hmph... Little lady, you are nothing I look for in a woman. But the terms themselves are more than favorable. I'll order you around like a slave."

"It seems you've accepted my proposal."

"You're on. The thought of gambling with a life on the line sets my heart aflame. I accept this duel."

Jerome smiled as though he had already won.

Altina sheathed her sword.

"Then the duel is on. But I'll add this: Don't come under any misapprehensions. If you enter this duel with some perverted ulterior motive, I'll bash in that rotten head of yours."

"Mind your own business, little lady. Isn't it about time you start your bridal training?"

"Wha!?" Altina grit her teeth in anger.

It was a cheap provocation but an effective one, given that her resistance to such matters was surprisingly low.

The loud pop as Jerome cracked his knuckles brought her back to attention.

"When should we do this? I'm free right now."

"Very funny. I've put so much at stake to avoid any excuses being made over the result; you think I'd be careless enough to duel you here and now? Think. Perhaps they'll say you were still half asleep, that you were hampered by last night's drinking, or that there was too great a difference in preparation."

"Hmph..."

Even if Jerome wouldn't admit it, a debatable outcome would create a serious rift between Altina's supporters and his own. Leaving any room for excuses would lead to misfortune, no matter the result.

"*Oui...* Then noon, three days from now. As for the venue, this plaza should do," he proposed.

"Is three days really enough?"

“Who do you think I am?”

“Understood. Then let me tell you, just so there are no misconceptions: There will be no surprises—”

“Don’t get in over your head! No matter what traps the little fourteen-year-old girl sets, you’ll never steal a victory from me! There’ll be no excuses for the result of our duel, and if anyone complains about the result, I’ll take it as a personal slight. I’ll snap the neck of any who dare.”

“...I see.”

“I’ll warn you again: No matter who I’m up against, I will never hold back in a duel. You should have your will notarized while you’re still able to breathe.”

With those words, Jerome made for the central tower, this time free of obstructions. A portion of the knights cried out, the ones who worshiped Altina as a goddess.

Altina, the subject of their fervent admiration, didn’t seem moved in the slightest.

“I don’t plan on letting any of my subordinates die.”

“...So you intend to win?” Regis called over once Jerome had left.

“My my, Regis, no one issues a duel with the intention to lose.”

“Stories where someone carelessly enters a hopeless duel for love or honor are surprisingly common... I never thought you were this foolish, Princess... I must have misread you completely. This is the worst.”

Regis felt he had aged a good ten years.

To go as far as to challenge the Hero of Erstein himself to a duel! he screamed internally, barely able to keep himself from passing out.

She looked at him incredulously.

“‘Foolish’ is a bit much. Is my ignorance of popular fiction really a cause for embarrassment? I didn’t know people wrote about unwinnable duels, so wh—”

“That’s not what I meant! I’m saying *challenging the hero, Jerome, to a duel* was foolish!!”

“I mean, there was no other option. I’ll win and show everyone who the strongest person in this fort really is. Martial arts alone are not what makes a commander, but being stronger than those around you is the simplest way to prove superiority—that’s what you said.”

“Another slip of the tongue...”

Regis rubbed his fingers against his temple. The growing headache was almost enough to make him faint.

Did she not understand the situation? Or did she have some kind of plan in mind? She was definitely giving off a clear air of confidence.

“It was no slip. I think it was fine advice, Regis.”

“...Do you honestly think you can duel him and win?”

Altina puffed out her chest and gave a proud declaration:

“Of course!”

Chapter 4: The Thundering Blade

The fort was abuzz with talk of the duel. Naturally, there was no way the princess could win with Jerome as her opponent... But then why had she issued the challenge? Did she really think the margrave would hold back against royalty?

The soldiers exchanged rumors in hushed whispers.

"You think they'll trade a few rehearsed blows before the margrave surrenders? Turning your sword against royalty's practically a death sentence, ain't it?"

"Yer only saying that 'cuz you didn't see it at the plaza. It's been a long time since I saw the general seriously worked up; thought I was gonna piss myself."

"Hey, is the princess gonna be all right?"

"Well he's gonna marry 'er, so I doubt he'd 'urt 'er too badly."

"Hehehee... What a roundabout way to propose!"

"Ahahahah!"

In a good and honest confrontation, Jerome's victory was inevitable. The soldiers' main point of concern lay in whether the duel was truly serious or just a farce.

If it *was* serious, what would the margrave do with Altina? Many were concerned over what they saw as an oblivious princess, who had spent her entire upbringing at the palace, lashing out at an esteemed hero.

Interest focused in particular on whether he would actually take her as a bride when he won.

Regis made his rounds through the western ward, gathering the rumors that spread between the soldiers.

"...Is it too much to ask for a single person who believes Altina can win?"

A large majority of the soldiers considered themselves side characters in the anticipated duel between the princess and the margrave, who stood at center stage. This was, however, far from true—these gossiping soldiers were by far the most important players in this soon-to-be tragedy. Altina had issued her challenge to gain the soldiers' trust, and Jerome had accepted precisely because said soldiers were watching.

What the three thousand men of the border regiment had to say on the matter was more important than anything else.

It had been unintentional, but Regis still felt responsible for spurring the princess into action, and wanted to help her however he could. It was therefore necessary that he understood the soldiers' thoughts.

Having patrolled everywhere he could think of, he returned to the central tower...

This time heading toward Jerome's room.

As he stood in the hallway outside, an overwhelming tension washed over him. His heart pulsed at a concerning pace.

Steadying his breath, he tapped a knuckle against the black-painted door.

"Who is it?" came a low voice from inside.

He swallowed dryly.

"...It's Regis. I came because I need to talk to you, Sir Jerome."

"Hmph... Pointless words, I'd assume."

"That depends, really..."

"Enter."

Regis opened the door and entered a chamber about as large as his own room. It appeared the bedroom was further in, as there was another door in the back. To its side was an office desk, and the shelves by the wall were lined with books on law and economics.

Jerome was in the center of the room, leaning a short, heavy practice spear against his shoulder. His upper body was bare and already drenched in sweat.



The spear only had a round weight at its end, yet Jerome's fiercely intimidating aura was still enough to strike fear into Regis's very soul.

“.....”

“Kukukuh... Has the little lady sent you to poison me or something?”

“If that's a concern of yours, it's Clarisse you should be looking out for.”

“Yeah, she's a scary one. What's a man to do...? Such a good woman, ruined by a terrible personality. What a waste.”

“I'm here about the duel.”

“It's too late to do anything about it now.”

“...I thought so.” Regis sighed.

Had Jerome not been fully up for it, Regis had thought of a number of ways to rescind the challenge.

But the man actually seemed to be giddy with anticipation. So much so that he was already training for it.

“Phew... Who'da thought she'd challenge me, just like that? And here I was hoping she'd waste her days away complaining and lazing around until she was married off to some high aristocrat or another... But it looks like I had her wrong.”

“It would've been a load off my mind if she *had* just lazed around.”

“What kinda talk is that, kid? You don't think your precious little lady can win?”

“Not just me. The soldiers feel the same. The only one who believes she can win is the princess herself.”

Jerome shook his head. He took a horizontal swipe with his heavy training spear, scattering sweat from the muscles on his arms and chest.

“Hm... I wouldn't say that.”

“...What do you mean?”

“I'm not making light of the little lady's abilities. It's plain idiotic to

underestimate anyone who can swing that massive sword around.”

“I suppose.”

So he's not even going to let his guard down, Regis lamented internally.

Quite honestly, martial arts prowess was something Regis couldn't discern no matter how closely he watched. Jerome's movements as he swung a heavily weighted training spear were so fast he could barely even chase them with his eyes.

Mph. Mph. He swung his spear as he spoke.

“That sword'll be trouble... Trying to block her attacks, be it with a spear or a sword, would just shatter my weapon. Those can be replaced on the battlefield, but if your weapon breaks in a duel, it counts as a loss.”

“I see.”

“That's also most likely what she was trying to tell me before I left. She plans on using the *Grand Tonnerre Quatre*.”

“But, Sir Jerome, I heard you owned a lance that could match even the treasured sword.”

“I do... but that's a cavalry lance. It'd be unwieldy to use on foot.”

“Then why not bring your horse?”

“For a fight in the plaza? Now that'd be a laugh. A cavalry soldier is best suited to open plains. ...She's thought this through. I can't use my greatest lance, nor my trusted steed, which forces me from the type of combat I excel in most. The little lady might just win this one.”

“I can't think such a small disadvantage would influence the result.”

