

III

Author: Yukiya Murasaki

Illustrator: himesuz



LTINA

the Sword Princess

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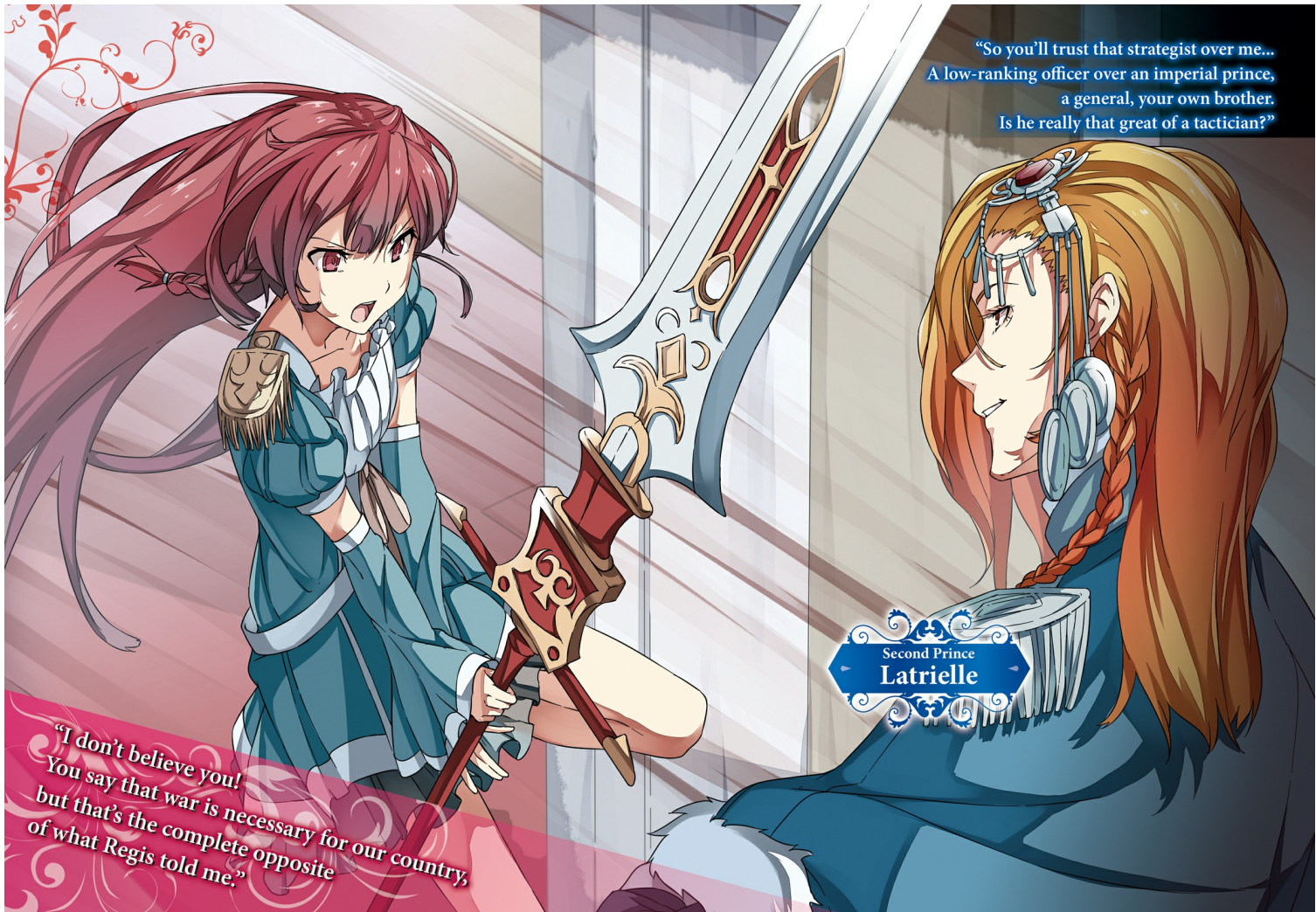
the Sword Princess

ALTINA
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III







“So you’ll trust that strategist over me...
A low-ranking officer over an imperial prince,
a general, your own brother.
Is he really that great of a tactician?”

Second Prince
Latrielle

“I don’t believe you!
You say that war is necessary for our country,
but that’s the complete opposite
of what Regis told me.”



First Prince
Auguste

“Ahem...
The Gaillarte
Garden Party...
is counting on
First Prince
Auguste to
become
the next
emperor.”

“Now this is a troublesome
development, wouldn’t you agree?
Just listen to them, Sir Regis.
They haven’t even familiarized themselves
with our basic rules of etiquette.
What a noisy bunch they are.”

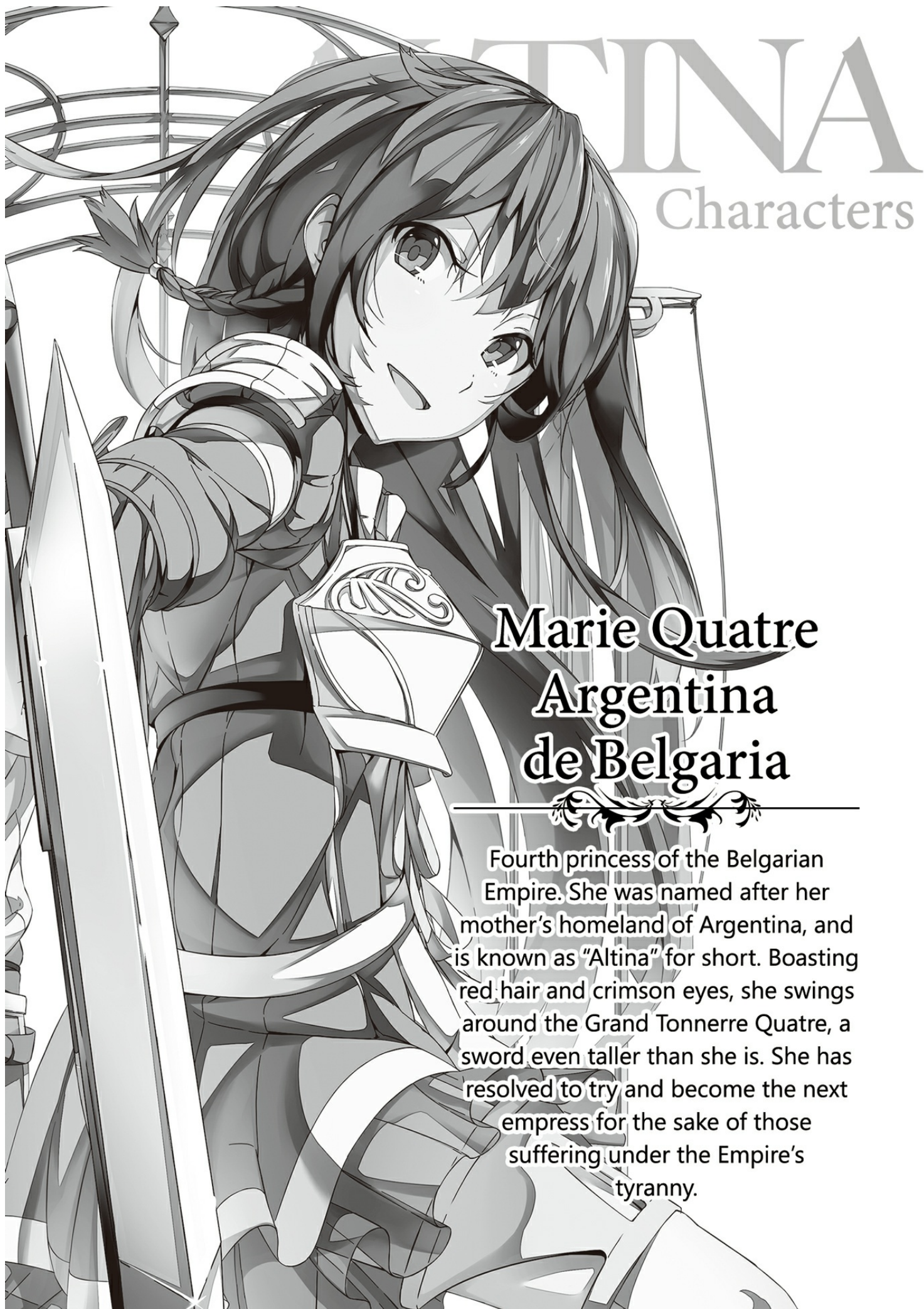
“I shall become
the magnificent emperor
you so desire. If you would please
accompany me along
the way!”

Was this just a front?
Did Latrielle have
some kind of plan?

Vixen of the South
Elenore

Advisor to the Second Prince
Germain





Marie Quatre Argentina de Belgaria

Fourth princess of the Belgian Empire. She was named after her mother's homeland of Argentina, and is known as "Altina" for short. Boasting red hair and crimson eyes, she swings around the Grand Tonnerre Quatre, a sword even taller than she is. She has resolved to try and become the next empress for the sake of those suffering under the Empire's tyranny.



Clarisse

A maid six years older than Altina who has been by the princess's side for as long as she can remember. Altina trusts her from the depths of her heart. While Clarisse is usually silent like a doll, she tends to joke incessantly with anyone she's taken a liking to.

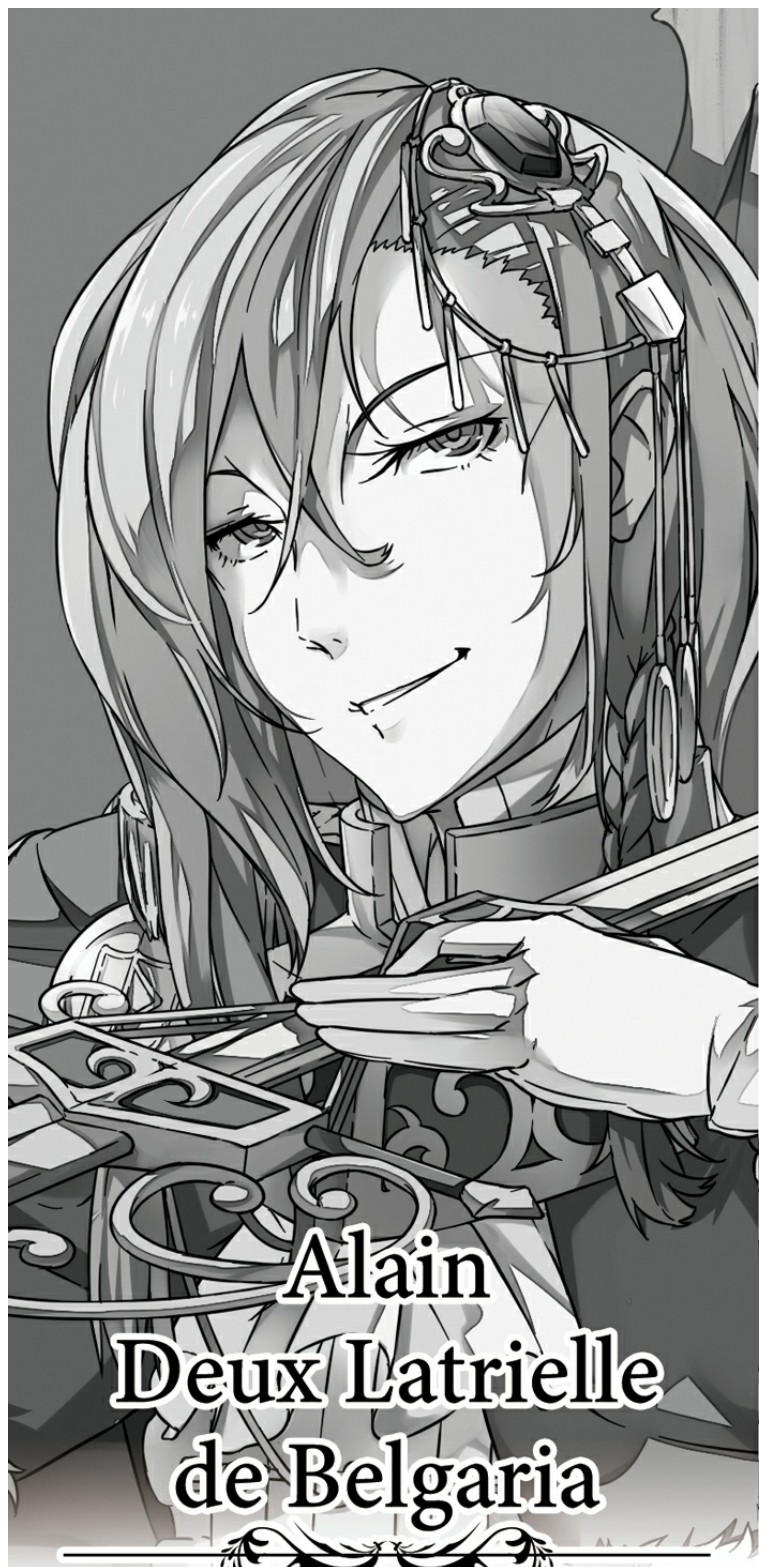
Regis Aurick



Fifth-grade administrative officer.

A bibliophage who dreamed of becoming a librarian in the military library. He was an abject failure in the military academy, unable to swing a sword, draw a bow, or even ride a horse. The abundance of knowledge he has obtained from his books does give him some talent as a tactician, however.





Alain Deux Latrielle de Belgaria

Second prince of the Belgarian Empire. The son of the queen, he possesses talent in both military and civil affairs. While officially serving as the commander of the First Army, he has seized control over the entire imperial army in the stead of his elderly father and the sickly first prince.

Jerome Jean de Beilschmidt

Revered as an accomplished general, he was driven to the border by those envious of his achievements. He would spend his days as the de facto commander of Fort Sierck drinking and gambling, but he surrendered this position when Altina bested him in a duel.





Eddie Fabio de Balzac

First-grade combat officer. The new head of the House of Balzac, famous for its outstanding swordsmanship. Despite having inherited his house's aptitude for swordplay, Eddie has never cut down a person on the battlefield. The sword he carries, the Défendre Sept, has been passed down in his family since the days of the first emperor.

Carlos Liam Auguste de Belgaria

First prince of the Belgarian Empire. While being first in line to the throne, he was sickly from birth.

After coughing up blood and collapsing following a banquet, he disappeared from the public eye for an extended period of time, but has since made his return.





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The story so far—

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.

The year is 850 on the Belgarian imperial calendar—

Having been banished to Fort Sierck on the northern front, Regis is approached by the tenacious Fourth Princess Marie Quatre Argentina de Belgaria—“Altina” for short—a stunning young woman whose imperial lineage was denoted by her crimson hair and red eyes. The daughter of a commoner, she was shunned by the queen and other high nobles, eventually being 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 in the middle of 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 resolves to change the country!

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

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

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—her apprehensive would-be strategist included. To this end, she challenges their de-facto commander, the general and hero Jerome, to a duel...

...and comes out victorious.

Moved by her display of strength and resolve, Regis finally places his trust in the princess, swearing to work as her tactician.

But, immediately after the duel, Fort Sierck is attacked by barbarians! Having moved under the cover of a blizzard, they are able to launch a surprise attack.

Regis, now assuming the position of strategist, proposes a plan that would not only drive away the invading barbarians, but capture their presumed leader as well.

“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.”

The battle carries out as anticipated, and the man known as the Barbarian King is captured. He introduces himself as Diethardt, and proclaims his horde to be the nation of Bargaenheim.

Despite it being regular practice in the Empire to either hang or make slaves of captured barbarians, Regis recognizes their potential and, aware that his own forces are nowhere near strong enough to put Altina on the throne, requests their help. In exchange, the regiment will support and acknowledge Bargaenheim as a sovereign nation.

The dialogue in the courtyard ends in success as Diethardt agrees to lend his support.

«Imperial Princess Marie Quatre. I offer you my thanks, and promise my utmost assistance toward your ambition.»

And so the year turns to 851 on the Belgarian imperial calendar—

As news spreads that their border regiment has gained the cooperation of barbarians, Altina receives an unreasonable request from the commander of the Belgarian military—her brother, Second Prince Latrielle:

You are to capture Fort Volks in the Grand Duchy of Varden of the Germania Federation.

His true objective is undoubtedly to weaken Altina’s forces; the fortress is notorious for being impregnable, so it would be simply absurd for the small force on the border to attempt an attack. A crushing defeat would be inevitable in a head-on collision, and should the regiment refuse to act, they would be

branded as traitors.

As they are further pressured to act, Regis recalls an old military strategy he once read about in a book and puts together a plan to take the fortress.

Luck is on their side, and the scheme unfolds largely as planned. While not without casualties, the border regiment successfully captures Fort Volks under Altina's command. And half a month after that, a new letter from the prince arrives:

This coming April, as I'm sure you know, we will hold a celebration to commemorate the founding of our nation. 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.

"I'll go to the capital. Even if nothing but darkness awaits me there!"

Chapter 1: Roads and Coaches

Only the light of the oil lamp guided the military carriage as it meandered across the dark plains.

Before it towered a colossal fortress that seemed to reach into the very heavens themselves. Various holes could be seen halfway up the sheer cliff face that was its front wall, each one lined with deep black cannons.

The iron front doors opened outward, revealing a number of small bonfires which dotted the grounds. Robust soldiers stood on guard, spears in hand.

No more than two months prior, this had been the impregnable fortress of the Grand Duchy of Varden. But now it had passed into Belgarian hands and had become the base of what was coming to be known as “Marie Quatre’s Army.”

Its name was Fort Volks.

The coachman driving the carriage raised his lamp, moving it around in a designated sequence as a signal. The sentries at the gate returned a separate signal to show they had understood.

Moments later, the officer in charge of the security detail stepped out, touching his right hand to his chest in salute.

“Splendid work, Tactician!”

“...Oh, thanks... I should say the same for you.”

Regis, who was huddled to the side in the cabman’s perch, lowered his head in a show of embarrassed respect. He was talking to a noble a number of years older than him—and a few ranks higher in the military, to boot.

Now recognized as “the tactician who’d captured Fort Volks,” Regis had been lionized to a considerable degree.

Our victory came down to Altina, though, Regis muttered in his heart, knowing he could never truly voice his dissent.

The carriage stopped at a large entrance that had been carved into the surrounding rock. Regis thanked the driver before climbing down.

He held his luggage to his chest as he ascended the staircase to return to his room. The long climb was a stark reminder that the fortress's major drawback was its abundance of stairs.

"Hm?"

"You're finally back, Regis!"

Along the way, he bumped into his commander, who was on her way down.

"Hey, Altina."

When there were people around, Regis would address her in a manner befitting her station, attempting to speak cordially and referring to her only as "Princess." Acting casually was too risky of a move, and, as he had been told once before, the baseless rumors that could result would impact troop morale.

That said, due to her incessant requests, he would drop this front and speak normally whenever possible.

Under normal circumstances, Regis wouldn't have had to worry about such rumors; she was still just fourteen, and was thus widely recognized as a child. But something about Altina was simply so alluring. Perhaps it was her red hair, which seemed to shimmer and sway like a blazing inferno with each step she took. Or her eyes that glistened as though they were rubies. Or maybe her skin which, despite years of harsh sword training, was as smooth and pale as the finest porcelain.

As he looked over her, her shapely, rose-colored lips turned sharp and sullen.

She very quickly closed in on him.

"Don't tell me you went into town again."

"I did. But no need to worry—I didn't waste any money."

"I'll quit worrying once you've paid back what you owe me."

"H-Haha... You'll get it soon, I assure you."

"Good grief. You've been gone so long I nearly forgot your name."

“Eh? I haven’t been away for *that* long... I was only away for three days this time, wasn’t I?”

“Yes, *three whole days*! And you didn’t even tell me you were going!”



“That’s...”

Whenever he told her he was going to town, she would always stop him for one reason or another. In cases where that didn’t work, she would try to tag along. But having the commander accompany him meant they would also need to bring guards, by which point his leisurely outing was more akin to an expedition. After all, given the circumstances, she couldn’t just keep sneaking out.

Surely she understood that by now...

“How could you leave without telling me?”

“...I had business to attend to in town. And, Altina, you have your own duties in the fortress.”

“I’m aware. But next time you leave, at least give me a heads up, would you?”

“S-Sure.”

She had been her usual self when they first moved to the new fortress, but as of late, she’d been acting in a way one would expect of a lonely child.

A normal man might assume she had awakened to love or some such nonsense. However, to Regis, who had extremely low self-esteem, it was impossible to even entertain the idea that a woman had fallen for him—especially when said woman was of such a considerably higher status than him.

She must be growing anxious about her meeting with Second Prince Latrielle, Regis thought, To make such a strong-willed commander this troubled... He must be quite a terrifying individual.

“...It’ll be fine, Altina. Prince Latrielle is already the subject of enough dark rumors. He can’t afford to do anything that would sully his reputation even further.”

