

II

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LTINA
the Sword Princess

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Whimsical Maid
Clarisse

Beautiful New Knight
Eric

Bibliophagic Tactician
Regis

Sword-Wielding Princess
Altina

Even seen from a distance by a layman,
his sharp attack was clearly of a different class to his subordinates.
His spear drove through the air like a majestic bird.



Jerome
carried into
a thrust.



“Hey... What’s she going on about?
Is this your doing?”

“My proposal was that she
should say something along the lines of:
‘We’re attacking Fort Volks to bring peace
to the border. Our plan is sound, but I need
you to believe in me and lend me your power...’”

“If we refuse
to take the fortress,
we’ll be marked as traitors!
But, the way I see it,
that’s a ridiculous
reason to go
to battle!”

“I don’t want to fight for that reason,
nor do I want to fight for myself. I want to fight for all of you!
Those of you with families would do well to picture their faces!
Or the faces of lovers! Of friends! And look to the man who stands beside you!
He is, and shall forever be, your comrade in arms!”



ALICIA
the Princess



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The story so far—

The year is 850 on the Belgarian imperial calendar.

Inept with a sword, unable to ride a horse, and apathetic toward the empire he serves, Regis Aurick is a hopeless soldier who spends his days buried in books.

Despite ranking as a mere fifth-grade administrative officer, Regis, as the lone surviving officer of his camp, is forced to take complete responsibility for a crushing defeat at the hands of a barbarian ambush and is subsequently banished to the northern front.

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

But this optimism is short lived. His destination, Fort Sierck, has its fair share of problems.

For one, its commander is Fourth Princess Marie Quatre Argentina de Belgaria —“Altina” for short—a stunning young woman whose imperial lineage is denoted by her crimson hair and red eyes. The daughter of a commoner, she was shunned by the queen and other high nobles, and she was eventually appointed commander of a faraway border regiment at the unprepared age of fourteen.

Under normal circumstances, her time would have been spent idly, the empty title making her little more than a decoration. But the impassioned princess, having spent her adolescence caught between internal struggles for power, aspires to something greater. She has seen the strife caused by self-seeking nobles—the ruthless taxation and pointless wars—and so resolved to change the country!

And so, Altina seeks out Regis, hoping he will agree to become her tactician.

“I’m going to become empress. I need your wisdom.”

She is driven by her cause, so much so that she would put her very life on the line. But Regis doesn’t share her confidence.

“Precisely because it’s a difficult dream to reach, I want to lend you my aid. The thing is... I can’t even imagine myself being of use to you.”

“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.”

A seemingly moot point, he thinks—but Regis is nonetheless moved by her heart.

Their first battle is staged within the fort itself.

In her pursuit of the throne, Altina must first prove her strength to the border regiment she strives to command in more than just name. However...

Its de facto commander, General Jerome, refuses to accept the princess as his superior. A revered hero driven to the border by those envious of his achievements, he is respected and obeyed by the soldiers of the border regiment.

And so, in a plan to gain the soldiers’ recognition and the trust of her strategist, Altina challenges Jerome to a duel.

Regis admonishes her recklessness, only for the princess to reply:

“If I ask for your life, then it’s only natural for me to wager my life as well. I don’t want to become an empress so foolish she thinks loyalty is earned simply by sitting on the throne.”

With Altina’s reputation—and her life—on the line, the duel commences in the midst of a blizzard. Despite the clear disparity in their abilities, Altina pushes through, and following several close encounters, just narrowly grasps victory.

Moved by her display of strength and resolve, Regis finally places his trust in the princess, swearing to work as her tactician. Cries of amazement and celebration spread through the plaza, the soldiers growing ever more rowdy over the dramatic curtain call.

But then, a bell rings out from the watchtower. The soldiers fall silent.

It’s a barbarian attack!

Chapter 1: The King of Barbarians

Regis had resolved to become Altina's tactician. He wasn't confident in his decision, but he had no other choice.

He whispered what he believed to be an appropriate course of action into the girl's ear. She had only just been recognized as commander, and consequently needed to reinforce her authority by providing her troops with 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 battlefront. If the opposing force is too numerous, you are to prioritize the safety of our troops and withdraw."

"As you will it!!"

Having become her subordinate in name and in practice following their duel, General Jerome led his cavalry out of the fort. The pounding of hooves, clashing of metal, and heated cries of men could be heard from beyond the stone walls.

The cacophony of combat behind them, Regis and Altina made for the central tower. Its highest floor had a balcony from which they could survey the state of battle, as well as a meeting room where they could formulate plans.

But first, he needed to treat the injuries Altina had sustained during the duel. With the celebrated blade of the first emperor—and a bit of luck—she had managed to claim victory, but her wounds were so severe it was remarkable she hadn't been carried from the plaza on a stretcher.

She was surely in unbearable pain. Even so, she had to power through. For the loser, Jerome, to depart for the front lines while the victor struggled to so much as walk... It would defeat the very purpose of proving her strength.

Drip, drip.

Blood trickled to the snow at her feet. Her complexion suggested she might collapse at any given moment, and yet she continued to drag her feet onward.

“Hah... Hah...”

“Hold on, Altina.”

As he walked beside her, Regis could do nothing but whisper helpless words of encouragement. Even as they covered ground, their destination appeared so terribly far away.

An imposing structure of piled cobbles, the tower stood at the center of the fort. The door at its base was made of dull, heavy-looking iron. It was so heavy that it required Regis to use the full weight of his body as he closed it behind him.

“Khhh...”

The door shut with a loud thud, enclosing the stone passage before them in darkness. The sounds of combat grew immediately distant.

The moment she was no longer in view of the soldiers, Altina crumbled to the floor, her breathing shallow and irregular.

“Hah... Ghh... Urrrh...”

“A-Altina, are you all right!?”

“Ngh... Hah... Hah... Kuh... I’m fine... I can... stand...”

Thanks to the barbarian attack, the soldiers had all either made for their defensive stations or were preparing to sortie from the plaza. No one else could be seen in the tower.

It couldn’t hurt to let her rest here for a moment.

“Altina. If you die here, all your efforts will have been in vain. Don’t push yourself; you can rest here for a bit.”

“Y-Yeah...” She entrusted her back to the stone wall and took in a sharp breath.

Regis lowered himself down beside her, gazing at her profile.

Altina’s mother had peerless beauty that led the emperor to take her as his concubine, even though she was a commoner. Many considered her daughter to have inherited her charm and, as Regis sat there, he could understand why.

Just moments ago she had been on the cusp of death, and yet something about her looked... refined. Her crimson hair flowed more gracefully than ever, seemingly glistening even in the dimly lit corridor. Her skin was whiter than the downpour of snow, completely vacant of the colors of fatigue. Even the ruby-like gemstones barely visible behind her faintly parted eyelids now carried a depth Regis had never noticed before.

He had barely any interest in the allure of women, but even Regis found himself entranced.

But her features also carried an air of innocence—an air that reminded him that, despite everything, she was still only a fourteen-year-old girl a year away from the Belgian age of adulthood.

And yet she displayed unimaginable strength, both physically and mentally. She refused to give in, no matter how dire the situation.

Even while slathered with blood and dirt, her hands were nothing less than beautiful. Her fingers were like gentle curves of porcelain, so slender he feared they might crack from even the slightest touch. Those fingers held a two-handed sword even taller than she was, and with those fingers she had defeated an esteemed hero known for his combat prowess.

Was this aberrant strength due to her lineage, or her training alone? Either way, she was quite something.

“...What’s wrong, Regis?”

She turned to face him.

“Ah, are you feeling any better?”

“Yeah, I’ve pulled myself together... but you keep staring at me. Is something wrong?”

“Huh? W-Wa-Was I really staring?”

“I could almost feel your eyes piercing through me. Do I look weird or something? Is there dirt on my face? No need to hold back. Speak your mind.”

“No, no, not at all. You look really pretty!”

“Hah?”

Regis immediately clasped a hand over his mouth.

The hell am I saying to a fourteen-year-old!?

A minstrel from the capital would have phrased it more elegantly. *I was simply enraptured by your looks*, perhaps. But Regis was no minstrel. He fell silent, blood rushing to his cheeks.

Altina examined him with a look of concern.

“Oh, you must have been freezing standing out in the blizzard. Your face is all red. Take care you don’t catch a cold.”

Her right hand reached to feel his forehead.

He immediately flinched. It was an unconscious response—one born of embarrassment—but it seemed Altina misunderstood.

“Ah... I’m sorry. My hands are dirty, aren’t they.”

“No, that’s honestly not it at all!”

“Don’t worry about it. I don’t like flattery or needless consideration; it reminds me of those noble ladies. I know my hands aren’t quite like other women’s. But I sweat when I train, and blood and dirt are pretty inevitable after a fight.”

“...That really isn’t what I meant.”

Regis moved his own hand toward her. His heart was palpitating at a fearsome pace, but he wholeheartedly desired a resolution to this terrible misunderstanding.

His hand came to rest on hers.

“Eh?”

“Y-Your hands are beautiful. These are the hands that actualized your will. That delivered you to victory... Err, the thing is... I’ve never been so friendly with a woman before, so... I’m not used to being touched. I was just a little surprised.”



“Oh... I see...”

She appeared to accept his explanation, but he’d missed the appropriate moment to remove his hand.

Regis became trapped in thought.

I remember a scene like this in a book I read not long ago. It was Coillier Romeros’s Rohl’s Traveling Spirit. “I took the girl’s hand... and after stroking her cheek, I planted a kiss on her sickly sweet...” No! What do you think you’re doing, Coillier!? If you take me in that direction, I’ll be hanging from the gallows in no time!

He agonized, internally flitting through books, desperately searching for an escape.

But in none of the stories that came to mind would the main character, having taken a girl by the hand and spoken of her beauty, then let go without doing anything. He had no reference point.

As he sat frozen, unsure of what to do, he was suddenly brought back to reality by a very deliberate “ahem.”

He turned his head to see a woman in an indigo maid gown—Clarisse, casting a wide smile in his direction.

“Are you trying to get used to ‘being touched’ by taking advantage of our poor, vulnerable princess, who can’t even walk on her own? Hmm, Mr. Regis?”

“Oh, no! That wasn’t my—!”

“You’re surprisingly devilish.”

“I am not!”

“What were you intending to do with the princess?”

“I wasn’t intending to do anything!”

“Oh, really? I thought she needed urgent medical attention.”

“A-Ah, right, of course! Umm... There’ll no doubt be soldiers in the infirmary, so that’s not an option... We’ll return to her room under the pretense of a change of clothes, then call a doctor.”

Altina nodded in the affirmative.

“Right,” said Regis. “In that case, Princess...”

“Hup...”

Altina placed her working hand on the wall to stand.

“Phew... Some strength has finally returned to my legs.” She looked relieved.

Regis rose beside her.

“Just don’t push yourself too hard, okay?”

“Should I go out onto the battlefield now? I won the duel and have been accepted as commander, so I doubt anyone will consider me a nuisance.”

“...If you act too recklessly, we’ll have a real problem on our hands. Death, even. My death. From the stomach ulcer you’re bound to give me.”

“Ah, that *would* be a problem. You only just became my tactician.”

“Altina, return to your room this instant,” Regis demanded. “Let the doctor treat you.”

“Are those the words of... a tactician? An admin officer? ...Or a friend?”

“A tactician, of course. I made you a promise.”

“Fufu... Then I suppose I should listen.”

Altina started down the hallway, Clarisse closely following in absolute silence. She wasn’t offering any direct assistance, but was tactfully positioned so she could immediately step in should Altina fall.

“...By the way... Ms. Clarisse, what are you doing here?” Regis asked. She was supposed to be waiting in the carriage.

“I believed the princess would return to her room once the duel had been won. Although, I must admit, I never anticipated Mr. Regis would be holding her hand on my arrival.”

“Tha-That was a misconception, given the complicated circumstances, that can be very simply explained,” he stammered. “You see, um... Err...”

Not only Regis, but Altina also had turned a warm shade of red.

As usual, Clarisse's words had only served to exacerbate the situation, and yet her expression was gentle and composed.

"Please leave the princess to me, Mr. Regis."

"I can stay. We should be fine for a while; I placed Everard in charge of the second wave."

Everard was knight captain of the Beilschmidt border regiment and a seasoned veteran—without a doubt, a warrior he could trust.

Clarisse nodded knowingly.

"So, you're hoping to see the princess undress for her treatment."

"I never said that!"

"I understand. You're worried about the princess."

"Of course I am."

"But *I'm* worried about the princess's chastity."

"So you intend to paint me as a beast no matter what I say... Hah, I never even considered it." Regis paired his words with a somewhat unenthusiastic shrug.

Clarisse lowered her gaze.

"Is that so? As a man, do you not consider anything... *wrong* with that?"

"Hey!" Altina interrupted, a confused look on her face. "I can't understand a thing you two are talking about. An animal Regis resembles? The green uniform and black hair, plus how slow he moves... He'd be a turtle."

Clarisse placed an affectionate hand on the princess's head as she teetered.

"Oh, Princess. My cute, cute little princess."

"Eh? Am I wrong?"

"...I'm more afraid of what *you* might teach her, Ms. Clarisse," Regis grumbled to himself.

Owing to her lack of friends at the imperial court, Altina knew surprisingly little about things beyond her duties as a princess and a commander. She would

be an adult—and of marriageable age—in just a year’s time, so Regis could sense there may be problems in that regard. That being said, he had only gleaned that kind of information from books himself.

As he replayed the exchange in his head, it became harder and harder for Regis to believe the situation he was in. It was inconceivable to think he was exchanging such idle chatter with someone ranked so far above him.

She was the imperial princess, as well as his commander. Her rank was major general. In contrast, Regis was the descendent of generation upon generation of commoners, and while she called him a tactician, in name he was no more than a fifth-grade administrative officer.

Major general, brigadier general, first grade, second grade, third grade, fourth grade, fifth grade. They were six ranks apart. The fact she permitted him to address her by a nickname was nothing short of a miracle...

Regis shook his head, hoping to expel any unnecessary thoughts.

The soldiers outside were in the midst of combat with the barbarians. His position required him to compose a battle plan, no matter how slim his confidence.

“...All right, I’ll take command from the top floor.”

Altina returned a deep nod. “I’m counting on you, Regis.”

“I believe in you, Mr. Regis.” Clarisse offered words of praise from behind a subdued smile.

Having parted from the women, Regis raced toward the stairs.



He was exhausted by the time he reached the top floor.

Hands planted firmly on his knees, Regis devoted his entire being to forcing air into his lungs.

“Gah... Hah... Hah... Hah...”

“Are you okay!?”

The voice had come from a young knight, who rushed over to him. He was

perhaps around sixteen years of age—younger than Regis, that much was certain.

Honey-colored hair bound behind his head; he was a handsome man with blue eyes and a slender, refreshing face. He wore top-grade metal armor with a gold-colored longsword sheathed at his waist, giving him the appearance of a character straight from a fairy tale. His voice was certain and articulate, albeit somewhat effeminate.

“Are you injured!?”

“Me? Ah, no... this is just...”

He may not have regarded himself very highly, but even Regis had too much pride to admit to the concerned youth he was merely winded from several flights of stairs. He averted his eyes, and focused on collecting his breath.

“Ghh, heh... Hah... Phew... I’m fine.”

“I’m glad to see you’re in good health, Mr. Regis.”

“Pardon? Have we met somewhere before?”

“My name is Eric Mickaël de Blanchard.”



The man courteously bowed. His surname, Blanchard, quickly sparked Regis's memory.

"Don't tell me... you're Sir Everard's grandson? You were with Marquis Thénézay, as I recall."

"Yes!"

He had heard from Everard that his grandson had been stationed in the noble army Regis had previously served. When the barbarians exploited the gap in their defenses, decimating Marquis Thénézay's main camp, this man—Eric—came under the impression he had only survived thanks to Regis's command.

Regis, however, was certain such credit should be owed to the combat officers in the reserve forces.

Regis took another good look at him. This was definitely what it meant to be fine-featured.

Knight Captain Everard was a bald, bearded giant—as if a gorilla had donned plate armor and taken up a polearm. Regis considered Everard a man still in his prime, so he was relatively shocked to see Everard had a grandson this old.

But perhaps the greatest surprise was the complete lack of semblance between the two.

Blood rushed to Eric's cheeks.

"Back then, Mr. Regis... Your dignified figure, your calm demeanor, your precise command... I was convinced, then and there, that you were the lord I should wager my life on."

His words were strong but not forceful, his smile invigorating like a glimmering spring.

To think such a high evaluation had just been handed to someone run ragged by a staircase. Regis almost wanted to apologise.

"...I heard you volunteered to come here."

"Yes! I arrived just last night. I had hoped to extend my greetings then, but you looked extremely busy."

“Why would you come to the front lines of your own volition? This is a dangerous place.”

“That’s exactly it. You saved my life, Mr. Regis. Becoming your shield is the very least I can do.”

“...I know I should feel grateful, but... I don’t believe I’m worthy of such a noble proclamation.”

“You assumed the role of tactician, did you not? You declared as such in the duel a moment ago. I was watching.”

“Erk.”

Given the situation, he’d had no other choice. It wasn’t as though his proclamation had been insincere, but to Regis, who wasn’t used to being the center of attention, the memory made him want to curl into a ball.

“For someone of my... ineptitude... to become a tactician... Whether I’ll be able to serve my role is... Ah. More importantly, the commander of this border regiment is Fourth Princess Marie Quatre. As a knight, should you not pledge your allegiance to her instead?”

Although Regis had received permission to call her Altina, he very much wanted to avoid any baseless rumors, so he made sure not to use the nickname in front of anyone else.

“Of course. As a knight of Belgaria, I offer my life and my sword to the emperor, his blood, the nobles, and the people. But the bonfire of hope you rekindled in the hellscape of chaos and despair shall never be forgotten.”

A line so poetically exaggerated it could have come straight from a classical play. Regis was happy enough reading such dramas, but to be involved in one was the last thing he wanted.

“B-Bonfire, eh...? I remember having a lantern back then, if that’s what you’re referring to.”

His gaze wandered around the corridor, lingering anywhere but on the young man before him.

Eric’s mood held firm as he offered a cheerful smile.

“On my grandfather’s orders, we’ve brought the princess’s sword here.”

“Oh, so that’s why you’re here.”

Regis finally regained his breath and looked toward the conference room.

A cloth was spread out over the table, with Altina’s treasured sword—the *Grand Tonnerre Quatre*—placed on top. As she hadn’t been in any state to carry it after the duel, it had to be transported by other means.

The mud and snow had been cleaned off, restoring the weapon to its former glory. The blade looked immaculate, showing not even a single scratch from the violent clash.

The large window partition to the balcony was open with a knight stationed on each side. As Regis came into view, they saluted in unison.

He passed through and out onto the balcony, the battlefield now spread out before him. A fresh layer of snow piled high on the outlook.



The wind continued to blow strong.

This was his second time coming to the strategy room balcony. The first had been with Altina the morning after he arrived.

Back then, the uninterrupted view had allowed for a spectacular sight. But now, because of the blizzard, the distance had become a white haze he couldn’t quite make out. Regardless, right now the scenery was the least of his concerns.

A battle was raging right before his eyes.

Fort Sierck was situated on a north-facing slope. A great many soldiers gathered in the plaza, awaiting their orders to march. Excluding those at defensive stations, the troops on standby numbered roughly two thousand.

Three hundred cavalry had already been dispatched. From what he could see, they were up against six hundred barbarians.

After the first exchange, both sides took distance to exchange menacing glares.

In a free-for-all, combat would usually last until one side took flight. But with

proper regulation, an army could take distance and rest before exhaustion claimed any needless casualties.

Jerome and Everard's cavalry units had set up encampments to defend the fort. The barbarians watched from afar, like starving beasts setting sights on their prey.

Strewn across the white, trampled-down snowfield, a number of bodies lay fallen and unmoving. While it appeared the barbarians had suffered more casualties, that didn't mean the imperial cavalry hadn't taken some losses of their own.

Eric came up beside him.

"Those are quite considerable numbers for barbarians."

"Yeah. I hear the barbarian forces are especially strong in this region... And there are probably even more of them coming."

"What makes you think so?"

"Watch how they behave—they keep taking glances behind them. Were it only the rearguard, I might have guessed they were just securing their path of retreat. But those at the vanguard are doing the same... I think it's appropriate to assume they're expecting reinforcements."

"I see. But then, why have they decided to attack in waves? Could they be hauling artillery?"

"Barbarians have no artillery. I believe the plan was for the advance six hundred to launch a surprise attack in the blizzard and then hold the gate open for reinforcements."

"Such a plan from mere barbarians!?"

"They'll give it that much consideration if they're attacking a fort... but they should have retreated the moment their plan failed. Perhaps circumstance requires them to take the fort at all costs...?"

The stalemate did not hold for long. The barbarians roared as they charged forward, and the battle started once more.

The cavalry accepted the challenge, lances at the ready. They would usually

be able to push back: against six hundred barbarians, three hundred cavalry should herald a one-sided victory.

But there were many strong fighters among the barbarian ranks, making the result much harder to anticipate. Among them, a gaudily dressed man swung a large war axe from the lead. Not only his appearance, but also his strength were a cut above the rest.

A knight opposing him thrust a spear from atop his horse, but his weapon was cleaved by a single swipe from the barbarian. As nimble as a monkey, the barbarian leapt higher than the horse's back, and again swung his axe with a single hand.

Blood spewed from the knight's open throat as he powerlessly fell from his horse.

A barbarian able to surpass a knight stationed on the border one-on-one was considerably rare. The men here were incomparable to those based in the imperial capital—men who were knights in name alone, lavishly enjoying the peace away from the war zone. These were elites who had cut their teeth on the front line—it was not common for them to meet such capable opposition.

Regis gazed ahead and sighed.

"So that's... the king of barbarians."

"Who's that?" Eric asked from beside him.

"According to the reconnaissance party's report, there's an extremely skilled man leading a union of at least three barbarian tribes."

"I see. So that man is their king?"

"I don't know his actual position in their hierarchy, but the strongest lion in a pride is most often the king."

"...Making him the barbarian king." Eric nodded, convinced.

His tone was still calm, but he no longer smiled. The atmosphere was too heavy for light-hearted conversation.

Two more mounted units were lost.

It was then that a jet-black horse broke into a gallop as Jerome raced over. He had fought the duel in his military uniform and then had been immediately called to battle, leaving him without armor. He no longer carried the short spear that had been hewn by the princess, instead wielding a silver cavalry lance.

“That has to be Sir Jerome’s mighty lance, *Les Cheveux d’une Dame* (The Dame’s Locks).” Regis pointed. “It’s renowned as the weapon of heroes: not only does it have an impressive length of 42 palms (311 cm), but its tip was supposedly forged from trystie.”

“The same trystie bequeathed to *L’Empereur Flamme* by the faeries?”

“According to legend... but the theory it’s a naturally occurring alloy is gaining steady ground.”

Jerome carried into a thrust. Even seen from a distance by a layman, his sharp attack was clearly of a different class than his subordinates’. His spear drove through the air like a majestic bird.

The barbarian king caught the blow with his axe, closing the distance for a counterattack. Having read his movements, the tip of Jerome’s lance was already refocused on his opponent.

Mere millimeters before it could pierce his skin, the barbarian king contorted his torso to dodge.

Allowing the man no time to recover, Jerome once again pushed into an attack, aiming for his heart. Once again, it collided with the axe.

The enemy was forced to retreat.

They were matched in ability, but the reach of Jerome’s weapon and his position on horseback put him at an advantage—Regis played out what would follow in his head.

Eric leaned in.

“It’s grandfather!”

Everard was scattering barbarians with his mighty fauchard.

“I’d expect no less.”

“I can fight as well. Mr. Regis, please allow me to join the battle! If the enemy has reinforcements, should we not send another wave of our own!?”

That would be the normal order to give. No matter the specifics, both sides would eventually clash head-on at full force.

“...The enemy will run if we send reinforcements now.”

“Isn’t driving them away our objective?”

“That sounds good on paper, but if we allow them to retreat, they’ll just regroup and attack again. If possible, I want a result that’ll leave a lasting impact.”

“‘A lasting impact’? What do you mean?”

“Err... Could you fetch me a pen and paper...?”

“Right away!”

Eric dashed into the conference room, returning with a sheet of paper, a pen, and a bottle of ink.

Regis moved to lay the sheet on the table, only to be reminded of the grand sword already rested upon it. There was enough room for him to write, but should he somehow manage to spill ink on the revered weapon, it would surely leave an embarrassing mark on the pages of history. Given how clumsy he was, that wasn’t a risk he was ready to take.

“...I’m sorry, could you hold still a moment?”

“Of course.”

Regis used Eric in place of a desk, setting an inkwell in Eric’s hand and holding the page against his breastplate as he smoothly wrote out line after line.

“All right, that should just about do it. They’ll probably get the message...”

He signed his name and rolled the paper into a scroll. The ink was hardly dry, but it would be fine so long as the words were still legible.

Regis handed it to Eric.

“...Please pass this to Sir Jerome, then Sir Everard, and then whoever is taking command of the soldiers in the square.”

“Understood! This is your first command as our tactician!”

“Mn? Yes, I guess you’re right...”

“Knowing you, Mr. Regis, I’m sure you wrote up a most wonderful strategy.”

“Hahaha... Hardly. Maybe if we lived in an era where an army comprised three hundred men, but this border regiment alone contains three thousand. Truly versatile command is but a pipe dream.”

“Is that so?”

“In this day and age, we need to invest in messengers. Being able to plan five moves ahead is useless unless those orders are actually carried out.”

Eric stared intently at the roll of paper he had received.

“Then... you’re saying you have the next five moves written here?”

“Well, you could call it that.”

“It’s like you’re a prophet.”

“I can’t divine the future, nor can I stand listening to those who believe they can... On this occasion, however, our situation just happened to resemble a battle record I once read.”

“I’ll stake my life on delivering these orders!”

Eric’s eyes were shimmering. He thumped his right fist against his breast.

“No, no. If you lose it, I’ll just write another one. Take care not to injure yourself. Please.” Regis scratched his head.

“Y-Yes... Understood.”

Truth be told, the state of the battlefield was ever changing, so he wouldn’t be writing the same thing twice. But Regis could feel the dangerous follies of youth radiating from this man.

Once he’d departed, Regis addressed the knights on standby in the room.

“I’ll be fine here. Could you guard Eric?”

They exchanged surprised glances, but demonstrated understanding with a salute.

The three knights were now gone from the strategy room.

“Good grief...”

Regis placed an elbow on the balcony railing and rested his cheek on his hand.

Should he have told Eric, ‘The future of the empire relies on this message’? *It would have definitely motivated him, to say the least...*

“Perhaps, but when you say that, the young soldier is prone to a bout of sudden death.”



Jerome’s one-on-one clash with the barbarian king was like a furious storm. Each thrust was filled with such thirst for blood Regis could make it out from afar. It wasn’t that he had held back in his duel against Altina, but rather that he now had no concerns about taking his opponent’s life.

The barbarian king was a marvel himself. He turned aside the ceaseless barrage of attacks with such a heavy axe, aiming to sever the lance whenever the opportunity presented itself.

Perhaps Jerome would have lost by now had his spear not been made of faerie silver.

As their weapons met once more, the axe suddenly shattered, forcing the barbarian king to pull back. But before Jerome could give chase, Eric arrived. He relayed the orders to the general...

...who immediately glared at Regis, completely disregarding the distance between them.

The central tower where Regis stood was too far from the battlefield to make out any expressions, let alone in the midst of a blizzard, and yet he could somehow feel the rage in Jerome’s eyes.

But Regis was their appointed strategist; there was little Jerome could do to oppose his command.

Had he not been so far away, Regis was sure the man’s gaze would have been enough to stop his heart completely. Had he been close enough for words to reach, what would he have said?



A short while later, Jerome's one hundred and Everard's two hundred cavalry cleared a route to the front gate, gathering themselves on either side. There was clear animosity in their actions, but they obeyed nonetheless.

They then drew a half-circle, enclosing the barbarians from both sides.

At the same time, the massive iron door of the front gate opened outward.

Regis's attention was suddenly drawn to the hurried footsteps approaching the conference room. He turned.

"Hm?"

"Ah, there you are!"

Altina entered, her left arm hung in a sling. Her dress was new, and she had equipped even more armor since he had last seen her.

Behind her was the maid, Clarisse, and... a woman in a white coat.

"Princess, did I not tell you to *get some rest*?" the woman sighed. She wore spectacles, an item so rare and valuable it was hardly even seen in the capital. Her short-cut hair gave her a rather masculine appearance. She was twenty-nine and held the position of imperial doctor.

Regis never got her name. Female medical practitioners were rare in the empire—in fact, she was the only one at the fort—and everyone simply referred to her as the 'lady doctor.' *Docteur féminin*. Just like Clarisse, she had apparently followed the princess from the imperial court.

Altina's complexion was considerably improved. Regis smiled in relief.

"Hey, are you all right now?"

"Yep!"

"She's not all right!"

The doctor raised her voice, narrowing the eyes behind her spectacles.

Altina dismissively waved her off with her right hand.

"I'm fine, I tell you! I can walk just fine. You worry too much, *Docteur*."

“Your arm is fractured!”

“True, but—”

“What!? You broke it!?”

The doctor responded to Regis’s surprise with a look of pure exhaustion, managing a small nod.

“God, she’s supposed to be a princess. I’d give her three months for a full recovery. Are you listening, princess? Please don’t add to my workload.”

“Won’t you get bored if you don’t exercise your skills every now and again?” Altina wasn’t discouraged in the slightest.

Clarisse sighed. “A wild animal still hunts, broken bones or not. That’s just how it is. We have little say in the matter.”

Almost in unison, Regis and the doctor sighed deeply.

“Hah... So our princess is the same as your common *loup gris*,” the doctor opined.

“How bothersome...” said Regis.

“W-What’s with you people? What else could I do? It was a fair duel! More importantly—Regis, how is the battle going!? Did we win!?”

Altina moved to Regis’s side and joined him in watching the situation from the balcony.

Her face immediately drained of color.