Far from it, Regis was now only more certain of Altina's impending defeat. The way he saw it, in a battle against someone whose skill was so vastly superior, the only way she would stand a chance was if her opponent acted carelessly. If he was intoxicated, maybe... Or worse.

And yet, far from careless, the man before him was on edge. The minor disadvantages placed on Jerome had only made him more alert.

Regis had no idea what Altina's intentions were, but from the perspective of a tactician, he had to say it was a poorly thought out plan.

"Oi, Regis... You're still hoping I lose, though, aren't you?"

"What makes you so sure?"

"If you wanted me to win, you wouldn't have come here. You'd be out enjoying the rumors alongside the soldiers. But there's no need to worry—I'm sure you'll still be doing the admin work you love so much."

"I must offer two corrections."

"Go on."

"First of all, the only resolution I hope for is a peaceful one."

If Altina stood victorious, she would no doubt be one large step closer to realizing her ambition. However, given the nature of her goal, that would also send her practically barreling toward a cliff edge.

If he couldn't stop her, Regis thought it was his duty to at least secure a safety net.

"Kukukuh... I doubt you'll find such things as peace on the front lines."

"And my second correction... I don't love administrative work, not in the slightest. Whose fault do you think it is that I'm losing so much sleep!?"

He inadvertently dropped all formalities; he had intended to suppress his emotion, yet ended up baring his fangs.

After widening his eyes in slight surprise, Jerome burst into a grand laugh.

"Kwa-hahahah!! I see, then please allow me to rephrase myself: There's no need to worry, you'll still be doing the admin work you despise so much—all for me!"

"How terrible." Regis slumped his shoulders.

Jerome's voice suddenly changed tone, coming out much quieter than usual.

"Hey, Regis... You've already noticed, haven't you?"

"...Is this about the budget?"

He nodded.

Regis felt a cold sensation run across his nape. While he was looking through those vast swathes of paperwork, the pieces had gradually fallen into place.

“...The reason you drove off the administrative officers... was to make sure finance would be handled only by those who could keep a secret.”

“Now you’re getting it.”

“...Why did you trust me?”

“That’s... not something I have to answer.”

“When we first met, you tried to bribe me, and then threatened me with a pitchfork. I wonder, was that all because of this?”

The Beilschmidt border regiment had a certain extra expense that wasn’t disclosed to the military’s administrative department, though Regis had yet to identify how such funds were being used.

But considering the circumstances, he could hazard a guess.

Jerome curled up the edges of his lips.

“Hmm... About what we discussed: You’ve been so busy with paperwork, I kept putting it off...”

“About you becoming my direct superior?”

“Forget I asked. It no longer matters. In three days’ time, this cheap drama will be over. You will work under me.”

Regis made a loathful face.

“I’m not valuable enough to draw a margrave’s interest.”

“Don’t let it go to your head; you’re just a freebie. The commander-in-name will be driven off, and a member of the royal line will marry into the Beilschmidt household... After such a large purchase, you’re just an extra apple the grateful shopkeeper throws in the bag.”

“I see... So, I’m an apple.”

An extra or not, Regis found it terribly unsettling he had become even a

fraction of what drove this man to fight. Whatever the case, the margrave kept his guard high, had a strong will to fight, and was confident of victory. What's more, Regis could sense he had his own aspirations, too.

He tried his hardest to keep his irritation from showing.

This is going to be tough, Altina. Why did you have to issue this challenge?

❖ ❖ ❖

Whatever happened in three days' time, there was something Regis needed to do today. If the regiment came under inspection, then not only the officer in charge of finance, but even the commander could be punished for failing to supervise. Even if she was but a commander-in-name.

Such an inspection risked certain secrets coming to light.

Now returning to his own room, Regis wrote up the rest of his paperwork in a hurry.

He'd fallen victim to the demons of sleep on several occasions, who managed to snatch a great deal of his time; luckily, despite their best efforts he somehow finished the job and stamped the seal onto his final stack of paperwork.

His task complete, Regis languidly rose from his seat and walked outside.

The sun was now at its zenith. The sky had been cloudy that morning, but was now sunny enough to melt the snow coating the ground below. It was warm enough that he could have even done without his coat.

A line of people had formed by the southern gate.

The courier was here.

The majority of those pleasantly accepting letters were knights. Most soldiers could neither read nor write and so, naturally, seldom partook in writing letters.

“The carriage is leaving!”

Clang, clang, the bell chimed.

Regis broke into a sprint.

“Wait, wait! Hold the carriage! I’ll be in big trouble if this isn’t sent out today!”

The postal service came only once every two weeks.

Just before the courier could hop on board, Regis pushed the sealed document into his hands. He returned a subtly peeved glare.

"Let's see... It's addressed to the Ministry of Military Affairs? Mister, aren't military documents sent through a different postal service?"

"I'm in a hurry, and there'll be serious consequences for us if that isn't delivered. It's a mission of vital importance. Please."

"Hold up, I'm just a civilian courier, not a soldier! If it's really that important, send a messenger."

"Sir Jerome refuses to waste his soldiers on paperwork. It's a real bother..."

"Hm, well, the ministry *is* in the capital, so I guess I could drop by..."

"Thanks, that's a massive help."

Regis handed over a shiny copper denier as a tip.

The courier smiled and placed the document with the rest of his cargo.

I'll write that off as a necessary expense, Regis decided, painfully aware of his lack of personal funds.

The post carriage departed through the southern gate. With this, it seemed Regis could finally get a wink of sleep. He let out a large yawn, only to be interrupted by a faint giggle coming from behind.

He turned around to see Clarisse, a mountain of laundry hoisted under her arms.

"You look tired."

"Yeah... Not only has the paperwork worn me thin, there are all sorts of things happening that I just can't leave be."

"Is it about the princess? You don't have to worry about her."

"...Do you have any time to spare?"

"Do I look free? The absolute cheek."

She pouted, adjusting her stance to further emphasize the already unmissable

heaps of cloth.

Back at the capital, it was natural to use detergent to clean garments, but here it was normal to use the tried-and-tested washboard. Detergent was still a luxury item in these parts.

“Sorry, you do look busy... It’s quite strange to do laundry at this time of day, though. Aren’t you supposed to do that early in the morning?”

“Milk was spilled all over the tablecloth in the dining hall. If I don’t wash it now, the smell will be something awful.”

“Oh, I see. Were you the one who spilled it?”

“No. I just happened to be free. If you don’t mind me doing laundry while we talk, I’ll happily hear you out.”

“Let’s do that. I’ll carry half.”

When he held out his hands, Clarisse smiled mischievously.

“Will you be all right?”

“I may be weak, but I should at least be able to carry half the laundry you can carry.”

“No, I meant the milk. It’ll stick to your clothes.”

“Erk... Whatever. I’ll wash it out with a wet cloth later.”

“Fufufu...”

The cloth Clarisse entrusted him with wasn’t even that wet... though it did smell of milk.

Regis made for the washing area with her.

Among a servant’s duties, laundry was just as important as cooking and cleaning. There was a semi-basement specially constructed for the task in a corner of the soldiers’ western ward.

Water from the melted snow flowed in through clay pipes, keeping the row of washing stations nice and wet.

The cloth was first submerged in the flowing water. Clarisse gave it some time

to soak, letting as much of the stain wash out as possible.

Her pale hands immediately turned red on contact with the icy water.

“Kh...”

“Let me help.”

“I’m fine. So, you wanted to talk about the princess?”

“Yes, but... when you’re doing such a tough job right in front of me, I feel uncomfortable just standing around while I talk.”

“You say some strange things. That’s just what we call status.”

“In that case, helping out where I want to is within my status. ...Um, like this?”

Regis took a tablecloth from the mountain of laundry and imitated Clarisse, soaking it in the water.

“Ugah!?”

It was painfully cold.

“How incorrigible... Take your hands out of the water from time to time. You’ll get frostbite if you keep them in.”

“Ah, that makes sense. Are you okay doing this?”

“I’m used to it.”

“I see.”

“In the mornings, when I’m doing large loads of laundry, I’ll use that pot over there to heat the water. You can use it to warm your hands, and hot water gets rid of stains easier.”

There was indeed a large pot in the corner of the room.

That explained it. Otherwise, he couldn’t imagine how anyone could wash multiple pieces of clothing. Regis already felt like crying after just one.

“You’re not going to heat the water today?”

“There are only a few pieces to do. Are you done with your talk?”

“No, just beginning... Kuh...”

He rubbed his fingers that were stinging from the cold, trying to reclaim their heat. But leaving the cloth be wouldn't get rid of the stains.