Some said he had even attempted to poison the first prince, Auguste, to take his place as next in line to the throne. This seemingly baseless accusation had reached all corners of the Empire.

The incident had occurred in July of the previous year, making it already eight months ago. Auguste had apparently spat up blood and collapsed after a

banquet. He had always had a weak constitution, but ever since then the man had secluded himself in his residence.

Whether the rumor was true or not, Latrielle's reputation would undoubtedly be torn to shreds if any harm came to Altina in the capital. In fact, it was for that very reason that Regis was more concerned about Auguste's faction, fearing they might send assassins after the princess to take advantage of the circumstances.

"Hm?" Altina cocked her head to the side. "Why are you talking about Latrielle all of a sudden?"

"...H-Huh?"

"I'm talking about the terrible man who went off into town without telling me."

"Why—a man very devoted to his professional duties, no doubt."

Looks like I really am incapable of nonchalantly soothing a woman's worries like some kind of suave story protagonist... Regis shrugged in response to his own internal dialogue.

Altina changed the topic.

"Though, on that note, Auguste's residence burned down not too long ago."

"Yeah, so I've heard... I was gathering information in town. The official report maintains it was the work of bandits, but there are rumors it was another assassination attempt."

"Is that so?"

"A guard from the capital garrison reported it was 'caused by bandits attempting to steal the work of a renowned painter.' The newly appointed commander of the garrison, Lieutenant General Baudouin, took full responsibility and resigned."

"Oh my... Well, it was a detached residence, but you could say a part of the imperial palace was burned down. I can't blame him for stepping down. I'm just glad that Auguste came out all right."

Altina was fourth in line to the throne with a goal to become empress—was it

really okay for her to rejoice over the safety of the first prince? She was presumably just delighted to hear that her brother was safe, and hadn't given the situation any deeper consideration than that.

However, finding absolutely no motivation to try and convince her she should desire the death of a family member, Regis carried on the conversation.

"...Baudouin was a noble from Latrielle's faction. I can't see why he'd resign."

"Mn? What do you mean? Faction or not, he was in charge of the garrison when the attack took place—shouldn't he be held accountable for what happened?"

"Yeaah... But, no matter how valuable a painting may be, would bandits really target a property where the *first prince* was living? It'd be more natural to assume that the commander of the garrison in charge of his security led the assassination. In which case, wouldn't he be resigning because he failed to finish the job?"

"Regis." Altina furrowed her brow. "You're jumping to so many conclusions here that I can't quite follow."

"You think so? I thought the plot was rather well-written, if you ask me."

"Are you really confident in this one?"

"Yes, I'm certain of it. Give it maybe half a year, and we'll see the release of a spicy play based on that very same conspiracy theory. With the names changed, of course. Perhaps the book'll come out before the production..."

"Have you just been talking about your books again!?"

"Ah, no... Well, the truth of the matter aside, it's crucial that we plan for the worst and prepare as much as possible before we leave for the capital."

"Right! Into the lion's den we go! But it matters not what foul beast we come across, so long as we have the sword to slay it!"

"...That idiom isn't supposed to be so optimistic."

"Oh, really?"

As their conversation continued, the clatter of metal armor rang through the

stairwell. As the two turned in response, the shape of a large, well-built man appeared.

His eyes carried a wild, sharp glint, and his lips were bent in a discontented grimace. His wide shoulders and tight muscles gave him quite the intimidating aura.

It was the hero bearing the moniker of the black knight—Margrave Jerome Jean de Beilschmidt.

“What are you doing here?” he snarled.

“Err... Reporting on the retirement and likely accountability of Lieutenant General Baudouin.”

Regis couldn’t bring himself to admit he had actually been exchanging idle gossip.

“Baudouin? A lieutenant general? I’ve never even heard that name before.”

“He was recently appointed as the commander of the capital garrison, but resigned upon taking responsibility for an incident where bandits attacked a detached residence.”

“Hmph. The capital garrison, eh? Experts in sucking up who never actually march out to war. Trash of the useless variety.”

Having been deployed onto the battlefield more times than he could count, Jerome tended to harshly condemn those who never left the safety of the capital and fought only in internal conflicts.

This was a sense of values shared by most soldiers stationed on the front line.

“Regis—that trash aside, how did that matter go?”

“...All arrangements have been made.”

And so a meeting was held in the command room.



In the command room at Fort Volks—

Given that the fortress was a former mine that had been fortified by the Germanian Federation, it was as far from elegant as one could get—a simple

room consisting of no more than white walls and a black, inorganic table and chair set.

The only decorations to speak of were the vase of red flowers that had been placed in one corner following the occupation, and the banner Altina had designed which hung on the wall. It featured a large shield, drawn onto green-colored cloth to signify the common people.

Four members in total surrounded the crude long table made with only durability in mind: Altina, who was wearing her arm and leg guards over her dress; her tactician, Regis; General Jerome; and the old knight, Everard.

Just as Regis finished reporting all of the information he had gathered from town, there was a knock at the door.

“Eric Mickaël de Blanchard!”

“Enter.”

“Yes, sir!”

In came a young knight, only sixteen years of age. He wore a well-maintained uniform with his blond hair tied behind his head—a handsome man with blue eyes and a slender face. As always, his voice was as velvety as that of a young girl.

He was apparently Everard’s grandson... Though Everard was black-bearded and bald-headed, with a muscular body akin to a large ape.

Altina looked over at Regis as if to say, “I’m leaving the explanation to you.” In response, the strategist rose from his seat and presented the proper papers to the young man before addressing him:

“I’m placing you in charge of the guard detail escorting the commander, as per the recommendation of Sir Everard.”

“Y-Yes! I’ll gladly accept this appointment!”

“...When the princess leaves the fortress, you are to ensure her safety. I trust you can do this.”

“I swear it on my life!”

With that, Eric sealed his lips and gave a salute.

Altina flashed a smile. "I'll be in your care."

Even though Everard had been the one to make the recommendation, his expression was surprisingly grim.

"I'd hoped to serve as the princess's sword and shield myself," he admitted.

"That would be quite troublesome... After all, you're the captain of our garrison, Mr. Everard."

"Yes, I understand."

With Fort Volks as their new base of operations, the Beilschmidt border regiment currently housed around six thousand officers and soldiers. Rather than a regiment, it was now closer in scale to a large brigade. And lately, the soldiers had indeed begun to call themselves Marie Quatre's Army.

Beilschmidt Border Regiment Organizational Chart

Commander Marie Quatre

Tactician Regis

**Garrison
Captain
Everard**

Fortress
Defense Garrison
1000

**Escort Officer
Eric**

General Jerome

Black Knight
Brigade
500

Mercenary Cavalry
500

Artillery
1000

Infantry
1000

Mercenaries
2000

ALTINA
the Sword Princess

This was the general line of command.

Within the Belgarian Empire, all regiment matters were entrusted to the commander. As letters were the only form of communication, it was unreasonable to expect regular guidance from the capital. It was for that reason that commanders—especially those on the border—were granted exceedingly broad jurisdiction.

Despite that, neither Altina nor her predecessor, Jerome, had any particular interest in organizational matters. Thanks to that, there were quite a few inadequacies in their current system of command.

Military physicians, cooks, smiths, and stable hands, for example, also counted among their ranks, but their definite superiors had yet to be decided.

Were they to be added to the organizational chart, the head chef and master smith—among other such roles—would be ranked on par with the tactician, Regis. However, this meant their presence would also be required at strategy meetings, which they would only find a nuisance. For this reason, they were generally treated no different than the common soldiers.

Jerome scoffed, scrutinizing the still-saluting Eric.

“Hmph. Not that I think this princess needs a guard.”

“I thought so too, at first.”

“Kukukuh... It’d be embarrassing if the one being guarded was stronger than her guard.”

“Indeed...”

Eric bit his lip.

It wasn’t hard to imagine that Altina was stronger than him: the imperial princess’s strength had even been enough to overwhelm the hero, Jerome, on one occasion.



“...But we can’t have the princess thoughtlessly draw her sword,” Regis stated, shaking his head, “Especially not in the capital.”

Altina nodded meekly in agreement.

“I know that already. Plus there are places where it would be inappropriate for me to bring my sword at all.”

“That’s right. The celebration will be a three-day party at the palace. Naturally, you’ll be in attendance as a princess...”

She would be all dressed up—definitely not carrying a treasured sword taller than she was.

“I hate fancy dresses! I could carry my sword if they’d just let me attend as a general.”

“You’re asking for the impossible.”

“Latrielle gets a sword!”

“...He’s the commander of the First Army.”

“And I’m the commander of this regiment.”

“...Yes, but... Well... He is a man, after all.”

“Gnn...! That just pisses me off! How am I supposed to accept that!?”

In this era, the distinction between men and women was akin to a difference in status: dishearteningly great and near impossible to overturn. A house which bore only female children, for instance, would have to welcome a male from elsewhere as its successor—meaning said children were forced to concede inheritance rights to the second or third son of another house.

As such, problems of succession tormented many aristocrats, royal or not.

“Well, whatever.” Altina beckoned Eric close. “Take a seat.”

“Y-Yes!”

Upon receiving his orders, Eric lowered himself down into the seat allotted to him.

Regis placed the next document on the table.

“...Sir Jerome, this one’s about that matter we discussed. I’ve spelled out the items and arrangements we’ve prepared in detail.”

“Hmph. Looks like you made another large purchase. Where did the money come from this time?”

“We had a few Varden nobles among our prisoners of war... It means we don’t have much money left anymore, but this is the only chance we’ve got, so...”

Aristocrats taken as prisoners of war could be released for a ransom. This was an important source of revenue for any military.

“You’ve done quite a bit. I’ll admit, I’m impressed.”

“...We’re at a numerical disadvantage. Such preparations are more than necessary.”

“Hah. Victory is determined by valor more than numbers.”

“Perhaps, Sir Jerome... but we can’t risk weakening our cavalry at the moment. Avoiding combat is our best bet.”

“Believe me, I don’t plan to lose any men either. That’s why I’m playing along with your cheap tricks.”

“Thank you ever so kindly.”

“Hmph. I’ve got nothing against strategy, but in the midst of battle, death does tread closest to the cowards, Regis.”

“...I’ll keep that in mind.”

Jerome took the document from the table and gave it a quick look before stuffing it whole into a leather sack.

Altina gave Regis a dubious look.

“What are you talking about?” she asked.

“...Just a little insurance. Meaningless preparations, if nothing happens... Next, we should decide the program for the trip to the capital. I think it’s appropriate that the Black Cavalry accompanies us part of the way there.”

“I thought so too, but isn’t that a bit much if we’re only traveling within the

Empire?”

“That may be so, but it’s not uncommon for a royal to mobilize an entire army as an escort.”

Altina waved her hand dismissively. “That’s just showing off.”

“...But we need to demonstrate appropriate status. Won’t having too few followers only lead to ridicule?”

It seemed Regis’s attempt at careful persuasion had had the opposite effect. The look in her eyes grew sharp.

“Only a noble would say something so ridiculous. I think it’s wrong to use taxpayer money to flaunt status! What’s wrong with being the same as everyone else? I don’t see why we aren’t just taking a stagecoach.”

“W-What are you talking about!? Of course not— Err, no, I mean... I feel it would be inappropriate for someone of your caliber, Your Highness.”

“Regis, you traveled from the capital to Theonveil via stagecoach. And the cheapest one, at that.”

“...A fifth-grade administrative officer of common upbringing and an imperial-princess-cum-major-general are completely different stories.”

“But it’d be much cheaper than sending an army, yes?”

“...Yes.”

“Then it’s decided—we’ll be going by stagecoach! I’ve always wanted to ride in one!”

“That’s—”

“Not a chance! That’s far too dangerous!”

It wasn’t Regis, but Everard who raised his voice in fervent disagreement. Eric nodded along.

“Kuhahah!” Jerome roared with laughter. “Let her go. Let them laugh.”

“...Who knows what they’ll say in the imperial court...”

I failed... Regis held his head in his hands. It was a foolish mistake to ever

bring up budgets in front of Altina. She always listened to what he had to say before making her own conclusions, but what she decided from there was oftentimes irrational.

A royal, of all people, brushing up against who knows who on a public stagecoach!

“...Actually... That does sound rather familiar...”

Regis recalled a similar development from a book he had once read.

“Regis, what’s wrong?” Altina looked at him anxiously. “Are you angry?”

“No... This might work in our favor. No matter how well you conduct yourself, the nobles are going to scrutinize you for every little thing regardless. The color of your dress, the shape of your hairpin... The list of potential criticisms goes on.”

If honoring etiquette would only have her condemned for something else, it wasn’t such a bad idea to take a chance. After all, Altina’s goal wasn’t one that could be attained through normal means.



Imperial Year 852, April 9th—

A carriage departed through the morning mist. Four large chestnut horses leisurely swung their heads to and fro as they walked along, in no apparent rush.

This was the stagecoach that made the round trip from Theonveil only once per day. It was a rather large carriage that seated twelve with three rows of four seats and had room for luggage on the roof.

Seated in the center row were Regis, then Altina and Clarisse, and then Eric.

Clarisse was a maid who had served the princess from the days she had lived in the capital, and was a woman around two years older than Regis.

Her caramel-colored hair was fastened behind her head, and as they were on a special outing today, she wore an indigo one-piece dress rather than her usual

maid uniform, a red sash around her waist and a white shawl draped over her shoulders.

Her refined features made her look more like a lady-in-waiting than a maid.

They had deliberately positioned themselves so that the men were protecting the women from either side, but Regis had a feeling he was the weakest one here.

Altina glanced down at Regis's waist and gave a wry smile.

"It's rare to see you carrying a sword."

"...It occurred to me yesterday that I probably shouldn't be seen without one," Regis said, prodding the sword hanging from his belt, "I had to scour my room to find it."

"Right. An unarmed soldier would seem out of place. You really had me worried when you said you'd pawned it."

"Erk... Sorry for the trouble."

While he *had* once pawned it to buy books, he had been able to buy the sword back using the money the princess had lent him.

"Have you been maintaining it properly?"

"Well, uh... Let's just hope it's as durable as your treasured sword..."

"Even I oil my sword."

Altina's sword, the *Grand Tonnerre Quatre*, was a legendary blade made from Trystie, a rare metal that was said to have been bestowed upon the first emperor of the nation by the faeries.

The sword was rumored to be able to shatter even the strongest weapons with a single blow, take no damage from even the sharpest spears, and be immune to rust and wear.

However, it was also taller than Altina herself, and so was too large to be brought into the carriage's seating compartment. It would consequently remain in the luggage hold for the remainder of their journey.

Many researchers had theorized that Trystie—also known as faerie silver—

was in fact no more than a naturally occurring alloy, and a new strain of steel that could almost rival its strength was currently being mass produced in High Britannia.

Regis unsheathed his own sword ever so slightly. It slid from its scabbard with considerable ease, revealing the dull sheen of a blade.

“...It’s actually in pretty good condition.”

“Oh, so you actually do perform proper upkeep! I’m starting to see you in a whole new light.”

“...It sat around abandoned for so long that Eric said he couldn’t bear it anymore, so he took care of it for me.”

“And now that respect is gone! C’mon, give it back!”

“W-What exactly... do you want from me...?”

Altina turned to Eric, who was seated on the other side of Clarisse.

“You shouldn’t spoil him!”

“Y-Yes, ma’am! But, due to the tactician’s heavy workload, I thought I should help him out however I could.”

“I understand that you’re busy, but...” Altina drew her face close to Regis. “...if that’s the case, just ask me. Why did you go to Eric?”

“Eeh!? Why, that’s... Using common sense, do you not think a lowly fifth-grade administrative officer asking his major general to maintain his sword for him is somewhat... ludicrous?”

“I see no problem with it. I’ve got time to spare.”

“In that case, there’s a mountain of documents that need your signa—”

“Ah, I see the mountain! Do you suppose that’s the one Fort Sierck is on?” Altina averted her eyes to the surrounding landscape, masterfully changing the subject.

She was skilled when it came to using a sword and was rather competent when it came to analyzing situations, but she wasn’t as great at reading or writing. As a result, she was always running from study and desk work. This also

meant that, whenever the commander's signature was needed, Regis found it easier to just sign for her. It wasn't a major burden compared to his total workload, but...

Regis shrugged, and Eric gave a gentle smile.

Clarisse sat as quiet and unmoving as a doll. She would joke and laugh with her trusted friends like Altina and Regis, but when others were around, she stayed silent and expressionless. Eric was also in the carriage with them, and the other rows of seats were all occupied by guards.

These sturdy soldiers wore light armor under their street clothes and had swords at their hips. This all made the coach feel rather cramped.

As per Regis's suggestion, the stagecoach had been fully reserved by the imperial army.

"...The nobles might laugh, but the common folk will see you more favorably. I think."

"Is that what happened in one of your books?"

"Pardon?"

"What are your thoughts? Will a commander who arrives in a carriage like this make a more favorable impression?"

"Hm... Well, perhaps I would feel more compelled to support you than if you were riding an extravagant carriage surrounded by rows of knights."

"There are nobles who say that a ruler must be imposing and magnificent for the people to feel pride in their nation."

"...That may be true in the capital and other affluent regions, but a majority of the towns we'll pass through are remote regions near the front lines and the poorer lands of the north."

"When you're struggling to make a living and someone shows up all fancily dressed telling you to be proud of your nation, it'd be insulting if nothing else."

"...Quite a few nobles can't seem to grasp that."

"Yeah. Maybe I was one of them once. Thank you for taking this all into

consideration, Regis.”

“Ah... No... This was originally your idea, Princess.”

The thought of reserving a stagecoach and loading it with guards had also come from something he had read in a book once.

The carriage cleared the valley, and the forest around them gradually grew denser. Ever since they had occupied Fort Volks, the roads leading into imperial territory had been improved and were rather well maintained. But there was still the potential threat of the barbarians who lived in the forests.

The guards grew tense.

“...Do you reckon Diethardt’s doing all right?” Altina whispered into Regis’s ear.

“...I should think so. We already informed Bargenheim of our expedition,” Regis replied, speaking quietly enough that only she could hear, “In a sense, these woods should be safer than the capital.”



The first day came to a relatively smooth close; they had stopped off and spent the night in the margrave’s manor.

Elin had intruded on Regis’s room, ultimately leading to another quarrel with Clarisse that was resolved only when Altina threatened to draw her sword. It had all been a little unsettling, but, right on schedule, the reserved stagecoach departed for its next destination.

Altina was in a noticeably good mood.

“That was quite a sendoff from the townspeople.”

“Yes, they took to you better than I thought. Thank goodness.”

“Those people from the merchants’ guild were especially kind... Was that your doing?”

“...Hahaha.”

Well, someone has a keen eye, Regis thought as he gave a dry laugh.

“Don’t tell me you... actually paid them to do all that?”

“I’m not *that* underhanded. We managed to keep the costs down on this expedition, so I was able to pay off some of our orders in advance. New bedding, additional equipment, and the like.”

“I see.”

It wasn’t as though everyone in town had received work, but large orders did breathe some life into the townsfolk. And, naturally, they’d be passionate in seeing off a regular customer.

“...Showing some gratitude to the ones who padded their pockets isn’t so bad, is it?”

“Right!”

Having seen the people of Theonveil smiling from the bottom of their hearts, Regis was starting to believe in Altina’s goal even more.



Second-Grade Combat Officer Abidal-Evra would turn thirty-eight this year.

He was a commoner and the youngest son of six, but his strong build, his sword arm which had been tempered by his older brothers, and—above all else—his honest nature had him singled out by the hero Jerome. He was knighted and subsequently gained peerage as a noble, despite coming from a much humbler upbringing.

He was now a breadwinner shouldering the expectations of his family.

It was only three days prior that Abidal-Evra had been issued an order he quite nearly took as a joke— “Abidal-Evra,” Jerome called out after training, “What do you think about Regis and Eric?”

“Sir! I see them as a skilled tactician, and a promising young knight!”

“Then what about the princess?”

“She is a popular commander, sir!”

“Hmph... I should’ve expected as such from a rockhead like you. All right. Abidal-Evra, I’m putting you in charge of security for the expedition to the capital.”

“Yes, sir! It’s an honor, sir!”

That much was within his expectations. He had already heard that the princess, Marie Quatre, would attend the foundation day celebration, and in her absence the general, Jerome, would have to act as her proxy—as such, he had to stay at the fortress with the troops. And Sir Everard had just been appointed captain of the garrison.

Given the situation, he thought it only logical that he, or someone of equal rank to himself, would be given the mission. He felt proud to have been chosen.

However, General Jerome’s next words caused him to doubt his ears.

“You will be traveling by stagecoach, and there will be eight guards, yourself included.”

“Sir! Wait... A stagecoach...? Eight guards...? And we’re expected to protect the imperial princess!?”

“Saying you can’t do it?”