“Eh!? What’s going on!? The enemy’s entering the fort!”

“Yeah... I had Sir Jerome and Sir Everard’s units move to the sides and then opened the gate. It threatens the barbarians with an attack from three sides.”

“Yeah, but you’re supposed to protect the front of the fort, and then divide the troops only once reinforcements have been deployed. If you open the gate beforehand, they’ll just charge straight in!” she explained in a flurry.

Regis found himself quite impressed.

“That’s incredible. You know the basics of strategic warfare?”

“Enough to know there’s been a catastrophic error made here! The enemy’s entering through the gate— Aah, they just keep coming in!”

The barbarians poured into the parade ground ahead of the central tower. They met with the imperial soldiers gathered as reinforcements and the battle resumed.

The doctor’s face went even paler than Altina’s.

“Hey now... Is this going to be all right, Strategist!?”

“...For now.”

“I believe in you, Regis.” Altina stared him down. “So please explain.”

“Explain, huh? How should I put it... Let’s say you’re the barbarians. All of a sudden, mid combat, the cavalry defending the fort parts and the front gate stands open. What crosses your mind?”

“It’s a huge chance!” Altina immediately answered.

“I’d think it’s a trap,” answered the doctor.

Clarisse simply replied with an “I don’t know.”

Regis continued his explanation.

“Yes, I expect opinions will be divided. Between those who see it as an opportunity and charge ahead, and those who suspect a trap and freeze up... a difference in response naturally comes about. But the tricky part is, unlike in chess, soldiers in real combat won’t always move as they’re ordered. Soldiers stand on the battlefield under a delicate balance of ambition and fear.”

“So you’re saying they won’t all do the same thing?”

“If they’d been able to predict our strategy beforehand, perhaps they’d be able to regulate their ranks. But the barbarian chain of command is already muddled as is, so if you offer them a sudden opportunity to strike, they’ll all attack, albeit gradually.”

The doctor tilted her head.

“Why would they all attack, even knowing it might be a trap? If it were me, I’d remain no matter who else went. I can make my own decisions.”

“Because the imperial cavalry is simultaneously closing in on both sides. If your allies are pushing forward, you have no choice but to follow. The only alternative is certain demise.”

“Oh... I see... Then they really have no other option.”

“Yeah. But, on a snowy incline, cavalry is overwhelmingly faster than foot soldiers moving uphill. Sir Jerome and Sir Everard’s units will no doubt reach the front gate before they can.”

It was just as Regis stated. Of six hundred barbarians, only around two hundred managed to enter the fort before the cavalry bisected their sluggishly-moving forces from the sides. The horsemen had become a second wall glaring inside and out.

Altina clapped her hands together at the realization.

“I see! The plan was to separate them!”

“...That, too.”

“There was another reason?”

“The division is just a means to an end... A means to surround the most troublesome piece on the enemy side. The barbarian king is strong—even Sir Jerome was struggling to take him down. And that could well be why he chooses to stand and fight in the vanguard.”

Just like a certain princess, he was quite a reckless one.

“Quite right.” Altina nodded in earnest. “It’s a given for the commander! Why should anyone follow if you’re not there to lead them?”

“In the regiment I used to serve, the main camp was always the furthest back... Whatever the case, I made use of that. I thought he’d be the first to charge if he saw the chance.”

“Is it going well, Mr. Regis?” Clarisse interjected.

“...We’ll probably win.”

“In that case... why do you look so worried?”

“Eh? Is that the face I’m making? That’s not very promising...”

“That’s how it looks to me.”

On Clarisse’s indication, Altina and the doctor looked at him, too.

Regis awkwardly scratched his head.

“...For the most part, this battle is following a situation I’m already familiar with. But I do have one concern. See, this plan fails if the barbarian king doesn’t surrender.”



Eric had relayed the directive to the soldiers in the square.

Men equipped with large shields moved shoulder to shoulder, forming a defensive wall on the inner side of the front gate. Behind them stood a row of soldiers armed with long spears.

The front gate began to lower as they laid this impromptu trap. Before it even met the earth, barbarians barreled in like an avalanche.

“UOOOOOOOOH!!”

Roaring like wild beasts, they drove their axes into the shield wall, scattering shreds of leather and splintered wood...

And leaving them vulnerable to the spearmen eagerly waiting at the ready.

“Graaah!!”

Debris mixed with blood as one barbarian was pierced through the chest.

It was a bold strategy. Should their formation be breached, they would not only risk the lives of the men on the field, but of the noncombatants housed in the fort. There would be a harrowing number of casualties.

The imperial soldiers in the square numbered a thousand against only five hundred barbarians. Such inferior numbers could normally be subdued without issue.

But from the ranks of the encroaching barbarians, one man cleared the defenses with a single, impressive leap.

Regis pointed from his vantage point on the observation platform.

“That’s the barbarian king.”

“Oh! Is he strong!?”

As Altina leaned herself over the balcony...

A single arrow tore through the air toward them.

His attention fixed on the man now forcing his way through the empire’s ranks, Regis stood completely unaware as it reached for his flank.

One of the barbarians must have noticed him.

Even had he not been distracted, Regis lacked the finesse to successfully dodge it. He processed no more than a faint glimmer as the arrowhead suddenly appeared in his peripheral.

“Eh—?”

An abrupt impact forced the air from his lungs—accompanied by the dull *schwing* of metal—and the still-dazed tactician was knocked from his feet.

Altina had pushed him aside, striking down the arrow with the protector on her right arm—it was only as he noticed the arrow on the stone beside him that Regis realized what had happened.

“Wh— Woah!?”

“What’s wrong!? Did it get you!?”

“A-Are you— Are you okay, Altina!? Your wound—!?”

“Huh, wound? I blocked it with my armor. There’s no way an arrow from a normal, upward-fired bow could pierce iron plating.”

“That’s not what I meant...”

It seemed she was fine.



The king of barbarians leaped higher than the surrounding heads, using the nearest shoulders as stepping stones to rise higher still. He soared above the imperial soldiers poised with shields and spears.

“Hrraaaaaah!!”

He gripped a new, larger war axe, which he brought down into the skull of a hapless soldier.

The man beside him, splattered by the blood of his now-dead comrade, swung his weapon in a panic. It cut through air and then dropped to the ground as his arm was almost fully severed from his torso.

Resounding terror spread through the crowd; those in the path of the barbarian king quickly descended into frenzy.

So widespread was the pandemonium... Perhaps their encirclement would collapse entirely.

Years ago, in combat with the neighboring Germanian Federation, Black Knight Jerome had penetrated the opponent's armored cavalry head-on, completely turning the tide of battle. It had been that sheer power that earned him his reputation as a hero. Perhaps this barbarian would manage the same, becoming a new legend in the annals of war.

That is, he might have, had the opposing tactician not already enacted a plan.

As Regis lay on the cold stone of the balcony, the intercepted arrow beside him, his orders were already underway.

A portion of the encirclement thinned out in such a way that could only be discerned from above. As expected, the king leaping overhead seized the sudden opportunity—he had no other choice. If he was too slow in breaking through the regiment's formation, the barbarians who'd entered the fort would be surrounded and wiped out.

So the barbarian king continued to jump from shoulder to shoulder, pressing toward the opening.

“Hup!!”

A number of seemingly unarmed soldiers who had been lying in wait amid the crowd called out in unison as they threw something at the king overhead.

Three weights tied together with rope. These were projectile weapons called bolas, and were generally used in hunting. Unlike arrows, they spread out when thrown to cover a wider range, making it easier to ensnare fast-moving beasts.

Though they rarely saw use on the battlefield...

Not just one, but several were hurled from among the mass of soldiers.

The king curved his axe and struck three of the bolas down.

“Grraaaaaah!!”

But a fourth managed to wrap around his arm. As he struggled to remove it, another entangled his legs. And then a sixth was thrown; the rope snagged the barbarian king’s waist, and the momentum-carried weight slammed into his stomach.

He was dragged from the air, just barely managing to catch himself with one arm as he smacked into the ground.

“Ghh!?”

He lifted his head; a number of imperial polearms were already honed in on him.

“Don’t move, you ape!” the captain leading the attack roared, readying his blade.

“Don’t kill him!” resounded a voice so loud it eclipsed even the dissonance of combat in the square below. The voice belonged to Altina.

Regis, who had been beside her, held his now-ringing ears.

Her orders had reached them. The captain kept his sword raised, but the barbarian king had been spared.

“...What are you doing?” Regis queried, still clasping his ears.

“I want to speak with that man.”

“Eh? Could you run that by me again?” Regis was so surprised by her words he had to make sure he’d heard them correctly. Especially as the tinnitus hadn’t quite yet fully alleviated.

To the people of Belgaria, the barbarians were to be treated as harmful beasts.

If a man-eating wolf was captured, and someone said they wished to speak with it, they would surely be met with looks of disbelief; it was a common

assumption that words did not reach barbarians. Regis wasn't convinced, but he was still surprised to hear the princess say she wanted to speak to the barbarian.

"It'd be a shame to let such a skilled warrior die, wouldn't it?"

"...No, I don't understand that sense of values. But I do endorse conversation. Moreover, I think that's just what you need right now."

"I'm not really sure what you mean, but I'm glad I have your approval!"

Altina took in a deep breath. This time, Regis took a preparatory step back and covered his ears. He glanced over to see Clarisse and the doctor had done the same.

The princess raised her voice again:

"I am the fourth princess of the empire, Marie Quatre Argentina de Belgaria! I wish to speak with the king of barbarians! Both sides, cease your fighting at once!"

Her words were merely a sincere expression of her intentions, but the soldiers took them as a proclamation of victory. She had announced the barbarian king was captured.

The heavy air of unrest was replaced with sudden excitement as the men raised their swords and spears, shouts of celebration thundering across the plaza.

"UOOOOOOH!!"

"Vive l'empire!!"

"Vive Marie Quatre!! Vive l'empereur!!"

The battle had been conclusively decided. The barbarians had scaled a steep slope in the midst of a blizzard, battled through a formidable cavalry, and then had been immediately surrounded once they entered the fort.

They were exhausted beyond their limits, and the resounding cheers only further chipped away at their remaining shreds of morale.

One by one, the barbarians dropped their weapons, many collapsing to their

knees on the spot.



The barbarians who had stormed the fort had been gathered into a corner, separated at ten-pace intervals with their backs to the wall. The regiment's soldiers stood guard, bows and spears trained on their captives.

The blizzard was letting up, but the bitter cold of winter still seeped through the plaza.

Altina's dialogue with the barbarian king needs to be settled before sunset. If we keep the men in these conditions overnight, many will no doubt freeze to death.

Regis was pulled from his musings by a chorus of victorious roars from outside the fort. The barbarians who hadn't charged into the plaza, numbering close to four hundred, had distanced themselves from the battle and regrouped halfway down the mountain.

It would be easy for the regiment's cavalry to pursue and decimate this army, especially now their most powerful warrior had been captured, but Regis had already forbidden such a move. Instead, he ordered them to spread word of a discussion between the barbarian representative and the imperial commander.

A massacre had been what he feared the most.

Had the barbarians not surrendered, they would have most likely been massacred by the surrounding imperial army. Granted, it wasn't a particularly rare sight on the battlefield, but it was one he wanted to avoid nonetheless. For both the strategic and emotional consequences.

Thank God I managed to keep the casualties down on both sides. He let out a relieved sigh.

It wasn't long before the barbarian reinforcements arrived, just as he'd predicted.

They joined the gathering outside of the fort. Regis watched them carefully, anxiously awaiting their next move. But the barbarians stood in place, neither attacking nor retreating.

They appeared to be waiting for the results of the discussion.

Fort Sierck's last battle of the year 850, tense as it was, neared its tentative resolution.



"Oi, Regis!"

Upon returning to the central tower, Jerome closed in on Regis with the speed and intimidation of a cavalry charge.

"Ah, um, yes...?"

Regis had been sat at a desk in the conference room, filling in a report on the battle. This was normally the work of a specialist, but as Jerome had driven out the regiment's administrative officers, there was no one else it could be entrusted to.

Altina had returned to her bedroom to change into more appropriate attire; she could hardly put pressure on him with her arm in a sling.

Jerome leaned in close.

"What the hell was that battle plan!?"

"...That, uh... If they retreated into the blizzard, it would've proven near impossible to chase them down, let alone capture their most powerful unit."

"So you let them into the fort!? To think, our walls were breached by lowly barbarians! We'll be the laughing stock of the empire!"

"That's quite all right. I'm sure they're already so entertained at our commander being a fourteen-year-old girl that they won't pay this any notice."

"Even worse!" Jerome snarled through gritted teeth, so plainly irate it seemed he might snap at any moment.

Regis spoke in a softened tone as he attempted to soothe him:

"What does it matter? Let them undermine us and lower their guard. Concealing one's true strength is an effective strategy in both offensive and defensive combat."

"I see. A petty scheme befitting such a weak-willed man. But there's one thing

you overlooked.”

“What’s that?”

“I can’t *stand* being looked down on!”

“...I... I see.”

Regis scratched his head. The general was right—it wasn’t something he’d accounted for. He had considered maybe Jerome would fly into a rage over the discernible risk of such a strategy, but never that it would be a problem of dignity.

It seemed reality wouldn’t progress as smoothly as in the books he read. In such a situation, Regis would usually be quite uneasy about his competency as a strategist, but with the vehement Jerome still leaning mere centimeters from his face, he instead felt uneasy all over.

“I noticed there are barbarians held captive in our fort. Why aren’t they dead yet?”

“The princess wished to speak with them.”

“‘Speak with them?’ Is she an idiot? Either put them to work or hang them from the ramparts.”

It was clear he wasn’t being cynical or facetious: there was a sincerity in his tone that showed he truly doubted her intelligence. The barbarians weren’t beasts—that was what Regis believed, at least, but he understood that outlook was in the minority.

This was a gamble to get closer to a goal otherwise too distant to see. This dialogue had to succeed. If communication broke down, she would be judged as a whimsical, irrational leader. But this hurdle was an inevitable one. Her sights were fixed on such a reckless aspiration that the path had to be paved with disadvantageous gambles.

“...It won’t be too late to reconsider the princess’s intellect once the talks are over.” Regis rose from his chair. “It’s about time.”

Jerome turned to the exit as well.

“I opened the storehouse. Meat and ale.” His words were completely devoid

of emotion.

“...Oh... I see.”

Regis had wondered what the reward for battle would be, and it did seem this regiment customarily held banquets. Come to think of it, they had also put out meat and ale following the bandit subjugation.

In the noble army Regis had previously worked in, the highest success was rewarded with jewels and art, but they had no such funds here. And Regis had to wonder whether this regiment’s soldiers would even be grateful for such gifts.

“Thank you for the advice.”

“This isn’t for you or for her. It’s a leader’s duty to reward his men.”

“I’ll take that to heart.”

“Hmph... Quit being so quick to humble yourself. Are you mocking me?”

“No, but... Ah. That’s a difficult order.”

“Just say what you’re thinking deep down. That spineless nature of yours is why others have such a hard time trusting you.”

“You want me to be honest?”

“Yes, no secrets. Speak at will.”

“...I want some paid vacation. And I need some more books.”

“The hell would I care?”

“How callous.” Regis slumped his shoulders in disappointment as his hopes for a break ended as quickly as they began.



Hasty construction turned the courtyard usually used for training into an impromptu audience chamber.

Altina was seated in the center with a large mantle draped across her left shoulder and down to her knees. It served to conceal her wounded arm.

Regis stood to her right, and Jerome to her left.

There was no red carpet, but soldiers lined through the impromptu hall to create a path, flying the empire's banner at the ends of their spears.

The flag was made from red cloth to represent *L'Empereur Flamme* and decorated with seven swords. This design was a newer innovation: It was believed the first emperor fought under a white flag, but in the modern era these were recognized by neighboring territories as a sign of surrender.

The king of barbarians was led between the walls of soldiers.

His hands were bound at his hip with rope, Everard keeping a tight hold on him from the side. Regis caught sight of Eric behind him.

The group came to a halt roughly ten paces away.

"I really don't mind, bring him closer. How can we speak comfortably at such a distance?"

"But..."

"And undo the ropes. What I desire is a dialogue; I don't seek to interrogate a prisoner of war."

"Princess!? This man moves as fast as a monkey—he's terribly dangerous!"

It was only natural for Everard to voice an objection. Altina met his eyes with an unwavering stare.

"Are you suggesting an unarmed foe could defeat me in battle? What's more, I have a highly praised general at my side. Bring him closer; I won't be branded a coward."

"Gn... Mm... Very well."

Everard had expressed consideration as he knew the princess was injured, but he was now before the troops, and there were times when the dignity of a ruler took precedence over safety.

His ropes untied, the barbarian king stepped forward five paces.

Regis struggled to swallow; his throat had dried out from nervousness.

The man looked around the same age as Jerome—in his mid-twenties. He wore clothing fashioned from beast pelts and bird feathers.

Within the empire, barbarians were invariably depicted as vile demons to be slain by radiant knights, boasting the faces of monkeys and bears. But this man's appearance carried a somewhat noble grace.

He refused to kneel, instead looking down over the princess in a display of arrogance.

A normal audience chamber would have seated the monarch higher up, ensuring they remained above everyone else even when seated, but the room's hurried construction had afforded no time for this luxury.

Everard frowned.

Altina addressed the king, paying his disrespect no mind:

"Let me introduce myself once more: I am Marie Quatre Argentina de Belgaria, fourth in line to the imperial throne of Belgaria."

The man before her said nothing.

Can he even understand her? Feelings of doubt reached silently through the soldiers.

But Regis could see the man in deep thought. His eyes widened in slight anticipation as the barbarian king first opened his mouth.

«What a long name.»

He spoke in the native tongue of Germania. It was likely that was where he hailed from, and that he was educated enough to understand Belgarian.

While the empire was almost always at war, cultural exchange with surrounding nations was still a regular occurrence. Times of peace simply made such trade easier to achieve.

For that reason, it was only common courtesy for an imperial noble to study the dialect of neighboring lands. Regis was just a commoner, but had been taught Germanian as part of the military academy's administrative officer curriculum.

Meaning everyone in earshot—aside from the soldiers watching blankly from the sidelines—understood Germanian.

“What utter disrespect for the name of our princess!”

«Disrespect? Belgarians really do enjoy their needless formalities.»

As Everard’s face reddened with outrage, Altina waved a dismissive hand in his direction.

“Pay it no mind. He is not of the empire; it’s laughable to demand respect from those who aren’t our subjects.”

The knight captain slowly exhaled through his nose as he conceded, and respectfully nodded in response.

Altina turned back to the barbarian king, this time speaking in Germanian.

«What should we call you? In the empire, it is custom to return a name when someone introduces themselves. Or are the rumors that barbarians are nameless true?»

«We do not consider ourselves barbarians. I am Diethardt; I have cast aside the name of my house. Our nation is Bargaenheim.»

Jerome scoffed. He made a grandiose display, lurching back with his arms half raised in feigned surprise, and threw his voice so all the soldiers could hear:

“Hah... What a grand discovery. Who could have guessed that dreary forest was a nation! To think our neighboring territory wasn’t the godforsaken Germanian Federation, but a nation of savages—who knew the barbarians had a sense of humor!?”

Diethardt ground his teeth as the courtyard erupted into laughter, resentment raging inside him until—

A burst of sudden anger interrupted the revelry. Not from the ridiculed king, but from Altina. She punched her right fist into the chair’s oak armrest, which let off a resounding *snap* as it broke.

“Ah...”

Silence returned.

She cleared her throat. “It seems I’ll need to educate you all on how to treat a guest. You may leave at once.”

“Princess!?” Everard fiercely protested, but his words fell on deaf ears. She kicked back the half-splintered chair as she stood.

“All men, fall back thirty paces. This is an order!”

Jerome ran a thumb across the scar on his chin.

“Kukukuh... You sure? That barbarian might try to wring your neck.”

“Should that happen, you may intervene.”

“And if you’re taken hostage?”

“Oh? I didn’t think you’d mind.”

“Very well. Chat with that scummy Germanian traitor all you like.”

Jerome receded to join the wall.

Regis moved to follow suit, only to be taken by the collar.

“Where are *you* going?” Altina questioned.

You just told me to leave, he thought, but decided to phrase it more formally given their audience:

“As you have commanded—”

“You are our tactician, now is your time to shine. Don’t you have anything to say?”

“...I’m parched.”

“Ah, that reminds me...”

Jerome and the soldiers retreated thirty paces, putting them against the courtyard walls. Everard and Eric heeded the orders as well.

On the princess’s command, two chairs, a table, and a glass bottle of wine were brought in.

Diethardt was seated first. Altina sat across from him, Regis stood to her side.

“Not bad at all. It’s like a café terrace,” the princess observed.

“...Quite right. I’m sure a café terrace out in the snow, surrounded by bloodthirsty soldiers, would be a great success back at the capital,” Regis

remarked. "It's got novelty, I'll give it that."

Altina leaked a good-spirited smile. "You think there'll be a line?"

Diethardt, on the other hand, continued to glare daggers.



«So people of Belgaria drink their coffee on the roadside? I fail to see the appeal.»

«It's too cold here in the north, but most of Belgaria is nice and warm, with a comfortable breeze. I say that, but I've never actually been to a café in town... Although I'd love to drink coffee at a wonderful little shop just once in my life.»

Having the imperial princess sat at an everyday café would quickly cause a lot of commotion. There was no way she'd be able to drink in peace.

But the imperial court has its own taxpayer-funded terraces. Regis kept those words to himself—a place infused with the envy and scorn of nobles would leave a bad taste in her mouth, no matter the coffee.

He urged her toward more pressing matters.

“...Princess, we don't have long until sundown.”

«Allow me to ask, Diethardt: Are you the king of Bargenheim?»

«*Nein*. Bargenheim is a nation, but we have no king. Our people take notice of my words because I happen to be one of several who founded the nation.»

«Does that not make you a king?»

«I have never taken wealth nor food from my comrades.»

«Ah, I see. So your nation has no taxation.»

He responded with a single nod.

To Altina, this was a fresh, innovative idea.

“Regis, doesn't that sound wonderful? A country with no taxes! Their people must be so content.”

“...Perhaps, if such a system didn't nurture feelings of unjustness.”

“But wouldn't everyone be equal without taxes?”

“...Say, for example, someone has to stand guard over the fields. Who decides who's placed on watch?”

“Hm? Would it not be a representative like Diethardt?”

“In that case, Mr. Diethardt is the king, and tax is levied in the form of the

labor spent on watch. For so long as people live together, they will naturally be divided into decision makers and servants. No matter what name they may go by, they are either the king or his taxpayers.”

“Ah, so that’s how it is.”

“To have no tax is akin to having no country. A nation can’t be maintained on ideals alone... You may win hearts through victory, but such feelings are seldom enduring...”

Regis caught sight of Diethardt and refrained from speaking further; the barbarian’s severe glare tore right through him.

«Bargenheim is certainly small as a nation, and I admit our principles are far from ideal. But your empire is misguided. In our ranks are many who have fled your land, having suffered under its oppression.»

“.....”

Regis remained silent, awaiting the princess’s next words. This was the dialogue she had hoped for, and he intended to act only as her aide. If she was to walk the martial path, negotiations such as this were unavoidable. And considering Regis’s lowly status, it was possible certain diplomats would deny even his very right to speak.

That was why Altina needed to take the leading role in these conversations.

«I agree. The empire is misguided.»

Should I have answered in her place? Regis immediately regretted his decision, a grating pain forming in his stomach.

Her words wouldn’t reach Jerome and the soldiers by the courtyard walls, but even so, he never expected her to speak so openly.

Diethardt lowered his eyebrows into a dubious expression.

«Do you understand what you’re saying? Or is speaking in my language too difficult?»

«Being an imperial princess doesn’t mean I cannot criticize the empire, does it?»

«It means you shouldn't. Such is your position and your obligation.»

And here was a princess being lectured on the proper behavior of royalty by a barbarian. What troublesome times.

But, despite his values, Diethardt proved to be surprisingly cultured; the points he raised were valid ones.

«I choose to live by my own beliefs. Not by the rules of a position others have forced upon me,» Altina replied as she shook her head.

«Even if doing so means rejecting the empire?»

«I want to save the people oppressed by its injustices.»

«You're mistaken. If powers collide and a civil war breaks out, it is those very people who will suffer the most.»

This was something Regis had considered as well. But when he unraveled the threads of history, the necessary course of action was clear.

This was something Altina understood as well.

«If the people wish to be freed from oppression, should they not be the ones working for it? If they don't want that, they can ignore me and stand by the current institution. I'm not God; I can't claim to be able to erase all human suffering. No, the people can only save themselves.»

«If that's true, what's your purpose in this?»

Altina looked to Regis. At first, he assumed she was seeking his advice, but that wasn't the case. She immediately continued: «All I have to be... is the trigger.»

«I don't understand. You Belgarians speak so indirectly, glorifying your sins. Speech should be logical and to the point.»

«Then, in short: If my criticism of unjust tyranny causes the people to act to save themselves, then that is my purpose. Don't you agree?»

«Isn't that irresponsible? Those with status have an obligation to bring happiness to those who follow them.»

Altina tilted her head.

“Regis, do I have such an obligation? Am I irresponsible?”

“...If you cause action and gather people to change the structure of the empire, then answering to those people’s expectations is your duty. It is a natural duty grounded in the simple logic of honoring your promises.”

“And should I collapse halfway there?”

“You’ll be harshly judged. That’s politics for you... In fact, the current greatest problem in the empire is how statesmen who are unable to bring happiness keep their power without criticism or judgment.”

She responded with a deep nod.

“I see. So the country I wish to create as the empress is a country that will judge me if I can’t deliver them happiness?”

“...That sounds about right.”

“Could I toil to be empress only to be put to death by the very laws I created?”

“It’s possible... Do you feel like giving up?”

“Why would I? When a ruler strays from their path, their people suffer and die. It only makes sense that the one who should suffer most is the leader who failed them.”

He recalled what Altina had said once before.

“If you expect others to risk their lives, you have to wager your own as well... Something like that...?”

“Right!”

You’re being far too extreme. That was what Regis wanted to say, but he kept the words to himself. If she was adamant about putting the lives of others above her own, then it was simply the duty of those around her to protect her.

She turned to Diethardt.

«I will become empress. I will change the empire. And the moment I stray from my path, I’ll accept my fate in the lunette of a guillotine.»

Her discussion partner’s expression changed: a face once overcome with

hatred and disgust now appeared calm and sincere.

«I see... That is certainly... responsible. You speak with resolve.»

«Not that I plan on failing!»

«It seems I misunderstood you.»

«How so?»

«I assumed you were another shameless imperial exploiting the people, unaware you were even doing so.»

«And you weren't entirely wrong. I have yet to make a single person happy. Even the bread I ate this morning was snatched from someone who worked hard to make it.»

«I see... That's one way to think about it...»

«Admittedly, these are values I've learned from Regis.»

«...Perhaps... I am also mistaken... I believed a country with no taxes would be a true utopia... But, in reality, the sense of unfairness rises among our people. Is the lack of a definite social contract leading to inequality...?»

«It's definitely possible.»

«If we wish to be a nation, we must establish laws and take taxes for the public good... But, if I can't make my people happy... I shall be criticized and punished as the leader... I had the resolve, but...»

His words were heavy, as though he was thinking over each syllable.

As a leader, he must have had his own troubles.

To aid the princess, who was at a complete loss for words, Regis interjected.

«If the leader of an organization changes policy, there will be clashes and criticism regardless of the outcome. That's why reform is difficult when things are going well. I think you made the appropriate decision, Mr. Diethardt.»

«...No... While I noticed the problems, I cannot correct them... I do not possess the integrity of the young princess.»

His eyes turned to Regis. These weren't the malicious eyes from moments

before, but eyes that showed respect.

«Are you a steward? A military officer?»

«I am... a tactician... more or less.»

«A tactician. So you are the man behind my capture.»

«...The soldiers were the ones behind your capture... But I am the one who conceived the plan.»

He isn't going to get angry at me for leading him into a trap, is he? He knew it was a bit late, but he didn't want to show an unsightly side to Altina. And so, even though he was cowering internally, Regis put up a false air of confidence and stood tall.

Diethardt spoke resignedly.

«Had I... a tactician like yourself... perhaps I would have met a different end.»

«Y-You overestimate me. With such a disparity in numbers, victory was always ours in an upfront confrontation.»

«No matter. It is my defeat... If I may make a request, I pray the others aren't executed. At the very least, that their lives may be spared.»

«...If the princess may weigh in.»

She dropped her chin in a single nod, then Altina took over the conversation.

«I'd like to ask you something... Why did you and your men attack our fort? Was it revenge against the empire?»

«There are those in Bargaenheim who resent the empire. Many lost their families and loved ones in the long years of war. But revenge was not our objective. The grand duchy of Varden, of the Germanian Federation, has started cultivating the forests, threatening our land.»

«That sounds like a very pressing matter.»

«Right... The population of my nation has seen exceptional growth this year, and so we require even more food and shelter. That problem would have been resolved if we captured this fort.»

«Hm. I would have preferred if you attacked Varden instead of us.»

«That'd be impossible with Fort Volks in the way.»

«What's that?» Altina tilted her head.

Regis hurriedly whispered into her ear, speaking quietly so only she could hear: "...A fortress in the grand duchy. In the forty years since its construction, no enemy force has ever set foot on its grounds. It's been called 'impregnable.'"

"Oh, didn't know that was there."

"...It's quite embarrassing if our commander doesn't know about the enemy fortress right across from us."

"I-I know that. Up to this point, my direct enemies were Sir Jerome and my own emotions. This is where it starts for real."

"Whatever works..."

She had not received the education to lead an army, and she would need more time before she was ready to do so. After all, right now Altina was only just at the age where one would normally enroll at the military academy.

Whatever the case, Altina put the conversation back on track.

«So Bargaenheim didn't invade out of hatred for the empire?»

«That was not our sole reason, no.»

«That's sufficient.»

Altina leaned in. Her left arm was still hidden beneath her mantle, so only her right elbow planted onto the table. Then, she spoke again.

«I don't feel like executing you!»