So he developed a small technique, hastily scrubbing the cloth against the washboard, then quickly withdrawing his hands to warm them before repeating the process.

“How are you holding up?”

“Urgh... Why do you think Altina issued the duel today of all days?”

“I doubt she thought too hard about the timing. She likely just had a flash of inspiration.”

“She really needs to learn how to act more deliberately.”

The smell of milk had finally dispersed from one sheet. While there were light splotches of yellow and brown here and there, it was now mostly white.

“Even so, I’m sure the princess will be fine.”

“I know it’s too late to stop her, but... I never thought you’d be that optimistic.”

“Why, Mr. Regis, don’t you believe in her?”

“I don’t have the talent to discern martial prowess. But when I consider objective fact, Altina barely has any chance of winning. If Sir Jerome could be defeated by a fourteen-year-old girl with barely any real combat experience, he would have died on the battlefield long ago.”

“I see. That is one way of looking at it.”

“If there’s another, please enlighten me...”

Clarisse pulled her sheet from the water.

“Because the princess assured me, ‘It’ll definitely work out♪’”

“That’s just abandoning all thought. You can’t meld faith and fact as one and the same.”

“Then what do you intend to do?”

“...There aren’t many options left.”



After finishing the laundry he was unaccustomed to, Regis parted with Clarisse and returned to his room. He couldn't tell whether his unsteady feet were the result of stress or sleep deprivation.

On his way, he heard the rhythmic swish of practice swings in the courtyard.

He followed the noise to see Altina swinging a massive fauchard. Though it was an excessively long piece that usually required two hands to wield, she grasped it with one as if she were brandishing a small twig, moving the wind with each flourish.

I'll admit, there's no doubt she's no ordinary girl, Regis thought. She boasted brute strength completely unsuited to her appearance.

He studied her a while longer. It seemed Altina was aware of his presence, as she suddenly flashed a smile in his direction.

"Oh, you want a go, too?"

"I don't. I couldn't. I don't mean to brag, but—"

"You can't even lift it?"

"Probably not."

Regis shrugged, eliciting a wry smile from Altina. She resumed her swings.

"You're... incredible."

"If you're talking about my physical strength, I've always had confidence in it. I've been swinging swords meant for adults since I was a small child."

"However... whether you can win against Sir Jerome is honestly... What I'm trying to say is... I think it'll be difficult."

"Of course. If he could be defeated so easily, our enemies wouldn't be having such a hard time."

"Could it be you have some sort of plan? You *are* the one who issued the challenge." He staked his last thread of hope on this question.

She looked back at him, rather perplexed.

“A plan? It’s a duel, so, of course, the stronger one will win.”

“Ech... So you really put zero thought into this. There are things you can do to increase your chance of victory, you know.”

“I know that. I’m not an idiot.”

“So you *were* thinking!?”

“His spear will be faster, so he’ll have the first strike. I must parry, and as my sword is too unwieldy for a nimble counter, I’ll have to mix in hand-to-hand combat as well. Do you think closing in and kicking him in the shin would be effective?”

Regis’s head dropped in disappointment.

“What’s with that...? So you’re just going to go at him with naive integrity...?”

“Otherwise this duel is meaningless. Winning is not my end goal.”

“Eh?”

“My aim is to prove to everyone that I’m stronger. I won’t earn the soldiers’ trust unless I face him head on and win. Nor will I earn yours.” Altina held a composed expression as she spoke.

Regis did think she was right. However...

“...He’s not someone you can beat without a plan, is he?”

“If I win using some scheme, this whole duel will have been pointless.”

“R-Right...”

“You’re not plotting something strange, are you?”

She glared at him hard. He inadvertently found himself avoiding eye contact.

“...There are plenty of ways to turn the tide without anyone noticing, you know? Like throwing glass pebbles, or focusing light to blind him, or laying a contraption under the dirt that’ll—”

His nervous whisper was cut short by a sudden howl as the wind picked up around him.

A shattering roar resounded as the large polearm was slammed at Regis’s

feet. It pierced deep into the ground.

“Stop screwing me around!”

“H-Hey, Altina!?”

“Ah... Sorry. I’m a bit on edge...”

As the girl hung her head to apologize, Regis bowed back. *That one was on me*, he conceded.

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t trying to upset you.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“I can understand why you’d want to fight fair and square. However, the destination you seek lies beyond a series of countless victories. Do you not think there’ll be times where we have to take the back door?”

Perhaps this was too harsh a truth for a fourteen-year-old girl. As things stood, the fourth princess, Altina, had no chance of legitimately succeeding the throne. If she wanted to become empress, it would have to be through usurpation.

Her motive was one born from integrity, so there was no way she would approve of a path stained in blood. She could only see a clean, just road ahead.

Then I shall walk the stained path so that you don’t have to. Regis clenched a fist.

A fist that was almost immediately enveloped by a pair of small, pale hands.

“Eh...?”

Fingertips clad in heat from her practice swings stroked Regis’s skin. Altina had moved right beside him.

When he looked up, she was so close he could almost make out his reflection in her beautiful crimson eyes.

“This may be presumptuous, but I know you’re worried about me. I understand you know about a lot of things.”

“I-I am worried... But I don’t know a great—”

“There is definite value in thinking tactically. But there are times when you have to win fair and square.”

“...And this is one of them?”

“Yes, wouldn’t you agree?”

Regis closed his eyes. He flipped through a number of books in his memory, drawing out the relevant information.

But he decided against using them in the end.

“If I used a scheme to help you win... you’d lose the righteousness of the road you tread. There is nothing more wretched than being ruled by one who has strayed from their path.”

“Err... I don’t really understand those complicated bits, but my gut tells me I need to win this fairly!”

“Can I believe in you...?”

“I’ll give you reason to believe in me. Just you watch!”

Altina tapped her fist against Regis’s still-clenched hand.

Their knuckles let out a quiet *thump*. Regis responded to this age-honored display of kinship with a nod.

Any plan to help her win would not only be unnecessary, but harmful to her as she was now.

But that didn’t mean he would stand idly by.

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Regis rubbed the sleep from his eyes as he stepped into the officers’ dining hall. As the person he was looking for wasn’t there, he next went to the stables.

Some aimless wandering later, he was loudly greeted by the very man he wanted to see.

“Ah, Regis!”

“I was looking for you, Mr. Everard. Do you—”

“I was just looking for you. We need to talk!”

“You mean... about the princess?”

“Mn? About the duel? Wa-hahah!! I knew she’d challenge him one of these days, but I never expected it so soon. Took me a little by surprise!”

“You saw it coming?”

“For them to keep leaving her out like that... She’d have to do something about it eventually.”

“Yes, well...”

“And in a situation like that, the only option left is to draw your sword and carve your own way!”

Regis held his head. In short, Altina’s thought process wasn’t too different from the muscle-headed knight captain’s. When she was holding a sword, at least.

His head hurt.

No, that was precisely why she needed Regis as her tactician.

“Yeah... More like dig your own grave.”

“Wa-hahah! You have quite a way with words. As expected of a tactician!”

“You’ve got it all wrong. I’m not a tactician.”

“Oh really? Those were some splendid tactics you used to nab those bandits. And wouldn’t using tactics make you a tactician?”

“No, that’s... The princess asked for my help, so I repeated something I’d read elsewhere... I don’t have the capacity to come up with new strategies of my own...”

“What’s so bad about that? Offering information that others don’t possess—sounds plenty useful to me!”

“I suppose...”

But what if he lacked the required knowledge at a crucial moment? Wasn’t that precisely the time a *true* tactician would be needed? Just like the situation at hand.

Everard slapped him on the back with enough force to blast away any remaining drowsiness.

“That smarts!”

“There are lives that were saved thanks to you.”

“What...?”

“My grandchild, you see! My dear *petit-enfant* was in Marquis Thénezay’s army, but somehow got out of that defeat alive.”

“Well, yes, the main camp was wiped out following a sneak attack, but the majority of our main forces got off just fine. I highly doubt I had anything to do with that.”

“You mean they barely escaped with their lives under persistent barbarian attacks, right?”

“...You could put it like that.”

“When you were dismissed from the main camp to the back lines, my poor grandchild was a part of the reserve forces sent back with you.”

“I do remember that unit.”

“And thanks to your command, the unit never routed and was even able to help its fleeing comrades.”

Regis recalled what had happened. They were painful memories to delve into.

“...By the time we’d noticed the enemy raid, the main camp was already up in flames... I advised them not to go back to help. I mean, it was already too late; they needed to prepare for the follow-up attack... There was little else we could do.”