“Ah, no! I-If that’s the order—”

“Hmph. Every word I speak is an order. It’s Regis’s plan, so he must have put some thought into it. It’s in your hands now.”

“Yes, sir! Understood, sir!”

The hand he raised in salute was trembling. Could it be this was some sort of conspiracy, and he was being sent to his death along with the princess? Perhaps he was being used as bait. Was he fated to die?

He spent a sleepless night pondering these questions.

The other guards selected to accompany him were all soldiers who had no families to leave behind. He had to wonder whether that had been a criterion.

He felt as though he was already on the verge of death passing through the sea of trees the barbarians made their home. While he could feel at ease in Fort Sierck and in Theonveil... those familiar lands were behind them as they quite quickly found themselves on the main road.

This was a guard mission that would normally require mobilization of a

thousand troops, yet there were only eight soldiers in total.

Abidal-Evra could feel his hands becoming damp with sweat.

“Ah, Regis! That’s the station, isn’t it!?” the princess, Marie Quatre, cheerfully cried out.

“...That’s right. Is this your first time seeing it?”

“When I came to Fort Sierck from the capital, there were so many soldiers around me that I couldn’t take in any of the scenery. They wouldn’t even let me leave the carriage.”

“...That sounds about right.”

My thoughts exactly! the knight screamed in tacit agreement with the strategist.

And yet it was this very same tactician who had proposed this bad joke of a situation. He couldn’t understand what the man was thinking.

They had reached the first station two hours from Theonveil. This was the area where the hills and vineyards spread so far they touched the horizon, and, as it was now early April, the flowers had bloomed and colored the land.

A small station stood at the edge of a poor farming settlement. A simple station—nothing more than a modest rest area and stable, where their carriage stopped for a break.

“Good work, everyone,” said the driver, “We’ll be departing after a thirty-minute rest.”

In a normal stagecoach, the clients would probably chat as they wandered about. But Abidal-Evra and the others were trained soldiers, tasked with protecting an imperial princess. Promptly disembarking the carriage, they stood at their predetermined posts, surrounding it from all sides, keeping an eye on their surroundings.

Abidal-Evra opened the wooden door from the outside. From the order they were sitting in, it was the tactician, Regis, who stepped down first.

“...Ah, thanks.” The man respectfully lowered his head.

Abidal-Evra crisply saluted back.

This tactician was terribly humble, his attitude so servile it was impossible to tell what was going through his head. But his skills were by no means lacking. Fort Volks had earned its title as an impregnable stronghold long before Abidal-Evra was even born. Yet this man had brought it down as though it were nothing.

He's still a fifth-grade admin officer from a common background, but it shouldn't be long before he's granted knighthood like me, he thought.

Knighthood was an honorary peerage bestowed upon those who displayed great achievement. It was a non-hereditary title, meaning it could not be passed down to one's children.

However, simply being a noble made it easier to take important offices in the military, taxation was more lenient, and one was free to start up a business.

Once Regis had departed the carriage, he was followed by Imperial Princess Marie Quatre. Her crimson hair flowed as it caught the wind. She brushed aside several long strands clinging to her neck, revealing her pale nape.

She truly was a beautiful young woman.

Her appearance wasn't at all exaggerated. Perhaps due to her trained muscles, even the simple act of dismounting a carriage came off as such an elegant gesture.

Her spectacular elegance stood against the clear blue sky made her look like a mural one would find on the walls of a church.

It was the first time Abidal-Evra had ever seen the princess so close, and it made him terribly nervous.

The maid disembarked next, and then finally Eric.

By that time, another soldier had already confirmed the safety of the rest station. He sent over the hand signal to indicate there were no issues.

Abidal-Evra offered a reverent bow.

"Princess, please take a seat in the rest station."

“Hm. I feel bad for saying this, especially after you’ve gone through so many checks, but... I’d much rather stand, if possible. My bottom’s starting to ache.”

“Dear God! A doctor! Call a doctor!”

“Wait, wait—it’s nothing serious! The seat was just a bit hard, that’s all.”

“Ah, understood! I’ll arrange to have it replaced with something more comfortable at once!”

“I-I don’t need that either.”

As the princess dismissively waved her hands, the tactician beside her let out an offhanded chuckle.

“Hahaha... Perhaps we should have used a fancier carriage after all.”

“Absolutely not! This is all just a part of the experience. I’m having a great time!”

“Thank goodness. We wouldn’t make it in time for the ceremony if we swapped carriages now.”

“Hm. Regis, is the ceremony more important to you than my bottom?”

“...I don’t mind switching carts, but... the masses will surely find it more than entertaining if you tell them, ‘I was late because my bum hurt.’”

“How terrible.”

“You’ll get another strange nickname, I presume.”

“Ah, stop! I told you I’m fine! How about you, Regis? Does your bottom not ache as well!?”

“...Well, I’m generally sitting in hard chairs every waking hour of every day. In fact, this is the perfect environment for an office worker like me.”

“That feels a bit unfair.”

“Haha... What do you expect me to do about it...?”

The princess puffed up her cheeks, which elicited a wry smile from her tactician.

Abidal-Evra was taken by surprise. *They’re pretty close...* He had always

believed Altina was a commander who wouldn't discriminate against commoners, but as someone of imperial lineage, she was acting more casually than he ever would have expected.

The princess's maid prepared tea, bringing it over on a tray. As ceramic utensils could be broken, the teapot and teacup she carried were made of silver.

"Princess, would you care for some tea?"

"Thank you, Clarisse. Do you have enough for everyone?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll go right ahead."

The princess glanced over at Abidal-Evra with a warm smile on her face.

"We've got plenty of time, so how about some tea?"

"Eh!? B-But... We're on the job, so..."

"It's fine—perfectly fine. There's such a nice view, and it's so clear out we'll notice if anything comes at us."

"Y-You do... have a point, but..."

"Resting when you can is part of a soldier's duty. I wouldn't want you to be worn out when it really counts. Here."

Of all things, he ended up taking a tea cup from the princess. Resting in his rough, callused hand, the silver cup was small and dazzling like a precious treasure.

"T-Then I'll treat everyone to some."

"Yep! Call them here."

"Right away. GUAAARDS. ALL HANDS, ASSEMBLE!"

The carriage was ready to depart again by the time the guard soldiers had all finished their tea. They boarded, returning to the same seats as before.

Abidal-Evra was seated in the center of the back row. It was his duty to

protect the princess's back, even if doing so should cost him his life.

She and the tactician were talking again:

"They changed out the horses."

"Yes, such is the merit of a stagecoach. A knight's horse is a personal possession, and a military horse is trained specially for war, so they're hard to swap out. But a stagecoach can change its horses at a relay station, allowing it to maintain an impressively quick pace."

"Who do a stagecoach's horses belong to?"

"...This highway is under direct imperial control, so that would be the Ministry of Transportation. They're the administrative body that manages the important roads and ports, though some territories have coaches managed by their respective feudal lord as well."

"I see."

"Each rest station where the horses are swapped is called a stage, and the stages are what make it a stagecoach."

"It's all very convenient. Is that something the military can use, too?"

"...I'm not sure whether it would be feasible on the northern warfront, but in the south, the military makes use of a similar system. It's nowhere near developed enough to transport an army, but it can be used to carry orders and reports in a hurry."

"You've been to the south before?"

"I've read about it."

"Oh, right. This is Regis we're talking about."

The carriage rattled around as it pressed on. At this rate, they'd reach the next station right on schedule.

"Regis," said the princess in a serious tone, "when I reach my goal, there's one thing I'm going to do."

"What's that?"

"I'm going to make stagecoach seats a little softer."

The imperial princess restlessly shifted her posture.



Before noon, on the sixth day since leaving Fort Volks—

While the roads were well maintained, a long trek of over a hundred lieue (444 km) was definitely tiresome. Regis looked over at Altina sitting beside him.

She was snoring soundly, slouched over Clarisse's shoulder. While she probably wasn't too heavy...

"...Are you all right, Ms. Clarisse?" Regis asked anyway.

"Perfectly."

"...We'll be at the capital soon."

At that moment, one of the soldiers on watch at the front raised his voice.

"It's an army!"

Tensions flared through the carriage. Altina shot up at once.

"What!?"

"Princess... Please make yourself presentable first," Regis said, peering out of the window.

From the summit of a gentle slope approached a line of mounted troops, kicking up dust behind them.

As Clarisse wiped Altina's mouth with a handkerchief, the princess sullenly whimpered.

"Mnn... So? Who is it!?" she asked.

Who did the unit belong to? Regis looked at the flags the cavalry had raised.

"...A gold lion and sun over red cloth... *Tsk...* It's the First Army—the soldiers led by the second prince, General Latrielle."

The air grew ever more tense. Some in the carriage even seemed to be preparing themselves for death.

The unreasonable order to capture Fort Volks had made it clear enough that Altina and Latrielle were political enemies. It wasn't public knowledge that the fourth princess was aiming to take the throne, but she was surely seen as more of a threat than the first prince, Auguste, who was now too feeble for public office, and the third prince, Bastian, who was living an uneventful student life.

"...Please calm down, everyone." Regis spoke in a gentle tone, attempting to soothe those in the stagecoach as they neared the line of soldiers who looked to be out for blood. "We're on a main road, in broad daylight, with the capital just beyond the hill. There are plenty of carriages passing by. No matter the reason, Prince Latrielle would never draw his sword here, especially with his banner held high. This may just be a test of our decorum."

I see... Abidal-Evra nodded.

"To take us by surprise, invite unrest, and then prod at a failure in decorum to damage the princess's reputation..." the knight mused, "Is that the enemy's scheme, sir?"

"...Any funny business from our side and we'll play right into his hands."

"Very well. We are all former soldiers of the capital. We shan't do anything that may sully the princess's good name!"

"Yes, I'm counting on you. I'll be as cautious as I can, myself..." Regis said, keeping his voice as level as he could.

The still young Eric, on the other hand, was making quite the worried face. Clarisse, however, was as collected as ever.

Altina was firmly gripping her own dress.

"I might be the worst at that. Latrielle was always cautioning me about my manners..."

"Is that why you're not so good when it comes to handling the prince?"

"I mean, he's so bloody petty! He even gets in a state over where you set down your fork!"

"...Ah, yes... My sister gave me an earful on that one, too... It's all right. He can only be so petty here."

“I hope so.”

The stagecoach slowly climbed the hill, coming to a stop as they reached the frontmost line of cavalry.

His resolve clear through his expression, Abidal-Evra disembarked the carriage with his men and opened the door from the outside.

Regis stepped out, immediately scanning the Empire’s notorious First Army.

Normally, the strongest soldiers would stand at the front, while the less experienced troops would be moved nearer the back to pad out the numbers. But he couldn’t spot any weak-looking troops here. Their equipment and discipline were first rate, each soldier seeming to brim with confidence.

“.....”

“How does it look?” Altina quietly asked as she stepped down behind him.

“...The First Army consists of three knight regiments—a thousand men each—along with seven thousand foot soldiers. From what I can see, only the White Wolf Brigade is here.”

“Even so, that makes it eleven against a thousand. That’s around ninety per head.”

“...There won’t be any fighting, okay? And please don’t include me in those numbers. It’s just not happening.”

“I’m counting myself twice.”

“Hey...!?”

“Here he comes,” Altina muttered.

From among the ranks of horsemen, a man in red armor riding a white horse proudly made his way forward.

He boasted magnificent golden locks, his face gave off a beautiful, sharp impression, and his eyes were like blazing red gemstones.

The longsword at his hip surely had to be the first emperor’s regalia, the *Armée Victoire Volonté* (The Victorious Call to Arms). Its hilt was adorned with jewels and had been dyed a gaudy crimson.

There was no mistaking it...

This was the second prince of the Belgarian Empire, Alain Deux Latrielle de Belgaria.



He approached alone.

As he came closer still, he dismounted his horse.

Altina stiffened up. While she was wearing a dress now, if she had had her sword at her hip, she would have reached for it.

There was nothing Regis could do. There was nothing *any of them* could do. Who in their right mind would obstruct the path of a prince?

The clatter of metallic armor grew louder as he approached, step by step by step.

Altina gritted her teeth as she looked up at her foe.

He was finally close enough to shake hands—no, closer than that.

Latrielle spread his arms wide and locked her in a gentle embrace.

“I’m so sorry... dear sister.”

“Ah, wha—!?”

She froze in his arms, unable to even speak properly.

“I’ve put you through such hardship,” Latrielle continued, speaking in the tone of a gentleman, “All because of my incompetence. What a fool I was to entrust an army to my dear sister. Please forgive your undeserving brother.”

“...Err... Latrielle?”

“Argentina, when I heard you were coming to the capital by stagecoach, it broke my very heart. To think you had fallen into such an unfortunate predicament!”

“Eh? It’s not what you’re thinking. This is so I can see things from the perspective of—”

“Oh, there is much to talk about, I’m sure. But, for now, repaying you and your subordinates comes first. Let us hurry to the capital and find you somewhere to rest.”

“Y-Yeah.”

“It is not nearly enough to congratulate your victory, but I prepared a horse

for you, Argentina.”

“A horse?”

Latrielle’s gaze moved to his army. Moments later, a soldier from the rear lines appeared, leading along a horse.

A chestnut steed whose coat was so glossy it practically glimmered. Its cleanly cut mane and long tail were golden, and its left hind leg was white from the knee down.

It was a beautiful, burly war horse.

Latrielle took the reins, urging Altina closer.

“Fufu. A well-natured and clever mare. I do hope you get along.”

“Yeah. R-Right. Incredible.”

Regis had already recovered from the shock.

“...I see.”

Latrielle was trying to win her over. What’s more, he seemed to have a good grasp of her personality—as expected of her brother. To the girl, this was a present far more effective than any amount of gold or jewelry.

Regis pored over the bookshelves in his head, fishing through literature he had once read in an attempt to find an effective solution to their predicament.

“All right, in this situation—”

“Fufu. And, of course, I also prepared horses and a carriage for the strategist, Regis, and his fellow travelers. I apologize that they were picked to my preferences, but would you care to accompany me?”

Latrielle’s eyes were fixed on him.

“Eh!?”

Prince Latrielle, a member of the imperial family and effectively supreme commander of the Belgarian Army, is actually going to give a common fifth-grade administrative officer the time of day!? Regis was shocked yet again.

A miscalculation.

Regis had an excessively low opinion of himself—that was precisely why he had never even considered the possibility that the prince might acknowledge his presence. No matter how thoroughly he searched his repository, a development this terrible was nowhere to be found.

His only option was to nod.

“...Thank you.”

Eric, Abidal-Evra, and the others were given high-class war horses, while Regis and Clarisse were encouraged to board the carriage. A glossy green carriage, as if carved from emeralds.

A special wagon was readied for their luggage.

There was no way for them to decline. Regis gave his thanks to the stagecoach driver for the long ride, and bid a tearful farewell to the hard bench that had accompanied him over the past six days.

He got us.

They had been completely swept up in Latrielle’s momentum.

Regis recalled what he had once said to Altina:

“That was all just surface knowledge I learned from books. If I were to fall into an unfamiliar situation, I’m certain that my expertise wouldn’t be of any use.”

Good grief. It seemed he had been right.

Prince Latrielle showed talent in both military and civil matters; he was appraised to be worthy to be the next emperor. It felt as though a small fragment of said talent was currently being shoved in his face.

He made the first move. Now what should I do?



The emerald carriage seated four passengers, containing two rows of seats facing each other.

A ginger-haired soldier sat in one of the rear-facing seats. His drooping eyes

gave a peaceful impression, while his age appeared to be near Latrielle's.

From the gold and silver ornaments adorning his uniform, it was clear he was a noble—and a high-ranking one, at that.

He greeted Regis with a bright smile as the tactician opened the door.

"Oh, I know you. You're Regis, the tactician, aren't you? I'm First-Grade Admin Officer Germain Laurentiis de Beaumarchais. Call me Germain."

"Ah. Right. I am Fifth-Grade Administrative Officer Regis Aurick. Have we come into the wrong carriage?"

"Oh, no. It's only a short distance to the capital, but I would be honored if you would accompany me. Won't you sit down?"

"Y-Yes... That's..."

Regis turned to look at Clarisse behind him, but the maid was calm, her expression unchanging.

"Please pay me no mind and proceed. If there is no space for me in the carriage, I do not mind going on foot."

"Definitely not! If I allowed you to do that, the princess would never let me hear the end of it."

"And I would almost definitely be reprimanded by Prince Latrielle," Germain added, "Come in. Take a seat."

"...Very well. Thank you for your consideration."

Having been urged by Regis and Germain, Clarisse bowed and boarded the carriage. She sat in the innermost seat, while Regis took the one beside the door.

Germain sat comfortably across from him.

Normally, a maid would have to take the less desirable rear-facing position, while Germain would take the seat of honor, right where she was presently seated.

First Altina's welcome and now this. They really are thorough.

Regis had to appreciate their efforts.

Germain spoke up, a sociable smile on his face.

“Regis, my good sir, I’ve always wanted to have a good talk with you.”

“...Err... I’m a commoner, and a fifth-grade officer... You don’t need to address me so respectfully.”

“Oh, my apologies for that. I’m the third son of a marquis, you see, and I always had two competent brothers around, so I’ve gotten used to this way of speaking.”

“You have brothers?”

“Yes. My brothers are stationed on the western front.”

“Now that you mention it...”

Regis recalled the names of the commanders in the imperial army. At present, the Second Army had been dispatched to safeguard the west, and their commander and deputy commander were two brothers from the Beaumarchais family. But Regis hadn’t known their third brother was a staff officer for Prince Latrielle.

The man gave a wry smile.

“The Beaumarchais are a military lineage, but I was terrible at swordplay, spending all of my time buried in books, so I was sure I would never be a soldier. However, I happened to catch the prince’s eye while in the military academy, and now I serve as one of his officers.”

“Oh, I see.”

Regis felt it presumptuous to compare the third son of a marquis to a commoner such as himself, but he still felt an affinity between them.

“And I heard you were quite the intellectual yourself.”

“Me? No, no... I wouldn’t go that far. It just so happens that reading is my one and only hobby.”

“I understand. What have you read lately?”

“I’m ashamed to admit, not much. I’ve been so busy... *The Ponytail Next Door* by Yorgol, perhaps?”

“Hmm...?” Germain tilted his head. “What sort of scholarly paper is that?”

“It’s a work of complete fiction.”

It was a best-selling romance novel in the capital. Regis had tried to bring up something safe that the ginger-haired soldier was likely to know about.

“Ha-hahahah!” A broad grin spread across his face. “Good one. I’d expect no less from you. Your jokes are first-rate.”

“...Huh?”

“Fufufu. As staff officers, we must serve our Lord with our wisdom. We have no time to occupy ourselves with such meaningless entertainment.”

“Erk.”

“In fact, I’ve always thought such frivolous works should just disappear.”

“...Excuse me?”

“Don’t you agree? Such idiotic fabrications stained by a vulgar desire to do no more than soil the prestige of our great empire. They are the height of depravity. Yes, wouldn’t you say such base literature belongs not on our bookshelves, but on the pyre?”

Germain’s tone made it clear he was being serious, honest in his claim that such a book burning would be of great benefit to the country.

Regis looked down at his lap, purposefully avoiding the man’s gaze.

“...Who can decide what is and what isn’t acceptable?”

“The Ministry of Justice, I’d suppose. As we are now, they’ve deemed all works critical of the Empire as treasonous, and our knights are more than willing to enforce that decree.”

“...Is their sense of values absolute? If so, all manner of expression deemed erroneous by the ministry would be expunged without question.”

“Yes, of course! Naturally! It’s only natural for a nation to restrict all potential threats to its sovereignty.”

“That’s absurd... If this country were to proceed down a misguided path, you would silence those who tried to voice wisdom? You attended the military

academy, so I'm sure you already know that only a foolish commander refuses to hear his men... Are you going to make this empire a nation of fools?"

"Err, well, no. Academic papers pertaining to politics won't be burned. Only worthless entertainment."

"...What decides the academic worth of a paper...? Ah, that's another issue entirely. Whatever the case, there are those who change minds through entertainment—change that ultimately benefits the Empire."

"Even assuming that's true, there are innumerable people who'll be swayed to crime by those works."

"And just as many to turn away from it."

Germain fell silent. Regis relaxed his fists, which had become tightly balled in his lap.

What have I done?

He had inadvertently allowed his passion to get the better of him.

Considering Altina's position, perhaps it would be more effective to play along with Latrielle's plan to win him over for the time being. It was a bit late to consider it, but should he have feigned agreement to maintain his political standing?

To Regis's surprise, it was Clarisse who broke the silence. She spoke softly, her expression stagnant.

"...I can't say I understand such complicated matters, but... it's the human condition to be born, to live, and to die. If we're all going to die someday... a life you can look back on fondly is a life that holds meaning. That is what I think."



Silence fell upon the carriage once more.

Regis had given up on trying to make amends. He hadn't said anything wrong.