«...What?»

«I have a goal that I can't achieve with the soldiers in this fort alone. I won't force you to become my subordinate, but I wish for the cooperation of the people of Bargaenheim!»

Altina was serious, and Regis had also been considering the idea. The three thousand soldiers of the Beilschmidt border regiment alone wouldn't make for a force strong enough to oppose the other princes.

Diethardt, struck speechless, sat in consideration for a moment.

«I see... Instead of executing me, you want to expand your war potential. How rational.»

«Then you'll help me out!?»

The barbarian king reigned in her smile before it could bloom.

«Sparing the lives of me and my soldiers isn't enough... I have comrades who despise the empire. Unless I return with conditions that will satisfy them, they will brand me a traitor who sold out his country in fear of his life.»

“Oh, he's right... Any ideas, Regis?”

“We should be fine in that regard. I've read plenty of treaties between nations; I should be able to come up with acceptable terms.”

“Hmm... That's helpful, but... why were you reading treaties?”

“Eh? I mean, they're freely available for anyone to read.”

“Was it any fun?”

“Mnn... The ones just renewing past treaties word-for-word were pretty boring... Oh, the treaty between High Britannia and Nederland in the year 809 was a masterpiece—in exchange for three hundred thousand pounds (approximately 136 metric tons) of silver, they accepted the same weight in tea leaves.”

“Just how much does that country love its tea?”

“Hahaha... It's pretty standard to offer marriage or send gifts as a sign of peaceful negotiation.”

“Should we send something too?”

“As this is more of a secret agreement, you really shouldn't make offerings that'd be evidence of— Ah, I mean, your highness, I believe such offerings are unnecessary.”

“You don't have to speak so formally... So, what conditions are in order?”

Regis mentally scanned all the provisions he'd read and put together something appropriate.

“Fourth Princess Marie Quatre requests the assistance of the nation of Bargaenheim. More precisely, the parties concerned shall erect a united front against the Germanian Federation. As collateral, we offer enough food support and temporary housing to pass the winter. Additionally, when the princess becomes empress, she shall recognize the sovereignty of Bargaenheim, and agrees to mutual nonaggression henceforth.”

“Mhmm, I see. I don’t really get it, but that definitely sounds like a treaty!”

«You’re asking us to become a vassal state of the empire?»

«Both sides should be of equal standing, should they not? Both people and countries are better off without ranking their worth.»

Altina spoke as though her words were self-evident.

Diethardt fell into thought once more.

«If you can promise those conditions, I will be able to convince my comrades.»

«Then you’ll help us out, won’t you!?»

«I will.»

«Thank you!»

She presented her right hand.

“Ah...”

A handshake was bad news. Regis moved to stop her, but Diethardt was already shaking his head before he could.

«Your soldiers are watching. No soldier would see to it that a princess who treats a mere barbarian as her equal becomes emperor.»

«Yes, you may be right.»

«I need you to succeed. For the sake of my country...»

«Of course!»

«...Still, what a truly splendid individual you are. It’s hard to come upon such excellence... Upon someone I would be honored to bring back to my country as

a partner.»

«Eh? Partner!?»

You want to marry me!? The very idea overwhelmed her.

Diethardt responded with a simple nod.

«This is the first time I've ever met someone I wanted to accompany me for the rest of my life. Perhaps this is what you call 'affection'...»

"Wait... Wait—!" Altina shot up from her chair, her face such a deep shade of red that even her hair seemed to pale in comparison. "Regis, what do I do!?"

"W-What...? Well, of course, it's not happening. You're still fourteen. You can't legally get married yet."

"Eh? That's your only reason?"

"...No... The rest depends on how you feel. Personally, if possible... Ah, but I have no right to make that decision for you. 'Love led by one's own will is the most important condition for human happiness.' That's what Coillier wrote... Ah, but I get the feeling he's just a bit of a philanderer, so..."

This sudden marriage proposal had thrown Regis into a panic. He could hardly put his thoughts into words.

"Regis. You don't care if I marry this man?"

Altina furrowed her brow and stuck out her lips in a show of discontent.

"...From my position—"

«What are you talking about?»

Diethardt rose from his seat and, without hesitation, walked over.

Up close, he was even taller than Jerome. His shoulders were wide, and his very presence carried a particular intensity. Perhaps it came from his barbarian robes made of pelts and feathers.

With his tempered fingers, he took Regis's hand. Not Altina's.

This was the hand of a seasoned warrior.

Regis's was small and slender. Compared to this man's, his was as delicate as

that of a young girl.

Diethardt gazed at him with heated eyes.

«If you will permit it, I ask that you come to Bargaenheim to guide me.»

“Me!?”

“Absooolutely not!” cried Altina, who was already forcing her body between the two. “Thoroughly, unreservedly, *definitively* not!”

«Hm. I understand. You would never relinquish such an excellent tactician.»

“Huh? Oh, yes. Regis is *my* tactician, you hear!?”

So he wanted to take me as a tactician. Thank God... Regis breathed a heavy sigh of relief. He had read before that nobles from the Germanian Federation expressed romantic interest in men and women alike. As that was likely where Diethardt hailed from, for a moment, a chill had trickled down Regis’s spine. This was the first time he’d ever sweat so much just from standing still.

The barbarian king kneeled to Altina.

«You say you will spare the lives of my brethren, will support us with supplies, and will even treat us as the empire’s equal... Imperial Princess Marie Quatre. I offer you my thanks, and promise my utmost assistance toward your ambition.»

«Thank you. I am grateful for your and your nation’s cooperation.»

Altina returned a deep nod, which Diethardt met with one last smile.

“*Tous mes vœux* (I wish you the best),” he said in fluent Belgianian.



Regis thought about the founding of the empire, over eight hundred years ago— Adrien Belgaria was born in Equitania, a region dotted with small kingdoms (and a western territory in the modern Belgianian empire). Due to a series of misfortunes, he was brought up under a nomadic tribe. Many believe this was why he developed an affinity for horse-riding and displayed such peerless strength with the sword.

Using these skills, he won every battle laid out before him. And he continued to win.

As the legends went, by the end of his days, he was matching wits with God and locking blades with the Devil. The likes of mere mortals could no longer compare.

Events from that era were only passed down by word of mouth, so it was quite likely dramatized, but... the fact stood that Adrien Belgaria became the first emperor of what would become the modern Belgian empire. Inspired by his blazing red hair and crimson eyes, they would revere him as *L'Empereur Flamme*.

History still debates when he set out to found a nation.

The nobles assert: 'The emperor was born an emperor.'

The churches preach: 'He received a revelation from God.'

The soldiers and merchants maintain: 'The victor may just as well call himself emperor.'

Regis believed the most exceptional book he had ever read was the Bible. As for why it was so exceptional? Simply stating he believed in it seemed to spare him from arguments with most people.

The second most exceptional work, however, came from a certain historian.

A historian who presented the theory that Adrien never once called himself an emperor.

He proposed that, after his death, the emperor was deified by his ministers so they could use the great leader's influence to stabilize the nation. They would groom his son from an early age to be the second emperor, and enough evidence was presented to lend credibility to his argument.

Of course, his assertion could never be publicly accepted...

However it took place, Adrien Belgaria led his tribe through countless battles, merged the surrounding nations and settlements, and laid the foundation for an enormous power.

It was true that a new era was upon them, but in gaining the cooperation of the barbarians, perhaps Altina had taken her first step toward a similar path of greatness.

The moment he saw Diethardt kneel to her—

Regis's body heat rose just a bit as he wondered whether he was taking part in history.



Diethardt was released, and the barbarians were informed of the meeting's results.

As the barbarian king had mentioned, there were those with grudges against the empire among them, so Regis expected some unsavory comments at the very least. But, because of their leader's popularity—or perhaps the appeal of the promised support and supplies—there didn't seem to be much friction at all.

It was equally possible they simply no longer had the strength to stage a do-or-die resistance.

The next day, they were offered the expeditionary tents and given preserved foods.

Also, while it wasn't that Altina didn't trust them, it would be laughable if the barbarians just made off with all the supplies. There was also the need to exchange information. And so, five soldiers who spoke Germanian were to accompany them.

The princess had gained a tactician during the height of a duel, entered and resolved a battle, and concluded successful peace talks—all within the span of twenty-four hours. Every single detail needed to be chronicled and reported.

What's more, Regis couldn't exactly be truthful about what had happened.

His administrative work was suddenly more than three times what it had been. This was an amount usually shared between thirty people.

So he spent his days buried in papers. And, before he had even realized, the year was over.

At a later date, Regis would calmly recount:

"More than when the barbarians invaded the fort, more than when the base camp was burned down, more than when I confronted the gray wolves in the

blizzard... I thought I was about to die.”

Interlude

The year came to a quiet close, and paved the way for Imperial Year 851—
“Regis? Regis! Oh, there you are.”

Altina burst into the officers’ dining hall, having apparently been looking for him. She walked across to where he was sitting, and thumped down into the open seat.

It was currently three past noon, and the other officers were nowhere to be found.

“Please stop running around shouting my name... I’m not some kind of pet.”

“You’re right about that. A pet would respond and come to you if you called for them.”

“...I see.”

Now that he thought about it, he had never deliberately responded to anyone who called his name.

“In that case... I’m worse than a pet. Can you please stop running around, shouting my name?”

“Why?”

“It’s embarrassing... I’m always in the dining hall or my room. That’s where you’ll find me.”

“A little exercise would do wonders for your health.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard of nobles who grow ill from lack of exercise. A disease the least of a commoner’s worries. If you’re concerned about my health, I could really do with a few more hours of sleep.”

“You’re not sleeping?”

“I still haven’t finished up that matter from last year.”

“Ah. That must be a lot of work.”

“If you sympathize, could you get some more administrative officers?” Regis pleaded, his voice ragged.

Altina shrugged. “I put in a request, but... it’s not working out. News that our border regiment doesn’t have any admin officers is finally spreading, and it’s giving the place a terrible reputation. Everyone thinks they’ll be worked to death, so no one wants to come.”

“Go tell the ministry I’m still alive, just dead on the inside. Oh, and my room is overflowing with paperwork. And I have no time to sleep...”

“You really want me to tell them that?”

“...Put down ‘safe, easy, and high-paying (opinions may vary)’ on the recruitment flier.”

“I’ll use my own discretion. More importantly, listen to this! I got a letter from a friend in the capital!”

Altina produced an expensive-looking white envelope.

“Say what!?” Regis doubted his ears but, on closer inspection, it was definitely addressed to her.

“Umm... I haven’t gotten to the surprising part yet. The surprise is what it says...”

“You actually have friends!?”

It truly was a surprise.

Altina furrowed her brow.

“Now look here... Is that really how you’ve been looking at me!?”

“I assumed you were isolated in the imperial court, so I just—”

“Gnn... Yes, I’ll admit I didn’t really hit it off with the other nobles, but...”

As their conversation continued, the maid Clarisse came in with tea. A mature, graceful woman. She was a little older than Regis, but it probably wasn’t this age difference that gave her such an impression.

“Pardon me. Princess, would you care for some tea?”

“I’d love some! Thank you.”

“You’re very welcome—and what about you, Mr. Regis?”

This set-up felt all too familiar. Last time Regis thought she was offering him tea, she instead teased him by saying, ‘I was simply asking what you planned to do next.’

I’m not making the same mistake twice, he resolved; and so Regis proceeded with the utmost caution.

“...Is that a question about my future?”

“Oh, how delightful, Mr. Regis. You wish to talk about your future with me? But we’re still in front of the princess... Ah, how embarrassing...”

“Wait, what!?”

“To think I’d be proposed to while pouring a cup of tea. What shall I do, princess?” Clarisse was now innocently batting her eyelids, swaying her hips from side to side like a smitten maiden.

Altina’s eyes shot open wide.

“That was a proposal!?”

“No! I did nothing of the sort!”

“R-Right. Ah, that was a surprise.”

“Ufufu... Here’s your tea. Incidentally, princess, is the letter from Balthazar?”

“Yeah.”

An important person from the capital, perhaps? The name definitely rang a bell, but Regis couldn’t put his finger on why. Going off the name alone, they were most likely male.

Regis felt a growing restlessness for a reason he couldn’t quite discern.

“...Is he a close friend of yours?”

“That’s right. He’s an old man going on sixty now, but he used to be quite the famous swordsman. Perhaps you’ve heard of him?”

“Huh? Wait, you can’t mean Duke Balthazar Basil de Balzac!? The strongest

swordsman in the empire!?”

“Right, right. His sword has been passed down his house since the days of *L’Empereur Flamme*. Balthazar’s already retired, but he still drops by the court every now and again.”

“How did you come to know him?”

“Well, I was swinging my sword in the courtyard one day, and he suddenly roared, ‘Completely wrong!’”

Regis was at a loss for words. There were far too many points to retort.

Clarisse, on the other hand, responded with no more than a simple head shake.

“...The imperial courtyard... Princess, you were swinging your sword in the imperial courtyard?”

“Ahaha, I was ten. Don’t worry about it.”

“...That wasn’t the only time, was it?”

“Well, I was doing it... practically every day.”

Then being ten had absolutely nothing to do with it. Regis groaned internally.

“...And Sir Balthazar also sounds like something else... Exploding at a young princess...”

“According to him, when you’re swinging a sword, it doesn’t matter if you’re female or even royalty. You’re a swordsman, and so should be treated as one.”

“He’s definitely an odd one.”

He had to be, to deliberately speak to the princess while she was being ostracized by the palace.

“Ever since that day, he would train me in swordplay whenever he dropped by the palace.”

“He taught you!? The great Sir Balthazar!?”

“Yeah. He doesn’t take students, but he said he could give me pointers as ‘a fellow warrior pursuing the blade.’ That’s how we became friends.”

“It was written in a book on the various sword styles... that the house of Balzac only passes its technique on to their direct descendants. They don’t accept outside disciples.”

“Oh, I see.”

Regis was completely flabbergasted, but Altina took the news all too easily.

“They always looked as though they were having the time of their lives swinging those swords together... I often brought them water as they trained,” Clarisse reminisced.

“Good times.”

“Though I was very much troubled when he suggested I start learning swordplay too...”

“Ahaha, right, right. You think old Balthazar was actually just bored?”

“But wasn’t that style supposed to stay within his house!?” Regis interjected.

It was quite possible he only taught her the basics, and had sidestepped the forbidden techniques he was supposed to hide. Balthazar was old and retired, after all. Even so, it was amazing to hear Altina was a direct disciple of the man praised as the empire’s strongest. No wonder she was so skilled despite her lack of real combat experience.

But why did the old swordsman teach the imperial princess, who wasn’t related to him by blood, how to properly wield a blade? Was it on a whim? Did he feel sorry for her?

I’d like to have a good talk with him someday, Regis decided.

Altina pushed a finger beneath the flap of the envelope and, in one clean movement, opened the letter.

“So, you see, it turns out Balthazar heard the rumors about our border regiment.”

“What rumors?”

“See for yourself...”

She spread the parchment out over the table.

It was top-grade paper, scrawled with thick and powerful strokes.

The new year comes and goes, and so soon shall my time.

The world grows distant from me, but an exhilarating tale immediately brought a pen to my hand.

My dear friend has added barbarians to her troops on the northern frontier, bolstering her forces two, perhaps threefold.

It brings vividly to mind the legend of L'Empereur Flamme.

Watching those weak-armed nobles panic does wonders to spice up my days.

What fun it must be there. I aspired to head out myself, the emperor's sword in hand, but my wife has regrettably detained me.

When you reach my age, not even fancy techniques and legendary blades stand a chance against the stubbornness of a loved one.

I intend to be your senior even in heaven. Don't dare go before me.

To a dear friend,

Balthazar

"Hmm... I see." Regis groaned.

Altina returned an innocent smile.

"Isn't that amazing? We're already the talk of the capital!"

"I did caution them not to make it public, but... I should've known it was inevitable. Of course the soldiers would take notice after we had them carry so many supplies."

"Is there something bad about them knowing the barbarians are our allies?"

"That much is up to the discretion of the feudal lord, Sir Jerome, and you, as our fort's commander. Regardless, nothing good will come of putting them on guard."

"You think so? I think it's better if they think we're strong..."

“The trick to winning a free-for-all is to keep a low profile. Sir Balthazar is worried about you, too.”

“When he said, ‘Don’t dare go before me,’ he meant don’t die, right?”

That too, but... Regis pointed at the page.

“To most Belgarians, the barbarians are an unknown entity. No matter how effective their assistance could be, would it really boost our forces two or threefold...? The military authority doesn’t have a proper grasp on their strength. More pressingly, while this is a military matter, he writes that the nobles are panicking... They must hold quite a bit of antipathy toward you.”

“Really?”

“The enjoyment with which aristocrats look down on others is second only to their love of wine. It’s something they rarely give a second thought, but now that the girl they tormented has taken up a sword, perhaps they look back on their actions... and feel fear. You might even be their devil.”

“The way I see it, they’re the vile fiends sucking the lifeblood of the people...”

“You may think so, from a commoner’s point of view.”

The influence of her commoner-born mother had given Altina a deep understanding of the feelings of the people, despite her being a princess.

“In short, Regis, you’re worried the nobles might come to harass us?”

“In a nutshell. Just remember what happened to Sir Jerome.”

“Yeah...” She gave an empathetic nod.

That man had been shunned by the other nobles precisely because of his great accomplishments on the battlefield. He was undefeated on horseback, and very capable in commanding his squad.

And so he was reassigned to this borderland, essentially driven from the capital.

“They thought they’d taken care of a hero and a princess by exiling them both to the harsh front lines, only for them to gain an unexpected source of strength... How should they respond?”

“Summon us back to the capital?”

“That would actually be the best move. You’d be easier to deal with, so long as they kept you where they could see you. But I fear such a move won’t happen. Aristocrats treasure their comfort and standing; they would never risk having someone hostile toward them stationed so close.”

“Sounds about right. Then will they order us to stop cooperating with the barbarians?”

“That would be nice and simple to handle... The official report never said anything about an alliance, so we simply have to pretend no formal agreements were made.”

“Hm. So, assuming that’s their move, won’t we be fine?”

“I hope so...”

There were any number of means by which the nobles could chip away at their troops. Not to mention that the second prince, Latrielle, who had full command over the military, was rumored to be quite a sharp one. It was hard to imagine he would just leave a border regiment that had gained such unforeseen power to its own devices.

“...We’ll need to give the situation some thought.”

Chapter 2: To Rebel or Accede

8 lieue (35 km) from Fort Sierck lay the northern town of Theonveil. It was in this town that two figures dressed in military uniforms stepped down from their stagecoach.

The first was a short and slender man, his chest decorated with medals and extravagant jewelry. His eyes were narrow and sharp like those of a fox, and a short saber hung at his hip. The man's name was Becker, a noble who worked as an inspector for the ministry of military affairs.

The other was a large, plump man, towering over his companion at 27 palms (200 cm). His face was like a boulder, and a broader, longer sword rested on his hip. He was Becker's bodyguard, Fourth-Grade Combat Officer Boislow. He held his stomach, letting out a sigh as he gazed along the stalls lining the main road.

"Looks nice... Over there. Becker, sir, look. They're roasting chicken."

"Are you seriously on about food again?"

Squinting his already narrow eyes, Becker kicked at Boislow and spat on the side of the road.

"Damn it, where's our escort!?"

"We're supposed to meet them at the northern plaza."

"They're going to make us walk!? Good grief, what an inconsiderate guide. This is why I hate the boonies. To start with, they should learn some proper manners."

Becker burst into a sudden walk despite his objections, only to immediately collide with a child running in the opposite direction down the street.

"Grr...!?"

"Ah!"

The boy, around six years of age, blinked, startled, as he lowered his head.

“S-Sorry!”

He was likely the child of a commoner, judging by his clothing. While he wasn't in rags, his clothes were poorly tailored and his shoes comparable to hemp sacks.

In stark contrast to his belligerence just a moment ago, Becker's lips curved into a gentle smile.

“...Ahem. Are you injured, my boy?”

He pulled a fancy white handkerchief from his breast pocket.

The child shook his head.

“N-No. I'm fine.”

“Why, that simply can't be true. Are you sure you're not injured?”

“I'm really fine, mister!”

“Really? It doesn't look that way to me. You're definitely injured.”

“Ah...? Where?”

Becker flourished the handkerchief in his left hand, his right grabbing the hilt of his saber.

Boislow twiddled his thumbs, still staring longingly at the stalls. Some commoner child wasn't worth his attention.

A serene smile still on his face, Becker's eyes ran red.

“Where? You really can't tell? How have you not noticed... that cut across your throat!”

He moved to draw his saber, but before he could fully unsheathe it, his name was called from a short distance away.

“Inspector Becker!”

The clatter of hooves and carriage wheels grew louder.

Driving this military carriage was a blond-haired man—Eric.

“Sir! Are you Inspector Becker, sir!? I have come from Fort Sierck to meet you! My name is Eric Mickaël de Blanchard of the Beilschmidt border

regiment.”

Once the carriage was beside them, he jumped down from the cabman’s perch.

Eric was handsome enough to make passersby do a double take.

Becker clenched his jaw as he continued to smile, his hand moving from his saber.

“Such an honor... But you’ve arrived ahead of schedule...”

He pulled a golden pocket watch from his pocket and checked the hands, despite the fact it would have been easier to glance at the church’s clocktower.

Eric snapped his heels together and touched his right hand to his breast in a model salute.

“Her Highness Fourth Princess Marie Quatre arranged for me to come at once.”

Upon hearing the princess’s name, Becker’s expression changed.

“Hm, hm... The princess made special arrangements for me?”

“But of course, Inspector Becker. She wishes to hear all about the capital. Now, please board the carriage. I must warn you—as a military piece, it isn’t built for comfort, but our journey shouldn’t be a long one.”

“Very well. We’re leaving, Boislow.”

“Oh, yes, of course... Hah... I’m starving...”

The inspector and his guard climbed into the carriage.

The young boy continued to stare at them in a daze until a woman flew from the crowd and locked him in a tight embrace. She then lowered her head, almost touching it to the ground.

Eric breathed a sigh of relief before returning a small nod.



“He’s just too much, that inspector!”

It was rare for Eric to be so openly angry.

The conversation took place in Regis's room.

"I see... So I was right to send you there early. To think he'd draw his sword on a child..." Regis raised a tired voice from behind the book he was reading.

Eric planted both hands onto the desk and leaned forward.

"It would have been a tragedy had I arrived a second later. Did you see this coming?"

"We've been having a spot of nice weather lately, so I assumed their stagecoach would arrive early. The snow here may be piled high, but not so much on the roads... Also, it's pretty standard for low-ranking nobles dispatched from the capital to work their high-handed ways in the countryside."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah. The antagonist of the book I'm reading now is precisely that sort of man."

"Hah... There you go again, covering up your deep insight."

Eric fixed him with an attentive stare.

It was quite apparent Regis had earned the man's respect, for which he was grateful... but he couldn't help but feel as though this admiration went beyond that.

"...I wasn't covering anything up."

"Did the princess really want to meet with that man?"

"Eh?"

"That's what you told me."

"Oh, that was just social courtesy... All Altina knows is that the inspector is coming. She's not too stellar when it comes to the whole flattery thing."

"Seeing as you're only telling me this now, does that apply to me, too?"

"Haha... Don't take it the wrong way."

"I don't mind, as long as it helped you out. Whatever the case, that man is dangerous. We need to exercise caution."

“So it seems... It’s about time.”

Altina was to receive the letter of notice just before dinner. The inspector could have simply passed it over the moment he arrived, but such nobles obnoxiously seemed to prefer formal regulations and arrangements. Did it make them feel more important?

Regis pouted as he considered how much of his precious reading time this would shave away.



A storage room was cleared and turned into a makeshift audience chamber.

An expensive chandelier from who-knows-where was hung from the ceiling and the walls were draped with elegant cloth; the place was unrecognizable.

After all, the princess couldn’t hold these discussions in the courtyard forever—or so Everard had asserted when ordering his soldiers to get to work. The new arrangement had apparently been designed by Eric.

Jerome may have been a noble, but he had no interest in this decorum. Even if such a meeting proved to be absolutely necessary, it could be held at his family manor in Theonveil. For this reason, this converted storage room was the first audience chamber Fort Sierck had ever had.

However, on Altina’s request, it wasn’t arranged so that the guest would have to look up at their host. There was a single, level table positioned in the center, almost as though the room were a one-party restaurant.

She took a seat in the chair furthest back, her still-recovering arm hidden beneath her mantle.

Becker and Boislow seated themselves nearby. The lack of guards between them could be seen by some as careless, but knowing these men couldn’t be as dangerous as Diethardt, Regis allowed it.

Clarisse lined cups along the table in silence before filling them one by one with freshly brewed tea.

“Hmm...” Becker’s lecherous gaze scoured her from top to bottom.

Altina interrupted his leering.

“You’ve come quite a long way, inspector.”

“Mn? Oh, yes. It’s the first time I’ve ever been so far from home... Ahem. But the view was most definitely worth the journey.”

“Ahaha... No need to be so stiff. You must have been taken aback by the countryside,” she cheerfully responded.

Perhaps because he was in front of royalty, Becker took on the persona of a well-disciplined dog. Meanwhile, Boislow reached his hand for the dried grapes and apples that had been presented alongside the tea.

Altina was seated at the head of the long table. To her right sat Becker, and then Boislow in the seat after. To her left sat Regis, and then Eric, who had volunteered to attend when no one else would.

Everard and the other soldiers kept low near the door. Not as participants, but as guards.

Under normal circumstances, Jerome should have attended, but he had vanished without even making one of his usual harsh excuses.

“...Did you tell the princess about the, uh... incident... earlier?” Eric whispered into Regis’s ear.

“...We’ll be in hot water if she finds out. It’ll sour her relationship with the inspector, and should things escalate and he were to return injured, the ministry would no doubt be after us. There’d be hell to pay.” He spoke in a whisper so only Eric could hear.

“Certainly...” Eric gave an understanding nod.

Moving on from her idle chitchat with the inspector, Altina cut straight to the point.

“You have a letter for me?”

“Indeed.”

Wearing a triumphant grin, Becker put on airs as he took out the envelope.

“It has been entrusted to me by General Latrielle himself.”

“Latrielle...”

Altina's face clouded over.

This was the man who had exiled her to the border. Their mothers differed, but he was still Altina's blood brother.

She received the letter and opened it. The further she read, the sterner her expression became.

"...Fort Volks?"

Altina held the paper out to Regis.

She wants me to read it?

"Pardon me." He gingerly took it from her hands.

It started with a long, drawn-out stream of salutations, lip service, and gratitude toward a dear sister for taking up military service at such an important position—all of which Regis glossed over.

He could summarize the order that underlay these empty words as follows:

You are to capture Fort Volks in the grand duchy of Varden of the Germania Federation.

"Now this is..." Regis muttered over a sigh.

Altina leaned closer to him.

"It's an amazing fortress, isn't it? And he's ordering us to take it on our own?"

"...That does seem to be the case. In fact, he even explicitly mentions that he 'can't send reinforcements.'"

Eric's complexion took a turn for the worse.

"He wants us to attack Volks with our regiment alone!?"

"Yeah... That's the order."

"That's impossible!"

Altina turned to Eric.

"You think it'll be difficult?"

“Princess, that fortress is impregnable! We’ve tried invading several times before, but even an army of ten thousand couldn’t take it down!”

“Come to think of it, Diethardt *did* say that fort was the reason he couldn’t attack Varden...”

Regis thumbed through the compendiums in his mind.

“...As I recall, there are records of the imperial army trying to attack on four occasions. The first was with three thousand soldiers, the second with eight thousand. The last two, ten thousand each.”

“And none worked out?”

“Nope— Er, I mean, no, they did not. You are correct. Our attempts all ended in failure.”

Altina had made it clear that she didn’t care what words people used, but Regis decided to continue speaking cordially while others were watching.

“If we were to attack, how many troops could we assemble?”

“We’d have to leave a thousand on defense, so I believe we would have maybe two thousand men.”

“Only that many?”

“Yes, only that many... It’s written that we must execute the plan before February 12th of this year, so we don’t even have time to bolster our forces.”

The princess was beginning to look concerned, and with good reason.

“Don’t tell me this is an impossible request?”

“Well...”

“I think so too!” Eric stood and declared, “No matter how you slice it, this order is unreasonable!”

Everard and his men exchanged looks by the door. An uproar was brewing.

Becker alone wore a composed smile. In fact, he seemed to be finding enjoyment in the situation.

“Is it not discourteous to dismiss the order as unreasonable? It was proposed

by General Latrielle and approved by the Ministry of Military Affairs; the command stands just as tall as His Majesty the Emperor's own will. As soldiers of the imperial army, what greater honor could there be?"

His voice dripped with sadistic glee. Did this man take pleasure in using the emperor's name to force such impossible demands?

Eric glared at him.

"Kuh... If it's such an honor, why don't you stand at the vanguard of our march!? Your outlook might change when you taste the steel of an enemy blade."

"Oh? A peon drags themselves from the gutter to insult me. You... Who were you again?"

"Eric Mickaël de Blanchard. Didn't you hear me introduce myself?"

"Hm... That's no house I know of. Can you really speak so boldly with such paltry status? I'm from a count house, you know."

Now that he'd delivered such an order, it would be difficult for them to speak on amicable terms. Coupled with the events that had transpired in town, the young Eric had grown emotional.

Regis raised a hand to quell their squabble.

"...We have received your letter, and we fully understand both its contents and deadline. Is that satisfactory?"

"Indeed. As long as you carry it out, that's all there is to discuss about the letter. My inspection of this border regiment, however, is a separate issue."

"That one is an administrative matter. There's no need to take up the princess's time with such a routine procedure, is there?"

"Hrm? I suppose you're right," Becker nodded. He then continued, his tone excessively syrupy to the extent of sounding unsavory. "There are rumors that this border regiment has recruited a great many irregular troops as of late... I can only hope they bring joy to His Majesty with their spectacular results."

"...Irregular troops? We hired a few maids from town the other day... Do you really think they'll help us capture the fortress?" Regis played dumb.