“Don’t be so modest. The main camp fell, but the reason our fleeing army avoided total annihilation was largely thanks to Fifth-Grade Admin Officer Regis Aurick taking command of the reserves to hold down the barbarian pursuit.”

“I didn’t command anyone... The reserve forces had senior combat officers; they’re the ones who took action.”

“That’s not what it says here.”

Everard held out a letter, which Regis took from his hands.

Tidy letters unimaginable of this man's progeny did indeed spell out a similar story: How the writer was saved by Regis's efforts when the army of Marquis Thénezay had fallen.

How a great many were saved.

And then how he'd learned Regis had been made to take full responsibility for the defeat, as the sole survivor of the fallen camp.

And so—

"To repay this debt, my grandchild volunteered for our regiment. Yes, a respectable decision to make!"

"Th-That can't be true! The survival rate here might be a bit better than other camps along the border... but you're more than ten times more likely to die on the front lines than in the capital. I can't believe anyone would volunteer for that."

"I'm sure they just want to protect their lord, who was so cruelly sent to die here."

"...I'm not worth that much trouble."

"Wa-hahah! You do say some funny things. When a person chooses to risk their life, they're the only one who truly understands why!"

Everard was speaking the truth—at least, Regis believed he was. But he still found it hard to believe he had saved anyone, let alone that he was worthy of protection in return.

It was mystery after mystery.

"Mr. Everard, are you okay with this? For your cherished grandchild to volunteer for such a dangerous post, just for the likes of me?"

"If such is their will, so be it."

"Am I even worth such a risk!?"

"Indeed... that is not my place to say," Everard responded with a gentle smile. Regis tilted his head, failing to understand what he meant.

“...Meaning?”

“Meaning, if you prove yourself to be the kind of thoughtless man who’d send my dear grandchild to their death, we’ll have to discuss your worth at the end of my fauchard.”

“So you’re *not* okay with this!”

“Sure I am.”

“Are you really sure!?”

If someone from his previous unit felt gratitude toward him, that was surely a welcome surprise. Yet Regis couldn’t shake the feeling that this person’s desire to protect him had in fact shaved several years from his lifespan.

He needed to set the derailed conversation back on track.

“...P-Putting all that aside... About the princess.”

“Yeah?”

“Do you think she can win?”

“I’d say she’d do well to last ten blows.”

Which meant, by Everard’s appraisal, Jerome would win within the first ten strikes. There really was that great of a gap in their skill.

“...This may stray from the chivalry of a knight, but... would you be willing to be the princess’s lifeline?”

“Gn? Let’s hear what you have in mind.”

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Three days later—

It was almost time for the noon bell to ring. Doves of soldiers had already formed a ring in the plaza. Snow had been falling to such an extent since the early morning that, if the wind picked up, they would surely have a blizzard on their hands.

But neither side showed any intention of postponing for the weather.

Regis dropped by Altina's room.

There were no happenings as there had been the other day. On the contrary, she sat calmly and quietly as she waited for the promised hour.

She wore arm guards, leg guards, and a breastplate over her dress, and perched on the edge of an extravagant chair.

An attentively laid out tea set rested on the table, untouched.

"You're not looking too good, Regis."

"If I collapse from a panic attack, you're the one to blame. I hope you know that."

"You're not the one dueling, so how about you kick back a little?"

"Do you really believe you can win? Against the Hero of Erstein?"

"Of course! I don't know how many times I have to say it, but if I don't prove to everyone I can win, I'll never earn their trust."

"This is a terrible gamble..."

She stood. Even though she was a head shorter than Regis, her aura was so grand he felt he should be looking up at her.

"Could I become empress from my peaceful perch, having not lifted a finger of my own?"

"Probably not... But there's something called risk management, and—"

"There are many battles in life that must be won alone."

"You're being too impatient."

"...So you won't believe I can win unless I prove it."

Altina could only offer a sad smile.

Regis was at a loss for words. *Can I really put my faith in her, even if no one else believes she can win?*

"If you let your emotions carry you to the wrong decision, you'll lose what can never be replaced. I'm not going to repeat the same mistake," Regis said, his voice tinged with remorse.

He remembered Marquis Thènezay. His decision not to press his warning a third time was one that would surely haunt him forever—his failure to perceive the pride of a noble.

The possession of knowledge was meaningless without the expertise needed to put it to use. Expertise that he didn't have. That disparaging fact had seeped into his very being.

“Are you going to stop me? Don’t tell me you’re going to ask me to run away with you. Why, that’s a little romantic, wouldn’t you say?”

“I could never do that. I considered it, believe me, but you’re skilled enough to make Sir Jerome wary. It’d be impossible to sneak you out without raising a ruckus. If you were willing to flee of your own volition, you would have stopped the duel by now.”

“Yeah. Reality never pans out quite so romantic.”

“Though I have considered what to do if you lose.”

Altina frowned.

“And what would that be?”

“I’ll draw Sir Jerome’s attention, giving you enough time to leave the fort with a certain knight. I can’t disclose his name just yet—”

He thought she might fly into a rage upon learning he had arbitrarily made preparations to escape should she lose.

But, to his surprise, she burst into laughter. She held her stomach and laughed, and laughed, and laughed.

“Oh, oh my... Ahahah... Re-Regis... You-You’re too much!! Ahahahah! For you to be that sure I’m going to lose... I never realized it was *that* bad!”

“I do feel bad for doing this. However, my personal sentiment and objective evaluation are separate matters. Preparing as much as you can to avoid the worst outcome is—”

“Ahahah, you’re right! You’re that sort of guy, and that’s why I need you. This is the levelheaded decision of a strategist.”

“This has nothing to do with strategists. I’m... Er... What even am I anymore?”

He had deviated so far from the duties of a fifth-grade administrative officer.

A dear friend? No, when exactly had he become such good friends with his commander, the imperial princess, Altina? It was foolish for him to misread their rapport as friendship, just because he was allowed to address her by a nickname.

Regis mulled over the idea and fell silent.

Altina had laughed so hard her shoulders were now lifting and falling with each breath. There were gasps for air mixed into her voice.

“Hah, hah... I thought I was going to die... hah... from laughter before the duel. To think you even prepared an escape route for after my loss... Aha... This is terrible.”

“I won’t make any excuses. I can’t find a reason to believe you’ll come out victorious.”

Regis spoke frankly, this time divulging his true feelings.

Altina showed no signs of anger. She simply nodded.

“I know. I already have someone who believes in my victory unconditionally.”

“Ms. Clarisse...?”

“Yes. But I also need someone who doesn’t trust me so blindly. To reach where I’ve set my sights on.”

“...Me?”

“I’m growing increasingly convinced. And in order to *earn* your trust, I cannot lose this duel.”

Altina had challenged Jerome to gain the trust of the regiment. That included Regis.

“...Could this duel have been avoided had I acted differently?”

“Hmm, perhaps?”

“Urgh...”

His anxiety had spiked by a good thirty percent.

Altina's hand reached out. She touched the left side of Regis's chest, her fingertips resting over his heart.

"Mn?"

"I *will* become empress... Should that dream become unattainable, my life is as good as over. But on this venture, I'll also be risking the one acting as my tactician."

No matter what precautions Altina took, should she fail, there was no doubt she wouldn't be the only one to bear the consequences.

His heart pulsed noticeably faster under her palm, but she continued on regardless.

"To ask you to be my tactician is to ask you to put your very life on the line for me."

"Yeah..."

Regis understood that as well.

That was precisely why he couldn't afford to hesitate.

"But, since I'm asking you to risk your life for me, it's only natural that I wager my own as well. I refuse to become a ruler so foolish she believes loyalty is earned simply by sitting on the throne."

Altina's fingers traced up his chest, fleetingly passing along his neck before coming to rest on his cheek.

Her hand was cold to the touch.

"Watch with these eyes. I'll make you believe in me... And then things will be just as we said that night."

"...You'll put as much trust in me as I refuse to put in myself. So I have to believe in you."

She nodded and slowly pulled back her hand, reaching it toward the large treasured sword leaning against the wall.

She gripped it firmly by the hilt.

“It’s time.”

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Altina faced Jerome at the center of a circular crowd. They stood ten paces apart.

Snow had piled under their feet, their field of vision becoming white and hazy. None could deny that this was a blizzard.

Still wearing her arm and leg guards, Altina clutched the *Grand Tonnerre Quatre*—the emperor’s sword—in her hand. The massive blade was unbefitting of such a petite girl.