Germain donned a fake smile. "Fufu, how rude of me. We've spoken of rather difficult matters in front of a lady. Talk of politics and religion is taboo at a party. Please, forgive the discourtesy of this country bumpkin."

"...No, that should be my line," said Regis.

Germain turned his gaze to the passing landscape. Tensions seemed to subside.

"We're almost at the capital."

"So we are."

Regis looked at Clarisse beside him. He could see the pangs of nostalgia in her narrowed eyes.

Chapter 2: A Duel by Moonlight

The imperial capital of Verseilles was a city without walls.

Its beautiful townscape, spread out across a gentle basin between mountains, could be seen in its entirety from atop the hill.

At its center was the palace, La Branne. From a bird's-eye view, it looked like a large, white, cross-shaped building dividing four gardens, with a large courtyard out front. Its size was comparable to a small town.

The palace was the Empire's backbone, acting as both the residence of the royal family and the place where matters of political and military importance were discussed.

Mansions owned by high nobles towered around it on all sides, held not only by those who lived in nearby territories, but also those from much more distant lands.

While there were no walls or gates to clearly divide the city, sentries could be seen lining the area. They acted as a barrier—any commoner who moved too close to the palace would be stopped and led away by armed guards before they could walk so much as ten paces.

The White Wolf Brigade marched down a wide, straight road which stretched out from the palace. Those living in the capital were crowded on either side.

As the anniversary ceremony would start tomorrow, they were already in a festive mood. Drinking-bouts had been held since midday, and the streets were scattered with stalls of all stripes.

But even then, there were too many people gathered for a mere celebration—at least, that was what Regis thought. He cocked his head to the side.

“...Why are there so many people?”

“They are hoping to catch a glimpse of Princess Marie Quatre. Of course, Prince Latrielle is also a target of much interest, but today is a special occasion.”

“She *has* been away from the capital for a while...”

“That too, but... The notoriety of Fort Volks was well recognized even in the capital. Naturally, the people are intrigued by the young princess who managed to capture it.”

“Oh, I see.”

The capital was home to many affluent houses, and those of more common backgrounds were genuinely inspired by the extravagant displays of nobles and the royal family. In such a climate, there would be no end to the popularity of a charming young princess who performed heroic deeds on the battlefield.

Latrielle had definitely taken the right measures under these circumstances.

Regis poked his head out of the window to see Altina. She sat atop the splendid chestnut steed, both legs to one side as it trotted along at a leisurely pace.

Likely owing to her political opponent, Latrielle, being right beside her, her expression was stiff all the way. Regis wondered whether this would make the female commander appear intimidating in the eyes of the people.

But as if to abate his worries, a child called out from the side of the road, enthusiastically waving his hand.

“Marie Quatre!”

While the gesture wasn’t necessarily rude, Regis was somewhat concerned about the boy’s lack of restraint in the face of royalty. Seeming to share his sentiment, the people present grew tense.

Altina, whose expression had been rigid up to that point, broke into a gentle smile and waved back.

Waah!

The crowd erupted in fervent cheers.

“*Vive Marie Quatre!*”

“*Vive l’Empire!*”

Someone among the crowd began to strum a tune, which spurred a drunk

chorus to sing praise to the Empire. As the princess continued to smile and wave, it looked to Regis like she was forcing the expression.

All of a sudden, his ears were struck with the familiar voice of a woman.

“Regis!?”

“Eh!?”

He turned. The carriage, which had been moving at an unbearable crawl, felt as though it was suddenly moving much too fast as his eyes frantically scanned his surroundings.

Then, among the distancing crowds, Regis spotted her.

He thought to call her name, but... by that point, he could no longer see her face. There wasn't much he could do about it, and Regis slumped back into his seat.

Looks like you're doing well, Carol.

Only then, during that fleeting exchange, did it really hit him—he was back in the capital.



A magnificent, intricately designed metal gate opened out before them, and the carriage finally entered the palace grounds, La Branne. It appeared the White Wolf Brigade could not follow them beyond this point, as they refrained from entering.

The same held true for Abidal-Evra and the others who had accompanied them from Fort Volks. Only the princess's personal guard, Eric, was allowed in.

The carriage stopped in the palace square. On one side: Latrielle, Germain, and six guard knights. On the other: Altina, Regis, Clarisse, and Eric; four in total.

This was Regis's first time in the palace. It all looked so unusual, perhaps even moving.

The crème-colored palace, a breathtaking display of esthetic architecture. The tiled plaza, replete with grand, intricately carved designs. The imperial guards, musket in hand, marching forth like clockwork in perfect unison.

He had read about it all many times in his stories, but had never actually seen it with his own eyes.

“...Amazing. They’re actually real.”

“Hah. We’re finally here.”

But, to Altina, this was where she was born and raised. She seemed several times more relaxed than when she had been surrounded by the crowds.

Paying no care to her dress, she jumped down from the back of the horse.

“I should thank you, Latrielle,” she said, stroking its rather damp mane, “For the horse, and for coming out to greet me.”

Certainly, it would have made for quite a comedic scene had they proceeded toward the palace in the stagecoach. Though, in a different sense, perhaps it would have drawn some approval from the crowds.

Latrielle placed an affectionate hand on his horse as well.

“Fufu. I’m glad you enjoyed it.”

“But, look—” Altina’s eyes grew sharp. “I don’t trust you one bit!”

“I see. Understandable. I’ve done enough to deserve that. I didn’t think one horse would be enough to atone for my past actions. Let’s meet again over dinner.”

With a somber smile on his face, Latrielle raised a hand in farewell and retreated into the palace.

Altina glared at his back.

“He’s definitely up to something.”

“...Are you all right, Princess?”

“That’s the face he makes when he’s planning something terrible!”

“...We *are* in the middle of a power struggle. Maybe that’s just the face he makes all the time these days.”

“You should watch out, Regis. He’s definitely going to do something.”

“...Tomorrow begins the three-day ceremony to commemorate the founding

of our nation. If nothing happens, that makes my job nice and easy.”

“He was making the exact same face when he slipped a frog into my bag!”

“...A mere frog would be a blessing.”

The palace’s servants came out to unload the luggage from the carriage. It seemed Regis could finally get some rest.

While Altina had been shunned from the imperial court, she was still a princess, so she had her own room. She entered right through the front door, exuding an air of confidence as she made her way further in. All the while, Clarisse followed closely by her side, moving so smoothly it was as though that was where she naturally belonged.

Her guard, Eric, showed no hesitation either. As expected of a viscount’s eldest son.

Regis was the only one who felt out of place, wavering this way and that as he walked a short distance behind them.

The palace walls were lined with so many marvelous pieces of art that it was practically a museum. In fact, the palace itself was impressive enough to be considered a work of art.

What’s more, all manner of famous scenes had unfolded in these very halls...

Oh, my. Is that the pillar from The Court Thief of Love!? And over there... That corridor is where the duel in The Legend of Alfred the Hero took place!

“...Amazing... So this is the holy land.”

Naturally, the servants weren’t the only ones roaming the palace halls; there were plenty of nobles too. Those that spotted Altina quickly frowned. Once upon a time, they would mock her loudly enough that she could hear.

But that was no longer the case.

Behind the princess followed those carrying her giant sword, the *Grand Tonnerre Quatre*, and rumor had long since spread that Altina had defeated the hero Jerome in a duel. Furthermore, since then, it had become known that she had forced an army of barbarians into submission and captured a tenacious fort that had for years been a thorn in the Empire’s side.

By this point, she was the commander of a full-on army.

As expected, it seemed the nobles of the capital recognized her as an accomplished warrior they could no longer publicly shame.

“I should have thanked Latrielle for one other thing.”

“What’s wrong, Princess?”

“Ever since he made me a commander, the palace has grown a lot... quieter.”

“I see...”

But evil was known to fester when forced to the shadows. Their contempt could no longer be vocalized, but the countless eyes fixed upon them as though they were demons sent a shiver down Regis’s spine.

So Altina was raised in a place like this.

He felt as though he had finally figured out what had been bothering him for so long. A royal like Altina resented the current state of the Belgarian Empire and sympathized with its people. A wonderful thing, surely, but he had questioned whether her mother being a commoner was really enough to explain those emotions.

But now he could see it.

How could she ever side with the nobles who had so strongly, openly and unreasonably made her life the subject of their scorn and hatred? If anything, *they* were the strange ones. Perhaps this feeling toward them had turned to misgivings about the very system of aristocracy, which then grew into an interest in politics, sprouted sympathy toward the oppressed, and finally came together as Altina’s ambition.

Regis started to piece it together.

“Hm? Did you notice something funny?” Altina called over.

“...Yes... This is the house where you grew up, isn’t it?”

“It is.”

“...I have a feeling I’ll come to understand you a lot more intimately during our time here, Princess.”

“Wh-What are you talking about, Regis!?” Her cheeks flushed red. “Don’t you find it embarrassing to say something like that so publicly?”

“Eh?”

She leaned in close and whispered into his ear:

“Why, I... At least allow me to introduce you to Father first...”

“...Calm down, Altina. I don’t really follow, but if you’re suggesting something as terrifying as a commoner being introduced to His Majesty, I must politely decline,” Regis whispered back.

Altina’s room was situated midway down the north wing of the palace. The room next door was meant for servants, and would ordinarily be used by Clarisse, but...

“It would be inconvenient to have you too far away, so you two can take this room. Clarisse, you don’t mind staying with me, do you?”

“I would be happy to, Princess.”

“That really helps out with my guard job, too.” Even Eric was on board.

In the various inns they had stayed at during their journey to the capital, Regis and Eric had slept alongside Abidal-Evra and his men. Only having two to a room afforded them a bed each, which was more than sufficient; there was no reason to decline.



By the time they arrived at their rooms, noon was already knocking at the door. Lunch was being prepared in the dining hall, and meals could be ordered on demand by simply asking the servants. However, Altina had proposed they go into town instead.

“Let’s go see the steam locomotive!”

Regis and Eric accompanied her. Clarisse, on the other hand, opted to stay behind, mentioning that she had to prepare their rooms as they hadn’t been used in quite some time.

Altina appeared to be in her element as she put on a robe, covered her hair

with cloth, and slipped through the back gate. Her movements were somewhat mechanical, as though she had done this a hundred times before.

This year, the Belgarian Empire would be opening its first railroad. A steam engine was currently making short test runs between the capital and the neighboring town of Cinq Jouel.

The train had been made in High Britannia, a queen-led monarchy once known for producing tea and fine art. In more recent years, however, interest in these commodities had been well overshadowed by the revolutionary advancements High Britannia had made in industrial technology.

Could this sudden influx of advanced technology be in any way linked to their large purchases of tea from the far east?

High Britannia was a country so small in comparison to the Empire that very few acknowledged them as a threat. Only those who were politically informed realized just how dangerous they were.

In response, the Empire had made efforts to increase the number of Belgarian exchange students studying in High Britannia in a desperate attempt to partake in their technological developments. But who knew whether the Empire would ever be able to catch up...

Regis believed that High Britannia was a country to be wary of, and his anxieties only grew stronger when he saw the steam locomotive.

“It’s incredible, Regis!” Altina innocently exclaimed, “It’s so big—incredibly big! And black! And it makes such a loud noise!”

“...It really does.”

“I want to go for a ride!”

“...That’ll have to wait for another time. There’s no guarantee you’ll even be able to catch the train coming back.”

Not only was this train cutting-edge technology, but there was a festival going on. As such, business was booming.

When he eventually pried the captivated princess away from the locomotive,

Regis popped into the book store he had used to patronize every day back when he lived in the capital, and exchanged some words with the storekeeper, Carol.

Then, in search of a late lunch, Regis attempted to enter a restaurant he had used to frequent called *La Taverne*... though it seemed to have since become an epicenter for political discussion. Industrialists and professors, among other intellectuals, ranted over one another with newspapers in hand.

“The treasury has already hit rock bottom, and the emperor welcomes his sixth consort with yet another extravagant ceremony! Then there was that birthday party for another of his consorts, and now the anniversary of our nation’s founding! When will the reckless spending end!?”

“The tax collected from the commoners is being frittered away to fund nobles’ dinner parties! How can such lunacy be acceptable!?”

A hot-blooded youth threw his fist into the air. “This country needs freedom and equality!”

Regis was left standing stock-still in the doorway. Altina, with her hair covered up, had quite the anxious look on her face. It would be terribly troublesome if her true identity came to light here.

“...This used to be a place where you could sit down for a quiet meal,” Regis sighed, “but perhaps we’d be better off going back to the palace.”

And so Regis urged Altina and Eric back through the front door of *La Taverne*.



They arrived back at the palace just as the sun brushed the horizon to the west.

The district northeast of the palace was used by the servants, who could be seen rushing about in preparation for dinner and the upcoming festivities. The sight reminded Regis of soldiers scrambling across a battlefield.

In order to reach the palace grounds, Regis, Eric, and Altina had needed to pass through an entrance blocked by several sentries. Though the guards had seemed somewhat wary of the concealed princess, the fact that the two young

men accompanying her were clad in military uniforms meant that the trio were permitted entry with relative ease.

The clamor of the city streets grew distant as they passed through the back garden, past the terrace, and into the palace.

Soon they arrived at a room inside the northern tower. Fine, intricate patterning decorated the wooden floor; simple yet sophisticated murals carved from stone decorated the walls; and above each window rested a pair of expertly embroidered curtains. The ceiling was a brilliant, metallic gold, and from it hung a gemstone-encrusted chandelier that glimmered in the light of the setting sun.

Regis unintentionally let out a gasp of amazement. By the palace's standards, this was no more than a relatively modest room situated in its most run-down wing.

Altina dropped her cloak to the ground and unwrapped the cloth that had been hiding her hair. She was back to her usual, modest dress. As long as she looked like this, there would be no reason for the patrolling guards to stop the trio as they made their way back to their rooms.

They stepped out into the hall, the walls around them crammed with various pieces of art, and set course for the palace center.

"I'm sorry, Princess. I hadn't meant to lead you somewhere so... crass."

"It's fine, Regis. I went out fully aware that I might see things like that," Altina responded, "Besides, nothing bad would have happened with Eric there."

Eric wiped the sweat from his forehead. "Y-Yes, of course. But I have to admit, it was still pretty nerve-wracking."

"Mn? Isn't that..."

Altina reached a hand toward her hip as she glanced down the corridor. But her fingers grasped nothing but air.

Her sword, the *Grand Tonnerre Quatre*, was usually sheathed at her waist, but the sight of a young girl carrying such a massive blade would have drawn too much attention in town. For that reason, she had decided to leave it behind.

Eric stepped forward, having noticed Altina's gesture. He poised his hand to draw, only to freeze on the spot.

"Huh!? T-That person... Could it be...?"

Shambling down the corridor was a silver-haired man. His small, slender build was like that of a delicate lass, and his height was roughly around the same as Regis's. He wore a well-tailored military uniform and, while no medals adorned his chest, the man's status was made clear by the jewel-encrusted longsword dangling from his hip.

"Auguste!" Altina called out.

Rather than the person she called out to, it was his attendant—a tall, black-haired man—who reacted.

He came forward half a step, and touched his right hand to his left chest in salute.

"Why, if it isn't Lady Argentina."



“Oh, so Eddie’s with you too. What’s with this ‘lady’ nonsense? Just talk to me how you usually would.”

“Ah, thanks for that,” said the black-haired man, “I’m not so good with all the formal stuff.”

Regis had previously had some idea who the man was, but the red longsword at his hip—and the fact that Altina had just addressed him by name—made it all too clear.

This was Duke Eddie Fabio de Balzac.

The house of Balzac was famed for its extraordinary swordsmanship, its first leader having apparently served as the right-hand man to *L’Empereur Flamme* himself. As proof, they had been granted the seventh treasured sword of the Empire.

There could be no doubt about it—the longsword at Eddie’s hip was the *Défendre Sept* (The Emperor’s Safeguard VII).

This man was the grandson to Balthazar, the one who had trained Altina in how to use a sword. Judging by the way he spoke to the princess, it appeared they were not particularly hostile to one another. But Auguste was considered one of Altina’s political enemies—why would she be on such good terms with his attendant?

“Let me introduce you!” Altina placed a firm hand on Regis’s shoulder. “This is my tactician, Regis.”

“A-Ah...” Regis stammered, “It’s a pleasure to meet you. I am Fifth-Grade Administrative Officer Regis Aurick.”

“I’ve heard a lot about you!” The black-haired man grinned. “The pleasure’s all mine, Mr. Regis. You can call me Eddie.”

At those words, he extended his hand toward Regis for a handshake.

A duke reaching out to a commoner? Regis had heard this man had an affable personality, and his actions only seemed to reinforce those rumors.

Regis reached toward Eddie in turn, his fingers trembling uncontrollably as they shook hands.

“...Right... I hope we get along.”

Eddie’s expression turned pensive for a moment. “Hm. Do you think I’ve put him on edge?” he muttered, now looking rather dejected.

The silver-haired man elbowed him gently in the flank. “Of course you have, you halfwit.”

“Ah... In that case, my apologies.” Eddie bowed his head.

“Argentina...” spoke the silver-haired man, “It’s been quite some time.”

The princess paused for a moment. “Erm... You’re... Auguste, right?”

“Of course I am.” The first prince, Carlos Liam Auguste de Belgaria, spoke with blatant discontent.

Altina’s face twisted into a look of pure bewilderment.

“Haven’t you... shrunk?”

“H-How in the world would I have shrunk!? Th-The very nerve!”

“And it sounds like your voice is just a tad higher than usual...”

“...!?”

Eddie stepped in. “Well, you see, Argentina... Mr. Auguste has been through quite a lot since he collapsed from his illness.”

“Oh, really? Well, that’s fine; we have much to talk about, so there’s not much point lingering on the matter. Hey, by the way—” Altina prodded her index finger into Eddie’s chest. “Why are you accompanying Auguste?”

Eddie awkwardly averted his eyes. “I’m working as Mr. Auguste’s guard. Were you not aware?”

“It’s news to me.”

This wasn’t something Regis had heard about either. Such information very rarely reached the border. They were only informed of major events, such as the prince’s villa being burned down.

“...Come to think of it... I heard you were attacked by bandits, Prince Auguste,” Regis asked, hoping to lure the prince into revealing more about the

incident.

“Indeed. Latrielle provided the funds, while Lieutenant General Baudouin masterminded the attack,” Auguste responded without hesitation, “Though I must admit, I don’t have any evidence to prove it.”

Auguste’s declaration had been delivered with such clear conviction that Regis found himself rather flustered. It seemed the rumors were true, after all.

Eddie nodded meekly in agreement.

“Mr. Latrielle has a very clear agenda; it really is quite bothersome. Argentina, while I don’t believe he’ll target you this time, you should be careful nonetheless.”

“Well, I never, ever let my guard down in the palace, so there’s nothing to worry about. How have you been, Eddie? Does the fact you’re protecting the prince mean you’ve finally mustered the resolve to strike down your foes? You never used to be too good around blood...”

“Yeah, can’t say that’s changed much. It’s hopeless. Just can’t seem to get over it... Not that you were any better.”

“I-I can draw blood when I have to! ...I think.”

Regis looked around warily. Passing nobles seemed to eye them with curiosity.

Altina, who had been banished to the country’s border, and Auguste, who had refused to leave his residence since the attempt on his life—to see them both together having a friendly chat was a rare and unexpected sight, for sure.

That said, allowing them to speak for too long would risk crucial information being leaked. In fact, the statement Auguste had just made could prove quite problematic if anyone were to question them on it.

“...Princess,” Regis interjected, “we must prepare for dinner.”

“Yeah, that sounds like a good idea. I can’t help but feel on edge around here.”

Had she noticed her surroundings as well?

Altina raised a hand to Auguste.

“Well then, dear brother, let us meet again at dinner.”

Auguste nodded. “All right. Take care.”

The two passed by one another and continued down the corridor in opposite directions. For a moment, Eric stood in place, his eyes simply focused on Auguste’s back. Then, having snapped back to his senses, the young knight hurried to catch up to the leaving Altina.

Eric apologetically bowed his head. “Sorry to keep you waiting.”

“...Was something wrong?”

“Ah, no, err... It’s nothing.”



Altina went for dinner. As the party hadn’t started just yet, she had opted to wear the standard attire for a noble: a rather common one-piece dress, an abundance of decorative cloth bound at its waist.

Regis, Eric, and Clarisse did not accompany her. Instead, their food was brought over to the servants’ room, where the trio would eat before the princess returned. From the moment it arrived, it was clear that considerable care and money had gone into the cooking—not only for the main dish, but the hors d’oeuvres as well.

“Is it... really okay for us to eat this?” Regis wondered aloud.

“I’m not sure about you, Mr. Regis, but Sir Eric here is a noble,” remarked Clarisse.