After a dreary audience, Regis explained the paperwork situation to Becker.

It stood to reason that inspectors were not supposed to be deliverymen for the ministry's orders. They were meant to look into whether a body of troops was observing regulations, whether they were properly filling out paperwork, whether they were carrying out orders, and so on, and to then report any issues back to the capital.

Regis was sure it would take a considerable amount of time just to walk him through the vast seas of paperwork... but Becker's absolute lack of enthusiasm had him return quite quickly to his guest room.



Later, when night had fallen, Regis lit a candle as he continued his administrative work, processing documents in the solitude of his room.

There was a knock at his door.

"Yes? Come in..."

The door swung open, and there stood a familiar red-haired girl.

"Good evening, Regis."

"Hey... Altina... You're here at such a late hour again..."

"Should I not be?"

"No, it's fine... Just take care you don't cause any strange rumors to spread."

"Hm?"

She tilted her head, evidently failing to follow.

Regis gave up on explaining, instead leaving it at: "You shouldn't drop by people's rooms this late at night too often."

"As always, I can never tell what any of these stacks of papers are for."

"...There are forms here that would normally require your signature."

"Oh, if it's just my signature, I'll gladly sign."

"Really? Then I'll haul them over to you later. It's only that pile, that pile over

there, that small mountain of papers, that stack there...”

“I’m not a very fast writer, mind you.”

“Hah...”

“Hey, Regis... About that inspector. Wasn’t he a bit strange?”

“...He was. Checking your pocket watch again and again during a meal is definitely not normal.”

“No, that’s not what I meant... I have a bad feeling about him.”

“Yeah... I wouldn’t doubt it.”

“Did something happen?”

“Eric mentioned something. And when he was auditing me a moment ago... rather than the correctness of my paperwork, he seemed far more interested in taking bribes.”

Altina’s eyes opened wide.

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“No matter how well my reports were written, he would nitpick. ‘This explanation is too hard to understand.’ ‘No one uses that expression anymore.’ ‘Your handwriting is an absolute mess.’”

“Those are all false charges!”

“...And If I wanted them overlooked, he said he’d do so for a fee.”

When Jerome had first met Regis, the reason he accused the admin officer of seeking bribes was due to the abundance of these sorts.

Altina turned on the spot and rested her hand on the doorknob.

“Not on my watch!”

“Wait, wait! What he did is standard practice! He may be a crook, but he’s not the only one.”

“Don’t tell me you actually paid him!?”

She met him with a gaze sharper than a spear, but Regis merely shook his head.

“I knew it’d anger you, so I didn’t... though I do think it’d be a lot easier to just arbitrarily sweep it under the rug.”

“I won’t forgive that.”

“Him, or me?”

“Both! Whatever the case, I need to knock that man into shape!”

“That’s a bad idea. He’s got connections in the ministry. If you anger him, it won’t just be petty harassment next time... Worst case scenario, it’d be a summons to the court of inquiry.”

“Like I care!”

“You’re a princess, so they won’t summon you... In that case, I’d be the one up for inquiry.”

“Erk!”

How disgusting. I’m holding myself hostage... Regis thought. But he had no choice. If Altina went on a rampage now, the regiment would fall apart.

“He must have family high up in the ministry, or otherwise he wouldn’t be appointed as an inspector... It wouldn’t be smart to make an enemy of him now.”

“So he provoked Eric and tried to solicit a bribe from you because he thinks he’s untouchable?”

“That’s right.”

He had also sent quite depraved looks to both Altina and Clarisse, but the princess did not seem to have noticed. Regis decided not to say anything that might add fuel to the fire.

Altina’s right fist quivered as her rage seethed without an outlet.

“Grrrrrr—!!”

Regis decided it was time to change the subject.

“More importantly... You came to discuss Prince Latrielle’s order, correct?”

“Ah, that’s right! What do we do?”

“Fort Volks, huh...”

“What sort of place is it? I’ve never seen it before.”

“I haven’t either, and if possible, I’d like to keep it that way. According to the books I’ve read, it’s a sheer, wall-like cliff in a region of nothing but gently sloping hills. It towers at 225 cubits (100 m) high.”

This meant it was more than six times taller than the very highest point of Fort Sierck.

“Of course, there’d be little use in having their defenses at the very top. Instead, they have their cannons positioned in small caverns that run along the side of the cliff, around 100 cubits (44 m) from the ground.”

“That’s higher than the tallest building in the empire.”

“The cliff covers the south and east, while the north and west join onto a mountain range.”

“And we can’t attack from the mountain side?”

“When they fortified the area, they apparently dug quite a deep trench on the western side. It *would* be possible to get close while avoiding cannon fire, but to get to the fortress, we’d have to climb down into the ditch and then back up again, so it’s not much better... The north side has a pit dug from when the area was used as an open mine. The incline is softer, but not only does it still pose the same problems as the ditch, water has since pooled at the base to form a lake.”

“Couldn’t we just ignore the fort and attack their capital?”

“In any siege, you’ve practically lost once the enemy cuts off your rear... The enemy would be able to resupply as much as they need, but once your resources ran out, you’d have no choice but to surrender.”

“Ah, I see... Then could we take on the enemy when they’re outside the fortress?”

“If we did, wouldn’t they just retreat back inside? And if we chased after them, the outcome wouldn’t be much different from attacking the fortress directly... Cannonballs shall rain from the heavens.”

“I see.”

“Across the past four attempts, the empire has attempted night raids and encirclements, preparing for a drawn-out campaign, but...”

They would not be in their current situation had those efforts succeeded. Not only was the fortress itself considerably sturdy, the enemy commander was also competent.

“...If possible, I really don’t want to do this,” Regis muttered.

“What other choice do we have?”

“Yeah...”

Opposed as he was, Regis couldn’t deny that Prince Latrielle had made an impressively effective move. He was presumably already used to dealing with situations where a competing power gained an unanticipated addition.

Altina proclaimed her resolve.

“We have to do this! Latrielle gave us the order because he believes we can.”

“Eh?”

“...What? I mean, he ordered us to take the fort, so he has to believe we can, right?”

“...No?”

“Heh?” Altina looked suddenly perplexed, her expression blank.

The girl really was too naïve.

“What Prince Latrielle wants... is for us to lead about half of our troops to attack an impregnable fortress and fail, losing a large portion of our soldiers and our unifying power.”

“But if we can’t win... why would he order us to attack?”

“Because he’ll be able to chip away at the war potential of a border regiment that grew far beyond his expectations. Such is the intent of his order.”

“Wh-What!?”

Her face burned a ferocious red, and she slammed her unbound hand against

the desk.

A painful-sounding *bang* resounded through the room.

“Just how lightly does he take the lives of our soldiers!?”

He no doubt valued them as little more than pawns in a much larger game of chess.

“Calm down, Altina... I don’t plan to let our troops die in vain.”

“You have an idea!? Ah, could we pretend we never heard the order?”

“With Inspector Becker here, we can’t approach this half-heartedly.”

“But, even if we fought properly, doesn’t he seem like the sort who’d report we weren’t taking it seriously?”

“That’s why we have to keep him in a good mood...”

Altina fell into deep thought for a moment. She was, in her own way, doing her best to protect her soldiers.

“Hey... What happens if we *do* ignore the orders?”

“It would be considered treason... I’m pretty sure we’d be branded as traitors, and it wouldn’t be long before the empire’s First Army marched out to subjugate us.”

“Traitors!?”

“You’re already prepared for that, aren’t you?”

“I am, but... The First Army... They’re strong, aren’t they?”

“Yeah. I think I told you before, but the First Army gathers strong soldiers from across the nation and equips them with the newest, most cutting-edge equipment. They’re the strongest army in the empire. They have members from all over, some of whom will be familiar with the lay of the land, so we won’t even have a regional advantage. If we were to fight them... we’d have it rough.”

“So we can’t win?”

“Not conventionally, no... We can’t even guarantee Sir Jerome and Mr. Everard would fight beside us. Same goes for the soldiers. We haven’t prepared

enough to challenge Prince Latrielle.”

Altina bit down on her bottom lip.

“...That’s right... What should we do?”

“I think we have to attack the fortress... keeping our casualties as low as possible. On top of that, we need to leave a good impression on Inspector Becker so that he reports there were no issues once he returns to the capital.”

“How unfortunate.”

“How forward. I feel the same, but there’s not much else we can do.”

Regis opened a book already sat on his desk.

“I’ll handle the research on Fort Volks. Just focus on recovering your arm.”

“I know that already— Mn?”

“...Something wrong?”

As if she had developed a sudden uncharacteristic interest in literature, Altina peered curiously at the desk.

The book appeared to have been bound using an old process, its discolored pages sewn together with leather thread and its cover a thin sheet of wood into which a title had been carved.

“Is that, by chance, a book on Fort Volks?”

“Well, I thought this might happen, so... Hah, I’m just kidding. I happened to spot it in town. The book was written around forty years ago and chronicles events even older than that.”



Over fifty years ago, in the imperial year 800, the current emperor, Liam XV, had yet to take the throne.

This was the era of his predecessor, Emperor Vicente, who was said to choose his ministers based on their prowess in music and poetry. The man himself showed talent in the arts, and his contributions to culture could never be understated: developments in paper and printing had only been possible thanks to his generous investments in the field.

However, such expenditures required cuts elsewhere. Subsequent reductions in the military budget, alongside the appointment of mediocre people into command positions, put the army at a disadvantage on all fronts.

The situation became so dire that for quite some time the area around Theonveil was occupied by the grand duchy of Varden.

When Emperor Vicente eventually succumbed to illness, the young Liam XV succeeded the throne. At the same time, General Corneille was appointed marshal general. As the emperor was considered the supreme commander of the army, this wasn't a position that existed in the military hierarchy. However, the state of affairs could not be entrusted to a new emperor with insufficient combat experience.

By this point, the empire had lost over thirty percent of its territory.

However, once Marshal General Corneille had reorganized the weakened army, he went on to regain much of the empire's former land, achieving victory against enemies both inside and outside of national borders.

In no time at all, the northern front was recovered from the grand duchy of Varden. The opposing army overwhelmed, the empire's troops pushed all the way to their capital.

As good-quality iron could be extracted from their newly acquired territory in the mountainous regions of Varden, a mine was promptly created—Volks Mine.

Little did the imperial army know that their own creation would become the impregnable fortress that afforded their enemy a considerable advantage.

Ten years later, when Marshal General Corneille died in battle, the military once again fell into chaos as the empire was met with counterattack upon counterattack. In the end, the front lines were largely back to where they once were—and where they would remain.

Imperial Year 812. The grand duchy of Varden repurposed the mines as a sturdy defensive base against the empire.

In response, the imperial side reconstructed Theonveil, once a farming settlement, into a border town, opposing Fort Volks with a fortress of their own.

That was Fort Sierck, where they were now.



“So, yes. It’s a book that details our long, twisted relationship with Fort Volks.”

“From back when it was constructed?”

“Yeah. It reports up to the fortification of Volks Mine and, as I said, was likely published around forty years ago. It’s part of a series detailing the history of Theonveil since the empire reclaimed its northern territories—the first of eight volumes. Papermaking techniques were quite advanced at the time, but bookbinding was still underdeveloped, so it has quite a peculiar make.”

“Hm. Must’ve been expensive.”

Altina took a stab at something he never thought she would bring up.

Regis froze in place.

“...No...”

“You had a sword when you came to this fort, didn’t you? I haven’t seen it around lately.”

“Ah, well, that’s because, whenever I swing it around, I always just end up injuring myself.”

“Where is it?”

“...I just want to preface this by saying the sword wasn’t military issued. It was a personal possession. All right?”

“I see. And where is it?”

“At the... pawn shop in Theonveil... Assuming it hasn’t been sold yet...”

“What kind of soldier pawns his sword!?”

Altina closed in menacingly as she spoke. Regis lurched back in his chair, coming ever so close to toppling over.

“I-I mean... I don’t use it—it would’ve just accumulated rust...”

“How much was the book!?”

“I-It wasn’t anything extraordinary. Two hundred...”

“Huh? Two hundred denier? Your weekly pay should have covered that. I mean, it’s still expensive, but—”

“Two hundred sol.”

Altina twitched at his final word.

One silver sol was worth twelve copper denier.

The pale fingers of her unrestrained hand gripped Regis’s head.

“Are you an idiot!? Huh!? You *are* an idiot, aren’t you!?”

“Am I? I don’t regret the purchase...”

“You should regret it!”

“B-But this is a terribly valuable book. Its contents are useful, of course, but its historical value is also—”

“Where did you even scrounge up so much money from!?”

“Well, you see, I thought it was impossible at first, but... word had spread through town that I’d become the regiment’s tactician, so the shopkeeper said I was trustworthy enough for him to open up a tab...”

“So now you’re in debt!?”

She gradually tightened her grip. His temples were starting to ache under the pressure.

“No, having a tab is different from being in debt, when you get down to it...”

“Listen to me!”

“Yes.”

“My mother always told me—commoners may live poor lives, but no amount of poverty will ever cost them their lives. *Unless they’re in debt.*”

“Well, there *is* more than enough food to go around.”

“If you understand that, then don’t go into debt over a book!”

“O-Ow... You’re hurting me, Altina. Your fingers— They’re crushing— My

head is going to—”

“If you need such an expensive book, tell me! You’re my tactician.”

Her words were stern, but she wore a look of complete sincerity.

“...I could never do that,” Regis declared, apologetic though he was.

“Why?”

“I mean... I didn’t buy this book because I thought it’d be useful. I just thought it looked interest—oooooooooww!?”

“You good-for-nothing spendthrift!”

He couldn’t deny that.

Finally, Altina released her grip.

Seeing as how she boasted the grip to swing such a colossal sword one-handed, she likely hadn’t been serious at all. But it still hurt enough to bring tears to his eyes.

“I haven’t been lectured like this since my sister blew up at me for enrolling in the military academy.”

“I feel for your sister... But there’s no use in crying over spilled milk. I’ll lend you the money; you’d better pay me back soon.”

“Huh? No, that’s—”

“Better than having rumors passing through town that my tactician’s in debt.”

“Hrmm...”

“What is it? No need to hold back.”

“Really? Well, if you’re going to lend me the money anyway, there are two other books that I... Ah, no, it’s nothing!”

“Ah, God. You book-obsessed buffoon!!”



The next day, Regis returned to town to settle his debt. Only one stagecoach ran per day, so he stayed the night at the military outpost before returning the next day.

Upon returning to the fort, Regis opened the door to his room.

“Huh?”

“Kyaah!?”

Eric jumped up from Regis’s chair.

He sure screams like a girl, Regis mused.

“...Umm... What are you doing in my room?”

“Ah, w-well, you know... I’m sorry... I didn’t see you around, so I was searching and...”

“I took a trip into town. The princess didn’t tell you?”

“Oh, is that where you were? Because of my lowly status, the princess isn’t someone I can approach so freely. You’re a special case in that regard.”

“...I see.”

Altina always acted so jovial that Regis was prone to forgetting her status, but her position was princess and commander. She was not someone you just approached to ask the whereabouts of a fifth-grade admin officer.

It was at times like these that not having any direct superiors or subordinates became an inconvenience.

“But, if you were looking for me, why were you sitting in my seat...?”

“Erk... Th-That’s— Er... I thought I might be able to find you by... acting like you usually would...” he said, his face a bright shade of red. The way he squirmed and twisted his body left no vestige of a knight. Once again, he was comparable to a bashful young girl.

Regis could feel the corner of his mouth twitch.

“...That’s quite a novel way to search for someone.”

“I-I apologize.”

“No, it’s fine... Did you need me for something?”

After calming his breath, Eric regained the dignified appearance of a young man.

“Phew... It’s about the fortress. I realize I may be stepping out of line by asking, but what are we going to do?”

Going off of Latrielle’s orders, they only had a month before the attack needed to be carried out. Discussions were no doubt in order.

Regis issued an order to Eric.

“Could you summon Sir Jerome and Mr. Everard to the strategy room? I’ll head there after getting the princess.”

“Understood. The two are currently doing practice drills outside the fort, so we may be a while.”

“Training, eh? How passionate.”

“If I may have my say, that’s just how serious of a matter attacking Fort Volks is.”

“...Yeah.”

“Then, if you’ll excuse me!”

Eric stood at attention before exiting the room.



Regis took some time gathering all of the necessary documents. He held the bundle of papers to his chest and made off for Altina’s room.

On his way, he passed in front of the dining hall.

“No...”

He heard a small—a terribly small—plea.

“Hm?”

Regis turned back and peered into the room. The tables were lined up in their usual arrangement, and looked to be as well maintained as they always were. The hand-wound clock on the wall indicated it had just passed two in the afternoon.

As Jerome and his men had gone off to train, the officers who usually frequented the hall were nowhere to be found.

Regis's eyes suddenly stopped on a dish cloth that had been left on the table, seemingly abandoned. This room was always cleaned by Clarisse, and from what he knew about her, she wasn't one to leave a task half-finished...

But there were always exceptions. It wouldn't take long at all for Regis to return the rag to the adjoining kitchen.

Tucking his documents under an arm, Regis stepped through the door to the dining hall and pinched the cloth from atop the long table.

It was damp. Meaning, it had just been used.

"...Did something urgent come up?"

A faint clatter could be heard coming from the kitchen. Was someone preparing dinner? Perhaps it was Clarisse.

Regis slowly approached the source of the noise.

"Err, excuse me..." he announced as he poked his head through the doorway.

The kitchen was in the shape of a hemisphere jutting out of the base of the tower. Its interior was simple; a stove sat against the far wall, with counter space stretching out on either side.

Inside stood a narrow-eyed man in uniform, and a boulder-like giant: Inspector Becker and his escort officer, Boislow.

Across from them, with her brown hair bundled behind her head, a woman in an indigo-colored maid uniform lay face down on the floor.

Regis had to doubt his eyes.

"...What!?"

There was no mistaking the timid face that raised to see him. It was Clarisse.

"Mr. Regis... You mustn't..."

"What... are you people doing!?"

Becker scoffed.

"Hmph. You wouldn't pay up, so I had to get my compensation one way or another. Or, what, have you had a change of heart?"

“...How could this be... I’d heard the inspectors were all terrible people, but... to go to such vile lengths!”

“Hey now, watch your tongue, junior officer. I’m an inspector, you know. Don’t you care about your report?”

“Kuh... Clarisse! Get over here. Listening to anything they say won’t make the princess happy.”

“I-I know... but...”

She rose ever so slowly, then walked up to him with fearful steps.

The moment she reached him, she surrendered her weight into his arms.

“Mr. Regis...”

“.....”

Her body was trembling. It was the first time he had ever seen Clarisse so frail.

“What’s this? I thought you were a sham of a tactician,” spat Becker; “And now you’re playing the knight? No money to give, no women to offer... You must be joking! This is terrible. Absolutely terrible. I suspect this border regiment must be planning a rebellion, eh?”

“Don’t be stupid. Your actions are clearly in violation of military regulations. Inspector Becker, I’ll have you stand before the military tribunal.”

“Oh really? Over what? I haven’t done anything wrong. Not yet, at least. Don’t make me laugh.”

“Coercing bribes from an officer and attempted rape... That’s more than enough. Perhaps I’ll find even more charges if I look into where you’ve been dispatched before.”

Becker clicked his tongue. He gestured his chin toward Boislow.

“Silence them. For good.”

“Righto!”

Regis hurriedly grabbed Clarisse and retreated a few steps. The documents fell at his feet.

The giant closed in, trampling paper after paper on his way.

“Fo! Fum! Silence them!”

“Aah... Such a good woman, too. What a waste,” Becker muttered under his breath, as if completely above the slaughter about to happen before him.

Regis escaped the kitchen into the dining hall. He dragged Clarisse by the hand, weaving his way between the long tables, running as fast as he could toward the door.

But, despite his portly build, Boislow was abnormally fast. No, it was quite possible Regis was just abnormally slow...

Whatever the reason, the giant managed to circle around and reach the only exit before them.

“Gfufufu!”

“Erk...”

The officers’ dining hall was situated on the first floor and had no particularly large windows. Light filtered in through small openings along the walls, but none were big enough for someone to pass through.

Like a beast salivating as it stood before its prey, Boislow slowly drew the long sword at his waist.

Clarisse firmly took Regis’s hand in both of hers.

“Mr. Regis... This doesn’t have to happen. I can just endure it... Such things are inescapable.”

“Letting you sacrifice yourself to save me? Now that’s the worst... I’d be better off dying.”

“The princess needs you.”

“Ms. Clarisse... Everyone dies someday. But, the way I see it, a person ceases to live the moment they cast aside their beliefs.”

“Even so, there are some things that can only be gained by living through humiliation.”

“...I’ll bear as much humiliation as I have to... but I can’t allow someone like you to undergo such a fate.”

“Mr. Regis... You shouldn’t say that... to a woman like me.”

Boislow closed in, his gargantuan form now looming over them.

“Gfufu. You can lose your heads together!”

The giant prepared to strike, raising his sword so high it almost reached the ceiling.

Regis wrapped his arms around Clarisse, pressing her to his chest in an attempt to protect her. She hugged him tight, and in that moment he regretted his own frailty that wouldn’t even let him serve as her shield.



Boislow's smile, merciless like a ferocious, carnivorous beast...

...suddenly warped in agony.

"Gwooaah!?"

A great volume of blood spilled onto his feet.

"Eh...?"

Regis couldn't immediately discern what had happened.

The great giant crumbled to the ground, revealing the young man standing behind him. The form of Eric, bloodstained sword in hand, appeared before them.

His breaths were sharp and irregular.

"Hah, hah, hah... Are you okay, Mr. Regis!? And you too, Miss..."

Clarisse responded with a silent nod.

Regis looked down on the collapsed Boislow.

"D-Did you kill him?"

"I missed his vitals."

The man was curled up on the floor, groaning. A bleeding tear stretched from his buttocks down his right thigh. It definitely didn't look fatal, but was deep enough that he would no longer be able to chase them or even plant his feet to swing a sword.

"...You saved us... Thank you, Eric." Regis placed a hand to his chest to soothe his pounding heart.

"I'm just glad I could be of use to you, Mr. Regis."

"How did you find us?"

"You weren't at the conference room, so I went out to look for you. I'm glad you're all right... Now, how should we deal with *him*?"

Eric cast a glance toward the kitchen. There, in the doorway, stood Becker, a bitter look on his face.

“Hmhm. A knight attacking from behind... How cowardly!”

A terrifying darkness burned in his eyes, comparable to an evil spirit from the holy scriptures.

Eric readied his sword without faltering.

“If my actions were unjust, I will gladly face judgment... but not before I have you locked away!”

Regis was inadvertently gripped. It wasn't only his appearance; the way Eric carried himself was the epitome of a knight from a fairy tale. It felt like a bit of an exaggeration, but the comparison was too apt for him to discard.

Becker's eyes were bloodshot, and saliva spouted from the corners of his mouth as he spoke.

“Ki hee hee... A lowborn thinks he can shove *me* in a cell!?”

His hand shot for his weapon, but what he drew wasn't the shortsword at his waist, but a pistol he had hidden in his overcoat. The latest model from High Britannia.

It could only hold a single bullet, meaning the gun had to be reloaded after each shot, but there was no preparation required to ignite the gunpowder. The gun could be fired as soon as it was loaded.

Eric bit his lip. He may have stood a chance on an open plain, but with the writhing giant and rows of tables between them, it would be difficult to make the first move with a sword.

As the barrel could only hold a single shot, he could manage so long as he avoided the first round. But Becker would certainly hit at this distance.

And once he'd taken out Eric, Becker would have to kill Regis and Clarisse to ensure the news didn't spread. Perhaps he was considering the possible ramifications, as he didn't shoot immediately.

In his mind, Regis pored over the books he'd read in the past, searching for a similar scene.

“...This should be the best move.”

“What are you going to do, Mr. Regis?” Clarisse asked, clinging to the sleeve of his uniform.

“...I’ve never lost in a game of chess. Please trust me.”

He delicately took her hand in his and peeled it from his clothes. Heavy tears had formed in the corners of her eyes.

There was no convenient magic that would save all three of them without any danger.

The basic tenet of chess was to use the weaker pieces as strategic bait to keep the stronger pieces alive. In this situation, he was definitely the weakest piece.

Regis broke into a sprint, screaming as loud as he could as he charged straight at Becker.

“Uwaaaah!!”

Becker flinched, having been taken by complete surprise.

“Wh-What!? You dimwit!”

Regis just needed to pressure him into firing and their victory would be assured. But close-quarters combat was evidently outside of his realm of expertise. Becker simply switched the pistol to his left hand and drew his saber with his right. The blade was thrust out before him in an instant, and Regis came to a sudden halt three paces from his foe.

He raised both hands.

“...You got me... I suppose I should have read more from the action genre.”

He knew the man had a sword, but never figured he could draw it so fast. Regis was terrible when it came to judging a person’s physical ability.

Becker brandished his saber.

“I’ll start with you—!”

“Let’s make a deal!”

“Mn!?”

His sword stopped on those words. Eric and Clarisse watched, unable to even

breathe. The air was stretched thin.

“...A deal, Inspector Becker. Do you think you can kill all three of us and get away? Kill me, and what will you do with Eric? Shoot him? That leaves enough time for Clarisse to escape.”

“Hah! As if a woman could outrun me.”

“...And what will you say to the soldiers who hear her screams? Clarisse is so dearly beloved by the princess she had her tag along from the capital.”

“Mn?”

“...Inspector Becker... Will you allow us to leave? Do that, and we’ll forget what we saw. How about it?”

“I can’t trust you!”

“Do you really have anything to fear? If we were to press charges, you would only have to deny them. The fact your gun was never used would prove very useful in court.”

“It’d be much quicker to kill the lot of you.”

“And you expect to prove your innocence with a fired gun and a bloodstained sword? You aren’t thinking you can use your aristocratic status to pressure the *princess*, are you?”

“No... That’s...”

“Think it over. You have me hostage, so Eric can’t make any sudden movements. This is a matter that’ll determine the rest of your life. Give it some thought, and you’ll definitely see some merit in my proposal. Oh, right, right—an old scholar once said— Please, it won’t take long to explain, just hear me out —”

Regis then proceeded to recite three whole lengthy fables where negotiations had led to the best outcome. His raised hands were finally beginning to grow weary when— “What are you *doing*!?”

In the doorway stood a young girl, flowing red hair draped across her shoulders. It was Altina! Behind her stood Jerome and Everard.

Upon seeing them, Eric and Clarisse immediately lightened up.

“Phew...” Regis breathed a long sigh.

“You’re finally here.”

“You never showed up, and then Eric disappeared, too, so I wondered what could have happened, and... What happened here!?”

Altina scanned the room with a ferocious glare, eventually resting her eyes on Becker. The color immediately drained from his face.

“N-No... This is... I didn’t...!”

Regis was glad he could finally lower his hands.

“Ms. Clarisse was almost assaulted... And when I threatened to take him to the military tribunal, he tried to kill me.”

“You weasel! Weren’t we making a deal!?” Becker roared.

Regis shook his head.

“My apologies, but... initiating negotiations is quite a standard way to buy time. Humans lose their composure when chance comes into the equation. In a situation where you have to kill three people, one of them approaches you with quite the appealing proposal. It would no doubt be in your favor to accept, but it could be a trap... Naturally, you hesitate. After all, it’s a decision that will affect the rest of your life. But, unbeknownst to you, there was somewhere I had to be, and as long as I wasted enough time, someone would come for me.”

Becker’s eyes ran red.

Worry spilled into Regis’s mind. *He’s not going to fly into a rage and shoot, is he?*

...But, instead, the man broke into a sudden lament.

“Oh, how could this be!? My dear subordinate was attacked from behind without reason, so I simply drew my gun in self-defense. Yet you say the sins are all on me!? This is a conspiracy! A ploy to ruin my reputation!”

“...It’s a bit late for that.”

“...I’m thinking of making a report when I return to the capital. ‘The

Beilschmidt border regiment is an excellent army following regulation to the letter. With daring and resolve, they attacked Fort Volks, only to be forced to retreat after heavy losses.’ Gfufu. How does that sound?”

A thin smile plastered across his face, Becker looked to Altina.

In short, he was making a proposal: A false, glowing report in exchange for the dismissal of his crimes. It was the exact opposite of what he had presented Regis a moment before.

Regis had his answer ready in an instant, and promptly opened his mouth to speak. But before the words could even pass his lips, Altina raced forward, her unslung fist balled into a tight knot.

She closed in on Becker, raising her arm, and—

Crack!

She smacked her fist straight into his simpering face.

“You absolute *cretin!*”

“Gyoeh!?”

He was knocked from his feet, his back forcefully smacking into the dining hall wall.

His pistol and saber dropped to the ground. Thankfully, the impact hadn’t caused the gun to discharge.

Blood from his shattered nose streamed down his upper lip.

“Ooo... Blood... My... nose... My blood... My nose!?”

“I have just one thing to say to you!”

Becker held his nose and looked up.

Altina stood before him. In one firm gesture, she pointed a finger at him.

“I’d rather be dead than make a deal with a villain!”



Becker's back gave out, and he slid slowly down the wall as he limply crumbled to the floor.

Both him and Boislow were immediately restrained by Everard and Eric.

Only at that moment did the soldiers on patrol finally show up.



Considerate of the trauma she had just been through, Regis sent Clarisse to rest in her room. He had Eric escort her, just in case.

Becker and Boislow were tightly bound, soldiers stationed all around as Everard led them to the dungeon.

Only Regis, Altina and Jerome remained in the dining hall.

"Give them time to cool their heads," said Regis. "When the escort officer's wound heals, we'll send them back to the capital... With a report on their breach of conduct, of course."

"Right!"

"Hmph," Jerome grumbled. "Just behead them already."

"You have such little consideration for the lives of others, Jerome," Altina uttered with a sigh.

He responded to her rebuttal with no more than a shrug.

The metallic smell of blood still lingered in the air. Jerome fetched a bottle of wine from the kitchen, popped the cork with his teeth and took a long swig.

"Kukukuh... That inspector's offer wasn't bad at all. Have him write a false report, and that's everything settled."

Altina shot him a cold glare.