Jerome, on the other hand, had equipped no armor, instead opting for a black shirt with military pants: His casual wear. He held the sort of short spear a foot soldier might carry in a dense forest. Regis estimated it at around 27 palms (200 cm), roughly the same length as his opponent’s greatsword.

Regis watched from the midst of the surrounding crowd. Beside him was Everard, fully clad in armor.

“They’re calm, both of them.”

“I can tell... How are preparations?”

“Good as done. I had Miss Clarisse wait in the carriage.”

“Thank you.”

That was all that needed to be said on the matter. Everard stroked his beard.

“The margrave is real gutsy. He could’ve taken a light sword for a speed advantage, or a long spear for superior reach, yet he purposefully chose a weapon that puts him at a disadvantage.”

“I’m clueless about the matchup between a sword and a spear... That short spear puts him at a disadvantage?”

“It’s neither long nor light, and’ll break in a single blow.”

“Don’t tell me he’s going to use that as... an excuse if he loses?”

“He picked the weapon himself, so it can’t be used as an excuse. It’s the opposite.”

“He picked it to ensure the princess can’t make any excuses?”

“Correct! Just as she laid down terms and gave three days’ preparation to avoid any excuses for his defeat, the margrave has given himself a handicap to make her own excuses useless. ...It begins.”

“...!!”

The noon bell had chimed, signaling the start of the match.

The shrill clanging of metal echoed through the square.

Most present predicted the young and rash princess would go for an immediate strike, which would then be surely sidestepped by the margrave.

“Uoooooooooh!!”

Yet the one who raised a mighty roar as he made his preemptive strike was Jerome.

His feet kicked up snow as he charged forward.

Altina didn’t move—perhaps she couldn’t.

Having closed the distance in the span of a single breath, the margrave thrust out his spear.

“Sei!”

Would the first strike decide it—!? The soldiers followed intently.

“Try again!!” Altina energetically announced.

She twisted the flat of her sword to face the approaching spear.

Jerome let out a groan, almost immediately drowned out by the screams of metal.

The girl had expertly deflected the attack aimed at her shoulder.

“Well, I’ll be... A normal spear can’t even scratch it.”

“Trystie: Faerie silver...” Regis muttered under his breath.

In the days of the wars that founded the nation, there were legends that faeries had bestowed the remarkable metal unto *L’Empereur Flamme*.

In reality, it was little more than a naturally occurring alloy—at least, that was how modern-day researchers saw it. Of course, no one had actually come across it, but in this era it was common knowledge that mixing together several types of metal could produce materials far stronger than regular iron.

But none had yet managed to produce an alloy that could rival Trystie, so there were inevitably some who still believed it was a blessing from the faeries.

The large sword could thus also serve as a shield for Altina's small body.

With his preemptive thrust blocked, Jerome pulled back his spear to regain his posture.

But the girl stepped in before he could.

A dull *thud* reverberated through the square.

“Guh...!?”

A rending kick had struck the back of Jerome's knees.

The titan's posture had crumbled.

“Take this seriously, Jerome!” she cried out.

“Grrr!?”

The massive sword swept in from the side. It hadn't even touched the ground, and yet the snow beneath had completely scattered, the blast wave powerful enough to reach even the furthest surrounding soldiers.

Jerome rolled to evade the strike. Had he taken the blow, not only would his spear have likely been crushed, but his torso as well.

The soldiers watching were astir from this unforeseen development. Who could have guessed the princess's sword would force the margrave to roll across the floor, staining him with snow and mud?

“...Does that mean she can actually win?”

Everard placed a hold on the hope now surging up in Regis's chest.

“Things are just getting started!”

Once Jerome had taken some distance and regained his stance, his face grew

into a smile.

“Too soft, little lady. You didn’t take me out there... and you’re going to regret it.”

“My goal is to prove I’m stronger than you, not cleave my subordinate in two.”

“Do you have room to hold back?”

“I could ask the same: Why aim for my shoulder? Because you can’t marry the dead?”

“Kukuh... I can’t deny that.”

“Come at me seriously!”

“Hmph, interesting!”

This time, both sides closed the distance in tandem.

Jerome unleashed a stream of consecutive thrusts, Altina angling her sword to deflect them one by one. Seeing her slender arms effortlessly maneuver the hulking lump of metal as though it were a twig lacked any sense of realism—it was like he was watching a badly-produced play.

Gradually, Altina weaved her own attacks into the fray. Jerome now seemed to be parrying much more frequently.

She’s pushing him back!? Commotion gushed forth from the soldiers.

The atmosphere hadn’t escaped Everard, whose hands now trembled.

“Oooh... To think the princess was this strong... Truly a goddess!”

“Can she win?”

“Nggh!? Hmm... The margrave’s certainly showing restraint in his thrusts. Maybe he’s showing some concern for the princess, but... When she blocks his attacks with her sword, he needs to be able to pull back his strength before the impact to prevent his spear from shattering. In contrast, for him to defend against *her* attacks, he has no choice but to parry.”

“Because a direct block would break his spear?”

“Correct. He needs to be wary of his weapon on both the offense *and* defense, so it inevitably looks like the princess controls the pace.”

“But that’s not enough?”

“It is a pity the princess wasn’t born a man.”

“Eh? What does that have to...?”

As he watched, Jerome’s attacks became more and more frequent as Altina resorted to a more defensive stance.

Jerome seemed to have energy to spare. At times he would draw grand arcs with his spear, seemingly for no reason but to flaunt his good health.

In contrast, Altina’s breath was growing shallow. Her shoulders rose and fell.

She lacked stamina.

She may have had the impressive strength needed to swing her colossal sword, but her endurance couldn’t compare to that of the hero, whose build and experience made him a veteran in extended combat. As her movements slackened, she could no longer keep up with the thrusts of the spear.

Its sharp tip grazed the edge of her dress.

In theory, nothing should have changed—Jerome was surely still fighting on thin ice, where one wrong move would break his weapon. But, bit by bit, the tide turned so drastically that it almost seemed he was tormenting her.

Her dress torn, Altina’s shoulder was lain bare. Thin beads of blood oozed from her pale skin.

“Hah... Hah...”

“Not bad. I thought you’d be on the floor by now, little lady.”

“I won’t surrender just because I’m a bit short of breath.”

“Hm, I’ll admit it. There aren’t many in this fort who could keep up with me this long. Not to mention at your age. Give it a few years and you’ll be a fine swordsman.”

“Hah... Hah... A swordsman? Have you knocked your head? What I demand is for you to recognize me as your commander.”

“With the strength you’ve shown, your orders should pass far easier than before. You’re not on my level, but they should treat you as a deputy commander, to say the least.”

“In that... case... I can’t quit just yet!”

Altina brandished her greatsword on high, kicking the snow back as she advanced.

Down came the blade.

“Hyaaaaaaaah!!”

“Good grief... Don’t bite off more than you can chew.”

The sword smashed into the ground, raising a cloud of white smoke. A deafening rumble erupted from the earth as though lightning had struck.

Jerome avoided the attack, lunging forward to counter.

“Sei!!”

“Hee-yah!”

The sword sprung from its resting place in the earth. It shot straight at the spear darting toward her.

But before it could connect, Jerome pulled his entire body back, weapon and all.

The blade passed through thin air.

He had read her. Her footing was now unsteady; the blow she had poured her remaining stamina into had missed.

Such an opening could not be overlooked, and so followed a horizontal strike from the shaft of Jerome’s spear.

With no time to dodge, Altina took the blow with her left arm. She was knocked off her feet.

“Aguh!?” The guard that had protected the girl’s upper arm shattered.

Regis squirmed his way forward.

“Altina!?” he called.

The girl tumbled wildly through the snow. *That's the match*, he thought.

But the sword wouldn't leave her hand. She immediately stood.

"Hah... Hah... Hah... Kuh... Hah..."

Her eyes, blazing orbs of fire, fixed on her foe. Blood spilled from her upper left arm, dyeing her dress sleeve and gauntlet in red. Her arm slumped down, exhausted, drained of all power.

Perhaps she had fractured it. Perhaps it was paralyzed from pain.

Her greatsword was now supported by her right hand alone.

It seemed impossible for her to fight on. And yet, her expression showed no consideration of defeat.

Jerome, who'd taken his distance again, stuck his spear into the ground and relaxed his stance, though not dropping his guard completely. He spoke casually: "Do you want to continue?"

"Of course... Hah... Haha... I can't give up here..."

"Even when you're down to one arm?"

"Would you... nkh... resign on the battlefield, just because... hah... one arm wouldn't move?"

"Hmph, admirable spirit. But what will you do if you become commander? Little lady, can you shoulder the lives of the three thousand men of this border regiment?"