What’s this? Regis sensed an unmissable change in the woman’s behavior. She barely ever spoke in the presence of others, and yet... Perhaps by being around Eric for a while, she had started to warm up to him.

Eric’s face was touched with red as the conversation suddenly focused on him.

“We’re as low as viscounts can get,” Eric said dismissively, “My position means practically nothing here in the imperial palace.”

“...Perhaps they’re trying to suck up to the princess’s subordinates...” Regis rested a finger across his lips in thought. “I really don’t want to believe such extravagant meals are served to all the common folk in the palace.”

Not only the appearance, but the taste was superb. Seafaring technology had certainly advanced dramatically in recent years, but black pepper was still considered a high-class luxury item. Yet these dishes showed no restraint in its use.

Regis quickly fell silent, focusing every fiber of his being on enjoying the generous meal.

It was around then that someone knocked on the door.

“Who could it be? Don’t tell me there’s another course...”

However, before the words had even passed Regis’s lips, Clarisse had already risen to her feet. As she unlatched the lock, Eric’s hand cautiously hovered over his sword.

The door opened, and in burst Altina.

“Regis!”

“Huh!? Princess...?”

“Please, oh please— just address me how you usually do!”

She bumped him aside with her shoulder, knocking him with so much force that he quite nearly toppled from his seat. Altina then planted her rear into the slight opening she had made beside him.

They were now sharing a seat.

“Wh-What!?”

“I... I just can’t take it anymore!”

“Alt— Err, I mean, Princess—”

“Oh, what does it matter now!? Eric’s going to be with us from now on anyway. It just drives me mad.”

From the look on Eric’s face, it was clear he had no idea why his name had been so suddenly brought up. He hadn’t done anything wrong, and surely had

no idea what was going on.

It seemed like it would be impossible for Regis to continue concealing his relationship with Altina from Eric. He resigned himself and groaned.

“Hah... Err... Truth be told, Eric... This is rather hard to say, and I wouldn’t want you to misunderstand, but—”

“I’m no good with all the formal stuff! That’s why I’ve told Regis he has to speak more casually around me and call me by my nickname.”

“...Personally, I think protocol should be respected, and rumors of a scandal with a commoner would impact troop morale... But as my duty here includes looking after the princess’s wellbeing...”

“For God’s sake! I order you to address me how you normally do!”

“Erh... Um... A-Altina...”

“Ehehe.” Her cheeks flushed red.

Eric hung his head, looking as though he might pass out on the spot.

“M-Meaning... Regis—you and the princess... err... share a love that transcends station!?”

“Wrong.” Regis responded immediately, prompting Altina to shove him aside using her hip. He was finally forced from the chair entirely. “...Wh-What was that for, Altina?”

“This seat is rather comfortable. I want it. Regis, wouldn’t you prefer to eat on the balcony? The breeze is lovely.”

“...If possible, I’d rather eat inside; it’s freezing out there. Is this a noble thing? I’m not sure I understand the appeal...”

Regis ducked away, completely unable to comprehend why Altina was suddenly in such a bad mood. Concluding that there was no way he could rectify the situation, Regis simply pulled up another chair.

Clarisse took Regis’s plate and cutlery from in front of Altina and placed it where he was now seated. She then prepared a brand-new plate for the princess.

“You can’t expect much, Princess... This is Mr. Regis we’re talking about.”

“Yup! This is Regis’s fault, no doubt about that!”

“...What’s going on here?”

To his side, Eric let out a quiet giggle. Mere moments ago he had been wearing an expression suited for someone who had experienced the depths of hell, yet now he was positively beaming.

“You two are like brother and sister. That’s a relief.”

“...I’d rather we be like a commander and her tactician...” Regis mumbled, “But whatever the case, having any baseless rumors spread would trouble us both. Please keep this a secret.”

“I swear on my honor.”

While remaining seated, Eric half drew his sword as he took a knight’s oath.

“Thank you. Now then, Altina—why did you come back? What happened to dinner?”

Tonight was supposed to be the royal family’s first dinner together in quite a long time.

“Right, right! Regis, listen to this!”

“I’m listening.”

“Father had a brand-new consort!”

“...Yes, I heard the ceremony took place while we were attacking Fort Volks... The sixth consort. If rumors are to be believed, she only just turned fifteen.”

This would make her younger than not just Auguste and Latrielle, but even Bastian. The consort was barely any older than Altina. It wasn’t rare for an imperial noble to take a new wife younger than his son, but...

“And she was sitting next to Father at dinner! It’s like she’s his wife!”

“Th-That’s going to be problematic... The sixth was, err... Princess Estaburg, was it? The daughter of a foreign king. Perhaps she prides herself as being higher than the nobles.”

“The atmosphere was unbearable! With how tense things were between the empress and this new consort, I could barely even breathe.”

“That must have been tough...”

“That’s why I downed my *aperitif*—though mine was only juice—and snuck out!”

“You should go back!”

“No way, no way, *no way*! I’m not spending another second in there!”

“...Hah, I suppose it’s too late to do anything about it now... You’ll be at tomorrow’s party though, won’t you?”

“Hell no!!”

“...Altina. Abidal-Evra has carried out his duty by escorting you here. Now it’s time for you to fulfill yours.”

“Y-Yeah. I was only joking... Of course I’ll do it. I will. Just not today. Anything but that.”

“...Okay. Tomorrow is where it counts, anyway. Our journey was a long one, so tonight you can focus on relieving any stress.”

“Ah, sounds good!” Altina reached for her knife and fork. “Ahaha, now that’s off my mind, I’m suddenly feeling really hungry. Nom—oh, this is delicious!”

“...We should eat as well,” Regis said, receiving an agreeing nod from Clarisse and Eric.



When the meal was over, Altina and Clarisse retired to their room. It was still too soon to sleep, but they were surely worn out from the journey.

Around half an hour after that, there was another knock on the door. It seemed there would be quite a few visitors tonight.

This time, Eric answered the door.

“Who is it?”

“It’s Clarisse. I brought tea.”

“Oh, come right in.”

The door opened to reveal Clarisse standing with a tray in her hands. She entered and placed the tea set on the table.

Regis had already changed into his pajamas, kicking back as he read a book. He lowered his head gratefully, though his eyes didn't move from the page.

“Thank you, Ms. Clarisse. I was just getting thirsty.”

“It's no trouble. Tea tastes better with company.”

“I see... Where's Altina? Is she already asleep?”

“The princess will not be attending.”

“Eh? What do you mean?”

“A messenger from Latrielle arrived a moment ago and handed over a letter. Immediately after that, the princess made herself presentable and headed out.”

“...What!?” exclaimed Regis.

“Wh-Where did she go!?” spluttered Eric.

Naturally, both men went pale.

“She did not take her overcoat, so I presume she is somewhere in the palace.”

“Why didn't you tell—!!” Eric swallowed his words before his tone grew harsh.

Clarisse was a maid, neither an aide nor a guard. It was shameful to speak on her master's private life unless prompted.

“Thank you for telling us, Clarisse,” Regis said, standing as he placed his book on the table.

“Oh no, there's no need to thank me. The princess didn't ask me to keep quiet.”

That made sense—Clarisse never would have mentioned what had happened had Altina asked her not to.

“I'm going to search for her!” Eric declared, making for the door. His sense of duty brought a look of desperation to his face.

“...Calm down, Eric,” said Regis, “As I told Altina before, we shouldn’t do anything reckless in the palace. Take care not to cause any problems that may worsen her position.”

“Ah, yes... Of course.” He straightened his clothing and exited with a bow.

Regis similarly changed into his military uniform. Doing so had put him in his undergarments before a woman, but this was an emergency situation where such things could be forgiven.

“...Did she bring her sword with her?”

“She did.”

“Then that means plenty of people must have seen her... That, or she’s somewhere she could have reached without being seen.”

“Do you have any idea where she could have gone, Mr. Regis?”

“...Yeah. Books containing inaccurate depictions of the palace tend to earn a terrible reputation, so many authors take great care in these details. There are even a number of works written by nobles who have actually come by the palace.”

“I’m suddenly getting worried.”

“You did well to tell me. Don’t worry, you’re not betraying Altina. As you said, she never asked you to keep quiet.”

“...I’m very worried.”

“...Right. Latrielle may have his reputation to uphold, but going out without guards is much too dangerous.”

“Oh no, I’m not concerned about my princess.”

“Huh?”

“I’m worried that Mr. Regis won’t be of any use protecting the princess when he gets there.”

“...Oh, right. Well... I could at least call for help, don’t you think?”

“A splendid idea. I’m sure the princess will gladly save you.”

“H-Haha... That’s a relief.”

Clarisse’s dry sense of humor had managed to ease the panic swirling through Regis’s mind. Eric was a trained knight and was thus useful in combat, but Regis’s use depended on him having a clear head; if he raced out in a frenzy he would only become a burden.

Regis needed to handle this calmly. He made his rounds through the library in his head.

“...Hm, yes. There was a similar situation in Baron Vigvire’s *Aroused in Darkness*.”

“How lewd.”

“It-It-It’s not that sort of book!”

It wasn’t something he had ever really thought about, but now that she mentioned it, the title was definitely a bit embarrassing. Sure, the story *did* contain its fair share of trysts in the imperial palace, but it was a fine, upstanding mystery. Had they not completely ruined the plot by having the palace blast off into the skies at the very end, it would definitely have become a classic.

“...I’ll be off,” said Regis.

“Mr. Regis, the princess is unrivaled when it comes to swordplay, but she’s pure and innocent, and very easily fooled... After all the blatant animosity she’s had to endure, she’s become terribly weak to a smile.”

“...I understand.”

“And that’s what makes her so much fun to tease.”

“Hey!”

“I’m only joking. Please protect her. Make sure no bad adults pull the wool over her eyes.”

“...Right... Then I should very well start by protecting her from you.”

“Fufufu. I’d love to see you try.”

“You’re a tough nut to crack...” said Regis, offering Clarisse a small wave as he

exited the room.

The palace was as large as a small city; the chances he'd find her by walking around at random were dreadfully low.

As Latrielle had thorough knowledge of every nook and cranny in the palace, he had surely chosen a perfect secret meeting place. And perfect secret meeting places were the ideal setting for romances about the palace.

Regis gently pushed the door to the Prometheus Chamber, opening it just a sliver.

The imperial palace stretched out in four directions, forming the shape of a cross. Altina's room was midway down the north wing, the detached residence where Auguste lived was beyond its northern extremity, and the gate they had used to leave at noon was to the northeast.

This room was in the northernmost tower, facing the northwest courtyard. A balcony jutted out over the courtyard, the front of which was cloaked by trees. It didn't get much sunlight as a result, and so wasn't used during the winter months. It was much more desirable in the summer, when the shade from the branches made the balcony nice and cool. Unfortunately, during the chilly nights of early spring when the pale blue interior brought cold winds and streams to mind, it served as little more than a damper on the spirit.

The large windowed door leading to the balcony was open, the laced curtains on either side swaying in the wind.

Beyond them was the form of a red-haired girl in a blue dress, a large sword at her hip.

So she really was here! Regis gave thanks in his heart. *Thank you, Baron Vigvire! I'll gladly buy your next release, even if the castle does once again soar into the skies! No seriously, what was up with that!?*

Whatever the case, loitering in the corridor would get him seen and captured by a soldier on patrol. And so Regis slipped into the room, careful not to make a sound.

His footwork was masterful, if he did say so himself. It seemed that spending

day after day navigating a room littered with precarious piles of documents had some unexpected perks.



Regis pressed himself against the wall of the dark room, straining to hear. He hoped the encounter wouldn't escalate beyond idle chatter...

The wind ferried Altina's and Latrielle's voices right to his ear.

"Fufu... Yes, I recall."

"Hm. You have not changed in the slightest, Argentina."

"And I'm sure you've changed a lot, Latrielle... You're speaking in a very strange manner. Are you supposed to be my grandfather?"

"Grandfath—!? ...I'm working hard so that others may deem me worthy to be the next emperor."

"Well, it doesn't suit you! So? What's this all about? You didn't summon me here to catch up on old times, did you?"

"Quite right. Argentina, I feel as though you've reached an age where you can truly understand the realities of our world."

"Naturally. I'm nearly fifteen."

"I must rebuild the Empire. For now, our sheer size allows us to win wars by numbers. But if heavy taxation were to crush the populace, our war fronts would very well collapse."

"Hm..." Altina sounded impressed.

"What's wrong?"

"I never took you as someone who'd consider the struggles of the common folk."

"I'm not a fool. No matter how high and mighty the aristocrats may carry themselves, allowing a spirit of rebellion to foster among the people would lead to our nation's downfall. There are more than a hundred thousand men in the imperial army, but the populace outnumber them several times over."

"That's right! The people are nearing their limit. That's why we need to put a

stop to their exploitation!”

“Yes, we must cut down heavily on expenses.” Latrielle nodded under the moonlight.

Altina’s expression brightened up. There was nothing more wonderful to her than the thought that Latrielle shared her ideals. While Regis found some of his actions rather questionable, Latrielle was definitely the closest to becoming emperor.

“This is what I think: we need to cut down on the aristocrats’ luxurious lifestyles, and keep Belgaria from engaging in unnecessary wars. We should pull back to easily defensible terrain.”

“Pulling back the war fronts is impossible.”

“Eh? Why?”

“If we chose to avoid war, how many people would lose their livelihoods? Not only soldiers; those who train them, those who transport them, those who forge their weapons, those who support them... The scope of war must be maintained at a uniform level across the whole empire. That is precisely why we establish multiple war fronts.”

“Y-You can’t...!” Altina raised her voice.

Latrielle glanced around cautiously. It was the night before the festival, and he could hear music and conversation from both the town and the palace. A single raised voice probably wouldn’t garner much attention.

“Latrielle, I don’t think that’s right.”

“The economic structure of our empire is dependent on war. You can stop the nobles from spending recklessly, admonish the commoners for idle hands, contain the losses in battle... but you cannot stop war itself.”

“But people are dying...”

“We can’t have over three hundred thousand unemployed.”

“That—”

“Listen to me, Argentina. As it is now, the Empire won’t survive for much

longer. We've been pushed to the brink. But I have no authority to restrain the nobles. I've barely assured control over the army, and even that will easily be snatched away from me the moment I lose the support of those close to the emperor."

"Father's associates? His ministers?"

"Correct. As well as the grand chamberlain, and, though they don't officially hold positions, his old high noble friends who often show at his banquets. If the words of those closest to him cause the emperor to have a change of heart, my standing will crumble in an instant."

"Even our father wouldn't do that, would he? Without you as its commander, who will unite the army?"

"There are many who have their eyes on my position. When you get as high as marshal general, succession through marriage is very much possible."

"Eh? Really?"

"....."

That was something Regis was aware of. When an emperor had only daughters, it was possible for an empress to come to power. But it was also a precedent for the most talented man—namely the highest ranked man in the military—to be taken in as a son, in turn becoming the next emperor.

At the time, the position of marshal general did not exist, so it was the commander of the First Army who would be chosen. He would then succeed the throne the moment the legitimate daughter turned fifteen. As it was the commander's son who would carry the imperial blood, the commander was treated as the emperor's proxy.

Whatever the case, Auguste was sickly, so as long as someone could take down Latrielle and secure full command of the army, that person would have a chance at the throne.

"In the end, my authority is almost inconsequential. It goes no further than directing troops on the battlefield."

Surely the right to move a hundred thousand men is far from inconsequential,

thought Regis. But Latrielle was right that it wasn't enough to stop the nobles from spending or to change the country.

The only one who could achieve that was the emperor.

"Ah." Altina made a sound as if she realized something. "In that case... don't tell me the one who'd be expected to become the adopted son's wife... is me!?"

"I would think so. You are the oldest of the emperor's daughters."

"Gnn..."

Even if such a marriage would make her empress, if a military man with such a strong lust for power became emperor, it would be impossible to rid the country of war. It was a very bleak outlook for the future—for Altina in particular.

"Though there is one other... Auguste's younger sister. She's even more sickly than her brother, so I hear she's been bedridden at the villa."

"Felicia, was it? How should I put it... She never wanted to play with me when we were younger, so I can hardly remember her."

"...That's because she only had the strength of a normal child. Any games that involved picking up cattle were out of the question."

"Bastian was the one who did that. I was the one who returned them to their pens," responded Altina rather matter-of-factly. Then, she seemed to come to a sudden realization. "...Felicia... Felicia, eh...? The silver-haired... Surely it can't be?"

Latrielle narrowed his eyes.

"Now do you understand what path this country must take? Do you understand why I need to become emperor?"

"Well, dear brother, I at least understand your point of view."

"...Pff."

"What?"

"No, my apologies... It's just been so long since anyone called me that."

"Mn? Ah, we were talking about the past so I guess it just slipped out. You're

just Latrielle. Yes, Latrielle is more than enough for you.”

Mleh. Altina stuck out her tongue.

She was surely the only one in the Empire who could do that to the second prince, and supreme commander of the Belgarian Army.

“Fufu... Next, let’s talk about you, Argentina... Your situation is very different from how it was half a year ago. I’m sure you recall that the Empire has two factions: one supporting Auguste, and the other supporting me.”

“And that’s what’s making it so hard to decide the next emperor, right? A real bother, that is.”

“Then do you know about the undecided column?”

“You mean the ones who don’t support either?”

Latrielle nodded. It seemed Altina wasn’t too knowledgeable about them. Regis knew a thing or two about the divisions in the palace, but wasn’t aware of any recent developments.

“There are undecided parties in the military and among the aristocracy. They have begun to move to form a third faction supporting you, Argentina. Though they have yet to make a clear proclamation.”

“Huh!?”

“Auguste is feeble, and there are too many dark rumors surrounding me... In which case, they need to search out someone else.”

“What about the third prince?”

“About three months ago, just as we were ringing in the new year, he went off to study abroad in High Britannia.”

“Mrh... So he ran away.”

“He did always distance himself from the power struggle. Perhaps he sensed he was likely to get dragged in. I have nothing but apprehension about sending that rude, ignorant and selfish brother of ours to a country so strict about good manners, but...”

“I’ve heard you could shoot him and he still wouldn’t die. He’ll come back

alive.”

“...Really?”

“He told me once that he’s dodged his fair share of bullets.”

Regis wasn’t sure that was what he had meant. No matter though—if Altina and Latrielle were just going to stand around and chat, there was no reason for Regis to stay any longer.

...But Latrielle then said something he couldn’t ignore.

“Whatever the case, the third faction that supports you has grown too large to ignore. Were I to combine them with my side, I would no doubt be able to take the throne. The emperor’s close aides are among them.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“Argentina, will you be my queen?”

“.....!?”

Altina was petrified, a dubious expression plastered over her face.

Regis quite nearly raised his voice in disapproval, but barely managed to cover it and contain himself. He had never expected Latrielle to make such a proposition.

Regis had considered a similar option not too long ago—an engagement to the sickly Prince Auguste as a means of changing the country. But he had discarded it, unable to think of any way to actually put such a scheme into practice.

Had he not already considered it himself, perhaps Regis really would have called out in shock.

So this is why he tried to win her over. He’s trying to absorb the third faction through Altina. I can finally see why she became so popular in the capital—Latrielle must have really fired them up.

Something had simply felt off about Altina’s reputation climbing so high after capturing but a single fortress, no matter how impregnable it was. The only reason Fort Volks had been allowed to remain in enemy hands for so long was

because it wasn't valuable enough to make it worth the time and money an attack would have required. Had it been an enemy stronghold important enough to decide the fate of the nation, Belgaria would have mobilized one hundred thousand, or perhaps even two hundred thousand, soldiers to take it down.

There was no doubt that Latrielle had herded those who were undecided into supporting Altina, creating a third faction he could then manipulate.

Latrielle's plan is simple, Regis thought, He's eliminating his political opponents.

On paper, Bastian had gone to study abroad. In actuality, he had run away. And, had everything gone to plan, Altina would have fallen from grace following a crushing defeat at Fort Volks. Perhaps she would have even died in battle.

Once they were both out of the picture, there would be no other successors for the neutral parties to support.

All he would have to do then was bring the first prince to an untimely end, or have him lose his standing completely. No matter how indecisive the emperor was, under such circumstances he would have to concede the throne. There would be no other viable options.

But neither Auguste nor Altina had been removed from the equation. Latrielle's plan had failed.

Perhaps he was beginning to panic. As things currently stood, were the emperor to die, the crown would be passed on to Auguste who was next in line to the throne. And while the emperor was currently in good enough health to take a new consort, he was old enough that his passing would come as no surprise.

As Altina had returned from Fort Volks with unexpected results, Latrielle's intentions changed from eliminating her to taking advantage of her.

If she accepted his marriage proposal, it would all be over. And so Regis mustered the courage to speak up...

...but an amused laugh stopped him before he even made a sound.

“Ahahahahah! What are you on about, Latrielle!?”

“...Hm.”