"You must be joking."

He scoffed, in lieu of a response.

Had Regis not met Altina, perhaps he would have accepted Becker's proposal. He was overcome by a somber feeling.

"...In the imperial army, such bribes and injustices are all too rampant, though

it's rare to run into someone that terrible."

Jerome shook his head dismissively.

"There are far more terrible stories out there... Haven't you heard?"

"...I've read about a thing or two."

Altina slammed her right fist onto the table.

"Unforgivable!"

"...Calm down, Princess... There's something more pressing to discuss right now. A matter that involves a great many lives."

"Ah." Altina's eyes shifted to her hand as if she had only just realized.

"Because I punched him?"

"...That's right. His escort officer was injured, too. We can't count on him to report anything even remotely positive anymore."

"I would much rather take on Latrielle than bow my head to such trash." Her voice was rough.

Jerome barely suppressed a laugh. "Kukukuh... Are you sure you should be saying that?"

"What? Are you gonna rush to the ministry and tattle on me?"

"I could... To see such an eyesore of a commander disappear would give me a new lease on life. But I wouldn't be able to stand knowing that smug, pompous second prince would benefit."

Considering Jerome's character and circumstances, he wouldn't snitch on Altina even if he knew of her intention to revolt. After all, he himself was embezzling funds under the ministry's nose.

In the overall scheme of things, their interests were currently aligned. But it was still too soon to consider action.

"...We can't challenge the First Army. As I said before, we don't have the forces to," Regis explained as calmly as he could.

"Then what do we do?"

“We’ve got no choice but to attack Fort Volks.”

“But even if we give it our all, it’ll be pointless; they won’t believe we obeyed the order if our report says otherwise.”

“Kukukuh... Would that matter? If our soldiers all die on the battlefield, the ministry’ll have to admit we fought our hardest,” sneered Jerome.

“That’s not an option!”

“Ha. I wouldn’t allow my men to die so needlessly, even if you ordered me to,” he teased. “What’s the real plan?”

Both Altina and Jerome looked to Regis for an answer. He had no idea whether it would succeed... but it was a risk they had to take.

“Let’s seize Fort Volks. If we capture it, the ministry will be forced to recognize our efforts.”

The two stood dumbfounded. Before his words could be misconstrued as some kind of tasteless joke, he proceeded with his explanation, spreading his documents across the long table. They were damp and imprinted with giant footmarks, but their content was relatively intact.

“...Please listen. The fortress has a reputation for being impregnable, but very few soldiers are actually stationed there. Our main problems are going to be the terrain and the countless cannons lining the outer wall.”

Altina leaned in so close that Regis could see his face clearly reflected in her ruby red eyes.

“Regis...”

“U-Um, Princess... Please look at the documents, not me...”

“Are you serious?”

“Do I look desperate or insane?”

“I couldn’t say.”

“I was really hoping you’d say you believed in—”

Bang!

Jerome slammed a hand onto the table. He regarded the documents with a serious glare.

“Speak, tactician. I’ll listen. I see you as trash, but you’re trash that does have some use. But your explanation will determine whether or not I have you locked up with that parasite of an inspector!”

“...Understood.”

Jerome moved his cold gaze to Altina.

“And, Princess: Didn’t you place your trust in this tactician?”

“Trusting in someone doesn’t mean you have to adhere to whatever they say. I trust Regis as someone I can exchange ideas with.”

“Kukukuh... I see.”

“And I trust you too, Sir Jerome. Especially when it comes to your talent with a spear.”

“Hmph. Naturally.”

Jerome urged Regis to explain, so he returned his eyes to the papers.

Chapter 3: Under My Flag

Regis had his book open in the conference room.

“Hmm...”

“Good morning! You’re up early.” Altina appeared, wiping her neck with a handkerchief.

“Hey.” Regis returned the greeting. “...I’m not sure whether I should call this early or late.”

“Don’t tell me you haven’t slept?”

“There was something I had to look into.”

“This book?”

Altina glanced down at what Regis was so invested in.

“Oh, no, I already finished looking into it... But the book I referenced was so interesting, you see.”

“Some things never change. What’s this book about, then?”

“The origins of and legends behind flags and crests. For example, this one...”

He turned to a page on the empire’s flag—seven swords drawn over a red cloth. She approached from the side and nestled up next to him, lowering her eyes to the book.

“Ah, that one.”

There was one hanging in that very room.

Regis then flipped to another page—one that depicted an array of swords on a white backdrop.

“The flag actually used to look like this.”

“Almost a white flag of surrender.”

“But, as it turns out, that’s not actually the reason they changed it.”

“Hmm...”

Altina reached out her hand and flipped through a few more pages. Regis glanced between her expression and the book.

“...Pretty interesting, right?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

“Incidentally, the flag used by the Beilschmidt border regiment was changed to Sir Jerome’s house crest back when he was appointed.”

“Oh, so that’s what that is.”

Another banner hung on the wall beside the empire’s. It was a deep red, featuring a black spear and lion—the flag of the house of Beilschmidt.

It wasn’t uncommon for a regiment to fly the flag of their commander’s house. The army of Marquis Thénézay, where Regis had previously worked, had done the same.

“How should I put this...” Altina continued. “They’re all red.”

“It’s customary for a noble’s flag to use the same red base as the empire. The church uses black and purple, while the common folk use green.”

“Hmm... What about blue and yellow?”

“Blue doesn’t have much to do with status... Rather, if you were to wave a blue flag, it would just melt into the skies and seas.”

“Ah. So it’d be hard to see.”

“Though, because of that, there are some who claim it’s the color of freedom.”

“I see.”

“And yellow is often used by the Germanian Federation, so it’s not too popular in Belgaria.”

“Ahaha... Then, what, do they hate red over there?”

“They think bright red is vulgar, so they tend to use dark brown instead.”

“So it’s vulgar...”

Altina pinched at her own hair and furrowed her brow. Her hair was, after all, a glossy and vivid shade of red.

Regis waved his hand dismissively.

“I don’t think it’s vulgar at all. It’s, umm... It’s very charming.”

“Pardon?”

“Err... Nothing...”

“One more time, one more time.”

“Oh, no...”

“One more time, one more time!”

“No, no, no...”



The earth below was carpeted by thick snow as the carriage departed through the southern gate. It strayed from the road just as Fort Sierck was out of sight.

A harsh gale picked up as the carriage took this large detour, lowering the hood the coachman wore and untucking her crimson hair, which fluttered in the wind behind her.

“Brr...”

“Are you okay, Altina?” asked Regis.

“Of course,” nodded the girl driving. “I’m great at driving carriages. Don’t you know?”

“Well, I had a hunch... but one-handed?”

She had been given a professional sentence of a three month recovery, so naturally her left arm was still fixed in place. Though it seemed to be healing quite favorably.

“One hand, one leg... If I say I’m fine, I’m fine.”

“...Just take things slowly.”

“I’m not going to mess up again.”

Altina deftly tugged at the reins with her right hand, regulating the horses to ensure they didn't go too fast.

An injury to their horse's leg had previously left them stranded, and so there were two horses pulling the wagon today. It was an extravagant military carriage that even sported oil lamps as headlights. Its large loading tray was stuffed with food stock and cloth; goods that were to be used in negotiations.

As they strayed further from the road, they descended an uneven slope.

"Whoa!?"

Regis nearly fell from the carriage, clinging to the grip beside his seat.

"Try not to fall off."

"Then how about we go a bit slower...?"

"It'll get dark!"

"But we're nearly there al— Hyah!?"

"And don't scream so much, you'll spook the horses!"

When the carriage had shaken enough to make his bottom ache, their destination finally came in sight: A hill of dry grass coated with a thin veil of snow. A single large tree sprouted from its gentle summit.

As their carriage approached, one man appeared. Four others stood a little further away. They all wore clothes made from pelts and adorned with feathers.

The empire called them barbarians, but Regis now saw them as the people of Bargaheim.

The man standing directly before them was Diethardt.

Altina stopped the carriage and leaped down from the cabman's perch.

«Sorry to keep you waiting! It's been a while!»

«Indeed.»

Regis, meanwhile, was having great trouble climbing down from the wagon.

«Pleasure... Sorry for... keeping you.»

«Long time no see, Tactician.»

A gentle color came to Diethardt's cheeks as he spoke, and almost immediately, Altina stepped between the two young men.

«We brought food and blankets. Feel free to use them.»

«...I would rather hear your request before I accept any advances.»

«These aren't payment. Think of them as gifts.»

«So they have nothing to do with your business here?»

«Well, if you don't need them, we can always just take them back.»

«I see... You're as harsh as ever. We'll graciously accept.»

After a bow, the men behind Diethardt began to unload the goods from the luggage tray. Altina spoke up as they continued their work.

«Now then, it's cold, so why don't we get down to business?»

«Very well...»

«As it turns out, we're going to capture Fort Volks!»

Her conversation partner looked back at her grimly.

«...That does not sound like a sane course of action.»

«If we don't follow the order, we'll be made out as traitors. And we can't fight the First Army.»

«The empire truly is rotten.»

«That's precisely why we need to fight... Regis thought up the plan, so I'm sure it'll work out one way or another.»

Diethardt turned to him with eyes of disbelief, causing Regis to awkwardly scratch his head.

«I'm not confident we can do it, but... we don't have a choice,» Altina continued.

«I see. Such is life... I assume the fact you're telling me this means you want us to take part in the attack?»

Altina nodded.

«That's right. But don't misunderstand—I won't have you charging straight at that hive of cannons. I wouldn't wish that on my men or yours.»

Diethardt tilted his head.

To take a fort, it was common practice to attack with enough brute force to overwhelm the opponent's defense. Standard procedures would have them tread over their fallen comrades to reach the walls, and once these had been breached, they would engage the enemy until their artillery had been suppressed and their main gate opened. That was how victory was usually attained.

Those were the very fundamentals Diethardt and his men had followed in their attack on Fort Sierck. Their plan had been to conceal themselves in the blizzard so as to avoid setting off the cannon fire.

«What is your plan, Tactician?»

«I do have an idea, for what it's worth.»

Regis sent a cautious look to the men unloading the carriage. He contemplated for a moment.

«...This plan is one I would categorize as an underhanded scheme... The fewer people who know about it, the better. If necessary, I can tell you alone, Mr. Diethardt. Are you all right with that?»

It was now Diethardt's turn to contemplate.

«Do I need to know the full plan to play my part in it?»

«You do not.»

«Hm... Then speak not. I don't believe you'll lead us into a trap at this juncture, Tactician.»

«It's still dangerous, though.»

«I would not doubt it. Such is my debt to you. And, more importantly...»

«Mn?»

But Diethardt chose to hold his tongue.

He had urged the tactician to say only what was necessary, but Regis checked

with Altina, just in case.

“Princess?”

“If he says it’s fine, why don’t we just go with that?”

“Understood.”

Regis condensed the information and briefed Diethardt. The men who had now finished unloading the supplies watched silently from a distance as the plan was carefully explained, one step at a time.

Once he had heard everything, Diethardt gave a hearty nod.

«...Affirmative. We will carry it out without fail.»

«Many thanks!» Altina exclaimed.

This time, Diethardt firmly shook the hand the princess extended to him. Then, he exchanged a handshake with Regis.

«Thank you.»

«I shall repay my debt to the young princess. For the honor of my country... and my love for her tactician.»

«You mean that in a friendly, kinship sort of way, right!?»

The intrepid young man leaked a slight smile.

An urgency burning in her eyes, Altina offered a concluding bow.

The tanned lion pelt mantle flourished in the wind as he turned away, and he and his comrades disappeared into the depths of the snowy forest beyond.



The Germanian Federation was vast. Twenty-two kingdoms and duchies, large and small, gathered together to form a single nation.

However, their sovereign state, San Preussen, was far from perfect, and infighting often broke out between its member states.

The grand duchy of Varden belonged to the Federation, and since its foundation its land had been threatened by neighboring lands—especially the Belgarian empire—a number of times. But the situation had taken a complete

turn with the construction of Fort Volks.

The budget required for war could be safely reduced by a large margin.

Varden's mountain ranges had always been blessed with an abundance of iron ore and their soil was plentiful with natural resources. This considerable decrease in their required expenses put the state in especially favorable financial standing within the Federation.

Using its surplus funds, Varden would go on to hire accomplished mercenaries, granting them good-quality weapons and keeping their artillery in top shape.

As their national power grew, the state endeavored to cultivate new land in the forests the barbarians called home.



Holger was one of the mercenaries who had drifted in, having heard of the grand duchy's warm reception to his ilk.

He would turn twenty-eight this year and had been hired half a year prior. While he was a veteran in combat, as mercenaries went, he was a newcomer to Fort Volks, and so was still being treated as a new recruit.

Mounting his horse, he galloped out to the main gate, seemingly unconcerned with the heavily falling snow. An urgent request for reinforcements had come in from the civilians clearing the forest: A number of barbarians had been spotted.

And so, they ventured into the forest to put them down. Twenty cavalry. Only the one leading the charge was a knight of Varden; the rest were mercenaries.

The breath of man and horse alike turned to a white fog that trailed behind them, and the snowstorm grew stronger by the minute. Holger cursed to himself.

Good grief... Those barbarians just had to cause trouble on such a godforsaken day... Can't those eyesores just learn to hibernate?

Neither the reclaimed land, nor the grand duchy, nor even Fort Volks itself spurred any deep feelings of attachment from Holger. A mercenary fights only for himself, which made having to chase down barbarians who had fled like

hightailing beasts all the more soul-crushing.

The forest thickened. Twenty horsemen proceeded in single file. Withered branches piled over with snow made the already cloudy sky even darker.

They had escaped this way, according to their intel. The knight at the lead was supposed to be following their trail.

Holger's elderly warhorse strayed from the line.

"Hey now!"

He tugged the reins to bring the crumbling animal back on track. *Don't make this any more troublesome than it has to be!* he scolded, all of a sudden growing anxious.

We haven't chased them too far, have we?

He looked to the knight leading the unit. It was hard to offer advice from his lowly position, but could his horse have demanded rest because it had sensed danger? *Was it trying to get me to reconsider?* he thought.

A lone arrow pierced through the air. It collided with the shoulder of the knight's light armor, bouncing off with a metallic din.

An ambush!?

War cries suddenly rose from the forest depths as if signaled by the arrow's twang. A harmony of shouts stacked on top of one another, and the ground seemed to tremble as a thunder of footsteps approached; they had more than a mere ten or twenty people.

The knight at the lead hurriedly stopped his horse, raising a nervous shriek.

"B-Barbarians!"

"Fool! Don't stop!" Holger inadvertently found himself yelling at his superior. He had stopped, but the line of horsemen behind him meant he had no way to turn back.

Their only option was to weave through the trees and then make a U-turn back in the direction they'd come from.

This idea wasn't novel by any means, and in moments the other mercenaries

had changed the orientation of their horses and scattered. No one had any obligation to save the foolish knight; running was their best chance of survival.

It was said the white flag didn't work on barbarians. They were beasts on the hunt; avengers driven by hatred; demons who had been abandoned by God. Rumor had it they ate men alive, slowly tearing them limb from limb.

Holger could feel a detestable sweat on his back. He could hear the rumble of countless footsteps further down their path of retreat.

"We're surrounded!" someone shouted in what was almost a hysterical shriek. The mercenaries had moved to retreat, only to have their one remaining escape closed off. They regrouped into a tight formation without the need for an order.

The extraordinary tension in the air had even the horses stifle their breath. Holger and the other riders stood in the very depths of hell.

The barbarians finally appeared. Their bodies were draped in the pelts of slain beasts and they brandished various axes and swords. Many were speaking with strange, threatening elocutions. What idiot had reported there were only a few of them? They had such a large gathering that they had now formed a sturdy wall around them.

"I hear they devour humans alive..." one of the mercenaries groaned.

"A-Anything but that!"

Another, younger mercenary drew his dagger and pressed it against his own throat. He had turned eighteen just the other day, having bragged to his colleagues that the dagger was a present from his parents back home.

Suicide, eh? Not the worst way to go... Yet, despite the thought, Holger placed his hand on the dagger and stopped the young man. He didn't have a reason for doing so; there was no chance they would survive.

The young man met Holger with uneasy eyes, as if questioning why he had stopped his hand. No words passed the boy's lips as he awaited his answer.

Holger considered it again, but he really didn't have a reason. What was he supposed to say? That he shouldn't give up? That they can find a way out so

long as they stay alive? That he shouldn't die before his elders? They were all hollow phrases devoid of any use or substance. He hadn't made a practice of carrying around sensible words for such a situation.

So instead...

"Follow me!"

Holger drew the sword from his hip.

Their enemies were numerous, but they had twenty cavalry. As long as they raced as one—as a single spear—there was a chance just a few of them might make it out alive...

From the barbarians that surrounded them, a man dressed in conspicuously gaudy clothes made his way forward. He wore the skin of a lion as a cape.

"Brave. But we have invested one thousand troops into this mission. I should warn you of your recklessness," the man said in fluent Germanian.

"A barbarian just..."

"My name is Diethardt. I shall hear yours in return."

"Holger. Are you really a barbarian? Or are you soldiers from another nation of Germania?"

"Neither. This forest is our territory. We are warriors of the nation of Bargaenheim."

I've sure as hell never heard of you! Holger cursed internally.

"What are you going to do to us? Are the rumors true? That you're gonna eat us alive?"

"Climb down from your horses, throw down your swords. If you answer our questions, you'll be free in two months..."

"Wha—!?"

He didn't know the reasoning behind his generous offer, but to mercenaries who were prepared for death in such a desperate situation, it was a proposal straight from the heavens.

Holger exchanged a look with the barbarian.

The young man who had been about to take his own life immediately dismounted his horse. He put down his dagger and the sword at his waist and dropped to his knees. Then, he placed his hands together in prayer.

“Erbarme dich, mein Gott!”

As the other mercenaries quickly followed suit, Holger refused to take his eyes from Diethardt for even a moment.

It seemed he had no other choice.

The mercenaries were taken prisoner by the barbarians, each one led off separately with their arms and legs in chains. When it came to Holger’s turn, he found himself shoved into a shallow cave with no more than a single blanket.

He thought he would die from the cold... but, from time to time, he would be given warm water and heated rocks to keep warm. They really did intend to keep them alive, it seemed.

As darkness fell, he could hear the sobs of a young man from another cave nearby.



Three days later, the lonesome Holger was escorted to see Diethardt.

His arms and legs were bound and, naturally, his sword was still confiscated. Granted, it was a miracle he was even still alive.

Beside Diethardt was a man wearing a Belgianian military uniform, and next to him stood a girl with crimson eyes. She wore a hooded robe and her mouth was covered so Holger couldn’t make out who she was, but the fact she was hiding her identity no doubt meant she was someone with status.

Holger held back the urge to spit.

Goddammit... So the Belgianian empire is involved.

They were surrounded by barbarians armed with spears.

The man in uniform, whose face was rather weak for a soldier, directed him to a wooden chair.

“Please sit.”

«Hmph... I know how this goes. Comply or be killed. Yes, I'll sit wherever you want me to.»

And so Holger sat across from the imperial soldier, a wooden table between them.

The man began speaking in stilted Germanian with an irksome Belgarian accent.

«I do not wish to kill you.»



«You expect me to trust the empire?»

«The choice is yours to make...»

«Tsk.»

Holger waited for what he had to say. When he'd been taken prisoner, Diethardt had told him he'd have to answer questions.

The man nodded. «My name is Regis,» he said.

«Holger.»

«Then, Mr. Holger, could you please look at this drawing?»

A map of some man-made corridors was laid out over the wooden table. *Some sort of mine?* For a second, Holger thought he would be made a slave to work in a mine, but quickly realized it was something else entirely.

«This is... Fort Volks!?»

«If you recognize it, it must not have changed too much. That's good.»

«Bastard. How did you come about such a—»

«Oh!? You recognize the value of this document?» Regis beamed with delight.

Holger rose from his chair. «What are you going to use this map for!?»

«I had my share of troubles, you see. It was a real hassle to get the mayor of Theonveil to show me a book from his personal collection... Apart from this beauty, he had books and notes that were said to have been lost during the war. The previous mayor must have been quite a bibliomaniac. His book on northern medicinal herbs was especially wonderful; not only does it have practical utility, it has irreplaceable historic value and—»

“Regis? Regis, where are you going with this?”

The robed girl behind him tapped him on the shoulder. To address a soldier so lightly, she presumably had some degree of status. She was probably an aristocrat.

The man called Regis sat back down.

«Pardon me.»

«So you made off with the map... And what are you going to do with it?»

«Why, I'm going to take the fortress, of course.»

He nonchalantly spouted such unbelievable words.

«That's idiotic!»

«Correct. We have to do something idiotic... which is why I need information from you. This map is from forty years ago. The fortress has been remodeled and improved since then, yes? Where are the guard stations? The powder magazine? Where does the commander stay?»

«...Even if you knew, it'd be useless if you can't reach the fortress itself.»

«Correct. So it doesn't matter if you tell us, does it?»

«You're going to interrogate the others if I don't speak up, eh?»

«No.»

«Huh?»

«I am going to ask all of you regardless. I need to compare answers, you see. But I cannot release those who lie. You will only be released for your honesty... Though I'm sure you won't be able to return to the fortress, so we will afford you travel expenses and return your horse and sword.»

Holger groaned. When he spelled it out, it all sounded so self-evident, but quite a bit of thought had clearly gone into this plan. The order to capture them all must have come from this man.

«Will you really release us?»

«I can't prove it, so you'll have to believe me... But I will make a promise. I will release you in two months.»

Holger glared at him. Regis stared back with a fixed expression. Diethardt and the robed girl behind him seemed to be awaiting his response as well.

It was clear that the surrounding barbarians were growing more tense. Would he be killed the instant he refused? He didn't feel like putting that to the test.

«...Fine. I'll speak... But help the others out, too. They're all a good-spirited bunch.»

«...Understood. We will compare your answers to what we hear from the others, and if they match up, you'll all be saved.»

«Honest?»

«Swear to God.»

Regis put his hands together and touched them to his chest.

Religion had spread through the territories of Belgaria and Germania before either nation had been founded, meaning that, while they were bitter rivals in war, they shared much when it came to beliefs; both lands worshiped the same one true God.

Holger lowered his finger onto the map.

«This is the front gate. There's a guard station right behind it.»

«...All right.» Regis produced a pen and made a note.

No matter what I tell him, there's no way to get through the endless bombardment of cannon fire... What is this man thinking?



Regis spent the week commuting back and forth between Fort Sierck and the barbarian forest. He took Altina along with him on the first day as she wanted to know what he was doing, but having her visit a barbarian settlement with no guards would normally be completely out of the question.

Should Everard find out, Regis felt he might fall prey to a wild fauchard, so he made his rounds on his own from the second day onward. Though, as Regis couldn't ride a horse, he had needed Eric to drive the carriage.

By the time every prisoner had been questioned, he had composed a relatively trustworthy overview of Fort Volks.

Right as the sun descended beyond the horizon, Regis returned to his own room. He placed the completed documents on the table and crumbled onto the bed.

The faint red glow of the sun faded, leaving the room in complete darkness.

“How exhausting...”

And just like that, he sank into a deep, deep slumber.

A violent knock shook his door.

“Oi, Regis!”

“Err, Sir Jerome?”

The door swung open just as he raised his body from the bed. Something similar had happened before, but... How was he supposed to react had he been in the middle of changing or something?

Jerome was a rare sight to behold. For once he was properly wearing his full uniform; he hadn't even loosened it at the neck as he usually would.

“What's the meaning of this!?” the margrave bellowed.

“Of what...?”

Regis rubbed his eyes. A blinding light streamed in through the window.

“Wasn't it just nighttime, or am I—”

“Snap outta this daze, or else I'll wring your neck, trash!”

“Oh, yes. My apologies.”

He had apparently fallen into a deep, dreamless slumber. Judging by how bright it was, it was already time for breakfast.

He turned his gaze to an item in Jerome's hand that had been thrust toward his face. An invoice. It listed the goods Regis had bought from a merchant. Goods of a considerable cost and quantity.

“...Fort Volks isn't particularly far, but there are still many things we need for proper siege,” Regis noted as he eyed the paper.

“Are *thirty cannons* an absolute necessity!?”

“Didn't I tell you I was buying them?”

“I heard you were buying cannons, but not this many! Are you planning to take on Fort Volks by making a fortress of your own!?”

“Oh, that's an interesting idea... But the ones I bought were mobile, medium-

sized cannons. Fort Sierck only has eight of them, so—”

“That’s already enough!”

“I ran a few numbers, and taking breakdowns and such into consideration, we’ll need at least this many.”

“Where did you get the money for this!?”

“Eh? Well, I... sent the bill to your house...”

“So it’s my money!?”

“Yes, but it was originally the imperial army’s money. You’ve just been cheating the books. And, if you don’t use it here, you might never get a chance to use it again.”

“Tsk.”

Jerome made a face that appeared to scream “I get it, but I don’t like it.”

Regis got out of bed, attempting to flatten the creases in the uniform he had accidentally worn to sleep, and got his appearance just barely in order.

“The fact that the invoice is here means the goods have been delivered?”

“Yeah.”

“Sorry... I’ve made the general do the job of a chamberlain...”

“My thoughts exactly. I wouldn’t have had to come all the way here if you’d just woken up at a reasonable time.”

“You could have asked a soldier to...”

Regis trailed off as Jerome met him with a terrible glare. The tactician gave a small shrug before he spoke again.

“...Well, I suppose you shouldn’t really talk about the finances in front of the troops.”

“So you do get it. This is your fault for sleeping in. Not even nobles are this bad.”

“Q-Quite right... My body just feels a little heavy—”

“You lack discipline.”

“Erk.”

He couldn't argue with that. Jerome, Altina, and the other soldiers trained zealously from the break of dawn.

Am I just that unfit? Regis mused as he placed a foot... somewhere that wasn't in front of him.

“Huh?”

He had intended to head toward the door, and yet now he could see nothing but quickly approaching panels of wood.

I'm going to hit the floor!

But just before he made impact, his body was yanked up by a strong force.

“What the hell are you doing!?”

It took him a moment to notice it, but Jerome had wrapped an arm around him. He had come dangerously close to falling over.

“...Ah... Thanks... Hac!”

“Hey, what's up with you!?”

“Well, I tripped and—”

“Dunce. Your body is burning up, goddammit!”

“Eh?”

Jerome supported Regis's back and touched a hand to his forehead. His fingers were rough and calloused.

“You have a fever.”

“Oh...”

Now that he mentioned it, he felt as though he was floating—or rather, that his feet didn't reach the ground—and his head was somewhere up in the clouds. It seemed this wasn't because he had only just woken up.

A look of worry crossed Jerome's closely drawn face. Regis didn't think he was the sort to worry about his subordinates' health, but... perhaps this was the reason he had garnered such popularity.

“Tsk... Bloody weakling! It just had to be at such a hectic time!”

“...Sorry.”

“Sleep. Now.”

“Right.”

As they spoke, the faces of two girls popped in through the doorway that had been left wide open. Altina made a dubious face as she saw Regis swept up in Jerome’s arms.

“What’s going on?”

“...Were you kissing?” Clarisse offered quietly.

“Don’t screw with me! Why would I ever kiss this piece of garbage, huh!?” Jerome’s face was red—not from embarrassment, of course, but rage. He dropped Regis, leaving him to unsteadily teeter to the bed.

Altina raced over. “What’s wrong!? You’re not looking too good,” she exclaimed.

“Yes... I have a fever...”

“Eh!?”

She touched her pale hand to his forehead. It was pleasantly cool and comforting. And ever so soft. Regis’s pulse quickened as he remembered the time he had held this hand before.

“It’s true. You’re hot. Your face is red, too. Are you all right!?”

“...I might be done for.”

“Don’t just give up! Is there anything you need?”

“I’m sorry... A cup of water...”

“All right, I’ll have it here in a jiffy. Anything else? Are you hungry?”

“Thanks... Bread or something...”

“Is that everything?”

“What about...”

“I’m not buying you a book.”

Regis closed his half-open mouth at her words, which warranted him a rather fed up glare from Altina.

“Prepare some food and water,” Jerome ordered Clarisse. “I’ll call the doctor.”

Her eyes opened wide in shock.

“Mn? What’s wrong?” he asked.

“...I’m just surprised. You’re being very caring.”

“What!? Enough nonsense. This is no different from maintaining a chipped sword. Regis is trash, but he’s trash that still has some use. That use is all I care about.”

“...Is that so?”

Clarisse dropped into a bow, her face as expressionless as ever, and made for the dining hall. While she was cheerful and quick to joke with Regis and Altina, when it came to others, she was unsociable to a mysterious extent. This was the first time Regis had even seen her converse with Jerome.

Jerome looked over Regis with a scowl, an unmistakable reluctance in his eyes.

“Get better in a day. Or die.”

“...I’ll do my best.”

Altina pulled the blanket over him.

“Are you cold? Should I bring more?”

“Thanks, but I’m fine...”

“Hey. Is there anything else you want me to do?”

“Let’s see... Right. Altina?”

“What’s up?” She eagerly moved in close.

“I’m counting on you to pay the merchants. The fee is ready in the safe, just hand it over. Have Mr. Everard look over the goods.”

“Oh... Sure.”

“And...”

“Yeah!? What is it!?”

“...I don’t want this cold spreading, so take care not to enter this room anymore.”

“Hmnn...”

Altina nodded, her lips pursed in a visible pout.



The lady doctor checked Regis’s pulse and temperature. She was using her bare hands rather than any equipment, so her inspection tickled a bit.

“Hm, yes... Overwork, no doubt.”

“...I see.”

“You need some proper rest today—and tomorrow too, preferably.”

“Ah, but it seems the equipment is here. I’ll need to explain how we’ll use them so the troops can grow accustomed to—”

A stern look knocked him silent.

“Mr. Tactician—or whatever your name is—the complications of overwork start in the stomach. You’ll feel like your food isn’t giving you energy anymore. Then it spreads to your heart. One day you feel just fine, then the next morning your body’s found cold. Do you understand me?”

“Erk...”