"Hah... Hah... So you think I challenged you without that resolve...? Nggkh... You're thinking too little of me. I'll show you I can shoulder a nation!"

Altina raised the sword with her right hand. Regis was surely not the only one reminded of the legend of *L'Empereur Flamme*, wielding his trusted greatsword with just one hand.

The soldiers were astir.

Jerome did not retrieve his spear, but instead offered a verbal counter that was equally as sharp.

"You mean to tell me an inexperienced little girl... can issue orders more

effectively than I can? This isn't a matter of spirit. I'm asking if you have the skills! One single mistake, and hundreds, thousands of soldiers' lives will be wasted. Do you understand that!"

"...Kh!?"

Altina, whose body had surpassed its limit with pain and fatigue, and who was barely maintaining herself through force of will alone, was finally shaken up. The girl's crimson eyes wavered.

Her gaze prowled the crowd before eventually resting on a single point.

Jerome followed her eyes. The soldiers who were watching did the same. So many eyes; so much interest gathered. Even Everard beside him.

Nearly everyone in the plaza was looking; he felt like the pressure might crush him to death. He was coming under the illusion that a person's gaze carried physical force. The boisterous voices that had surrounded him just moments ago faded further and further away.

Regis held his chest.

He could hear nothing but his heart, which pounded ferociously in his ears.

Why had it come to this? What had he done?

Right, it was that night. When Altina said she would believe in me, I didn't reject her. Was that it!? Was that why she'd go so far for someone as useless as me!?

I don't know this situation.

I don't understand it.

I've never read about anything like this before.

See? Don't you see now, Altina!? I can't do a thing.

I can hardly even breathe. I'm going to pass out.

In his hazy consciousness, Regis looked back at Altina.

Her lips were moving. The surrounding ruckus prevented him from hearing her voice, but he could clearly trace the words with his eyes.

I. Be. Lieve. In. You.

Yes, this really was—

“What a troublesome princess, good grief.”

Regis stepped forward as he continued, the snow crunching under his feet.

“...Your Highness, that is not what you’d call ‘belief.’ It is simply a combination of abandoned thought, unearned entitlement, and baseless expectations. Using such an unreasonable ideal to encourage someone to take on an obstacle beyond their limits... Such irrationality has birthed countless tragedies throughout history. How lamentable.”

He spoke with a mixture of sighs and groans, his strained voice barely forced from his throat.

“How truly lamentable... You’ve gotten me to take on a challenge that is beyond me. I’m crying at my own foolishness.”

Regis slipped out of the ring of soldiers, alone, and walked to Altina’s side.

She laughed in a chipped voice.

“Thank you, Regis.”

“...Too early for that.”

Letting off a murderous air, Jerome greeted him with a voice that resonated from the depths of the earth.

“What did you come here for? I told you, you’re an insignificant apple mixed in among the prime cuts.”

“My apologies, Margrave, but while I may be a bit role to you, it seems I’m something else to another... I promise you my counsel. Princess, if you win this duel, I, Regis Aurick, will be your tactician!”

Tactician!?

Surprise spread among the soldiers.

Regis’s basic ability had been recognized in the bandit incident, and while he hadn’t gained any widespread trust, no one found him particularly incompetent.

There were voices that questioned the height of his rank as a fifth-grade administrative officer, but they were not the majority. Rank-wise, the princess did score highest, after all.

Jerome lifted his spear from the earth, directing its point at him.

“Can you do it? With no ambition, no courage, and no spine!?”

“...I-I’ll admit, I don’t believe in myself. I have no confidence. But there is someone who said she believed in me. As long as she believes, I want to give it a shot.”

After he had been shown such resolve, Regis wasn’t brazen enough to give some excuse and decline. He hadn’t spoken up with the intention of spurring the princess on—no, his desire to aid her on the path she had chosen came from the heart.

“...I will be her tactician. And I must remind you, Sir Jerome, that should the princess win, you promised you would serve under her. The command structure below that development won’t change, so the competency of this fort shouldn’t diminish at all, should it?”

“Mh... All talk, as usual. I understand your point. Now get lost! The duel isn’t settled.”

“Very well.”

Regis slowly parted from the two and returned to the circle.

Jerome readied his stance once more.

“Hmph. Break time’s over, little lady.”

“What’s with that? I wasn’t buying time, nor did I ask for a rest. You’re the one who hesitated, going on about command and such.”

“You’re right. I didn’t expect this development... I tried one of those peaceful resolution things for once, but... the time for words is over. The little lady has the will and the resolve, and a freebie staff officer to boot. I recognize that you have the caliber to command this regiment. But that doesn’t mean I’ll lose here!”

“This duel wasn’t to show my will or resolve... it was to show my strength!”

“I’ll crush you!”

Both sides screamed, the atmosphere quivering under their pressure.

The conversation had afforded it a little rest, but Altina’s left arm was still dangling powerlessly.

She used her right alone to raise the sword...

And launched the first strike.

“HYAAAAAAAH!!”

An ear-rending battle cry.

She converted the momentum of the falling sword into a horizontal slash. She stepped in deep, keeping the attack at waist height. A strike that was hard to parry and hard to dodge.

Jerome nodded.

“I knew it, that’s all you can do. You don’t have the strength left to handle that blade more nimbly.”

The slash was aimed to cleave his torso.

But the margrave leaped into the air with inhuman dexterity, easily clearing the blade.

Had he ducked to avoid, perhaps she could have used the sword’s weight to arc the swipe downward. But this way, that weight would work against her.

Carried by the empty swing, Altina’s body was pulled into a half-turn. She had opened her defenseless back to the enemy.

That’s the match over, a majority surely thought. Not only the soldiers, but Jerome as well. A thrust to her nape, and he would be the victor.

He prepared to land, ready to strike, when his plan was suddenly complicated by something he hadn’t anticipated— Altina continued to turn.

“Aaaaaaaaah!!”

“There’s more...!?”

In one revolution, the empty swing came at him again as another horizontal

slash. It was even faster than before.

With great acceleration, the sword encroached on his flank.

Jerome grit his teeth.

“Tssk!!”

He readied his spear at an incline to divert the attack.

The metallic clang that followed was louder than any other before it. The blade scraped along the spear, its trajectory turned aside from its intended path.

Altina’s right arm creaked painfully as she put all her might into twisting the swipe into Jerome’s weapon.

“Shatter!!”

But the greatsword proved unable to break the spear down the middle, instead sliding down its length. A conspicuously loud chime rang out as the blade collided with the spear’s tip, shearing it from the shaft. An inconvenience, no doubt, but not enough to class the weapon as unusable.

This time, Altina’s balance crumbled as she collapsed onto the ground. She smacked face first into the field of disturbed snow, scattering white in every direction. It was unsightly, but no one laughed at this display.

The soldiers gulped and watched closely as Jerome raised the spear shaft in both hands.

All he had to do was swing it down and stop it right over her head. That was it. There was no need to strike the already collapsed little girl.

Regis had forgotten to breathe.

The short spear came down, let off a dry sound...

...and snapped.

Right in Jerome’s hand, it broke like the dead branch of a withered tree.

“What...!?”

Jerome was at a loss for words, and he wasn’t the only one. Everyone

watching had lost their voices.

All that remained in the man's hands was a stick around the size of a dagger. There was nothing preventing him from continuing the fight, but his spear had broken.

Altina remained collapsed in the snow.

"Fuu... Fuu... Uuu..."

She tried her hardest to pick herself up, but her left arm wouldn't move, and her right no longer had the strength to support her weight.

Her legs and shoulders trembled; there was no way she could continue to hold her weapon.

The soldiers watched, unblinking.

Jerome took his broken spear, and in one clean movement...

...he tossed it aside.

"Hmph... My weapon broke in a fair duel. Is there any worse way to lose?"

The soldiers began to clamor over those words—his admission of loss.

The general lost?

The princess won?

Shock and excitement rippled through the crowd.

Was Altina, her face still in the snow, able to understand the situation?

Everard asked, just to make sure.

"Then, Sir Jerome... you accept this as the princess's victory?"

"Are you deaf?"

His sharp retort made the knight captain deeply lower his head. The soldiers raised screams and jeers at this final act no one had anticipated. Some even cheered.

It was an uproar great enough to shake the entire fort.

Regis hurried over to Altina.

“Princess, you won. Please, stand up... This is the important part!”

“Uurrghh...”

She nodded.

Her stamina had been expended well beyond its limit.

The blood from her left shoulder continued to trickle onto the now-pink patch of snow below.

Even so, if she collapsed here, the duel would lose all meaning.