“Aha... Hahahah! I never thought you’d say something like that. That was the sort of joke Clarisse would make.”

“I’m not sure who that is... but I’m too old to horse around. I think we both stand to benefit from the arrangement.”

“Oh, sure—we’ll both benefit. Is that any way to propose to a lady?”

“...Though unusual under any other circumstances, the church permits those in the royal family to marry their siblings. There would be no legal issues.”

“So you’re serious?”

“Naturally.”

“That just makes it even worse!”

Altina advanced a few paces toward Latrielle, grasping the *Grand Tonnerre Quatre* hanging from her waist. Then, she released the clasp over her shoulder and swiped her sword.

As the sword was longer than she was tall, it was impossible for her to draw it from a normal scabbard. For this reason she wore a custom-made one, which was designed in such a way that it could be removed with a single swipe.

“What are you trying to do?” frowned Latrielle.

“I don’t believe you! You say that war is necessary for our country, but that’s the complete opposite of what Regis told me.”

“So you’ll trust that strategist over me... A low-ranking officer over an imperial prince, a general, *your own brother*. Is he really that great of a tactician? He didn’t look so wise to me...”

“Yes, he does look somewhat unreliable...”

Regis felt as though he should be apologizing for something.

“But he would never lie to me! He told me that putting an end to war would benefit the nation!”

Regis recalled that this was something they had talked about in the carriage several months ago. Had she remembered it and believed his words all this time?

Latrielle sighed. His tone warped, now akin to the voice one would use to pacify a bad-tempered child.

“That man is in no position to manage the Empire’s finances. If he knew the reality of our situation, perhaps his thoughts would change.”

“Don’t write him off so easily! If you become emperor, I won’t be able to do a thing no matter what I believe. I believe in Regis... If it weren’t for him, then I’d still be little more than a political prisoner in Fort Sierck. No, perhaps I’d have even died at Fort Volks!”

“It was wrong of me to make that command. I’ll apologize for that. But for the good of the Empire, won’t you let bygones be bygones and support me?”

“I’ll support you if you can promise me the war will end.”

“It’s not as if I enjoy pointless conflict.”

“Then will you order a retreat to a more defensible position?”

“...That is a possibility. It will take some time, though.”

“Hm. Then proclaim it before the nobles and His Majesty at tomorrow’s banquet. Then I’ll trust you.”

Altina pinned the prince with a cold glare, and he fell silent with a pensive look on his face.

“...There is a time and place for such a proclamation. Please understand, dear sister.”

As she lowered the tip of her sword, Altina’s tone turned harsh.

“...You’ve always treated me like a child... Ever since I was born. You’ve never taken me seriously!”

She lunged toward him.

Is she really going to cut him down!? Regis was sure his heart would stop. Latrielle must have expected her move, as his expression didn’t change—he

looked as though he was still mid-conversation.

And, the next moment, he vanished into thin air. Or at least, that was how it looked to Regis. Even though his vision from his hiding place was obscured, their figures illuminated by no more than the pale moonlight, he could tell that Latrielle's movements were abnormal. Inhuman.

He closed the distance between himself and Altina in an instant.

"You really were going to stab me... How very thoughtless of you, Argentina."

"We'll settle this here and now! That should make things nice and easy."

"How foolish."

"Perhaps. But I'm not cruel enough to watch my men die, then blindly accept that's how things have to be! *You're* the one prolonging the war! You murderer!!"

"It is to protect the Empire. You need to understand that, Argentina."

"Then I'll defeat you and protect it myself!"

Altina swung her sword at Latrielle. It sliced through the balcony railing with ease before crashing down into the stone floor.

Her upper left arm had been fractured for quite some time, but it was clear she had made a full recovery; her swing was even faster and more powerful than it had been in her duel with Jerome.

The large, naked edge encroached on Latrielle. There was nowhere he could go; he was backed up against the balcony railing, and as they were on the second floor—which was even higher than the third floor of a normal building—jumping down to escape wasn't an option.

"You're not listening to reason," Latrielle sighed. He caught the horizontal slash with his one-handed single-edged sword, and the clash of metal echoed through the room. Regis had read about this blade before—it was the *Armée Victoire Volonté*.

Not only did Latrielle catch the attack, he repelled it.

"You've grown strong, Argentina."

“E-Erk...”

“I heard you were trained by Sir Balthazar... This era has brought with it many far more powerful swordsmen. Had you been a man, perhaps you could have even been taught by the imperial instructor instead.”

“In battle, the most important thing is having the perseverance to win!!”

Having been forced into a more unfavorable position, Altina launched a kick aiming straight for Latrielle’s gut. But he simply raised his knee to block the attack.

As the princess’s posture crumbled, Latrielle took a step toward her.

“I don’t mean to slight the contributions of the House of Balzac, but... the art of swordplay is forever evolving. Nowadays, such a reckless kick would be considered a terrible move!”

“Perseverance!!”

Even as her balance crumbled, Altina fired off another kick. She had managed to take him by surprise this time, and her foot sunk into his abdomen.

However, high-ranking officials and commissioned officers had the areas of their uniforms covering vital areas reinforced with leather. Such a shallow kick wasn’t enough to give her a decisive advantage, but the brief moment he faltered gave Altina enough time to reposition herself.

“I’ve still got some fight in me!” she yelled.

“What an incorrigible sister you are.”

Latrielle appeared to vanish once more, closing the gap in an instant.

“...!?”

“Hmph. Have you never seen footwork like that before?” he scoffed, bringing down his saber in an elegant arc. It was impossible to follow his blade with the naked eye; the only indication of contact was the sudden clatter of metal as Altina raised her sword to block, catching Latrielle’s blade at eye level.

But before she could even react, a second razor-sharp cut nicked her lower body.

“Hyau!?”

The saber sliced through her skirt, just narrowly missing flesh.

“Have your opponent defend against a strike from above, then slice their braced legs. Normally, the battle would end there and then... Humans are quick to block when their head is under threat, but their own arms and sword obscure their vision, delaying their reaction to the next attack.”

“You...!”

Altina swung her greatsword, which Latrielle again dodged effortlessly.

“The sword fighting style practiced by the House of Balzac was fashioned around heavy armor users, so does not utilize a full range of motion. It is a defensive style. You’re not using your legs to their fullest.”

Latrielle kicked off of the balcony floor, the stone grating beneath his feet.

He pushed forward into a sharp lunge. Altina managed to deflect at the last possible second, but this didn’t slow Latrielle’s momentum; he circled around her, and before she could even turn to face him, his sword was already closing in on her once more.

“Kuh!!”

Altina twisted her sword, blocking the attack with its long hilt.

“Hmph. How resourceful. Did you learn that from Sir Balthazar as well?”

“Hyaaaah!!”

She swung back the *Grand Tonnerre Quatre* with all her might, ready to step forward into a devastating blow. But Latrielle thrust his own sword out, countering before she even had the chance to strike.

“You don’t need such a large swing to take down your opponent. Just watch their movements, then place your sword where they’re about to move to. That’s all you need to land your blow, for blood to flow, and for your foe to perish.”

“Urrgh...” Altina groaned.

A shiver ran down Regis’s spine. He swallowed dryly.

So this is the strength of the supreme commander... The man who leads over a hundred thousand troops...

He was so nervous that he was sure he could pass out at any second. Even so, he had to move. Steadying his trembling legs, Regis stepped forward.

“...P-Princess.”

“Eh!?”

Altina’s mouth dropped open, her expression blank and eyes opened wide. It was impossible to determine whether Latrielle was surprised or not. Regis was certain he had been listening in unnoticed... but the man appeared so unfazed that he was beginning to lose confidence.

“I’ve been searching all over for you, Princess... only to find you out in the night breeze. Were you talking with Prince Latrielle?”

“Me? Um... I was—”

“My apologies, Prince Latrielle. While I am fully aware of my discourtesy, the princess has just returned from a long voyage, and tomorrow is the ever-important anniversary of the founding of our great nation. While I may be out of place for saying so, I believe she should get some rest for the night.”

Latrielle’s lips curled into a discreet smile, and he returned the *Armée Victoire Volonté* to its scabbard.

“Fufu. I can imagine. I’ve droned on long enough.”

Regis offered a reverent bow while Altina moved to retrieve her own scabbard, which was lying in a corner on the balcony. She firmly bit her lip, eyes bleary.

“Urrgh...”

Latrielle stepped back inside, making his way through the room and toward the door.

“It’s not something I could act on straight away, but I shall consider your request. I await a favorable response, Argentina.”

As she watched his back disappear, Altina forced words through the lump in

her throat. “Kuh... Don’t think you’ve won, Latrielle.”



On her way back to her room, the princess groaned “I can’t stand this” around thirty times. As expected, Latrielle didn’t appear to have harmed her.

Regis sat Altina down, then slammed his hands against the table.

“Are you listening to me? Bravery and recklessness are completely different. Today, you have been imprudent, short-tempered and inconsiderate.”

“B-But you told me to face him.”

“...I didn’t tell you to physically attack him though. You fell victim to his cheap provocations. If the prince chose to pursue this, you could be locked up in an instant.”

“Erk!?”

“...He intends to increase your popularity and then use it for his own political gain. That’s the only thing that saved us this time. But as things stand, I don’t know how we can retaliate. You’re in the imperial palace, Altina. Not all problems can be resolved through combat. You should know that. Reflect on your actions.”

“...Was I too weak?”

“That’s not it. Had you actually landed a blow on Prince Latrielle back there, we’d be on the run from the Imperial Guard.”

“W-We would?”

“...Listen to me carefully. Swinging your sword around without a just cause makes you no better than a brigand. Is your grand ambition to kill your brother? Or is it to save the people?”

Altina clenched her hands over her lap, her head hung low.

“I... want to be the shield... that protects the people...”

“...I’ll believe in your words. If that’s how you really feel, then no matter how mistaken you think someone is, you have to refrain from drawing your sword unless you can demonstrate to the people that doing so was in the public

interest. After all, misgovernment begins the moment a ruler disregards what is best for their subjects.”

“Got it.”

Was the palace’s political strife too heavy of a burden on the fourteen-year-old girl who prided herself on her brute strength? While she had shown her ability to think and act rationally, all reason went out the window the moment someone provoked her impulsive side.

“...This is my fault for losing the initiative,” Regis said remorsefully, “I’m sorry.”

“Eh!? Regis, you didn’t do anything wrong!”

“...The situation has surpassed what I’m capable of, but... I’ll do my best. Altina, please act in a way that doesn’t bring shame upon your role as a princess.”

“Got it.”

“I’m counting on you.”

“Um... Regis...?”

“What is it?”

“...I’m sorry for worrying you.”

“Y-Yeah... You should probably be saying that to Eric, not me.”

Not long after, the man in question returned, white as a sheet and drenched in sweat. Altina offered Eric an earnest apology, but he was so relieved to see her safe that he didn’t seem bothered at all. All the while, Clarisse brewed a new batch of tea.

While Regis had very little confidence in his ability as a strategist, he definitely carried a desire to protect these people.

He looked up at the full moon rising outside the window. They were on a losing streak at the moment.

“...It’s about time we find our opportunity to strike back.”

Chapter 3: The Nation's Anniversary

"Ah, could you pass me that?" Altina called over.

"Princess, if you keep moving around like that, your hair will never be in order."

"Yeah, but don't you think that hairpin would look cuter?"

"Perhaps. Now please, face the mirror and sit still. And stop touching your hair."

"Yeah, yeah."

It was early in the afternoon, on their second day in the capital.

The commemoration festival had begun. The town bustled with festivities, while the palace erupted in celebration. In the midst of this, Altina fought an uphill battle. To be more precise, Clarisse was struggling hard to pretty her up.

"Hm... Maybe this one would look nicer."

A blue headpiece in one hand, and a gold one in the other, she seemed to be mulling over which one to go with.

"You'd look cute wearing either, Princess."

"You're not helping, Clarisse."

"Oh, that's a shame."

Altina shifted her gaze to a figure reflected in the mirror.

"What do you think, Regis?"

"All I can say is that you have ten minutes before the party begins."

The party would begin at two o'clock.

"Ah, you're no help... Eric, what do you think?"

The guard officer she suddenly pulled into the conversation was staring, entranced.

“How pretty...”

“That’s quite a peculiar way to praise someone, but thank you.”

“Ah! S-Sorry! I think you look lovely—very much so.”

Clarisse smiled at him.

“Would you care to try on a dress, Eric?”

“Me!? Ah, no, I’m... I’m a man, so... What a silly suggestion. Haha...”

Regis could have sworn that, for a brief moment, Eric’s surprised expression had been filled with glee. But he had to have been imagining it. Eric may have had the delicate facial features of a young woman, but he was the eldest son of the Blanchard household. According to his grandfather Everard, who was also the house’s current head, Eric had no siblings and his father had died in battle; in a few years’ time, he would succeed Everard.

“...Well, I do think it’d suit him...” Regis muttered, only to be immediately confronted by Eric.

“A-Are you serious!? Do you really think I’d look good in a dress!?”

“Eh? Err, yeah...?”

Perhaps that was too forward of me, Regis worried.

But Eric happily smiled, color touching his cheeks.

“Is that so...? H-How troublesome.”

“...Um...”

“Well, Mr. Regis, if you so fervently insist...”

“I’m not insisting anything!”

Altina shot him a cold glare through the mirror while Clarisse offered an amused chuckle.

“We’re in trouble now, Princess. Mr. Regis is crossing a dangerous bridge.”

“Right. It would be narrow-minded of me to comment on the preferences of a subordinate, so I won’t. I really won’t say anything, you hear? Not a word from me!”

“...I’m not crossing anything!”

“Then you were on the other side from the start?”

“Ms. Clarisse, please leave it at that.”

As their bantering continued, time seemed to pass in a flash.

“Ah... We’re going to be in trouble if we don’t leave now.”

“All right, you’re done,” said Clarisse, moving away her hands.

Altina teetered here and there as she stood, most likely due to the unfamiliar dress she was wearing. It was a deep red, the color of wine, and adorned with various soft-looking ribbons. The way its skirt was frilled made it look like a flower in bloom.

Regis was left speechless, entranced by the exposed pale skin around her nape, shoulders and chest.

“.....”

“What? Do I look funny?”

“Err, ah... You look... beautiful. Very...”

“Woah.”

“You should hurry up.”

“Ehehe... Say it again. One more time, one more time.”

“...You should hurry up?”

“I didn’t mean *that!*”

Regis knew full well what she had meant, but was too embarrassed to ever say it again.

The party was organized by the Ministry of Ceremonies, and only those invited could take part. A large majority of the invitations, quite naturally, went to nobles. While Regis was able to accompany Altina to the palace as her staff officer, he wasn’t personally invited, so he very much intended to stay in the waiting room with Clarisse. Security for the venue was handled by the capital garrison, so Eric would likely do the same.

Her makeup complete, Altina poked Regis's head.

"You could have at least put some oil in your hair."

"...Dressing me up would be rather pointless."

"You think so? But it's a party and all. Just a little bit wouldn't hurt."

"You're the one going to a party. We're just going to the waiting room."

"Oh, silly Regis. You're coming too."

"As much as I'd love to follow you, only those invited can attend."

"And I'm saying I'm inviting you."

"...Excuse me, what?"

Altina said it as though it were the most obvious thing in the world.

"I might not be able to bring you to the ceremony, but I should be allowed to bring a person or two along to the party. I'm not sure about the lower-ranking members, but the other nobles generally bring along family members, friends, and attendants."

Now that he thought about it, Regis had read a number of books in which an outsider accompanied a noble to a palace party. Though he never imagined he would be placed in that position...

"...I'm really going? To a party of nobles where His Majesty the Emperor himself will be in attendance?"

"That's right."

"...How could this be...? This is all rather sudden."

"Are you not up for it?"

"My heart's not ready. Ah, my stomach isn't either."

"It's fine," Clarisse said coolly as she opened a trunk, "I thought this might happen, so I packed a full set of ceremonial clothing for you."

"When did you do that!?"

"Then it all works out. Good job, Clarisse!" praised Altina, "Now, now. Hurry up and change."

“But the party’s already starting!”

No sooner than he had said it, he heard a fanfare in the distance. But Altina paid it no mind whatsoever.

“It’s fine. Arriving a little late suits me perfectly. What royal stands around waiting for a party to begin?”

“...I see.” Her words did make sense, in a peculiar way.

Left with little choice in the matter, Regis changed into the ceremonial military uniform that had been prepared for him.



Though it had been some time since Regis had been transferred to the Beilschmidt border regiment—a demotion, as he saw it—he had been far too busy for an enlistment ceremony, or even the New Year party, for that matter. He hadn’t worn anything this formal since his previous unit.

Marquis Thénézay, as a noble of the capital, would invite friends to his manor for whatever reason and host parties. Not because his house was particularly spendthrift; it was simply custom for nobles to frequently entertain one another.

Houses whose finances fell through due to expensive displays and parties weren’t rare. The conscious aristocrat might show self-restraint no matter the amount of mockery they may receive for it, but there were also terrible aristocrats who would use their right to command tribute to squeeze excessive sums of money from their fiefdom.

“That’s why... I’m not too fond of the palace’s parties...” Regis mumbled.

“If you really insist, I won’t force you to go.”

The conversation took place as they walked down the corridor leading from Altina’s room to the party hall.

Altina gazed at Regis, examining him from head to toe. The base of his uniform was a greenish blue, his chest furnished with a white cravat and golden chains, and red cloth dangled from both hips. To be blunt, he stood out. While the uniform was indeed for ceremonial use, it was far too flashy. He would

instantly become a sniper's target on the battlefield.

Altina nudged him playfully with her elbow.

"You don't look half bad."

"...I don't have broad shoulders, and I'm not very tall at all. Plus I can't imagine I'm much to look at. If I at least had some medals on my chest, I might be somewhat more presentable."

"You want medals? You should've said so. I would have put in an application. You'd probably get some."

"Mn... On second thought, if you made my coat any heavier I'd end up with stiff shoulders. Don't worry about it."

"Ahaha, I've never heard anyone turn down a medal for that reason before. Ah, if you'd rather not wear a uniform, should I get you a dress for tomorrow? You just might be able to pull it off."

She pinched her frilly layered skirt and waved it back and forth. Regis did find the dress cute, but he felt absolutely no urge to try it on. He was very thankful for that.

"...I'll have to decline. While I don't like parties, we need more information to find a means to oppose Prince Latrielle. So long as I can get in, we should be set."

"Then all's well."

"...But I'm so nervous I might embarrass you. I don't know what to do with myself."

"Are there no books on the proper manners for a party?"

"...I've read a few. Unfortunately, reading doesn't make me any better at dancing."

"Oh, don't worry about that. I'm terrible at it too."

"I never would have expected that. When you're holding a sword you seem so light on your feet."

"My dance instructor was always fuming at me. 'Your footwork is so sharp it's

like you're fencing. It's important to match your partner's pace and to breathe as one, so why are you swinging the men around? Your dance partner isn't a sword.' And so on, and so forth."

"I see... You had too much physical strength. But in that case, you should be able to dance fine with the rest of the royal family."

"Latrielle is even more nitpicky than my instructor was, so he's immediately ruled out! It's rare to even see Auguste at a party, and Bastian's been banned from them."

What exactly had the third prince done?

"...Looks like you've got your fair share of troubles."

Regis sympathized just a little with the emperor, who begot nothing but problem children.

The sound of the festivities grew louder. There were sentries at the entrance to the hall, and an elderly butler checking over invitations. *They won't turn me away for being a commoner, will they?* Regis wondered, his stomach beginning to churn.

The butler took one look at Altina then reverently lowered his head. He immediately informed everyone in the hall of her presence.

"Fourth Princess Marie Quatre Argentina de Belgaria has just arrived!"

In an instant, a heavy silence fell over the hall. The music had stopped, and all eyes gathered on the princess. A year ago, she had been no more than a princess with a commoner mother; nothing more than a target of envy and disdain to the aristocrats. But now she held a position of power and had a number of military achievements. It was enough that she could hold her head high.

As Altina started to make her way through the hall, the ambiance kicked up again as if hastily attempting to smooth the situation over. Regis walked beside her, trying hard to keep up her pace.

"...Hm."

"You keep fidgeting, Regis. What's wrong? If you're looking for a drink, they'll

come around soon enough. Just be patient.”

“...This is a world straight out of a play. No matter where I look, I only see nobles.”

“Well, that sounds about right. There *are* quite a lot of people here.”

“That’s not really what I meant.”

Quite a few had yet to arrive, but even so, there were at least a hundred nobles engaging in idle chatter.

The party was being held in a large hall at the center of the southern tower. The ceiling stretched even higher than the castle ramparts, and a number of chandeliers hung down from above, their warm glimmer creating what could only be described as a beautiful night sky in the middle of the day. Various embroidered cloths decorated the walls, while the floor was lain with tasteful carpet.