“The worst part is, this disease doesn’t usually come to people who’ll rest if you tell them to... so I prepared a certain medicine.”

“That’s a huge help. If you have a medicine that’ll cure me...”

On the doctor’s signal, Everard burst through the door. The bald man’s beard was so large it felt as though the room had shrunk.

“Wa-hahah! Down already? You need more *swoosh* in your life! *Swoosh!*”

He pantomimed some practice swings in the room.

The lady doctor winked.

“He’s all yours, Knight Captain.”

“Right! Leave Regis to me!”

“Fufufu...”

Regis goggled, unable to grasp the situation before him.

“Eh? What’s...?”

“Your health is connected to the fate of our goddess!”

The “goddess” he was referring to was, of course, Altina. It was connected to some aboriginal belief system, or so Regis had heard.

“Meaning! Making sure you get some sleep and protecting you from illness is proof of my devotion! My life’s calling!”

“Eeeh!?”

“Now sleep! I’ll even sing you a lullaby.”

“I could do without one!”

The doctor nimbly made her way to the door.

“Far too many soldiers have injuries from consecutive days of harsh training, so I’ve got work to do. Knight Captain, please make sure the tactician sleeps until tomorrow.”

“Ma’am, yes, ma’am!”

“Hah...”

Standing tall as though he were an obelisk, Everard filled the doorway, watching him with an intent stare. Regis sighed.

“Um... I get it. I’ll go to sleep... Aren’t you busy with training, Mr. Everard?”

“Rest at ease; I have Eric. It’s in my nature to keep my guard up even after I’ve struck the finishing blow. Moreover, I know the time to be most wary is when your enemy surrenders. That cautiousness is what’s kept me alive to this age.”

“...Is that how it works?”

A warrior great enough to bring not only his horse, but his grandchild to the frontmost line. His words were intriguing in the same way as a tall tale—so much so that Regis was eager to hear the stories this man could tell. Unfortunately, his expression made it quite clear that the next time he opened his mouth, he would be singing.

Regis gave up and closed his eyes.

“Hah... There’s a mountain of things I have to do.”

There weren’t very many days left until the deadline, February 12th.

He grew nothing but more impatient. Round and round his head spun, turning through page upon page of stories he had read once upon a time. Gradually, his weary body shut down, as if sinking into a murky bog.

“Hm...?”

“Oh my.”

When he next opened his eyes, there stood Clarisse in the madder-red light.

“...Is this... a dream?”

“When someone appears in your dream, it’s apparently because that person is thinking about you.”

“...Yes, I’ve read a poem about that before.”

“Which means my feelings have finally reached you. How delightful.”

“...All right, I’m not dreaming. Looks like I’m up.”

“You need to dream more, Mr. Regis. Where are your aspirations?”

Clarisse shrugged. She didn’t laugh, per se, but there was a clear hint of enjoyment in her expression; she only showed her emotions this openly when she was in a terribly good mood.

“Did you come to bring me that water?”

“When I look at you like this, it reminds me of my time in the capital.”

“Really? Did you have a family member you had to look after? Ah, no... I don’t

mean to pry.”

“Fufu... Close, but no. I grew flowers.”

“So I’m the equivalent of a flowerbed to you.”

“I hope someday you’ll bloom so you can entertain me even more.”

“If only I could...”

“Oh, you’ll manage, Mr. Regis. I’m sure you will.”

As always, she was placing baseless faith in him. He surveyed the room.

“Is Mr. Everard around?”

“He drops by from time to time... ‘He moves less than a corpse. He’s definitely asleep. Well, that or dead.’ Those were his words.”

“Hahaha...”

“It’s nothing to laugh about. The princess was terribly worried.”

“Was she really?”

“But since you told her not to enter the room, she keeps sending me.”

Now that he thought about it, he had indeed said that when his head was hazy from the fever.

“She actually listened to me? That’s a surprise.”

“What are you talking about, Mr. Regis? The princess has always done precisely what you’ve said.”

“I suppose so...”

Both her desire to become empress and her duel with Jerome has been thanks to his own careless words. Of course, he was no more than a trigger, setting into motion the goals that had already been decided in her heart.

Simply knowing she was counting on him made him regret putting his health in such a state.

“How are you feeling?”

“...Quite a bit better.”

“Oh, that’s a shame.”

“Err, why?”

“I had a monopoly on your sleeping face.”

“W-Wha—!? What are—!?”

“Fufufu... But it’s more fun speaking to you when you’re awake. I’ll bring you some food later on. Until then, please rest a while longer.”

“You’re right. Given our situation, I have to prioritize recovery.”

“Right.”

He accepted the water from Clarisse and downed the entire glass. As it touched his throat, the liquid immediately disappeared, as if sucked away into dry desert sands. He could feel his body demanding more. His throat was overcome with a prickling soreness, perhaps due to his dry cough.

Clarisse made off with the unlit candle from the table; it was the only source of light in the room.

“Make sure you take it easy until morning.”

“Oh dear... You don’t trust me, do you?”

“Fufu... Of course I trust you. I trust you’ll start reading the moment you feel even the slightest bit better.”

“Mnn.”

He couldn’t deny it. Had the moon been out that night, perhaps he would have read even without a candle.

Partially silhouetted against the madder-red sunset, Clarisse looked at him sadly.

“...Mr. Regis... Please don’t die.”

“Yeah... I’ll try not to...”



And so came the fated day. A grand total of three thousand soldiers lined the plaza of Fort Sierck. Two thousand would participate in the expedition, while

the others would remain to defend the fort.

With the largest force among the barbarians—Bargenheim—on their side, presumably only the Germanian Federation would dare launch an attack on them. There was therefore no reason to leave so many soldiers on defense, but...

Regis had his doubts about Second Prince Latrielle's sincerity. If simply weakening their war potential was his objective, their fort should be safe. However, if he wanted Altina's complete fall from grace, or to have her killed, there was a chance he had leaked the day of their departure to the enemy.

An opposing force could crash down on Fort Sierck during their absence, and with their base demolished, the regiment would collapse. There was also the equally likely chance that the expeditionary force could be pincered from both sides. The remaining one thousand were also reserve forces should the main army fall into such a predicament.

According to the records, two thousand was the lowest number ever mobilized to take Fort Volks. The over-thirty cannons loaded in their wagons might have counted for something had the fourth capture attempt not used around the same number.

The plaza overflowed with the pungent smell of horses, the clatter of armor, and the heated enthusiasm of a few thousand troops. Everard and Eric came over to Regis, who had been looking over their ranks from a corner.

They were both in full plate armor, equipped with a polearm and longsword, respectively. When the two stood side by side, there was even less of a resemblance between them.

"The day's finally come!" Everard boomed.

"Thank you for all of your efforts, Regis," said Eric.

"...Likewise." Regis bowed his head. "...That's right. It's finally time."

"Are you feeling any better now?" Eric asked.

"Yeah, I think so."

"You look as tired as ever."

“Hahaha...”

Everard beat his chest. “Just leave the fort to me! I’ll be awaiting the good news!”

Regis had assigned Everard, Jerome’s trusted retainer, to lead the defense effort. Without a strong, unifying leader, perhaps the troops would arbitrarily surrender if the enemy did attack. For that reason, the commander he chose was an even more important decision than the number of soldiers he left behind.

He had intended to leave Eric behind as well, but the young man had joined the expedition of his own volition, insistent on being Regis’s guard. Altina’s left arm hadn’t healed yet, so Regis was thankful to have a reliable knight in the main camp.

The two returned to their positions. It was Jerome who came up next.

“Hey, Regis.”

“Did something happen?”

“There’s one thing I thought I should ask,” he murmured, before discreetly looking both ways. They were quite some distance from the troops, so nobody else was nearby.

“I do hope it’s something I can answer...”

“What do you call the princess?”

“Me? Well, I call her... ‘Princess,’ of course.”

“Then what’s this whole ‘Altina’ thing supposed to mean?”

“...!?”

Regis froze. When had he overheard him?

Jerome squinted at him.

“So I didn’t mishear. Are you actually some kinda high noble? I always thought you were too knowledgeable for a commoner.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me. You could go back to my great-grandfather and all you’d find is peasants. In fact, I’m still paying off my fees from the military

academy.”

“You haven’t settled those yet?”

“I could have paid them off had I been able to spend three years in Thénézay’s army...”

“Hmph. Then why is someone like you calling the princess by a pet name?”

“I wonder that myself.”

“You get along with the maid, too.”

“Oh... No, Ms. Clarisse just enjoys teasing me...”

Though she had treated him kindly when he was sick.

“I was talking about Elin.” Jerome’s expression somehow turned even grimmer.

“Eh!?”

“Oh, so you’re like that with the princess’s maid, too? Is wooing women another skill you picked up from your books?”

“Hahaha... Of course not. Ms. Elin is simply devoted to her work on behalf of you, Sir Jerome. I have absolutely no luck with women.”

Jerome looked at him as if he were looking at a complete fool.

“...Well, let’s just forget about the maid... What’s your relationship with the princess?”

“We’re but a commander and her tactician. She’s a fickle one, as you know, so I’m sure she just permitted me to use the nickname on a whim.”

“I should hope so.”

Regis could feel a sudden anxiety bubbling up within him.

“Err, Sir Jerome... Are you asking because... The princess... Do you have feel —?”

“I’m asking because, while you may be her strategist, a scandal with a commoner would impact troop morale. Don’t cause me problems with your trifling nonsense, trash.”

“I-I know. Right...”

Any unsavory rumors would become unforeseen obstacles on her already treacherous path. He needed to interact with her more cautiously.

It was at that very moment that the lady in question stepped out before the lines of soldiers. Her left side was covered by a mantle, as it had been for a while now, and she was wearing armor over her dress in preparation for their expedition.

Altina climbed onto the podium. The soldiers stood at attention, awaiting her words.

She raised her right hand.

“How are you all feeling today!?”

“UUUUUUUUUUH!!”

As expected, her loud voice was answered with an even louder roar from the troops—an uprush so great one might think the ground was shaking beneath their feet.

Jerome made a bitter face.

“‘How are you feeling?’ What kind of an opener is that? What is this, a picnic?” He swore under his breath, keeping his voice low enough that it wouldn’t reach the troops.

Regis shrugged.

“That’s Altina for you... What do *you* usually yell then?”

“Let’s see... ‘Make sure your wills have been written. Either we kill the enemy, or we die trying!’ ...That sort of thing.”

“...What a pleasant way to address the troops.”

Altina threw her voice again.

“Soon we’ll be attacking Fort Volks! I’m sure you’ve all heard why it’s come to this!”

The soldiers went quiet, allowing her to continue.

“If we refuse to take the fortress, we’ll be marked as traitors! But, the way I see it, that’s a ridiculous reason to go to battle!”

“Hey...” Jerome whispered. “What’s she going on about? Is this your doing?”

“My proposal was that she should say something along the lines of: ‘We’re attacking Fort Volks to bring peace to the border. Our plan is sound, but I need you to believe in me and lend me your power...’”

“...What a boring way to address the troops.”

“It’s on the safe side.”

Altina continued:

“I don’t want to fight for that reason, nor do I want to fight for myself. I want to fight for all of you! Those of you with families would do well to picture their faces! Or the faces of lovers! Of friends! And look to the man who stands beside you! He is, and shall forever be, your comrade in arms!”

The soldiers looked to their sides. To their comrades. To a great many soldiers, those around them were fellow warriors who had joined them in battles of life and death.

“We will fight for one another! Our victory will be for those who are precious to us! Never forget that!”

From beneath her mantle, Altina pulled out a large cloth; a cloth that was a warm shade of green. A shield had been drawn in the center, albeit rather shoddily.

Regis had told her once before that green was the color of the people.

“I want to protect our people! I’ll never forget that, no matter what I face! I hope you’ll all do the same!”

The plaza was suddenly astir.

“Is she an idiot?” spat Jerome. “You can only truly fight for yourself. Isn’t that a given!?”

“...I’m on board with her. Though, I never thought she’d say this here.”

“You mean she didn’t consult you?”

“Altina asks for my advice when she’s feeling conflicted... But when she has conviction in her heart, she’ll act no matter who opposes her. That’s the sort of person she is.”

“Tsk... Wipe that damn smirk off your face!”

“Eh? There was a smirk on my face...? Well, I’ll be...”

Regis narrowed his eyes as he watched Altina on the podium.

“A shield to protect the people—this is my flag! The flag I fight under! I want each of you to lend me your strength!” Her voice resounded through the plaza as she shouted as loud as she could.

The soldiers once again quieted down, and soon the square was enveloped in silence.

The air was thick with apprehension; the longer one spent in the army, the more they hesitated upon hearing those words. In the empire, wars were started for the convenience of lords, and soldiers merely joined for the wages.

Those payments would often go toward supporting their families... but few considered this with more than a passing thought. No feudal lord was ever interested in why his men fought. That was normal; such motivations were seen as a personal matter. That was why it was unthinkable that the commander would come out before an expedition and ask her troops to fight for the people.

The troops appeared completely lost.

Then, a young soldier thrust an enthusiastic fist to the heavens.

“*Vive Marie Quatre!*”

Some distance from him, another man raised his sword.

“To be the shield of the people!”

“For our families!”

They were voices expressing their support for her speech. A chorus of distinct cries rose from every direction: voices of ardor and endorsement.

The eyes in the audience that had been darkened by bloodlust mere moments ago were beginning to shine with a different glow—the glimmer of their will to

fight for another. They had lovers, family and friends back home. Comrades beside them. The faces of precious people to remember.

Their feelings toward those around them and those they lived apart from swelled in their chests. There were even soldiers who shed tears.

Everard and Eric screamed out their approval from among the ranks.

Jerome stayed silent, carefully watching the soldiers' cheers.

And Regis found himself once again in awe of Altina's resolute determination and noble ideals.

Imperial Year 851, February 12th—

Three hundred cavalry, six hundred artillery, and eleven hundred infantry. A total of two thousand troops of the Beilschmidt border regiment departed from Fort Sierck.

Chapter 4: The Fifth Campaign to Take Fort Volks

The commander of Fort Volks hadn't changed in twelve years.

General Weingartner was an old veteran who would turn fifty-five this year. Ever since his promotion from chief of staff at the age of forty-three, he had achieved no shortage of victories against the Belgarian empire and the neighboring lands of the Federation.

Thanks to his skillful command and resultant low casualty figures, he had garnered quite a bit of trust from not only the grand duke of Varden, but also his commanders and men.

His hair had already grayed, and in appearance alone one would think he was well over sixty. He was a rather habitual man: he would wake up at the same time every day, eat the same meal, patrol the same route, and perform the same training regimen. It was said his conduct was more precise than the hands of a clock.

One off-day, when he happened to wake up fifteen minutes earlier than usual, the maids panicked, assuming they had overslept, and the cook apologized for being late.

After that incident, General Weingartner made sure not to leave his bed until the clock struck five, even when he did wake up early.

Such an endless string of repetitive days. That was, until a report came in that would disrupt his normal routine.

"Imperial army marching from the south!"

Fort Volks was overcome with both tension and excitement. Their reputation as an impregnable fortress had bred a certain arrogance, so there were many who carried on with their usual banter. But everyone knew the strength of the Belgarian empire.

Had the empire gathered troops from all of their numerous warfronts, they would have just over one hundred thousand men. The preliminary report

estimated only two thousand, but from their past experiences, not a single person in the command room believed that would be the extent of their forces.

Weingartner and eight staff officers had gathered in this strategy room. It was devoid of all furnishings and decorations, bar a long dark-colored table and the flag of Varden which hung on a white wall.

The new chief of staff perused the report from start to finish.

“—so I presume the imperial army will be in sight around noontime tomorrow.”

A young general rose from his seat.

“Fort Volks cannot be breached! Let’s teach them a lesson!”

“Hear, hear!”

“The empire could send ten thousand men and they still wouldn’t even reach our defenses!”

One by one, the others joined in to voice their vigor. Weingartner kept silent, his arms folded as he listened to what the staff officers had to say.

After a long while, he finally opened his mouth.

“We haven’t obtained any intel on the empire mustering their troops, nor have we received a report of any grand expansions at Fort Sierck. Going by what the fort can house, they can’t have more than ten thousand men. In any case, this is the empire we’re talking about; this is probably no more than one of those petty royal squabbles again... We shouldn’t drop our guard... but there’s also no need to lose our minds.”

The officers nodded in silent agreement.

A few had just been putting up a strong front, shaken by the news that such a powerful nation was approaching. But all worries in the room were eased by the old general’s words.

“Commander, what measures shall we take?” the chief of staff asked.

“First, we require a proper grasp of our enemy.”

“Very well. I suggest we send some mounted scouts; we should have more

accurate intel on our enemy within the hour.”

“I’ll leave it to you.”

The chief promptly issued orders to his subordinates waiting behind him. The other officers began to exchange plans and assessments.

“We’ll bring forward the cannon inspection that was scheduled for next week.”

“Good.”

“I’ll make sure the soldiers are prepared for war.”

“We need to replenish our food stock in anticipation of a long battle.”

“We should check the outer wall.”

Their roles decided, each officer rose from the table to go and perform their respective duty. As they began to move, Weingartner gestured for one man to stay.

“Have we received any news on that cavalry unit?” the commander inquired.

“...I’m afraid their whereabouts are still unknown. We’re pretty sure they were ambushed by barbarians. We dispatched a five-hundred-man search party on two occasions, but we haven’t even found any remains.”

“I see... It’s unfortunate, but when this engagement is over, we will ensure their families receive word of their bravery and be given a solatium.”

“Sir!”

The officer stood at attention, then raised an arm in salute before exiting the conference room.

Weingartner was left on his own.

“.....”

Fort Sierck had definitely become a point of interest. He had heard a rumor that, as the previous year had neared its close, the regiment’s much-acclaimed general had lost a duel against Fourth Princess Marie Quatre, who was in turn recognized as its de facto commander.

Even though the black knight was known to be audacious, he was still a margrave of the empire. It was understandable that he could never turn his sword against royalty.

And then this news of a campaign. Was the young and oblivious princess driven by foolish ambition? Or were there other circumstances involved? Whatever the case, he found it rather hard to believe this expedition would be any better prepared than its predecessors.

Standing from his seat, Weingartner returned to his usual routine. He arrived at the dining hall at his usual time, where the cooks had prepared his usual meal.



The next day, afternoon—

The chief of staff in charge of reconnaissance sprinted into the conference room.

“The imperial army is here!”

“They took longer than I expected.”

“That’s because... it seems they’ve set up cannons in the f—”

The burst of an explosion interrupted the already hesitant officer before he could finish.

Weingartner furrowed his brow. He exited the conference room, rounded the cave-like passageway of what had once been a mine, and stepped out onto the observation deck carved into the cliff face. From a slim crack in the rocks, he looked down over the land on the fortress’s southern side.

A withered winter forest spread out before him. A trampled wasteland with barely any vegetation; his soldiers had used the space for training just moments ago. The imperial army was positioned just beyond the forest—42 arpents (3 km) away, if he were to guess.

The fortress’s cannons were the latest model purchased straight from High Britannia, and their elevation served to increase their firing range. Even so, they

were just barely out of range.

According to the reconnaissance report, the imperial army had prepared medium-sized cannons. Their range would likely be somewhere around 28 arpents (2 km). At this distance, neither side would be able to reach the other.

“Those accursed imperials... What are they thinking, lining their cannons up at that distance?”

Another ignition. White smoke rose from a distant cannon, quickly followed by another thunderous *boom*.

The shell didn't even reach the outer wall before planting into the dirt.

“...A misfire?”

Not that any of his officers could provide an answer.

Following on, a different cannon spouted white smoke. Another roar. Another impact in the distance.

A deep crease graced Weingartner's forehead.

“Did the recon squad see anything else? Only cavalry, infantry and cannons?”

“Yes, sir! Along with what were assumed to be large stores of food.”

“‘Assumed’?”

“A vast quantity of wooden boxes and a large tent were sighted.”

“They're prepared for a prolonged battle?”

“That is indeed what it looks like!”

The staff officers grew anxious at the empire's incomprehensible actions. Weingartner paused, deep in thought.

“...It'll be hard to investigate further with those cannons there. Increase the number of people manning the watchtowers, and be wary of night raids.”

“Sir!”

“Also, send some scouts on a large detour to Fort Sierck. Perhaps they sent a small force ahead to buy time while they gathered large-scale reinforcements.”

“I-I see!”

The unknown was always the greatest source of fear.

Weingartner had presented but a single possible explanation for the imperial army's curious behavior, but the staff officers accepted his words as though they were the one and only truth. To set up a base of operations right in front of the fortress, steadily fortifying it as the number of soldiers gradually increased was definitely a tactic that the empire would adopt.

On the other hand, with that strategy, unless they assembled an army larger than he had ever seen before, he knew in his heart of hearts that Fort Volks would never fall.

"If there are large-scale reinforcements in the empire, we must beat down their forerunners before they can arrive. We might have to leave the fortress to fight. Be ready for that possibility."

"Sir!"

On Weingartner's orders, the staff officers clicked their heels together in salute.

That was the first day.

Three days since the engagement had begun—

The bombardment continued night and day. While the shells never reached the fortress, each shot rumbled like thunder.

The very ground beneath them shook. The officers appeared somewhat weary.

"Some of the soldiers are complaining that they can't work due to lack of sleep. Others are worried they're trying to cause a cave-in with the tremors."

Weingartner shook his head.

"An unnecessary worry. These mines were excavated using gunpowder; such paltry vibrations won't do a thing. What's more, in our previous battles, there have been times where the shells actually struck the outer walls. They would never crumble from shells that can't even reach us. Silence anyone who spouts such nonsense. If they insist on stirring up trouble, lock them in the dungeon."

“Sir!”

Everyone in the room who had shared those worries fell silent. Another officer stood.

“The unit we sent to Fort Sierck has returned. They reported no sign of reinforcements... Not yet, at least.”

“Tell them to keep watch.”

“Sir!”

“Commander, we should go out to confront the attackers! There are only two thousand of them! We have over four thousand soldiers! We should be able to win even on the open plains!”

“...They have the black knight.”

“What can one horseman do!?”

The name of this fiery youth was Zechmeister. He was twenty years old with curly copper hair, and his eyes were a deep black. He boasted enough strength to match his sturdy body and undaunted face. His deeds in a skirmish with their neighboring land of Bayerburg had recently earned him a medal from the grand duke.

“I was there during the battle on the Erstein plains...” Weingartner said, narrowing his eyes. “Between the kingdom of San Preussen, the kingdom of Sturmgart, and our own nation, we had amassed twenty thousand troops. We had a vanguard of three thousand armored cavalry.”

“I’m aware...”

“Then you should know he’s not someone to be trifled with. Our armored cavalry was torn apart by Black Knight Jerome’s five hundred horsemen. The campaign was a failure.”

“But commander! Our bronze knights are different from San Preussen’s cavalry of rusted iron! Theirs are knights in name alone! We were entrusted with silver spears by the grand duke!”

This new brand of steel was produced by a Germanian who had learned the craft in High Britannia. It was an alloy reputed to match even trystie in quality.

As weapons made of trystie—also known as faerie silver—were only possessed by Belgianian royalty, generals, and selected elites, the two metals had never actually been compared in combat. But there was no doubt the weapons made of this new alloy were different from the swords and spears they had used before.

Zechmeister had been granted one hundred of these spears from the grand duke, which he had in turn bestowed upon his men.

Weingartner had also considered the possibility that Black Knight Jerome's heroic exploits had been possible only because of his treasured spear, *Les Cheveux d'une Dame*. Regardless, the cautious old general still shook his head.

"The empire has not landed any shots; our outer wall is untouched. There is no point in leaving the fortress. Rather, couldn't that be our enemy's true objective?"

"T-That's..."

"Zechmeister. You would do well to sharpen the spears you have been granted. We'll no doubt be needing them soon."

"....."

The young man's eyes dropped.

Weingartner let out a sigh. *He's still so young...*

As the third night passed, the air was littered with the continued roar of bombshells.



The morning of the fourth day—

Plagued by the endless, reverberating rumbles of cannon shells, not even Weingartner could keep to his usual sleep schedule. "Even if you can't sleep, lie down and let your body rest," he had convinced his soldiers, and he was attempting to put those words to practice himself.

All of a sudden, a frantic knocking came from his door.

“Commander!” a voice called in from outside.

“What is it?”

“The bronze knights have sortied!”

“Gnn!?”

Weingartner leapt out of bed. He was still wearing his uniform, having lain down knowing there would be no time to change the moment something happened.

Throwing open the door without a moment’s delay, he was briefed on the report on his way to the conference room.

Half of the officers were already gathered on the viewing deck; naturally, Zechmeister was nowhere to be seen. The chief of staff pointed through the crack in the rocks.

“They’re initiating hostilities!”

“How could this be...?”

Now that it had come to this, he could only pray that the bronze knights really could stand against Black Knight Jerome.

Evading the barrage of cannonballs and enduring volley after volley of musket fire, Zechmeister’s five hundred bronze knights closed in on the Belgian battalion.

“Uoooooooooh!!”

Only 10 arpents (715 m) remained between them and the irritating line of cannons. And there, at that very moment, the Black Knight appeared, three hundred mounted troops at his side.

«Hmph... And there I was thinking I’d die from boredom. I would’ve rather faced men, but maybe I can get *some* entertainment from whacking moles!» the knight declared in Belgian.

Due to its deep, protracted caverns, those stationed at Fort Volks were often rather mockingly compared to moles. Zechmeister couldn’t follow everything the Belgian knight had said, but understood enough to know it was an insult.

He clenched his teeth.

“Hmph! The black knight is no more than his rusted lance, clinging to his past glory! My silver lance shall put a swift end to him!” the young man retorted in Germanian.

«Don’t you know? A mole pulled from his hidey-hole is even weaker than a rat!»

“Silence!”

Zechmeister spurred his horse into a furious gallop, charging toward their foe until—



The bronze knights of the grand duchy of Varden collided with Jerome's black knight brigade.

"TSUOOOOOOOOH!"

Urging his horse forward, Zechmeister thrust out his new alloy lance. Black Knight Jerome attempted to parry the attack with *Les Cheveux d'une Dame*.

Their weapons met, and the alloy lance was knocked aside.

«What's this? Is all that glimmer just for show?»

"Shut your trap! Blocking's all you're gonna be able to do!"

Zechmeister followed up with a stream of consecutive thrusts, not giving his opponent any room to counterattack.

...I'm pushing him back! He can barely even manage to parry my thrusts!

Jerome's spearmanship was splendid, but his fabled spear—said to be able to shatter any weapon with a single strike—had seemingly been matched. And, in a battle dependent only on skill, Zechmeister was certain he had the advantage.

"I can do this!" he exclaimed. "I can defeat the black knight!"

Jerome chuckled to himself. «Kukukuh... I heard your lance was made of new stuff, so I wanted to see how great it was, but... there's not much I can learn when it's in the hands of an amateur. I'll have to test it out myself.»

"Huh!?"

«Now!»

Matching the next lunge, Jerome leaned into a large, powerful sweep with his lance, and Zechmeister's own weapon was forced aside with such incredible force that it very nearly escaped his hands.

He had managed to hold onto it, but it was already too late; Jerome had been given an opening.

In an instant, offense and defense switched sides.

«Try this!»

"Khh!?"

Then came a flurry of stabs faster than anything Zechmeister had ever seen before. He neglected to even breathe as he desperately dodged each strike, parrying with his own spear when he could. But even then, his shoulder and neck were nicked.

Is he even human!?

A chill ran down the young man's spine. He could feel Death looming over his shoulder.

Jerome's blows were so quick and heavy that Zechmeister could no longer feel his hands, and the target of each strike seemed completely impossible to read. It was as though he were trying to block bullets.

Even when following its point closely with his eyes, he could only barely repel Jerome's lance. Each time their weapons met, Zechmeister was shaken by an impact so great he thought his arms might break. He couldn't see an opening to launch a counterattack.

«Kukukuh... You're surprisingly good. But could you handle me going even faster?»

"You're bluffing!"

His opponent's movements were near impossible to follow; surely he had already been going all out.

But, before he knew it, an intense warmth was spreading down to his left elbow.

"Gah... Khh...!?"

Jerome's lance had sunk into his upper arm.

Zechmeister barely managed to thrust out his own weapon in a frenzied attempt to push back his encroaching attacker.

«Hmph. Amateur. At times like these, you should aim for your opponent's hands...»

Zechmeister's thrust was easily dodged; he had failed to distance the black knight.

The lance impaled in his arm was retracted and then immediately launched forward once again. It was too late; he had no time to block.

He twisted his torso in a desperate attempt to dodge, but to no avail. Jerome's spear plunged deep into his flank.

"GAAAAH!!"

Feeling its rider collapse into its mane, Zechmeister's horse immediately took flight, apparently having realized defeat. The members of the bronze knights hurriedly followed suit.

Jerome raised one hand, stopping his allies from giving chase.

«Go any further and they'll open fire on us! Pull back!»

The black knight brigade receded. It wasn't long before the empire had returned to its ostensibly aimless cannon fire.

By the time his horse reached Fort Volks, Zechmeister's body had already gone cold. Weingartner and his officers met him with solemn faces, having climbed down to the open space just beyond the gate.

The bronze knights respectfully lowered him from his horse, laying him to rest on the ground. The young man who had attempted to become a hero would never open his eyes again.

Weingartner had been on the battlefield since before the man was even born. Even so, he could never grow accustomed to death. He touched a finger to the corner of his eye, then offered a moment of silence.

Some time later, once he had placed the youth's body in a casket, Weingartner gave the order for him to be returned to his family.

He glanced toward the gate. It had already been shut, so he couldn't see the imperial army.

"...The cannons have stopped," he muttered.

"Did they finally run out of ammo?" the chief of staff asked, tilting his head slightly to the side.

"No, they'll start again soon. They continued their bombardment right after

the battle and only stopped a moment ago. Perhaps they're also honoring our dead with a moment of silence."

"Eh!? No, that's... Perhaps."

A general had been slain, his remains returned on a horse. It was normal to offer a silent prayer on the grounds of religion. However, would the Belgianian army really show such consideration to a fallen enemy—let alone one they could no longer even see?