Altina propped herself up.

“Hah... Hah... Right... The loser, Jerome, standing... kuh... while the victor is down... What a laughingstock I’d be.”

“.....”

Regis silently nodded. Her strong will and relentless efforts had caused a peculiar heat to rise in his chest.

The declaration had come late, but his expression of sentiment in the midst of the duel had been no mistake. He would believe in this girl. He would continue to believe.

Regis wiped the now warm corners of his eyes.

Altina stood. She spread out her slender, white fingers and lifted them up toward the heavens. It was a quiet, beautiful proclamation of victory.

The surrounding noise grew even louder.

In the intense turmoil, Altina spoke only to Regis, who stood right beside her.

“Hey...”

“Yes?”

She reached her quivering right hand to grasp Regis’s shoulder.



“How was that? Do you feel like trusting me now?”

He nodded. He would not waver again.

“...Yeah, I’ll believe in you. I promise.”

“All right, it’s a promise.”

Altina smiled from ear to ear. Her face was like a clear spring day.

❖ ❖ ❖

The plaza, where the heat of the duel refused to subside, was like an unplanned, unprecedented festival. The noise showed no signs of dying down.

It was then that the echo of bells reverberated through the square.

The source of the ringing was no mystery. They came from the highest watchtower on the fort.

These bells had chimed before, time and time again.

The soldiers stood dumbfounded, at first not understanding what they could mean. The plaza’s clamor faded until they could hear the voice from the watchtower.

“Enemy attack!! Enemy attack!! Barbarians from the northern front!!”

The barbarians were using the cover of the blizzard to attack!?

Unrest and tension spread almost instantly through the troops, who immediately looked to Jerome.

“Margrave!” Regis yelled.

This was the only moment they had to establish the new relationship between him and the princess. If they didn’t demonstrate their shifted position here, it would render the match the girl had staked her life on pointless.

“...Settle down... I understand.”

Jerome walked to Altina.

He set a knee down on the snow.

“Princess, the enemy is here! Your orders!”

The soldiers watched in a daze, before hurriedly emulating him.

With Altina at the center, troops fell to their knees one after the next. The wave spread like a ripple on the water's surface. The change in their cognition was amply conveyed.

The girl's resolve had borne fruit.

Everard was among the ones on their knees, a wide grin spread across his face.

Altina was exhausted beyond measure. Her legs shook, and she continued clinging to Regis simply because she feared she would collapse should they part.

Regis whispered in her ear. After a nod, she issued the orders.

"Sir Jerome, I order you. Lead one hundred cavalry as the vanguard to meet the enemy. Discern their strength, and if possible, construct a battle front... If the enemy is too numerous, return with the safety of our troops as the priority!"

"As you will it!!" The general nodded and stood. "You lot, we've been ordered to sortie! Ready the horses, and bring me my lance! I'll wring the neck of any trash that dawdles!"

The soldiers moved obediently under Jerome's command.

Success. They had managed to display the princess's new standing.

Regis placed a hand on Altina's nearly crumpling back to support her.

"Hold on, a bit longer... Can you walk to the central tower?"

"Of course I can..."

He very much wanted to avoid the victor being carried off on a stretcher while the loser led the charge. She had to hold on for now.

Everard rushed over.

"You sure you don't have to take her to the infirmary?"

"The infirmary won't make for a noble sight... We'll go to her bedroom under the pretense of a change of clothing. I'll call the doctor to treat her there."

“Oh, I see.”

“Ah, if we don’t bring the sword...”

“I’ll order my men to get it.”

“Thank you. The enemy is using the blizzard to launch a surprise attack—there shouldn’t be too many of them. Our response was swift, so best case scenario we can drive them off with the vanguard...”

“What shall I do?”

“Mr. Everard, please prepare the second wave. Two hundred cavalry, on standby.”

“Standby? We shouldn’t go out, even if we’re ready?”

“A battlefield has yet to be solidified. Perhaps the vanguard will be forced to run, perhaps it’ll become a free-for-all... Please see how it develops before heading out. Otherwise, you’ll disrupt the first unit.”

“I see... Understood. Leave it to me!”

Everard gathered the knights.

They would have to prepare the infantry as the third wave. There likely wasn’t any need for orders on the defense of the fort.

Under normal circumstances, he would have sought out the opinion of Jerome, who was well versed in how this regiment fought. But in order to display Altina’s status, he could only dare to have him sortie.

His decision had been driven by politics this time. On a strategic level, the best plan would be to hold up in the fort until the enemy’s strength had been accurately ascertained, then send out a perfectly prepared corps to meet them.

But such textbook examples and chess strategies could never be applied so rigidly to a real battle.

Jerome’s vanguard left through the front gate; soldiers with weapons in hand raced to their stations; the knights ordered to carry the *Grand Tonnerre Quatre* hurried to the central tower.

The only ones moving slowly were an injured Altina, and Regis, who was

holding her up.

A weak voice passed her lips.

“I’m... all right... so... Regis, focus on command...”

Was her terrible complexion due to fatigue? The cold? Loss of blood?

Regis put all his efforts into a composed smile, a bluff he maintained to put her at ease.

“Don’t worry, Altina. This situation is one I know a thing or two about. It’ll be fine, just leave it to me.”

“...You sound confident.”

“Of course.”

“Not like you at all.”

“R-Right...”

She saw through him all too easily. He evidently didn’t have the talent to be an actor.

Good grief, Regis thought.

“Yes, I’ll admit, I wanted more time to get a grasp on our forces. Additionally, I wanted to sortie after confirming the barbarians’ scope... But sending Sir Jerome before the enemy could deliver an arrow to our gate was not a terrible decision. I think we can fend off this surprise attack. It’ll work out... Probably.”

“I see. That’s good.”

“Are you all right?”

“I’m fine. Perfectly fine... Hey, Regis...”

“Yes?”

“Thank you. When I was being questioned, and you said you’d be my tactician... It made me pretty happy.”

“I should be the one thanking you. I’ve wanted to say it for a while now, but... Altina, thank you for trusting in me.”

The main gate opened with a heavy noise. The bugle was blown, signaling the

advance of the second wave. The battle cries of several hundred men amalgamated into one mighty roar.

Regis stood at Altina's side, watching the soldiers charge onto the battlefield.

To be continued...

A History of the Belgarian Empire

Currency

In the imperial year 850, the Belgarian Empire used only three forms of currency: The gold livre, the silver sol, and the copper denier. There were no paper notes.

Both the livre and denier were around the size of a modern American quarter, while the sol was larger, around the size of a one dollar coin.

One livre was equal to twenty sols, which in turn equaled two hundred and forty deniers, though there was a chaotic period where this exchange was not standardized.

Sixty years prior, when vast loads of silver were obtained from a conquered land, the value of silver fell into a steep decline. This led to a severe financial crisis. Henceforth, the Ministry of Commerce restricted the circulation of sols to stabilize their market value.

It is said the implementation of machinery into the minting process came into effect directly after the restriction, as the hand production of copper coinage could no longer keep up with demand.

While this new form of production was initially prone to error, by this era, coins of uniform weight and shape were being produced with exceptionally high precision.

In regard to buying power, one denier was able to purchase an egg or a basket of apples (approximately three to four). It could also be traded for one day's worth of bread or a tankard of beer.

The living expense of a commoner was roughly 50 deniers per week. As a laborer's weekly salary was around 100 deniers, if spent frugally, it was possible for nearly anyone to save money.



Gold Livre



Copper Denier



Silver Sol

Incidentally, Regis Aurick's wages as a fifth-grade administrative officer were surprisingly high at 200 deniers a week, with the books he loved costing around 20 deniers each at the capital. This rose to as high as 200 deniers at the border. He bought them regardless.

As social security and insurance weren't established in the empire, most people saved their money in case of disease, injury or marriage. Others would send their wages back home.

The church carried out the role of a bank—they existed all around the country, be it backwater or battlefield, and during this era there was no other organization trustworthy enough to entrust one's money to with enough influence and power to oppose the tyranny of nobles.

Oil Lamp



Lighting

During this era, four methods of lighting were commonly used in the Belgarian Empire.

The most advanced was the gas lamp: Bright, reliable, and producing a comparatively low amount of smoke. However, gas fuel was difficult to process, and so these devices only saw use in select parts of the imperial capital, such as the palace halls.

Oil lamps were the second best and most wide-spread form of lighting in the empire. They boasted simple construction, consisting of no more than a wick soaking in a bottle of lamp oil, and found wide usage not only indoors, but as the lanterns carried by pedestrians and the headlights of coaches.