Toward the front of the hall was a platform large enough to be used for a stage play, and a sizable space in the middle of the room had been kept open for dancing. There were tables by the wall laden with food, and sommeliers poured wine at six separate counters. A line of sofas had been arranged at the very back of the hall, presumably for the nobles to rest on.

Fragrant scents wafted from every direction, but the most noticeable came from the vases on the wall-side tables, which were filled with rose-scented perfume. Regis felt as though he had stepped into a rose garden.

An orchestra in the corner was in the middle of performing a rather peppy tune.

“Looks like Latrielle is already here,” Altina said, glancing over the hall, “Do you think Auguste will come? Geh... And *she’s* here too.”

Among a large crowd of followers was the form of a woman in a conspicuously flashy dress that glimmered in gold. She was the elderly emperor’s sixth and newest consort: Juhaprecia Octovia von Estaburg. Though as she had already been taken by the emperor, her last name had since been changed to “de Belgaria.”

She was originally a princess of the neighboring kingdom of Estaburg to the east, and her followers consisted largely of the nobles who lived along their shared border.

The Empire had expanded eastward to a considerable degree over the last century; the lords who originally managed the territories would be granted a position of nobility within the Empire in exchange for a bloodless surrender. Incidentally, after only a single engagement with the Empire, no matter how quickly one surrendered, the lord would either be sentenced to death or exile.

While there was no clear distinction, the nobles of newly occupied territory were deemed *nouveau noblesse*, and were disdained and discriminated against for being upstarts and yokels.

Juhaprecia was bragging to everyone in earshot about the rather large gemstone dangling in front of her chest.

“Ufufufu. His Majesty himself gave it to me. He promised to give me an even larger jewel on my birthday.”

“Oh, as expected of His Majesty!”

“But I am growing weary of necklaces. I do hope he’ll give me something else next time.”

“How about an earring, my lady?”

“Dear me, but the jewel is going to be even bigger than this one. Can you imagine how much that would stretch out my ear? Ohohohohoh.”

She laughed, her followers guffawing in turn. The other surrounding nobles glared at them with ire.

Looks like the rumors of her debauchery are true... Regis quietly sighed to himself. A slow glance around the hall was enough to tell the Empire was harshly divided.

First, there was the faction supporting First Prince Auguste, led by his mother, the second consort Catherine; her household, led by Duke Touranne; and the other houses in the area. While they were some of the Empire’s oldest standing noble lineages, their territories were in the western countryside and so boasted

very little in regard to wealth and military strength.

Then, there was the faction supporting Second Prince Latrielle, led by the great empress herself, and consisting of the high nobles centered around her house. Their territories were based around the capital; they were affluent, with great influence over the military.

However, the fourth princess wasn't as detached from the factions as she thought. A certain someone offered her a deep bow. He was an elderly gentleman.

It went against proper etiquette for a noble to hold up royalty, so such a conversation would normally never happen unless Altina had spoken first. But there was no reason for her to ignore the man.

"Um... H-Hello?" said Altina.

"Pardon my great discourtesy, Your Highness Marie Quatre. It is an honor to meet you."

"Yes, likewise."

He was apparently a margrave with territory in the southwest who, upon hearing rumors of Altina's heroics, wanted an audience with her by any means necessary. She had always been ignored at gatherings up to this moment and so wasn't accustomed to being greeted. It was clear she was nervous.

Nobles with similar notions in mind started to gather, forming a ring around the princess. Many were either *nouveau noblesse*, or those who had reasons they couldn't ally themselves with the other factions. They were the undecided column. Were they going to become a third faction?

Considering how there were other nobles standing back, watching to see how things turned out, their numbers seemed great enough that it was understandable why Latrielle was so eager to secure their support.

Even so, it seemed these conversations wouldn't progress much beyond simple introductions, template greetings and generic flattery. Regis could tell he wouldn't learn any new information by staying here.

"...Make sure you remember their names and faces. I'll be taking a look

around,” he whispered into Altina’s ear.

“Eh? Um... Regis?”

“...Yes?”

“Mn. I— No. It’s nothing. I’m counting on you.”

“...Yeah.”

Altina looked discouraged, having been thrown into a situation unlike anything she had ever experienced before, but sallied forth with resolution.

Regis paced the hall, a wine glass given to him by a waiter in one hand. Who was talking to whom? Simply observing this would be considerably informative. It was knowledge that would prove useful down the line, so Regis planned to find an official from the Ministry of Ceremonies so he could get a look at the guest register.

This was information that would definitely never be shown to an outsider, but as someone in attendance it was simple enough to get ahold of. In no time at all, Regis had managed to secure a look at the register simply by saying he wanted to know whether a friend was coming.

Second Consort Catherine and the House of Touranne were scheduled to come, but had yet to arrive. While there were many others who were absent without notice, her status was enough to pique his interest.

“Ah!”

He felt strangely restless to see “Regis Aurick, Commoner, Fifth-Grade Admin Officer” written in next to Altina’s name. It was a stark reminder of just how out of place he was in a setting like this.

Offering his thanks to the official, Regis returned the register. He turned away, ready to go back to loitering around when—

“Why, if it isn’t Regis.”

Regis recognized the friendly voice as the man he had exchanged rather heated words with just the day before.

“...Good day, Germain.”

“I thought I’d find you here. I mean, you’re practically a hero at this point.”

“...That’s the princess you’re talking about, I just work under her. I’m only tagging along today as her guest.”

“You humble yourself. Those noblewomen have been eyeing you for a while now.”

When he looked where Germain had gestured to, he saw three young ladies looking in his direction. They shared some bashful giggles. Two raised their opened lace fans in their left hands, using them to cover their mouths, while the other kept hers closed, delicately running her fingers along its tip.

Using fans as a means of conveying feelings had gained considerable popularity among this era’s noblewomen. Holding one in the left hand in front of one’s face meant, “I want to become acquainted with you,” while stroking the top meant, “I want to talk to you.” At least, that was what Regis could remember.

A honeytrap? Regis looked away and deliberately cleared his throat. There was absolutely no way he would ever be popular with women—that was what he believed. He had no doubts that this had been set up.

He knew Latrielle was trying to win him over; he knew his objective. Seduction tactics—in this case employing such lovely women to send him amorous glances—were as basic of a trap as it could get. Yes, no matter how hard the prince tried to lure him in, Regis refused to give in.

“...My humblest apologies, but... I have no interest in those women, you see.”

“Oh my, so your interests lie elsewhere?” Germain shot him a playful wink.

“Th-That’s not what I meant!!” Regis was terribly flustered. Germain was a tough one—as expected of Latrielle’s retainer.

“Fufu. Well, my only intention was to help you broaden your network, Sir Regis.”

“...Much appreciated.”

“Prince Latrielle is still rather anxious over what happened last night.”

“Eh?”

Was he referring to how the prince had summoned Altina to an isolated room, attempted to threaten her into becoming his wife, and then very nearly beaten her black and blue? After all that, Regis was sure he would’ve been holding his head high.

“Despite how he looks, he’s a delicate one. Not long after the exchange, he fell into a state of depression wondering whether he had come on too strongly.”

“...Is that so?”

“But regardless of his current emotional state, I imagine it’ll be quite some time before the princess lets him talk to her again.”

“Yes, it would be best to give her some time.”

“Personally, I was considering having you, dear Regis, mediate between them.”

“...Me? Mediate between a prince and a princess?”

For a moment, the image of being caught between the *Armée Victoire Volonté* and the *Grand Tonnerre Quatre* crossed his mind, sending shivers down his spine.

“You could start tonight, if poss—”

The end of Germain’s sentence was shaved away by a separate, much louder voice.

“Ladies and gentlemen!”

Germain turned his eyes to the front of the hall, clearly displeased. A well-built, elderly-looking nobleman and a few people who were presumably his followers had climbed up onto the red-carpeted platform.

Germain clicked his tongue. “Bloody upstarts...”

“Who are they?”

“The... *up-and-coming* Duke Tiraso Laverde and his house. They have a vast plantation in the south, but they’re cowards who surrendered the moment the

Empire invaded.”

“...I see.”

It would have been pointless for a territory without any military backing to resist the Empire. If an invasion couldn't be prevented through political negotiation, immediate surrender was the appropriate decision.

The burly old noble, Tiraso Laverde, unfurled a sheet of parchment, though his eyes remained fixed on the audience before him. His gaze met with that of a young woman whose dark hair and modest black dress made her look like a crow. Her eyes couldn't be seen under her veil, but she carried a stern atmosphere about her.

The young woman nodded, and Tiraso Laverde started reading the parchment from up on the stage.

“Ahem... We are nobles who hold territories to the south, and many of us are what you might consider *nouveau noblesse*.”

His sudden words brought visible confusion to those listening, and even the nobles who had been deep in conversation began to focus on the stage.

“Ahem...” Tiraso Laverde's voice was now the only one that could be heard in the hall. “Compared to the imperial nobles of ages past who boast a strong connection of blood to one another, we are alone, and we are weak. Ahem... That is why, here and now, we p-proclaim the establishment of the... new noble alliance, the Gaillarte Garden Party!”

At those words, the room was astir. Tiraso Laverde ignored this and read on.

“Ahem... We of the Gaillarte Garden Party... did not originally offer our support to any prince.”

Meaning they were part of the undecided column—and judging by their numbers, quite an influential part, at that. Now that they had gone out of their way to proclaim as such, Regis had no doubt they would now express who they had chosen to support.

Are they going to announce their support for Altina? Regis could feel the anxiety bubbling up inside of him.

“Ahem... The Gaillarte Garden Party... is counting on First Prince Auguste to become the next emperor. Ahem... We wish to voice our wholehearted support for His Highness. For a long while—ahem—His Highness was brought to his knees by illness. However, his good grace has forced the demons of disease to take flight. He has recently begun wracking his brain over matters of public office—ahem—and his future achievements shall no doubt have him revered as one of history’s great emperors. Hack, hack...! Hack! Ahem... That is what we believe.”

“You have my gratitude!”

Auguste appeared from behind the stage; this was quite clearly a rehearsed production. Approaching Tirasio Laverde with confident steps, he exchanged a firm handshake with the elderly-looking noble.

“Ladies and gentlemen of the Gaillarte Garden Party, I thank you all for your kind support. I shall become the magnificent emperor you so desire. If you would please accompany me along the way!”

Applause rose not only from those on stage, but from small pockets around the hall as well. Those must have been Auguste’s supporters. They were considerably numerous.

Some parts of the speech had fallen flat, but its intent was clear—the Gaillarte Garden Party was a gathering of new nobles from the south. They were neither the time-honored nobles of Auguste’s faction, nor the capital-centered nobles of Latrielle’s. They were, so to speak, the very embodiment of the unaffiliated column, and now they had gathered, formed an alliance, and proclaimed they would support Auguste’s first faction.

Regis hadn’t heard any rumors that the sickly prince had stepped back into politics. But given the events that had just unfolded, as well as the fact that nobody seemed to be denying it, it was probably true.

While the third faction supporting Altina was growing... had the situation taken a sudden turn? Had there always been a large number among those in the unaffiliated column just waiting to express their support for Auguste?

Those in the hall exchanged bewildered words. The faces of the high nobles were especially pale. With this proclamation of support for a political enemy,

the most affected should have been Latrielle and his retainer... and yet, Germain's expression remained neutral.

"Now this is a troublesome development, wouldn't you agree? Just listen to them, Sir Regis. They haven't even familiarized themselves with our basic rules of etiquette. What a noisy bunch they are."

"...Y-Yes... Quite."

"Is something wrong? You're not looking too well."

"...I'm just not used to parties. Perhaps I'm a little fatigued."

At this rate, the emperor would have to recognize Auguste as his successor. This should have been a terrible predicament for Latrielle's side, yet not only Germain, but Latrielle himself didn't seem fazed in the slightest. The second prince resumed the pleasant conversation he had been in the middle of.

Was this just a front? Did Latrielle have some kind of plan? The fact that Regis couldn't pinpoint what the prince was thinking made him feel somewhat unsettled.

"Oh, right." Germain lowered his voice. "We were interrupted."

"Hm?"

"Prince Latrielle wants to speak with you in secret. Could you come to the prince's room at ten o'clock tonight?"

"...Is it really all right for the likes of me to approach him?"

"I'll inform the guards, of course."

To equate the situation to a chess board, the enemy had taken the initiative and already had them in check. What's more, Altina's side had no pieces that could be used for the counteroffensive.

Perhaps the enemy was slowly picking off pieces before approaching the king. He could run here, but then it would only be a matter of time before... checkmate.

"...Very well."

Germain nodded self-evidently, his face making clear he had known Regis

would comply.

“That’s good. Then if you’ll pardon me.”

And with that, Germain offered a polite bow and walked away.



Regis’s throat was parched.

By the time he realized, the glass in his hand was empty. While it was surely quite a high-grade wine, Regis couldn’t even remember whether it had been sweet or dry.

He made his way to one of the drinks counters and gestured for the attention of the sommelier.

“...White, please.”

“C’est entendu.”

A pale amber liquid with a faint green tinge was poured into his transparent glass.

“Thank you.”

He raised the freshly poured wine to his lips. It was refreshing; easy to drink, as though the wine had soaked right into him, leaving behind a pleasant fruity fragrance and an indescribable sweetness on his tongue.

“...Incredible... It’s so delicious, even my non-refined palette can appreciate the flavors.”

“Fufu. That’s quite the compliment.”

“Hm?”

“That wine was made in my own house’s winery. I suppose you could say it’s like one of my children.”

It was the woman wearing the modest black dress. She was, perhaps, in her mid-twenties. Her black, ink-like hair flowed down to her hips, and from beyond the black veil draped across her face, two dark obsidian eyes drew Regis in.

“...In that case, thank you. It was beyond words.”

“I’ll take a white as well.”

She took the glass handed to her by the sommelier and delicately swirled it before taking a sip, savoring the taste. Regis watched her, patiently awaiting her next words. He was interested in this woman; unless he’d been mistaken, before Tirasio Laverde had proclaimed the formation of the Gaillarte Garden Party, he had looked to this woman almost as if seeking her permission.



“Yes, it really is delicious.”

“...It is a pleasure to meet you. My name is Regis Aurick, fifth-grade administrative officer.”

“A name I hear all too often in these parts. They say you’re a skilled tactician who has made meaningful contributions to the northern front.”

“Ah, our achievements have been solely down to the princess...”

“Humility is a virtue. The more a merchant brags, the lighter his pockets.”

“...Is that so?”

“I am Elenore Ailred Winn de Tirasio Laverde.”

“You’re from the House of Tirasio Laverde? Then the gentleman back there—”

“That was my grandfather. I often accompany him on his business ventures, you see. My family name is quite the mouthful, so please, just call me Elenore.”

“I see... Then Mrs. Elenore it is.”

“Though my firm negotiating skills have also earned me the moniker ‘Vixen of the South.’”

“H-Haha... I’ll be calling you Mrs. Elenore. Please, call me Regis.”

“A pleasure, I’m sure.”

Elenore raised her glass, and Regis joined her in taking another sip of wine.

“...Ff.”

“I’ve never heard the surname ‘Aurick’ before... What is your peerage?”

“My peerage? Oh, I’m just a commoner.”

Elenore’s eyes opened wide.

“Then... you’ve been knighted?”

“Oh, no. I’m just a commoner. Had the princess not invited me, I wouldn’t have been able to enter the palace, let alone this party.”

“A commoner? But I heard you were a talented tactician.”

“It is true that I’m working as a tactician, but... I hold no more than a military

position. I have not been raised to the peerage.”

It was normal for senior officers to be nobles, so when one ascended to the post of strategist, it was common to also be knighted. But this was not a guarantee.

Elenore looked over Regis as if observing some rare novelty.

“I was sure that being clever was somewhat of a prerequisite for becoming a tactician.”

“Yeeeah... I’ve never thought of myself as particularly clever... but as I can’t ride a horse or use a sword, my mind is all I really have to offer. Though all I do is repeat plans I just happen to have read about...”

“Which means, Regis, you’ve got a good head on your shoulders.”

The fact she referred to him directly without using any courteous titles came as somewhat of a shock to Regis. Though it did make sense that a woman of such standing would see no need to respectfully address a mere commoner, and one younger than herself at that.

“...It’s not terrible... At least, I should hope not.”

“So there are smart ones even among the commoners. You learn something new every day.”

“O-Of course there are. There are commoner officials and teachers, even doctors—”

“Yes, there are commoners clever enough to learn trades. But a tactician with military achievements requires something more—to become one, you need to have proven yourself superior to an enemy general.”

“...That is generally how people see it, yes.”

“Am I wrong?”

“We have an amazing army on our side; I don’t think our victories were necessarily down to me being better than the enemy commander.”

For instance, in the attack on Fort Volks, the mission would have easily failed had their measurements been wrong, the tunnels dug any slower, or the

infiltration team defeated. And even then, they had only succeeded because Altina had managed to defeat a formidable enemy general in just one strike.

The look in Elenore's eyes changed to that of an appraising merchant.

"You're an interesting man."

"...A-Am I really?"

"How old are you?"

"...Eighteen. I'll be nineteen soon."

"Do you have any interest in business? A commoner like you shouldn't be too optimistic about rising any higher in the military. Would you perhaps consider a job that doesn't require you to risk your life so close to the battlefield?"

"Eh!?"

"How much are they paying you right now?"

"Well, I'm a fifth-grade administrative officer, so... a pretty normal amount."

"My house will triple it— No, quintuple it. Four thousand deniers a month. Take it or leave it."

Regis inadvertently found himself calculating how many books he'd be able to buy with that kind of money, but was able to drag his consciousness back on track with a sharp shake of his head.

"M-My apologies, but I'm not in it for the money."

"I see... I already have three husbands, but would you care to be the fourth? Oh, or would you prefer my third husband's little sister? She's still only eight, but—"

"No, I'm not saying I want a wife either. Err, nor am I implying that I'm interested in men."

"So you're without greed. You'll make a fine merchant."

"How does that even..."

Elenore was in complete control of the conversation. *It does seem I'm weak to older women*, sighed Regis. But at this rate, he wouldn't be able to draw any

useful information out of her.

Let's try probing a little...

"Still, the Gaillarte Garden Party... They sure made a drastic move. After all, those houses will have to oppose the high nobles of the capital. Those old houses in the west may have a decent amount of military strength and those in the south some considerable financial assets, but they don't have too many options when it comes to actual armed conflict."

"Politics is much too complex for a woman like me to discuss."

"And yet you appeared to have discussed this very matter with your grandfather beforehand."

It seemed she would sidestep any roundabout attempts to channel the conversation, so Regis tried a more direct approach.

Elenore gave a wry smile. "Good grief, perhaps I should have stayed out of the room entirely... My grandfather is great when it comes to judging worth, but he hasn't the courage to act alone. Granted, I must admit, his charitable soul had already earned him some popularity."

"...Then, Mrs. Elenore, I take it you're the one who united the southern nobles."

"We wouldn't survive without a little cooperation. It's those central high nobles who made this partnership necessary in the first place; they offer us transactions on unfavorable terms, demanding marriages that are akin to taking hostages."

These were standard tactics used by nobles—those who opposed them would be pressured and stolen from, and those who allied with them would be bled dry.

The Belgarian Empire had once been a gathering of small nations to the west before they expanded across the continent. It had been three hundred years since the capital had been relocated to where it presently stood. But since then, the Empire's nobles had exploited the nation for their own personal gain, gradually draining its strength. It was like a snake eating its own tail.

“...So you believe you can come out on top? Will Prince Auguste be the key to your victory?”

“We only had one hurdle, and that was forming the alliance. Now that we’ve done that, you could say it’s all over. This is our win.”

Elenore took a glass of red wine from the sommelier, raising it in what seemed to be a toast to herself.

“It seems Prince Auguste has overcome his ailment,” said Regis, “And now that he’s taken such an action where the emperor and all the lords can see...”

“Fufu. What now?”

Regis rolled the empty glass in his palm.

“...It means that Prince Auguste can now take up a position befitting his status. It’s possible he could reclaim the title of supreme commander that Latrielle has taken as proxy. Perhaps he’s already made a plea to His Majesty.”

While Regis had only ever spoken to Auguste once, his antipathy toward Latrielle had seemed notably intense—almost as if he had a desire for revenge that exceeded what one would usually expect of political enemies.

“...And if so, Prince Auguste’s enthronement will be a foregone conclusion. His ministers will be selected exclusively from the nobles who supported him.”

“Fufu. Well, I’ll give you sixty points for that. But remember, the prince’s top supporters are the old nobles of the west.”

“Yes...”

First Prince Auguste’s mother was the second consort, Catherine. She hailed from the House of Touranne situated in the west. Naturally, they were Auguste’s greatest supporters, and the ones who stood to gain the most should he take the throne—both financially and in terms of prestige.

“Even if we went through the trouble of eliminating the high nobles of the capital, the old nobles of the west would simply take their place; there’s nothing for us to gain.”