"As far as I know, General Jerome is not an emotional man. Which means the new commander, Marie Quatre, must have ordered it..."

"The empire's royals do love their ceremonies. I can imagine her showing such consideration."

"I thought it was utter nonsense for a little fourteen-year-old girl to become commander... but she may be more skilled at warfare than I gave her credit for. But, in that case... What's the meaning behind this bombardment that can't reach us?"

"Could it be a ploy to lure us into impatiently rushing out like Zechmeister?"

"It's possible. Any unordered outings are to be strictly prohibited. Pass the message to the other units."

"Yes, sir!" the chief of staff answered with a salute.



On the seventh day of battle, the chief of staff came to report at noon on the dot.

"Reinforcements from the capital are scheduled to arrive tomorrow morning. We should then be able to take on the enemy."

"Good."

It took less than two days to move an army from the capital to the fortress. It had already been many times that since the enemy had started their attack; he was starting to think the capital were taking their situation too lightly.

"Additionally, while they haven't caused any casualties, the noise from the

cannons has caused many soldiers to complain of a lack of sleep. As a result, there's a very long line to the infirmary."

"Do what you can."

"Yes, sir! It also seems soldiers have recently begun hallucinating sounds other than cannon fire."

"Other sounds?"

The chief of staff gave a nod, to which Weingartner cocked his head.

"I can't say I've heard anything... Have there been many reports?"

"Quite a few from the soldiers on the first-floor barracks. Perhaps because they're the ones who bear the brunt of the tremors."

"Hm. When I've been on patrol, I feel it's the higher points that shake more."

The whole situation was strangely unnerving. The enemy had brought far too few troops to take a fortress, and yet showed no signs of receiving reinforcements. The cannons continued to fire incessantly even though their shells would never hit. They had set up a large tent and brought with them numerous wooden crates presumed to contain food. Perhaps the cavalry who had disappeared into the barbarian forest some time ago were somehow related...

And now the soldiers on the first floor had started to report hearing strange sounds.

Sounds.

Weingartner suddenly looked to his feet.

"...Don't tell me..."

"Something wrong?"

"Gather the soldiers. Secure the basement armory—"

A conspicuously larger tremor assailed Fort Volks, knocking a number of officers to their knees.

Immediately, Weingartner raced out of the room.

“Gather the soldiers! They’re in the basement! They’re coming in through the armory!”

“General!?”

No staff officer could immediately understand what he meant.

From the hundred-cubit-high conference room, he rushed down several flights of ramps and stairs. As he descended further, his vision became clouded by white smoke.

The scent of gunpowder.

He could hear the sound of clashing swords.

“It’s the enemy!” one of the soldiers screamed.

Weingartner knew then that the imperial army had already invaded Fort Volks. They had come from below.



Two hours before the infiltration—

An open plain bordered the forest, littered with rocks and boulders of all sizes. The earth looked hard, dry, and nigh uncultivable.

Regis spread his map out over one of the rocks, using it as a table. The commanding officer of the construction team stooped down beside him.

“Looks like we’re finally about to breach, Mr. Tactician.”

“So everything’s finally ready?”

“We would’ve finished last night had we been aiming for the front gate...”

“It couldn’t be helped. If we came out at the front gate, we’d just increase the casualties on both sides. We wouldn’t be able to secure a decisive victory right away: they’d likely notice our tunnels, and if they were to then bombard us with cannon fire, our hasty constructions would surely collapse...”

“Yeah. Though the ground here is so hard, I was more worried we wouldn’t be able to dig through than I was about a cave-in... Sorry it took three days longer

than expected.”

“There were a lot of rocks.”

When excavating the tunnel, they would often be stopped by colossal boulders hard enough to bend an iron shovel. In order to pass, they would need to make small cracks in the surrounding rock, which would then be loaded with a small amount of gunpowder and detonated. They also had to bore into the ground to lay the foundations for the support beams they used to reinforce the cave walls.

As such, the process created quite a lot of noise. By incessantly firing their cannons, Regis had masked the noise caused by their tunnel digging under the various other blasts and impacts.

Incidentally, with the tools available to them, the construction team were able to excavate around 40 palms (296 cm) in half an hour. Regis had hired specialists, and rotated between several teams to ensure they could work day in and day out.

Many of the crates disguised as food stock in fact contained mining and construction tools. Rations were much less of a priority as Regis hadn't planned for a long campaign to begin with. The excavated dirt would be hidden under a large tent, and then discarded far away at the dead of each night.

“So, our final move is to detonate the floor above using gunpowder. We'll dig a hole just as deep below to ensure the debris doesn't block our path.”

“Just as planned,” Regis nodded. “We're going in through the armory, so it should be fine, but... it seems their gunpowder is stored in the next room over.”

“Yes. According to the blueprints, the powder room is just next door.”

“I don't want to think about it, but... if we've done our measurements wrong, a four-thousand-man fortress is going to be blown sky high. Neither our construction nor our infiltration teams would get away unscathed, either.”

“The empire's measuring techniques are the best in the known world. Have a little faith, Mr. Tactician.”

“Yeah... I'm counting on you.”

The information drawn from the bronze knights taken prisoner only confirmed what they already knew: The gunpowder cache was located exactly where the blueprint said it was.

But there were always exceptions.

Even after the work squad captain left, Regis continued staring at the diagram. Then he heard the sound of heavy footsteps pressing down dirt.

“You’ll catch another cold.”

“...Hey, Altina.”

“Looks like the tunnel is almost complete.”

“Huh!? How could you tell?”

Was there something he’d overlooked? Some obvious giveaway that might alert the enemy?

Altina stretched over and pinched his cheek between two fingers.

“Because you have a scary look on your face.”

“Urr...”

“You look like you could collapse at any second. Is everything going all right?”

“Yeshh.”

Altina let go of his cheek. It still stung a little.

“We win if we can break into their armory, right?”

“...I think so. Even the most well-prepared soldiers—those who would have worn a full set of armor on the first day—would likely carry no more than a sword this long into the campaign.”

“Right. It’s hard to go about your day-to-day business in a full suit of armor.”

“Indeed... And they’re likely short on sleep, to boot...”

“So are we. The earplugs weren’t much of an improvement.”

“...Yeah.”

As the plan was to keep up the bombardment day and night, the empire had

prepared enough earplugs for everyone. As well as a means to alert everyone in case of an enemy attack.

“If we take the armory, they lose access to their armor and spears...” Regis continued. “Well, the corridors are rather narrow, given that the place was a former mine, so we can’t use long spears either, but having shields and armor should be a huge advantage. More importantly, they’ll no doubt be panicking.”

“They won’t even know how the imperial army got in.”

“Yeah... All we need to do now is split into teams. One to hold back the enemy forces, one to take the cannons, and one to secure the gate.”

Once the gate and cannons were taken care of, the imperial army could break through with ease.

“They have greater numbers than us, don’t they?”

“They do. But, considering our momentum and the limited access they’ll have to equipment, everything should work out in our favor.”

“What about capturing the enemy commander?”

“...It doesn’t really matter where a fort commander who’s lost his cannons and soldiers goes.”

“I see.”

“Anyway, as long as we can suppress the cannons, it’s the empire’s win,” Regis said. He then pointed to a point on the map. “...Right here.”

Halfway up the outer wall of Fort Volks were the holes that served as windows, where the deep black cannons were lined up.

“...Once we take them, we raise the flag,” he continued.

“And then we’ve won?”

“Yeah. Our remaining forces will charge at the signal, and that’s that.”

“What if we can’t raise it?”

“The plan fails, we retreat, and... well, I pray they’re at least somewhat merciful at my hearing...”

“Hmm... Then I’m joining the first infiltration unit.”

“Huh!?”

“The most important step is securing the cannons, right?”

“That’s true...”

“Then I really should go!”

“Don’t be silly, Altina... You’re...”

“I’m what? Royalty? A woman? A child?”

“Injured.”

“Hm. So I could go if I weren’t injured?”

“...Yeah, that’s right. The limited space in the tunnels means we can only send so many people. It’d be unreasonable to send anyone who wouldn’t be able to fight. I’ll leave the infiltration to Sir Jerome, and once the flag is raised, I need you to charge in with the cavalry.”

The injury was an excuse. He just didn’t want to put her up to the most dangerous task.

He did think having the commander stand at the forefront was a noble ideal, but that depended on the plan. Failure meant she would be isolated in enemy territory, buried alive, or—worst case scenario—blown up, fortress and all.

“Yeah. Got it.”

“Do you really get—?”

“I just have to *not be injured!*”

Altina picked up a rock by her feet. She grabbed it with her left hand, which was supposed to be out of operation. It was a rock about the size of a human head.

Fshh. She took a deep breath.

“Haaaaaaaah!!” came a rending cry. Nearby soldiers who had been drawn in by the commotion surrounded at a distance to see what was going on.

Regis’s eyes were fixed on her as well.

“Tsuaaaaaaaaaah!!” Altina’s voice rose remarkably louder.

A great distance away, an imperial cannon fired off as per usual. An explosive noise that shook the earth. At the same time— The rock shattered.

Crumbled pieces of stone fell to the ground. This was no longer an issue of whether or not Altina was still injured; Regis was starting to wonder whether what he had just seen was even humanly possible.

“I did it!”

Altina balled her left hand into a triumphant fist. The soldiers raised cheers, perhaps having seen the display as some kind of performance to raise morale. Regis had no words.

Altina was looking at him, giddy, as if she was expecting him to praise her. “See? I’m not injured!”

“That’s crazy!”

“I’m all better.”

A month and a half earlier than the doctor’s diagnosis!?

“B-But... Having the princess and commander crawling through a dangerous tunnel is...”

“What now? Were you lying to me?”

“Well... N-Not exactly...”

“Then it’s decided! If you dare leave me behind, you’ll really be in for it when the battle’s over, you hear me!?”

“...I’m already in for it. You’re about to give me a stomach ulcer from all this stress...”

“You need to take better care of yourself.”

“Look who’s talking... In that case, I’m joining the infiltration unit as well.”

“Eh? Regis, you know how to fight?”

“I don’t... but I’ll take command on-site. That’ll make it easier to handle problems as they crop up, and I think it should increase our chance of success...”

So, Altina, I want you to be with me.”

“Feh!?”

Her cheeks flushed a warm shade of red.

“I’ll come up with the ideas, and you can make the decisions. Is that not the duty of a commander?”

“Y-You might be onto something...”

“Then have we reached an understanding?”

“Yeah.” Altina nodded.

Regis patted his chest, relieved. It was impossible to exclude her from the infiltration, but...

“Thank goodness... Then we’ll be on the fourth team.”

“Eh?”

“The first team is responsible for stalling the enemy. The second takes the cannons. The third secures the gate. And the fourth provides general assistance, dealing with problems as they occur. They’re all important duties, wouldn’t you agree?”

“I wanna raise the flag! I wanna be on team two!”

“...Huh? Are you not going to honor your words? You just agreed to stay by my side, didn’t you?”

“...!?”

Tears started to well up in Altina’s eyes, taking Regis by surprise. She wiped them away, then immediately took off running.

“Waaah! Regis is a cheateer!!”

“Hey...!?”

He couldn’t deny her words, but the glares from the surrounding soldiers were starting to burn through him.

What are we going to do if weird rumors start spreading!?

Consumed by his thoughts, Regis was feeling the darkness start to close in

around him when the construction team captain came over.

“Err, Mr. Tactician.”

The sudden voice pulled him back to reality.

“Hm...? Did something go wrong!?”

“No, uh... Would you mind if I took those stone fragments?”

“Huh? From the rock the princess crushed? Why?”

“As a good luck charm! What a magnificent sight. Such a beautiful princess, able to shatter a chunk of iron ore with just one hand! I’m sure these pieces would grant a divine blessing that would help in smashing rocks!”

“S-Sure...”

And so the religion spreads, Regis wearily noted over his pounding headache.



Everyone in the tunnel held their breath. As they endured the silence before the mission, the pout Altina had previously been wearing was replaced with an expression of severity, and sweat had started to bead on her forehead.

“If I don’t accompany you here, there would be no point in my joining the expedition.” That had been Eric’s justification for tagging along.

Soldiers lined the tunnel both ahead of and behind them. The cave was dim and gloomy, their only source of light being a single lantern held by the man leading the formation. Everyone breathed as quietly as possible, trying not to make a sound as they awaited the breakthrough.

Each team contained thirty troops; with a fifth and sixth team accompanying them as reserves, the infiltration team totaled one hundred and eighty soldiers.

The work team captain at the lead ignited the explosive that would breach Fort Volks. The spark traveled along the fuse, following it up the wall toward the ceiling.

The soldiers covered their ears with their hands, and opened their mouths in preparation for the blast. Regis, Altina and Eric did the same.

With a tremendous *boom*, dirt and rubble poured down from above. Regis

feared they might be buried alive, but... as luck would have it, he was covered in no more than dust and sand.

“Charge!!” shouted someone at the front.

“Chaaarge!!” Altina echoed from beside him.

Belgarian measuring technology was praiseworthy indeed. Despite having restricted space and nothing more than a forty-year-old map of the enemy’s fortress, they had opened a hole directly in front of the armory.

Granted, the hole was supposed to have led *into* the armory.

The first team stepped out. This was the first time a Belgarian soldier had ever set foot inside Fort Volks.

As gunpowder smoke and dust clouded the air, the imperial soldiers with short spears stepped into formation.

“Go! Go! Go!”

«What in the—!?»

A soldier from the fortress rushed into the room, only to be met with the point of a spear.

“Hyah!”

«Gwah!?»

It easily pierced through his chest, and the soldier moved no more. It seemed the man hadn’t even considered that this might be an enemy attack, having instead assumed the tunnel had collapsed; his hand was cast not on a sword, but a shovel.

Another defending soldier who had seen his comrade impaled before him practically shrieked.

«It’s the enemy!»

Then he, too, was permanently silenced by an imperial spear.

Following after the first team, the second team made for the stairs; the third headed for the gate.

Regis and Altina belonged to the fourth team, who moved in behind them.

“Pah!”

Altina gasped for air the moment she was out of the hole.

She was dressed much lighter than the Belgian soldiers, who wore full plate armor and were armed with shields, but the massive sword at her hip meant she still had a hard time climbing the rope ladder.

The blade was about the length of a short spear, meaning it could probably be used even in the narrow tunnels of the mine—or so Altina insisted as she dragged along the legendary double-edged sword.

It was the *Grand Tonnerre Quatre*—one of seven swords once wielded by *L’Empereur Flamme*; a sword that was treasured by the Belgian empire, and had been temporarily bestowed upon Altina when she was appointed the commander of Fort Sierck.

Given the fact she had been injured, it had only been brought on the expedition to serve as a symbolic decoration to motivate the troops. But seeing her actually wield the colossal weapon seemed to boost morale just as well.

Despite him carrying nothing at all, Regis took the longest to climb the ladder. As he fumbled around on the rungs, Eric slipped ahead and grabbed him by the hand.

“I’ll pull you up!”

“Ah...”

He felt as though he was floating through the air, a sensation that ended with a strong embrace.

“Are you all right, Mr. Regis?”

“...Oh, thank you.”

“Mind your head.”

“Got it.”

“Mrh...” Altina tapped her lips.

They had entered the main passageway of Fort Volks. It was considerably

wider than the other tunnels, perhaps even spacious enough for a long spear to be used. There were tracks on the floor, seeming to indicate the repeated use of carts or wagons.

The walls were bare stone, completely devoid of windows. While there were candles fixed on them at semiregular intervals, most had been extinguished by the blast wave from the breach. The infiltration team had already prepared for this, however, and had equipped themselves with torches.

Altina moved in close.

“Regis, what do we do?”

“Our role is to help out any teams who run into trouble—”

As the words passed his lips, a body toppled down the staircase, raising a terrible din as it fell.

“Gaaaah!”

It was a heavily armored imperial soldier. His armor had been dented and his helmet caved in.

And he wasn’t alone. One by one, fallen Belgarian soldiers tumbled down from the upper level.

It appeared a problem had indeed broken out. Regis wiped the sheet of sweat from his sand-covered face.

“Gnn... Are the cannons better protected than we anticipated?”

“Mr. Regis, I’ll accompany the fifth team!” Eric declared, drawing his sword.

“That’s—”

Altina’s safety was his priority, but Eric was a young knight entrusted to him by Everard. When Regis looked upon the soldiers who had been so easily pulverized, their armor knocked through as though it had been hollow, he couldn’t stand by and allow him to join the attack.

But if they took too long to secure the cannons... The infiltration team consisted of less than two hundred troops; they would easily be quelled and crushed by the four thousand soldiers of their enemy.

Regis was suddenly pulled from his thoughts by the gravelly squeal of metal scraping against the ground.

Altina, with the treasured sword in her right hand, sprinted toward the staircase.

“Here we go, fourth team!”

“Wha—!? Alt— Princess!?”

“Our duty is to jump in and help when a problem occurs! Isn’t that what you said!?” she exclaimed, already bounding up the steps.

“Follow the princess! Move! Move! Move!” the soldiers screamed as they ran after her.

Regis held his head in his hands.

“I-I definitely said that, but... Okay, yes! That’s what I said!”

Then he chased after her as well.

Eric matched his pace, running beside him.

“I see you believe,” he said.

“Eh?”

“That the princess won’t lose to anyone.”

“...I promised to believe... But...”

He was still worried. The enemy side had been quicker to react than he expected.

He could feel the chaos around him dissipate. Had they actually trained for this situation?

Inadequately equipped as they were, the soldiers of Fort Volks had begun their counterattack.

If they were going to suppress the cannons, there was certainly no time to waste.



Once she’d cleared the stairs, Altina readied her blade. The soldiers around

her held spears and swords.

The room they were in now had been used to store tools when back when the fortress had been a mine, so it was a little more spacious than the other areas.

“Let me guess,” Altina spoke aloud. “You’re the commander here?”

Across from her stood an old man wearing the uniform of a commissioned officer. Though his hair had grayed, the glint in his eyes was as sharp as ever.

“Correct. I am Weingartner, the commander of Fort Volks,” the man responded in fluent Belgian.

“My name is Marie Quatre Argentina de Belgaria. I serve as the commander of the Belgian border regiment.”

“I’d heard the rumors, but... you sure are young, princess of Belgaria.”

“Oh, I’ll be fifteen come springtime. Aren’t I already a splendid lady?”

Weingartner heaved a weary sigh.

“You’ve done well to lead an army at your age, let alone make it all the way here. To think you’d invade from underground... Very commendable.”

“Fufu, isn’t it? Though I can’t take credit for that.”

“Hm?”

Altina looked to Regis who was standing behind her.

Upon seeing that Regis was completely unarmed, Weingartner gave an understanding nod. “Your strategy officer.”

“That’s right. He’s my tactician!”

“Once upon a time, young lady, tunneling in combat wasn’t an uncommon stratagem. Because even if you knew it was coming, it was tough to prevent... But nowadays, the tactic has gone out of practice: tunnels are all too easily collapsed under cannon fire... To think you would use those very cannons to conceal the sounds of your digging...”

“Fufu.”

Altina puffed out her chest, her delighted expression practically screaming:

Isn't my tactician amazing?

Weingartner gritted his teeth in vexation, his eyes fixed on Regis with a ferocious glare. The tactician gave a feeble shrug.

“Erm... Sorry about that...”

“Once again, I must commend you. I feel ashamed of my own ignorance. However...” His fists began to tremble, and the old man’s voice rose into a mighty boom. “You shall not go any further! You shall return to the earth from whence you came—either of your own accord, or as corpses!”

Weingartner took up a stance with the iron cane in his hand. It had no spear tip or blade; it was just an iron pole. Yet, as could be seen from the defeated soldiers on the floor below, he struck with enough force to smash heads through their helmets.

Altina gripped her treasured sword in both hands, preparing for battle...

...but Regis simply shook his head.

“Princess, don’t be reckless... There is only one enemy; we have plenty of options here.”

“That’s right, Princess!” Eric exclaimed, his voice cautionary. “Allow me to fight in your stead!”

“No! ...I can’t. Unless I take this on myself, no one will see reason to follow me in the future. I need to keep demonstrating my strength—for the sake of my cause!”

Altina took a pace toward Weingartner. The nearby soldiers retreated a step, then another, so as to avoid becoming caught in the crossfire. After all, they had all seen the duel from a month and a half prior.

Be that as it may, this time, their eyes were not those of spectators.

Through this gesture, the soldiers here had placed their faith in Altina, just as they trusted Jerome and Everard. Her appearance, age and position were irrelevant; here, in this situation, they only recognized her strength on the battlefield.

To Regis, the disparity between himself and the soldiers was unquestionable.

His values and way of thinking were completely different from theirs; no matter how hard he tried, Regis couldn't focus so resolutely on her skill alone.

To him, she was the fourth princess of the empire and a fourteen-year-old girl. Her sword and teacher may have been first-class, but she was still just a girl.

Regis was anxious to the point of nausea; he didn't know what to do with himself. The sight of the soldiers' crushed heads at the bottom of the staircase wouldn't leave his mind.

"...Princess."

"What? You won't be able to stop me, you know."

"I know... Just, please... don't do anything crazy..."

"All right. It's a promise."

Altina turned to face her enemy head-on, watching him carefully as she called back to Regis and the others behind her.

"I'm going to win! Keep up with me!"

Altina kicked off of the ground.

Weingartner swiped with his cane in response.

"I can't lose either! I won't relinquish the land of the grand duchy to the empire!"

"I'm going to change the empire! But I need this fortress to do that!"

"Gnn!?"

Altina's sword swung high above her head...

...and caught on the low ceiling of the mine tunnel.

Weingartner's lips curled.

"Hah. A careless mistake, Princess!"

"What mistake!?"

The sword carved through the hard bedrock above as it continued its arc. The eyes of the white-haired man opened wide.

“How in the—!?”

“Teyaaaaah!!”

The sword had not been stopped by the ceiling. Altina had used her considerable strength to drive the blade through the stone, taking advantage of its weight to further increase the power of her downward strike.

Had Weingartner swung with all his might, perhaps he could have struck first. However, decades of experience had taught him to be wary of the unknown.

His momentary hesitation granted Altina the decisive opening she needed, and the *Grand Tonnerre Quatre* came crashing down on him.

A shrill, ear-piercing wail rang out as the old general blocked the attack with his cane.

But the sword didn’t stop.

“Guoh!?”

The cane of solid iron bent effortlessly, and the tip of Altina’s sword grazed Weingartner’s chest before stabbing into the ground. He collapsed to the ground on his side.

The soldiers surrounded him, spears readied, without a moment’s delay.

“Don’t move!”

“Gh... Kh... Alas... my greatest failure of all—a vital point of national defense, lost. I can no longer face the duchy or its people... Kill me.”

“Sorry, but it’s not over yet! There’s one more thing I need to do!”

And, with that, Altina charged ahead, making her way to a higher floor.

Regis speedily listed off orders to the soldiers.

“Ten remain here, two pass a message below! Tell them we’ve taken the enemy commander! The rest of you, protect the princess!”

The soldiers unanimously voiced their understanding and moved to take action. Regis joined those tasked with following Altina.

Running along beside him, Eric began to think aloud. “She’s amazing... That

princess... To think she could slice through bedrock.”

“You took the words right out of my mouth. It’s ridiculous.”

“I can’t even begin to imagine what she’ll be capable of once her arm has healed.”

“Oh, her arm’s already healed. She made a point of proving it earlier by crushing a rock in her hand.”

“Eh? But her hand wasn’t injured to begin with, so as long as... Ah, but no matter how strong her grip was, it would’ve put a lot of stress on her upper arm, so... wouldn’t crushing a rock still hurt like crazy? Maybe her bones really are fixed.”

“...Excuse... me?”

“You didn’t notice? Back there, she was only using her right hand. Her left was barely even offering support.”

““Only using her right hand’!?”

“Come to think of it, you did say you had a hard time understanding swordplay no matter how closely you watched.”

“S-She cheated...!”

“That’s... quite troublesome...”

Eric offered a dry laugh.

Regis could feel his emotions boiling over. *Had I known that, I never would’ve let her join the attack!*

They proceeded up what Regis could have sworn was an endless number of stairs. By the time they neared the top where the cannons were supposed to be stationed, Eric was forcibly dragging him by the hand.

When they reached their destination, the subjugation had already been completed by Altina and her soldiers. The cannoneers had been herded into a corner, their hands raised above their heads in exhausted surrender.

Among them was a man in a commissioned officer uniform similar to Weingartner’s.

“M-My position is chief of staff... In accordance with our treatises, I request proper treatment as a prisoner of war. Any abuse or excessive torture is in violation of paragraph eight, section—”

“Regis, all yours!”

She boasted the obstinate valor of a true warrior, but Altina was admittedly bad with such negotiations.

Short of breath and having only just arrived, Regis hobbled his way over.

“Hah... Hah... Hah... Hah...”

“.....”

“Hah... Hah... Hah... Won’t... kill...”

“M-Many thanks.”

Much to the contrary, the breathless Regis felt as though he was the one who should be worried about death right now.

“Are you sure that was enough? Shouldn’t you recite some passages or laws?” Altina interjected.

“Hah... Hah... That much’ll... kill... me...”

“You really need to get out and exercise more. Get your nose out of those books every once in a while.”

“...I’ll... consider it.”

It was an arduous task trying to keep up with this princess, especially for someone who was so physically inept.

Thanks to the holes that had been dug for the cannons, Regis was finally afforded a long-awaited breath of outside air. The breeze he had earlier thought of as drearily cold now seemed comforting to the soul. Regis pulled at the collar of his uniform in an attempt to air out his torso.

It had been less than an hour since they had entered the tunnels, but the other soldiers also seemed to be appreciating their return to the outside world. Many stood with their eyes closed, basking in the gentle sunlight and allowing the wind to brush their skin.

Altina pulled out the flag she had prepared earlier. Eric handed her a spear.

“Princess, use this.”

“Thank you.”

“I picked it up from an enemy soldier.”

“Fufu... It’ll give our flag that extra battlefield flair.”

After tying the banner to the spear, Altina leaned her body through one of the holes. Regis felt a chill run down his spine.

“T-The wind is pretty strong, so...”

“Ahahaha! I’m fine, Regis!”

“But if you fall—”

“Absolutely fine! A-OK! You worry too much!”

Swish. Swish.

Altina waved the flag—a flag that both depicted and represented a shield to protect the people.

I pray this battle will be an advantageous first step, Regis thought.

“Hey, everyone!” Altina cried. “We got them!”



At that signal, the black knight brigade charged toward the fortress with Jerome at the lead. The front gate opened in concert; it seemed the third team had succeeded as well.

And so ended Fort Volks's forty-year standing as the grand duchy of Varden's impregnable fortress.

Chapter 5: An Invitation to the Dark

After capturing Fort Volks, Regis returned to Fort Sierck.

Altina, Jerome and even Eric stayed behind. This was perhaps inevitable, as there were still some four thousand Germanian soldiers and a handful of commissioned officers at Fort Volks. Although they had been taken prisoner, a blunder from the Belgarians might allow them to reassemble.

Leaving Jerome to watch the fort alone was a risky move, as there was no guarantee he wouldn't exercise his ambitions, so Altina remained as well. However, the princess would need a trustworthy guard, hence the additional presence of Eric.

Regis sat alone, rattling around in the wagon. He'd made small talk with the other soldiers, but being away from the people he usually spent time with and traveling with a thousand soldiers hauling cargo was both a fresh and unsettling experience.

Once they entered the dark forest, the middle-aged knight leading the unit approached the wagon, an anxious expression on his face.

"Tactician, will we be all right...?"

"What do you mean?"

"There have been recent reports of barbarian attacks in this forest. Perhaps we should hasten the soldiers and—"

"Oh, if that's your worry..."

Regis thought back to Diethardt. He had played an integral role in the plan's preparatory stages.

"...we will undoubtedly be all right," Regis continued. "Of course, we should be wary, but there won't be any large-scale barbarian attacks."

"Hmm, so... the rumors really are true?"

"Ah... So you heard?"

Regis assumed their secret agreement had come to light, but...

“The princess is such a goddess that even the barbarians, those who are no different from savage beasts, will obey her,” the knight proclaimed with a completely straight face.

...that wasn't quite the case.

“Eh? Oh, no... The goddess part is...”

“Fufufu. Of course, I understand. Otherwise, there's no way Sir Jerome would have lost. Truly a goddess!”

“Ha, haha...”

He must be one of Everard's men, Regis concluded, absolutely perplexed by the man's apparent certainty.

The knight puffed out his chest.

“We have the divine grace of a goddess! So shall we be back to the fort by tomorrow at noon, just as planned. Ride your wagon at ease, Tactician, for no ill fortune shall befall us!”

“Yes... I'm already...” He sighed, before resigning to the soldier's conviction. “Thank you for such reassuring words.”



The unit returned without any major incident.

They had been blessed with fair weather. If this was the grace of the local goddess, he had no qualms about offering a quiet prayer.

News of their victory had already reached the fort, and the atmosphere was thick with festivities. When they arrived that afternoon, the wide-open gate was overflowing with cheering soldiers, some even ceremoniously scattering flower petals from atop the ramparts. For some reason, the people of Theonveil had come as well, treating them to meats and ales.

Everard came out to meet them.

“Oh! Regis!”

“Good job holding the fort.”

“Hah, what about you? You did good—very, very good! You really captured Fort Volks! As expected of our tactician. Nothing short of a hero!”

“Huh!? Q-Quit it... I didn’t really—”

“Hold your head high, boy. Those who accomplish what others cannot are called heroes on the battlefield!”

“I see...”

Realizing that he had no real say in the matter, Regis conceded with an ambiguous nod. He wanted to hide away from it all. The heroes from the stories he read were always so cool: they were strong and popular, always following noble ideals...

In fact, now that he thought about it, Altina matched those criteria much more closely. She embodied everything he believed a hero should be.

“Don’t you understand, Regis!? This uproar! Everyone thought the campaign was a death sentence. They’re rejoicing that they’re still alive, and it’s all thanks to your plan. Isn’t that worth commending?”