Candles were a less desirable alternative: They were dimmer, gave off a flickering light, and produced large amounts of soot. However, the regions that produced fuel for oil lamps were limited, and carrying large quantities of oil carried its own risks. It was therefore standard for candles to be used above all else in some regions.

For these, the Belgarian Empire used beeswax—a raw material taken from honeybee hives.

These were heated in water to remove the wax, which was then strained to remove any unwanted substances.

Standard market candles still contained much residual foreign matter and were usually ochre in color as a result. Wax that was free of such impurities came out white, and was seen as a highclass item more commonly used to seal letters, or as a material in furniture and cosmetics.

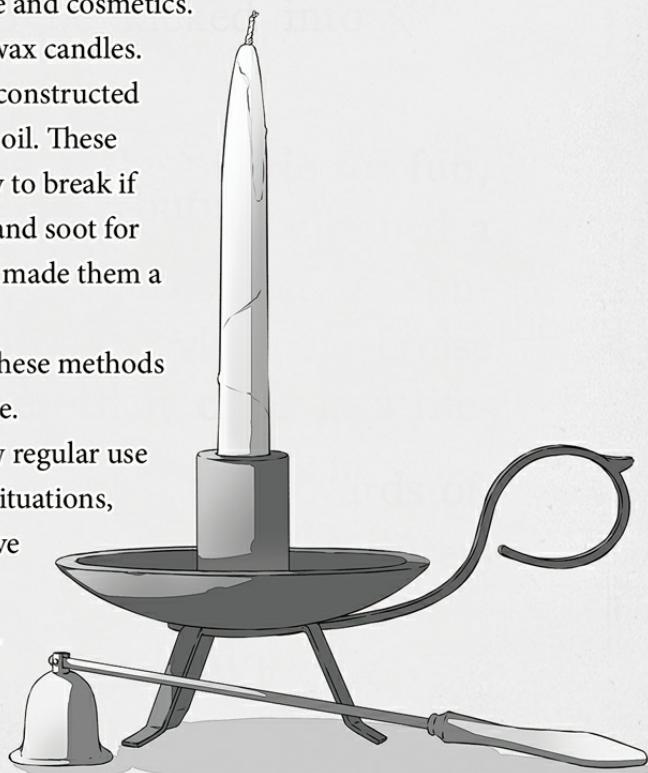
Church ceremonies often employed the use of white wax candles.

On the battlefield, an impromptu torch could be constructed from twigs and grass bundled together and soaked in oil. These burned brightly, were hard to extinguish, and unlikely to break if dropped. However, these produced too much smoke and soot for indoor use, and the unruly flames sent off sparks that made them a dangerous fire hazard.

While their uses and requirements varied, all of these methods generally relied on a tinderbox to first kindle the flame.

Most of the aforementioned implements only saw regular use in above-average households. Outside of emergency situations, servants and those of lower classes would rarely receive lighting from anything besides the moon.

Electricity was still in the early stages of research, and power generators had yet to reach a point where they could be practically used. It would be more than another hundred years before the invention of the lightbulb.



Ceremonial Candle

Afterword

Thank you for reading Altina the Sword Princess.

My name is Yukiya Murasaki, and this was my first publication with Famitsu Bunko.

How did you like the story of Altina, the sheltered princess who is anything but graceful, and Regis, the bibliophile soldier inept at combat and horse-riding? I can only hope you enjoyed it.

This story takes place in a fictional world that takes inspiration from Europe in the closing days of the Middle Ages. There is a particular country the empire is modeled after, and I'm sure many of you have noticed, but... this is a work of fiction, bearing no relation to any real individuals, organizations or historical events. I would be grateful if you could read with that mindset.

It is a fictional world with swords and knights, so I'm pretty sure this qualifies as fantasy, but there is no magic and no monsters.

There is no convenient contraption that will light a room at the flip of a switch. One must rely on oil lamps and candles for light.

Goods must be transported on foot, or by horse, which drastically increases the price of certain commodities at the border.

Servants spend a majority of their day cooking and cleaning, and laundry is carried out by hitting fabric against stone under running water.

That is the sort of world this story is set in.

In this volume, I depicted the meeting of Altina and Regis, with an episode that deepens their bond. I would be delighted to hear what you thought.

While it hasn't been settled yet, I plan on delivering another volume.

Altina, who has begun walking toward her ambition, and Regis, who has made his resolve. Their relationship thickens as they tackle a new problem.

To my illustrator, himesuz-sensei, thank you for drawing such refreshing and

beautiful illustrations. I love how your pictures capture the air of this world.

To my editor, Wada-sama, thank you for your willingness to consult on so many things. It's thanks to you that I could get this work to take shape.

To everyone in Famitsu Bunko's editorial division.

HS-kun, who helped me.

My family and friends who supported me.

And of course, you, for reading this far. You all have my greatest gratitude.

Thank you.

— Yukiya Murasaki

Congratulations on your new release!

My name's **himesuz**
and I'm the illustrator
for this series.
I hope we get
along.

I'd love to
draw Altina
without her armor
some more!

;) **himesuz**





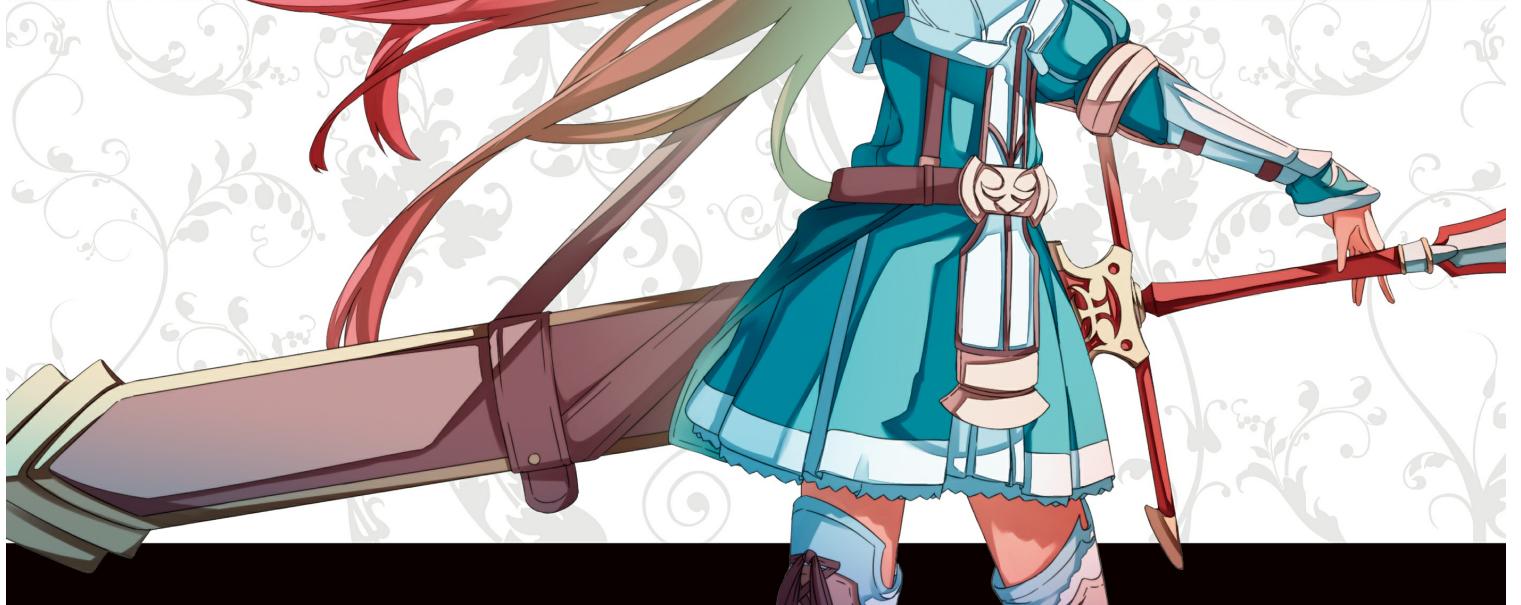




This time, both sides closed the distance in tandem.
Jerome unleashed a stream of consecutive thrusts,
Altina angling her sword to deflect them one by one.

Seeing her slender arms effortlessly maneuver
the hulking lump of iron as though it were
a twig lacked any sense of realism—it was like
he was watching a badly-produced play.

ALDNOAH. the Story of Princess





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Altina the Sword Princess: Volume 1

by Yukiya Murasaki

Translated by Roy Nukia Edited by Kieran Redgewell

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Illustrations by himesuz

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