“I see what you mean, but... Really... I just happened to have read a few relevant books... The rest was luck. A lot of luck. The ones who really deserve this praise are the soldiers and our specialists.”

“Dear me, you really are insecure!”

Smack!

Everard slapped him hard on the back.

The truth was, Regis wasn’t comfortable accepting compliments.

So he saw right through me... Regis gave a bitter smile.

“Hear ye, hear ye! Today’s centerpiece has arrived—our amazing tactician! Be honored to hear his words! Go on, say something!”

“Eh!?”

Everard’s booming voice had gathered the attention of every nearby soldier.

“Aah...” Regis hesitated. “Erm... Thank you all for your hard work. Truly... this victory... was only possible because of all of your efforts. Uh... Oh, right... This

would be a perfect time to tell you all... Ahem... The Beilschmidt border regiment shall be moving its base of operations to Fort Volks.”

In an instant, the soldiers fell silent.

The impregnable Fort Volks was to become their base!?

All of a sudden, the crowd erupted into cheers.

“Waah-hahahah!” Everard let out a grand laugh. “Now *this* is news! Guahahaha— Hack! Hack, hack!”

He laughed so hard he ended up choking.

The soldiers and townsfolk who had gathered for the festivities joined in the ruckus. Within moments, Regis realized he had been surrounded by merchants.

“Tactician! Tactician! We would be honored if you would enlist our services to repair Fort Volks!”

“I brought ten kegs of ale for today’s celebrations. Incidentally, if you ever need more weapons, please do come to our workshop.”

“Why not take this opportunity to replace all of your troops’ bedding?”

“...Yes, well... No, that’s not really up to my discretion,” Regis responded, trying to repel the eager mob.

“Then put in a good word for us with the princess!”

“...I definitely get the feeling she’ll just leave things to me.”

“Please request our services! Whatever you need, you can leave it to us!”

“Very well, very well. I’ll... consider it...”

Another man from the crowd suddenly wormed his way over to Regis.

“Now, now, Tactician! Let’s forget all these moneygrubbing merchants—now is a time for celebration, not business! Have a glass! Ah, by the way... That gal over there’s my daughter, and she’s about to come of age, so—”

“Wait, Strategist—you’re still single!? Then, by all means, take our daughter!”

“No, no, no!” Regis interrupted. “Women have every right to choose their partner, and no woman would ever choose me. I’ve not got the right stuff for

marriage.”

But his words didn’t deter them; the merchants relentlessly continued to advertise their services.

The Belgarian border regiment’s tactician, Regis Aurick, had become somewhat of an esteemed name. But that wasn’t all—the relocation to Fort Volks would require considerable remodeling and additional reinforcements. As far as large-scale military stores were concerned, it was an opportunity to make a fortune. No wonder the merchants were looking at him with such eager eyes.

“Err... Um... I have to prepare... for... something!”

Breaking into a dash, Regis beat a hasty retreat from the plaza.



Regis returned to his own room. As was to be expected, the entrance to the central tower was guarded by soldiers, so the merchants would be unlikely to reach him here.

He collapsed onto the bed, overcome with a tiredness different from the fatigue of battle.

“Kuh...”

Then an unexpected knock came from his door.

Regis shot up.

“...Who is it?”

“It’s me, Mr. Aurick. Elin.”

“Ah. Coming.”

Hah... An exhausted sigh escaped his lips.

Elin was a maid from Jerome’s household who would occasionally help Regis with his work. She was just a little older than him.

When he opened the door, the lively tan-skinned girl waltzed in, throwing her arms around him in a sudden embrace.

“Mr. Aurick!”

“Wah!?”

“Congratulations! Such wonderful news!”

Her eyes were bleary. Regis could feel the blood rush to his cheeks, and the softness he could feel pressing against him sent all manner of strange emotions surging through his body.

“A-Ahem... Ms. Elin...?”

“Going off to that notorious fortress... I thought all hope was lost.”

“Yeah. I thought so too...”

“And then, Mr. Aurick, I heard you were victorious!”

“Hahaha... Well, the princess was the one who won.”

“I just couldn’t... contain myself anymore. I needed to meet you right away.”

“Th-Thank you.”

Her arms still wrapped around him, Elin pushed herself against Regis, guiding him back ever so slowly. Regis attempted a feeble retreat, only to stumble backward as his foot caught on a stack of paperwork.

“Ah!?”

“Mr. Aurick!”

Ah, what a pain... I’ll have to tidy those up later.

But scattered papers were the least of his concerns right now. The next thing he knew, Elin had mounted him.

“H-Huh?”

“You know... I...”

“...Yes?”

Elin gazed upon him with fevered eyes. She brought her face close to his, her warm breath grazing his cheek.

Regis froze; his mind was blank, overwhelmed by the sudden turn of events. He could no longer process what was going on.

“Welcome back, Mr. Regis.”

A voice came from the doorway. It was a cold, steely voice. A voice he remembered all too well.

Regis was immediately wrenched from his trance.

“Ah, Ms. Clarisse!”

“This is a surprise... You still remember my name.”

“Wha—!? Of course I remember...”

When he lifted his head to look at her, her icy smile chilled him to the bone. It crawled down his spine, and he was gradually overcome by a deep sense of dread.

From the perspective of a bystander, this was certainly a precarious situation—after all, there was a girl pinning him to the ground in an extremely risqué position.

In a panic, Regis attempted to explain the situation:

“Oh, no! T-This is— Ms. Elin just came to congratulate me!”

“So it seems. Incidentally, if you wish to continue, I’ll gladly disappear.”

Regis squirmed desperately.

“C-Continue doing what!?”

As he continued to struggle, Elin removed herself, her disappointment palpable.

“Mrh...”

“...Hmph.”

Clarisse strutted into the room and fixed the toppled stack of paperwork.

“This is a military fort, not your margrave’s manor. If you’re looking to play games, please do so in the plaza.”

Clarisse bore through the maid with a piercing stare. Elin faltered back.

“I— I’m being serious here!”

“Is that so. And? Are you implying I’m *not* being serious?”

“Erk...”

“Fufu... But alas, this feud is pointless. I think you’ll find Mr. Regis has no interest in such matters. It’s a real shame.”

“That can’t be true! Men his age are always up for it, night or day!”

The two women turned to look at Regis. Elin’s eyes were heated and carnal, while Clarisse watched him with a frozen glare.

Perhaps because he had been raised by his big sister, Regis had a little brother’s natural reluctance to challenge older women. While these two were barely above his own age, they each gave off an aura that Regis knew he wouldn’t be able to win against.

Regis took another step back. He felt as though he had entered a den of gray wolves.

“...Um... Up for what?” he asked quietly.

The two ladies sighed at his hesitant response.

“Mr. Aurick, seriously...”

“This *is* Mr. Regis we’re dealing with, after all...”

“Is there something I’ve done?”

“The problem is more what you *haven’t* done, Mr. Aurick!” Elin exclaimed.

“Elin, just leave it at that... Get any more persistent and I’ll call the guards.”

“Khh...”

As the two girls exchanged blows, Elin’s younger brother, Gösta, entered the room. He worked in the margrave’s household as a steward’s apprentice.

“Ah, there you are, Sis. I just got a letter from Sir Jerome, so we should head back to the manor and have Mr. Maclen— Hm!?”

Having been met with a terrifying scowl from his older sister, the innocent boy turned pale.

“I suppose I should return to the manor. Good day to you, Mr. Aurick. Next

time, definitely!”

“S-Sure...?”

Clarisse turned her back to the siblings.

“I’ll go and get some demon-warding holy water from the priest at once, Mr. Regis.”

“Hm? What are you planning to use that for?”

Only once the door had closed and Elin and Gösta were out of sight did Clarisse’s wrath finally appear to subside. Her deadly glare had been replaced by a gentle smile, and she approached him with her arms outstretched...

...and pinched both of his cheeks.

“Hyau?”

He was naïve to think she wasn’t still angry. Though Regis didn’t even have a good grasp on why she was mad in the first place.

“Welcome back, Mr. Regis.”

“Ysh... ’m brck.”

“You promised you’d return, so... I always believed you’d be back. I’m glad to see you’re uninjured.”

“Yehh.”

She was still relentlessly pulling on his cheeks, making his responses near unintelligible.

Her fingers slowly relaxed, and she spread out her palms to stroke his face instead. His cheeks were now sandwiched between her two hands.

The next thing he knew, her lips were closing in on his.

Eh? What’s going on?

Regis froze up once again. For a moment, the only coherent thought that passed through his mind was how nice she smelled.

His throat was so dry it had gone numb. She was now so close that he could feel her breath.

“Mr. Regis...”

“U-Um... Clarisse?”

“That’s no good... You shouldn’t act so defenseless... around a woman like me...”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“You really want me to explain? Here? Mr. Regis, you’re horrible. I thought you were kinder than that.”

“...I’m... not particularly kind. Some people reach that conclusion because of my lack of courage.”

“Are you changing the topic?”

“Wh-Who can say? That wasn’t my intention...”

“Fufufu... You wouldn’t mind if I told the princess about this, would you?”

“Wh-What!?”

The moment he recalled Altina, Regis inadvertently flinched.

The maid released her grip on his face. Without even realizing it, Regis backed away from her. Clarisse regarded him with a delighted smile.

“I’m only joking, Mr. Regis... Would you care for some tea?”

“...Thank you. I’d love some. My throat is terribly parched for some reason.”

“Then I’ll be back shortly.”

And, with a polite curtsy, she exited the room.



Two weeks had passed since the Beilschmidt border regiment had captured Fort Volks. Their mainstays were now gathered in the conference room once used by Weingartner and his men.

The flag of the empire and the flag designed by Altina hung side by side on the wall. The shield drawn in the center hadn’t come out so appealing under her hand, so they had it redone by a professional.

An arrangement of red flowers decorated one corner of the room—they had

been prepared by Clarisse well in advance.

“I thought you’d need them for the celebration, so I went ahead and bought some,” she had said at the time.

Her adamance that the princess would be victorious came as no surprise.

Altina, Jerome and Everard joined Regis in the room.

Only the minimum permissible number of soldiers remained at Fort Sierck; the rest had now been transferred to Fort Volks. This would be their base of operations henceforth.

Regis held up a report in one hand.

“—and with that, the transfer is complete. It may prove inconvenient until we grow more accustomed to the new fortress, but I’m going to draft up a remodeling proposal. If there’s anything you think we might need, just let me know.”

Altina raised a hand.

“The cooks were a mess the last time I spoke to them. Said all they could make here was sausage.”

“Haha... I’ve already called in a designer for the kitchen. We should have a new cooking stove by next month.”

Jerome prodded irritably at the papers in front of him.

“What about the mercenaries? You did reach out to those who’d been stationed at Fort Volks, didn’t you?”

“Around a thousand plan to sever their contract with the grand duchy to join our regiment. But, for now, they’re still prisoners of war.”

“Not enough. At least three thousand of the four thousand stationed here should be mercenaries. I’m sure there are normal soldiers from the duchy who’d be willing to defect for the right price. We should be able to get another fifteen hundred out of them.”

“We aren’t made of money, so I made our requirements a little harsher. Age, combat experience and such...”

“Hmph. You’re as dull as ever. Throw it all out. Take anyone who’s willing.”

“But...”

“My training’ll weed out the weaklings. I’ll have the number of candidates halved in three months, tops!”

“I-I see.”

“You really are ignorant of anything that might lead to shedding sweat,” Jerome continued. “It’s pretty unexpected for someone so well versed in bloodshed.”

“You’re making it sound like I have some kind of strange fetish... These days, stories about genius are becoming more popular than stories about strenuous effort. Ah, actually—speaking of geniuses and bloodshed... there’s this book I read a while back... It’s about an aloof young girl who eats sweets as she solves the most bizarre mysteries. Oh, and there’s this one in particular! So, from the top of the tower falls a human—”

“Get on with the report!”

“Ah. Right...”

He rarely had the opportunity to talk about books, so it seemed he had gotten a little carried away.

“Um, a request to return the fort came in from the grand duchy of Varden... Do you want to hear how much they’re offering?”

“Tell them to shove it.”

“...I agree.” Altina nodded. “The lives that were lost taking this fort, and the lives that will be saved because of our victory... Neither can be bought with money.”

“If we wanted their money, we’d just march down and take their damn capital. Tell them to be patient; I’ll raze them to the ground once I have some free time.”

“Ahem, Sir Jerome? I was literally *just* talking about the value of life!”

“We’re going to be fighting them regardless.”

“Aah... Understood! Then I’ll write up a response to the duchy,” Regis weighed in. “It’d be in our best interest to postpone war for as long as possible.”

His words were quickly followed by a good-spirited laugh from Everard.

“You know, it seems the soldiers have started to address our regiment by another name.”

“Hmph...” Jerome averted his gaze.

Judging by his reaction, he already knew what Everard was about to say.

“What are they calling it?” Altina tilted her head.

“Marie Quatre’s Army.”

“H-Huh!? Me!?”

“It just goes to show how much the soldiers adore you, Princess.”

“Y-Yeah...? Is that so?”

“Course it is! You’re truly a goddess!”

Altina bashfully shrunk back a little.

Regis could see where they were coming from. Beilschmidt may have been the region they were based in, but their regiment had now exceeded its territorial boundaries. In that regard, calling it Marie Quatre’s Army was much more appropriate.

“...Quite a development.”

All of a sudden, a knock came from outside the door. Perhaps due to the mine tunnels that made up the fortress, the sound carried far better than it would have at Fort Sierck.

“...Come in?”

“Pardon me.”

Eric stepped into the room, a letter in his hand.

“This just came in from the capital.”

Regis could see both Altina and Jerome tense up at those words.

In the first place, the order to take Fort Volks had come in response to their cooperative relationship with barbarians; the border regiment had grown too strong, so the order was meant to diminish, if not completely wipe out, their forces.

Yet now Altina had obtained an impenetrable fortress as her base, and was planning to gain over a thousand more troops.

What would Second Prince Latrielle do now?

Regis took the envelope.

“It’s addressed to the princess... You don’t mind me opening it, do you?”

“Of course not. No matter what it says, I’m sure it concerns us all.”

“Well then...”

He placed the letter down on the table. He skimmed through another long-winded greeting, peppered with hackneyed words of congratulation.

Then, at the very end—

This coming April, as I’m sure you’re aware, we will hold the National Day Celebration to commemorate the founding of our empire. Marie Quatre Argentina is invited to attend. This is father’s wish. I look forward to the day our family shall be reunited once more.

Jerome pounded a fist into the table. “It’s a trap.”

“Almost certainly. But we can’t really ignore it,” Everard said with a frown.

Eric’s expression was dark. “That’s right... It says the princess’s father... the *emperor*... wishes for her presence.”

“This again!? Are we gonna be branded as traitors if we refuse!?”

Regis cocked his head.

“It’s presumably... not as serious this time. But we’ll have no one to blame but ourselves if rumor of our rebelliousness spreads. The fact we captured Fort Volks and the princess’s growing army has already made us the talk of the

nation..."

"As long as we have this fortress, we can hold our ground against the First Army!" Jerome declared, proudly raising from his seat.

In reality, a battle with the empire would still be difficult, especially considering their lack of supply routes, but they were undoubtedly in a better position than before.

"What do you think?" Altina asked, turning to Regis.

"Hm... Why don't you try meeting with them? I mean, they're your family, aren't they?"

"They're my family. But they might still try to kill me."

"Then we should see how things go. If you truly want to follow your will, the day will come when you'll have to face them..."

"The day I face them..."

"Yes. The protagonist of any story is always running into his archenemy. So much so that you might even assume they were best pals."

"Books again? Is that really trustworthy advice?"

"...Probably. Are you scared?"

"...I don't know."

It was rare to see Altina so faint of heart. It seemed her emotions were thrown into terrible disarray whenever her brother, the prince, came into the discussion.

Even so, to Regis he was a cause of concern that needed to be dealt with.

"...Prince Latrielle invited you by name. I'm not sure about the journey there, but if anything happened to you in the capital he would surely fall under suspicion. Though that's not to say you'd be completely safe. I've heard rumors that he attempted to poison First Prince August."

"Right... Running isn't going to solve anything."

"Yeah."

Altina stood.

“I’ll go to the capital. Even if nothing but darkness awaits me there!”

Jerome cracked his knuckles, a belligerent expression on his face.

“The capital, eh!? If we’re heading there, how about we bring all five thousand soldiers for our triumphant return? Hm?”

Regis grimaced.

That’d be an act of war, sir...

Altina shook her head.

“I only need Regis to come with me.”

“Wait, what!? Just me!?”

“Oh, and Clarisse will accompany us, of course.”

“Only the three of us!?”

“Tsk.”

Jerome disinterestedly slumped back into his chair.

“At least bring some guards!” Everard and Eric pleaded.

Regis had a mind to bring some guards himself. After all, there was no guarantee that Latrielle would be their only enemy.

No matter what happened, this would be his long-awaited return to the capital.

To be continued...

A History of the Belgarian Empire

Cannons

In the year 851 on the Belgarian imperial calendar, gunpowder artillery was used in the form of pistols, muskets, and cannons. Of these, the cannon was the first to be implemented in combat, and has since been heralded as the weapon that forever changed the state of warfare. Its construction is rather simple: The body consists of a cylinder closed off on one end, making for what is essentially a long and narrow cup. A pouch of gunpowder—the powder charge—is then rammed into the cannon via the muzzle, shortly followed by the iron ball that serves as the projectile. Finally, a spark ignites the gunpowder, causing it to explode. This generates a massive amounts of pressure, which in turn sends the cannonball soaring through the air.

But how, you might ask, does one ignite the charge? After all, the powder lies deep inside the cylinder, wrapped up in cloth and blocked off by the loaded iron ball. Near the back of the cannon is a vent around the width of a finger. A sharp, needle-like blade is inserted into this hole to puncture the pouch, after which a gunpowder fuse may be inserted into the vent, allowing the charge to be lit from the outside. While this rudimentary method of ignition did allow a small amount of pressure to escape through the vent, it remained unchanged for close to 400 years.

Cannons were undeniably powerful, but the solid iron balls used as ammunition severely limited their use. On the offensive, they mainly saw action breaking through walls and gates during sieges, and out in naval battles on the high seas. In sufficiently large quantities, they also proved useful in defending castles and fortresses.

The propellant used in this era was known as black powder: A mixture of charcoal, sulphur, and saltpeter that could be produced rather easily. Unfortunately, a variety of factors—including temperature, moisture, and the fineness of the grain—could alter the combustion rate and cause deviations in the explosions. Irregular explosions could lead to numerous undesirable outcomes: They risked destroying the body of the cannon; damaging the projectile; causing the muzzle to jam; and sometimes simply resulted in a dud. As not many soldiers were properly accustomed to operating cannons, the rate at which the weapons broke down on the battlefield was considerably high.



Incidentally, by this time, the nation of High Britannia across the sea had already developed the rifled, breech-loaded Elswick Cannon. While its construction was much less simple, it was powerful, long-range, and dreadfully accurate.

Books

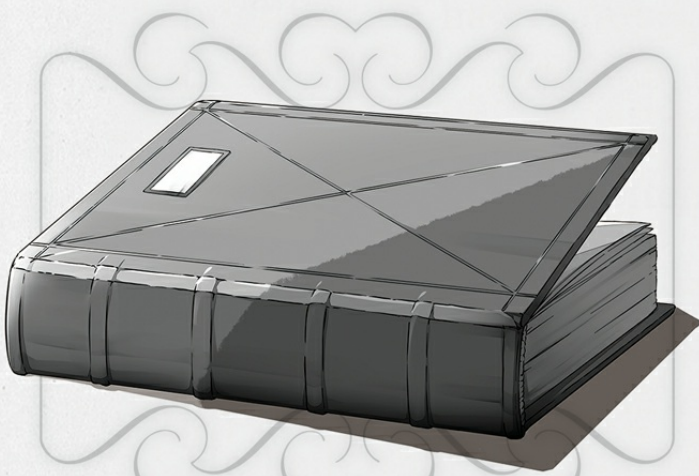
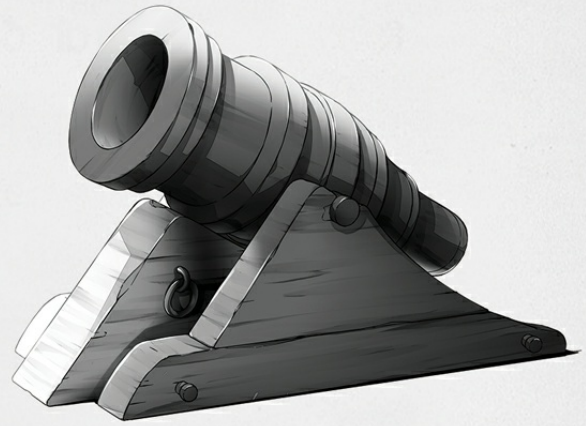
Prior to the production of paper, books were written on thin strips of bark shaved off of trees, or on animal hide.

Ink was made from the soot of burnt-out oil, or crushed minerals dissolved in water.

Early paper making was already a widespread practice by the time the empire was founded. Initially, worn-out rags were used as the base material. These rags would be shredded, dissolved in water, stretched thin, and then dried. Though the technology used to carry out this process advanced considerably, the process itself saw very little change over the years. Gradually, paper became thinner, whiter, and easier to mass produce, but the basics remained the same. Had a limited resource such as worn rags continued to be used, paper would never have become as wide-spread as it eventually did.

The first person to use plant pulp in paper making was a scientist of the Germanian Federation. Not only was the material easier to come by, it produced even higher quality paper than the alternative. This revolutionary invention immediately spread all across the world.

In the Belgarian empire, large-scale paper production began in the year 800 when a papermill and printing plant were set up on the outskirts of the capital under the orders of Emperor Vicente. With high-quality paper circulating for cheap, and printing services so close at hand, it was simply inevitable that the art of bookmaking would advance so rapidly. The resultant products were not simply rolled scrolls, or folded concertina books; these were proper books bound with sturdy string and metal staples. Some were even able to use glue when the paper was thin enough.



A book produced from plant material

Glue-based binding is fundamentally the same process used in the modern era. Glue is smeared along the interior spine of the book, which then firmly binds to the edge of the pages. (As should be the case with this book, assuming you're not reading the digital edition.)

Incidentally, while Regis Aurick was an avid reader, he was in no way attached to the books themselves. He maintained that, "A book's value is determined solely by its contents, not its rarity or workmanship," though, despite his claims, his heart did admittedly leap whenever he found a rare or well-bound book in his hands.

Afterword

Thank you for reading Altina the Sword Princess II. This is the author, Yukiya Murasaki.

The first volume was about how the imperial princess, Altina, found her ambition and gained both a tactician and an army.

This volume centered around how the newly-appointed tactician, Regis, takes command of a large-scale battle and captures a fortress. (And balancing the male-to-female character ratio...) I can only hope you enjoyed it.

This work takes place in a fictional world inspired by the closing days of the European middle ages. Just how much inspiration did I take, you ask? Well, all measurement units are roughly based off of ones that were actually used in the area around the time.

I'm sure many of you have already noticed some similarities, but... this is a work of complete fiction with no relation to any real individuals, organizations or historical events—please keep that in mind.

Honestly, before the first volume was released, I was terribly nervous that nobody would read a fantasy story without any magic or monsters. Mine was a story about lecturing a princess on politics, and washing clothes with a maid down by the river, but...

I've received a surprising amount of support. Truly, thank you.

Thanks to that, it looks like I'll be able to continue Altina's story.

In the third volume, the pair finally returns to the capital.

The second volume turned out to center around large-scale warfare, so this'll be yet another change of pace! What's more, Eric has been hiding a bit of a secret...!

I'll do my best to not keep anyone waiting for too long.

I'm glad I've been given the opportunity to write about the first prince,

August, as well. I'll start by releasing this story on FB Online.

When writing this series, I wanted to tell a single story from multiple points of view, and I'm very happy I was able to publish this work in the form I intended.

The first prince, August, hides a shocking secret: The guard assigned to him is the weakest swordsman in the empire!? It's a story about a silver-haired girl, and the son of Altina's master, Balthazar.

Now on to my thanks:

To himesuz-sensei, thank you for your refreshing and beautiful illustrations.

To Yamazaki-sama and Nishino-sama from Afterglow, thank you for all of the wonderful designs.

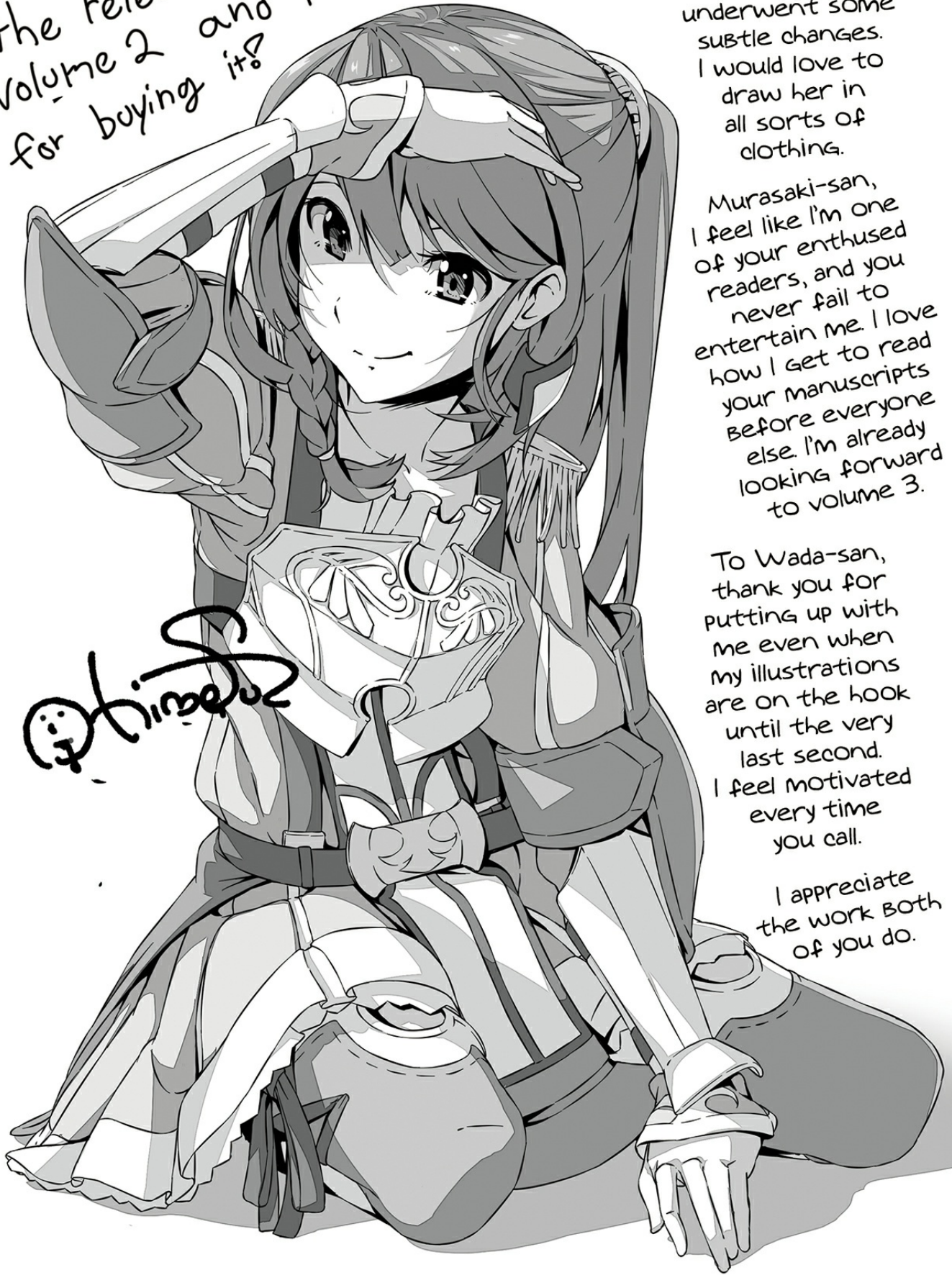
To my presiding editor, Wada-sama, I'm sorry for being behind on this and that.

To everyone in the Famitsu Bunko editorial division, everyone involved in the production, and to my family and friends who support me—and to you, dear reader, for reading this far—you all have my utmost gratitude!

Thank you so much.

— Yukiya Murasaki

Congrats on
the release of Altina
Volume 2 and thank you
for buying it!



This time,
Altina's outfit
underwent some
subtle changes.
I would love to
draw her in
all sorts of
clothing.

Murasaki-san,
I feel like I'm one
of your enthused
readers, and you
never fail to
entertain me. I love
how I get to read
your manuscripts
before everyone
else. I'm already
looking forward
to volume 3.

To Wada-san,
thank you for
putting up with
me even when
my illustrations
are on the hook
until the very
last second.
I feel motivated
every time
you call.

I appreciate
the work both
of you do.



Whimsical Maid
Clarisse

Beautiful New Knight
Eric

Bibliophagic Tactician
Regis

Sword-Wielding Princess
Altina

Even seen from a distance by a layman,
his sharp attack was clearly of a different class to his subordinates.
His spear drove through the air like a majestic bird.



Jerome
carried into
a thrust.



"Hey... What's she going on about?
Is this your doing?"

"My proposal was that she
should say something along the lines of:
'We're attacking Fort Volks to bring peace
to the border. Our plan is sound, but I need
you to believe in me and lend me your power...'"

"If we refuse
to take the fortress,
we'll be marked as traitors!
But, the way I see it,
that's a ridiculous
reason to go
to battle!"

"I don't want to fight for that reason,
nor do I want to fight for myself. I want to fight for all of you!
Those of you with families would do well to picture their faces!
Or the faces of lovers! Of friends! And look to the man who stands beside you!
He is, and shall forever be, your comrade in arms!"





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Altina the Sword Princess: Volume 2

by Yukiya Murasaki

Translated by Roy Nukia Edited by Kieran Redgewell

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Illustrations by himesuz

HAKEN NO KOUKI ALTINA Vol. 2

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Ebook edition 1.0: January 2020