Elenore was right—in itself, Auguste becoming emperor would not benefit the *nouveau noblesse* to the south. That was precisely why they had been

discussing forming a third faction in support of Altina.

But what if Auguste had promised some kind of reward to those unaffiliated nobles? Regis had a hunch. There were others who had hypothesized a similar predicament and secretly published books detailing the numerous possible outcomes. Such works had been disseminated for years now, so to Regis, such an explanation was far from unheard of.

“...You shared a desire to oppose the nobles from the west and center, so it can’t have been too much trouble to convince those from the south into forming the alliance. So this hurdle you speak of must have been because of another, separate objective, am I right?”

“Hm?” The look in Elenore’s eyes changed.

Regis continued: “...To the north is the powerful Germanian Federation, and to the west, the sea that separates us from High Britannia. In comparison to them, Estaburg to the east is far past its glory days, and the strength of the Hispania Empire to the south depends on naval warfare. It’s easy to see where our best chances for expansion lie, and one only needs to look at a map to see that there are far more convenient places the capital could be located. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“Fufufu... You’d be wasted on my third husband’s little sister.”

“My point is that, were Prince Auguste to take the throne, wouldn’t he relocate the capital to the south?”

Elenore swirled the wine in her glass, its heavy fragrance tickling the nose.

“Fufu... Relocate the capital? If so, the prosperity of us nobles in the south would be assured. But would the western nobles really allow it?”

“Under normal circumstances, no. But it’s a different story if someone with sway over them approves. For instance, the one who wants nothing more than to make her son emperor—Second Consort Catherine.”

Catherine and the House of Touranne held tremendous influence over the western nobles, and this authority would only increase were Auguste to become emperor. With the added cooperation of the Gaillarte Garden Party, it would be possible to force the relocation of the capital.

“Fufu. A most intriguing delusion.”

“...Personally, I’m rather anxious over the impact such a large move would have on the Empire’s treasury.”

“Many high nobles have debts to be paid, which may be collected at a moment’s notice. ...But only if it comes to that, of course.”

What Elenore seemed to be alluding to, albeit in a rather indirect manner, was the use of extortion.

“...I can’t imagine Prince Latrielle will just accept defeat, though.”

“He is a military man, not a politician or a merchant. His authority over this situation ended when he failed to assassinate Prince Auguste.”

“...Don’t you think he has countermeasures in place?”

“If you have an idea what he might be planning, Regis, I’d love to hear it.”

“I don’t mean to come off as rude, but... from Latrielle’s position, I can think of something just as important as taking down Prince Auguste.”

“And what would that be?”

“...Eliminating the undecided column. They are a threat. Let’s say, for instance, the second prince were to take out the first prince. The nobles supporting the first prince would lose their authority entirely, as once they’ve picked a faction, they’re unable to change their allegiance.”

“This is true. Nobles who switch their allegiance the moment power changes hands are simply contemptible. They are people you would do well not to lend an ear to.”

“However, the undecided group—those who haven’t voiced clear support for one particular person—can still gather behind a new prince or princess. They might prolong His Majesty the Emperor’s selection process even further.”

“I hear the emperor is still very zealous about having new descendants. I presume he’s simply desperate to leave behind a son with red hair and crimson eyes.”

A completely meaningless endeavor, as far as Regis was concerned. The color

of a person's hair or eyes had no bearing on their skill nor their personality. It was hard for him to accept that this personal belief steeped in superstition was influencing the lives of over a million imperial citizens.

"...So what you're saying is, considering his position, the second prince's objective should be to either eliminate the undecided group who haven't clearly backed anyone yet... or all his political rivals, the other princes and princesses."

Regis nodded. "Right. Assuming he was able to get rid of the first prince, he wouldn't want another rival to pop up and undermine all his hard work."

After all, those without a clear allegiance would still be able to back a new candidate. This whole situation was because the elderly emperor had yet to name his successor, still grasping at the idea that he could leave a "true heir."

"The second prince ultimately decided on eliminating his political opponents," Regis continued, "but he failed to remove both the first prince and fourth princess from the equation."

"And I imagine you played a role in one of those failures, Regis."

"Ah, no... Well... Whatever the case, for someone in Latrielle's position, what's important is that he removes his opposition—and eliminating the undecided column would be just as effective in achieving that."

"Is that so? So, as long as he can climb to the top of the succession chart, given the emperor's old age, he will have secured the throne."

"Yes, but Prince Latrielle seems impatient. I can't imagine he'll wait for nature to take its course."

"What makes you so sure?"

While the emperor was old, he was clearly healthy enough to take a fifteen-year-old consort. There was no telling how many more years he had ahead of him.

"...It may be quite some time before the emperor passes."

"But eliminating the undecided column won't be an easy task. There are plenty of powerful nobles in the east and south."

“...No, it’d be very easy.”

“Hm? What do you mean?”

“Were the undecided nobles to come out in support of Prince Auguste, they would simply become part of the first faction. The undecided column would no longer exist.”

Elenore fell into thought for a moment, then raised her glass to her lips, downing its scarlet contents.

“Fufufu. We’ve certainly relinquished the option of supporting another successor, but that doesn’t matter. Victory will be ours once Auguste takes the throne.”

“Right...”

“You sound disappointed.”

“...I just can’t pinpoint what Latrielle’s next move would be. This isn’t really a situation I’m used to, and unless I can predict what he’ll do I can’t come up with any plans of my own.”

“It’s simple—if someone outmaneuvers you, then you just outmaneuver them back. The loser is the one who can’t come up with their next move. Is that not what a tactician does?”

Elenore’s words, while spoken to him, seemed to be directed more at herself. Regis thought over whether he should reply or not, and eventually decided to swallow his words.

“...True enough... No mortal man is all-knowing. I’ll have to respond to his countermeasures as they come.”

“Yes, quite right. Incidentally, Regis...”

“Yes?”

“How about ten times your salary?”

“H-Haha... I really should be going. I’ve been gone a while, and, uh... I wouldn’t want to keep the princess waiting. But thank you for the wine, it really was splendid.”

Regis bowed and then swiftly took his leave.

...If I was in her position, I would have prepared for every possible move Latrielle could make.

Lives depended on a tactician's wit. Regis could never accept the idea that victory was decided through a back-and-forth of counters—that a strategist should simply try to react to their opponent's blows as they came. Being a tactician was about thorough planning; it was about reading steps ahead of your enemy so that every countermeasure was accounted for. Standing before the troops, before those who had entrusted their lives to him, before those marching to their deaths, Regis knew he could never just say:

"I never considered that."

Or at least, that was how he saw it.



That night, at ten—

The party in the palace continued. Surely it would carry on through to the next morning.

Altina and Regis had pulled out around eight, and the princess was now waiting with Clarisse. It was unlikely she would slip out again tonight, especially seeing as Eric was several times more wary of her now than he had been the day before.

Regis made his way to Latrielle's room, alone, still wearing his ceremonial uniform.

I really am walking into the lion's den...

The lord of the room sat in an expensive-looking leather chair, his elbow resting against a mahogany office desk. Latrielle brushed aside his magnificent golden locks, and focused his piercing red eyes on Regis.

"Fufu. You're nervous, aren't you?"

“...Of course I am. As a fifth-grade administrative officer, I never dreamt I would be granted the honor of an audience with the supreme commander of the Belgarian Army.”

“I already heard it from Germain, but Sir Regis, it seems you have quite a low opinion of yourself.”

“...Ah. Well, I don’t really have any particular strengths, and I don’t even know whether I’m being of any use to the princess. I’m sure things would have turned out for the better if she had a more skilled tactician by her side.”

“Would Argentina have taken me out by now?”

“...Please don’t even joke about that.”

He surely already knew of Altina’s ambition from their conversation the night before—she had loudly proclaimed it, after all. Even so, Regis intended to cover it up as well as he could. At the very least, he wasn’t going to be the one to confirm it. Such an intent should be voiced by Altina herself, at the right time and place, of course.

A chess board had been set up on Latrielle’s desk. Without a word, the prince moved a white pawn to d4.

“I don’t think my proposal to make Altina my queen was as bad as she made it out to be. Yes, while she might have other intentions... she doesn’t plan to lead her border regiment to attack the capital, does she?”

Latrielle gestured for Regis to make the next move, and so he moved a black pawn to d5.

“...Of course not. She has no intention of invading the capital.”

“There’s no way to know for sure, though. Common sense may make it seem improbable, but she has a habit of surprising me.”

Latrielle’s white pawn advanced to c4. Regis moved one of his own to c6.

“...It won’t happen.”

Though, as adamant as Regis was in his denial, he could feel himself growing anxious. Embracing her ambition to become empress, Altina had dueled an esteemed commander, General Jerome, to solidify her status in the border

regiment. The barbarian attack had immediately followed, giving them no time to breathe, and yet the regiment had turned the situation to their advantage, forming a cooperative relationship with the barbarians to alleviate their dire need for manpower. And thanks to an unreasonable order from the capital, they had captured Fort Volks. Altina's military potential had definitely grown. Did she really have no desire to attack the capital?

Latrielle moved a white knight to f3, which Regis matched by moving a knight to f6.

Regis shook his head. There was no way Altina would ever affirm a war that would cost so many lives.

"...The princess doesn't wish for a civil war."

"Is that what you think?"

Tap. Tap. A percussive rhythm accompanied their conversation as the chess game continued.

"...The present state of the Beilschmidt border regiment is the direct result of your order, Your Highness."

"I would have refrained had I known they employed a tactician such as yourself."

"...I am deeply honored to receive such excessive praise."

"Shall I guess what's on your mind?"

The corners of Latrielle's lips curled upward. Regis's fingers trembled, so much so that he nearly dropped his bishop.

"...Whatever could you mean?"

"With Fort Volks as their base of operations, the Beilschmidt border regiment has augmented itself to an extent the imperial army can no longer ignore. Now that Argentina makes her triumphant return to the capital, she will obtain authority befitting her military might, and will gain a say in military affairs. Her focus will be on pulling our armies back to a more defensible position and curtailing military expenses."

That was definitely something Regis had considered.

Latrielle's queen removed a black rook from the board. Regis unintentionally sighed. As long as he could continue concealing his bewilderment, he may be able to influence the situation, even if a definitive victory couldn't be achieved. For now, he just needed to ward off Latrielle's offense; Regis moved his king to a more defensible position, surrounded by other pieces.

"...I have no say... on what the princess thinks."



“I had noticed Argentina’s desire to change the Empire. But she is an impulsive one; I was sure she would never hold any concrete power. It was my blunder to afford her a competent tactician.”

“...What do you intend to do?”

“Were I to allow Argentina to return to the capital, those loudmouth nobles wouldn’t let me hear the end of it. I could relocate her to another battalion instead, but that would only increase the number of armies that sympathize with her plight should something happen.”

“.....”

Regis was careful not to say a word. His black bishop was taken, then his knight as his pieces disappeared one by one from the board.

“But regardless of what I do, surely allowing a competent tactician to remain by her side would become an inconvenience for me.”

Regis could feel Latrielle’s red eyes piercing through him. Regis was a soldier—all it would take for him to be relocated was an order from the Ministry of Military Affairs, who valued Latrielle’s opinion to the highest degree. More specifically, they possessed the authority to remove a civil officer from a border regiment.

But I’ve already considered that move, Prince Latrielle, Regis thought to himself.

“I don’t really have much of an attachment to the military.”

“Oh really?”

“Really. Say I was reassigned somewhere I didn’t want to be, for example. I would just have to resign. I’m not a royal or a noble... I have no military history to uphold, nor a house name to protect.”

“I see. So that’s your position.”

“Yes. So long as I paid off my student loans from the military academy, regulations would permit my leave.”

“Your student what?”

Latrielle seemed rather unfamiliar with the term. The system was set up so the tuition and living expenses required to attend the military academy could be written off as a debt, and a contract prohibited him from leaving the military until it was paid off.

“And truth be told, with this and that, I owe money to the princess too.”

“You borrowed money from her?”

“Although, as I already owe her money, I suppose I might as well just borrow the money to pay off my student loans from her as well. Then I can pay that off by doing grunt work at the fortress...”

He had read this in a book—*The Champion of the Sylvanian Attic* by Donativan Marqui Etna. It was a fictional novel in which a lowly grunt put various plans in motion, heaping great achievement onto a hapless foot soldier which culminated in his marriage to the princess. Though as it turned out, the one behind these plans wasn’t some debt-laden commoner, but rather a cat in boots who slept in the attic.

“Certainly.” Latrielle’s expression turned bitter. “If you’re not a soldier, I care not what floors you decide to sweep.”

“Sir.”

“But I could just as well bring you back to the capital.”

“...I’m a coward, you see. I fear what my current comrades will say about me.”

“I see. Then enough talk.”

It seemed Latrielle had given up on his plan to tear Regis away from Altina. Their game of chess was nearing an end. Piece-wise, Latrielle’s outnumbered his by and large, but position-wise, Regis had the advantage. Two white pieces in particular had taken the bait, and were now exactly where he wanted them. On the contrary, the few blacks that remained were stationed in the center, lurking precariously close to the white king.

Regis’s king had been moved to a defensible point early on in the game, and it didn’t seem as though that defense would crumble anytime soon.

Latrielle glared at the board as he stayed his hand, his teeth grit.

“Gn... Hm... You’re really quite something.”

“It’s only a game.”

“Look forward to the next decree you receive; Argentina will be the one handing it to you. Regis Aurick, you are to be promoted from a fifth-grade admin officer to a third-grade officer.”

Regis was at a loss for words. It wasn’t a completely unexpected development, but he thought it was more than he deserved. That said, he was unable to refuse it.

A promotion may have meant an increase in salary, but it also came with more responsibility. It was just as compulsory as a demotion—the person whose rank was being changed had no right to decline.

“M-My sincerest... gratitude.”

“Dissatisfied?”

“No, it’s just that... even my current rank feels beyond my capability, so...”

“If the imperial army was so blessed with talent that every third-grade officer and above was as competent as you, I’d be spending my afternoons taking naps and playing chess.”

Regis humbly lowered his head. Winning at chess was a hollow victory; Latrielle had managed to probe out Regis’s innermost thoughts, and if he returned to Altina with nothing but news of a promotion, it would ultimately be his loss. Unless he could take the offensive off the chessboard as well, his efforts would have been in vain.

Regis tried stepping in.

“...Prince Latrielle, are you paying me so much attention because I am the princess’s subordinate?”

“In part, yes. But I’m considering what will happen once I become emperor. To have a capable tactician by my side is a matter of course; the Empire has no future unless it continues to win its wars.”

Regis could feel an unwavering confidence in Latrielle’s words—the prince had absolutely no doubts that he would become emperor. But Elenore had

challenged his ascension to the throne. Unless he had countermeasures in place, the third day of the ceremony would begin with Auguste proclaiming he had gained support from an overwhelming number of nobles, creating a situation where the emperor would be forced to name his successor. As things currently stood, Latrielle stood no chance.

“As I thought. You have measures in place to counter the Gaillarte Garden Party. In fact, you even planned for them to take Prince Auguste’s side.”

“Hm, who can say for sure?”

The prominent nobles who had expressed their support for Auguste were now no longer in the undecided column. A third faction—those who supported Altina—was now becoming more distinct, and while there were still nobles without a clear allegiance, their numbers were small. It seemed the complicated political situation was sorting itself out.

The problem was, just what sort of countermeasures had Latrielle taken? There was no way Regis could know beyond asking him directly, and even then the prince would surely never answer.

Latrielle rung a handbell. The door opened, and there stood Germain.

“Is your game over?”

That was it. Regis was out of time. He hadn’t learned any clear-cut information, but he had at least gained quite a few leads. Though the same could be said for Latrielle, too.

“...Then if you’ll excuse me.”

“Indeed. Look after Argentina for me. If she calls herself a soldier, then she should understand the nature of the imperial army. Take care that she makes the right decision.”

The imperial army rewarded appropriate status and honor to an immediate surrender. However, the moment a struggle broke out, even an early surrender meant death or exile.

“...I’ll pass on the message.”

Regis saluted before excusing himself from Latrielle’s room.



“Fufu. Do you think you were able to persuade Sir Regis?” Germain asked.

They were the only ones left in the room. Germain stood beside his lord, who was now prodding his finger against the chess pieces still on the board.

“Hmph. It’s just as you said—he’s a tough nut to crack. Both his chess skills and his loyalty to the princess are rather impressive.”

“Oh, I heard about that from a junior in the academy. He’s remarkable.”

“I understand that now. But it seems he hasn’t managed to figure out my plan. He tried to probe into it, but... Hahaha! He won’t get a word out of me!”

Latrielle let out a laugh that looked as innocent and joyful as a young boy’s. It was an expression he would only ever let Germain see.

“Word just came in from my brothers,” said Germain, “It’s been secured. Arrangements have been made to bring it to the capital by tomorrow noon.”

Latrielle nodded, and Germain placed his hands on the table.

“It’s all going steadily, my liege.”

“I see.”

“Are you nervous?”

“...Yes, I won’t deny it.”

“Everything will be fine. Just leave it to me.”

Latrielle placed his hands over Germain’s. “Of course. I trust in you.”

“I... think that you becoming emperor is necessary for the future of our empire.”

Germain firmly believed that his lord was the only one who could save Belgaria—a nation that was slowly marching toward its own demise.

“This is my destiny,” said Latrielle, his eyes fixed on the chessboard, “I’ve made my resolve.”

Chapter 4: The Silver Princess

The third day of the ceremony—

After a light breakfast, the silver-haired Prince Auguste was in his room, preparing for yet another party. He was already wearing his uniform.

“...A little... too sickly, perhaps,” he quietly mumbled.

The maid doing his makeup, Lillim, fervently shook her head.

“They’ll get suspicious if you look too healthy!”

While Lillim was a skilled maid, she was comparable to a child in both appearance and height; Auguste had spread a pelt across the floor, and was crouched down onto it so she could reach him. His legs were together, his knees bent so much that his heels nearly touched his thighs—he sat almost like a woman.

Eddie, who had only been tasked with fixing Auguste’s hair, was sitting on the sofa watching over them. “You could do with looking a little more peppy, I’d say. Today’s the big day, after all. You need to show your good health to His Majesty.”

Auguste nodded, but Lillim’s brows sunk into a frown.

“He’s right. Very right. It’s a very big day. ...Which is precisely why we’ll have hell to pay if you’re found out now.”

“...Right.” Auguste hung his head. He could feel the anxiety setting in.

“It’ll be fine,” Eddie said, trying to cheer him up, “There’s nothing to worry about, Felicia. You’ve never made any mistakes before.”

“...Yeah... Thank you, Eddie.”

The one who gave a weak-willed smile upon hearing the name “Felicia” was none other than Auguste.

It had happened in July the previous year—the real Auguste had coughed up blood and collapsed after a banquet, never to open his eyes again. His mother, Second Consort Catherine, declared he had been poisoned, and the royal doctor conceded that she was likely right.

Felicia was distraught. Heartbroken. She cried, and cried, and cried.

“Remove his clothing,” Catherine angrily ordered the doctor.

“P-Pardon...?”

“Felicia.”

“Waah... Hic... Yes, mother...? What... What is it, mother?”

“You will wear Auguste’s clothes.”

“Eh!? W-What are you...?”

“Do you need me to spell it out for you? The man who poisoned your brother is going to become emperor. Doesn’t that anger you? Don’t you despise Latrielle?”

“Th-That’s...”

“Now wear Auguste’s clothes. ‘Auguste’ will be hospitalized for the time being. During that time frame, your mother will teach you how to act.”

Before becoming a royal consort, Catherine had been an actress. While her influence as a member of the House of Touranne may have played a part, she had been chosen to play the lead role in a grand production, and had given a magnificent performance. The emperor fell for her at first sight.

Over the next two weeks, the acting and makeup required for Felicia to become her brother was drilled into the princess. Only the most trustworthy maids were selected, and they were thoroughly educated as well.

A maid from Hispania was chosen to act as Felicia’s replacement. Her name was probably Eliana—Felicia barely recalled. Eliana was a girl whose eyes glimmered like beautiful black pearls, but Felicia’s eyes were the same deep crimson as the rest of the royal family.

Dressed as Felicia, Eliana was blindfolded under the guise of having developed

a ‘disease of the eyes’ and sent off to recuperate at Catherine’s house in the country. She was now in a villa that overlooked the sea, where she would never be graced with a chance to gaze over its emerald waves.

Half a month passed. Felicia spent every day holed up in the manor, deathly fearful of the moment her true identity would be exposed. Those days were no different from being in a prison.

Then came Eddie. “I’ll protect you,” he said. He held her close. And over time, Felicia learned how to be more confident in herself.

She also had the support of Lillim—a maid who was far more clever than her childish appearance might suggest—and had lately been performing her duties as a prince with positive results.

And then one day, a mighty noblewoman from the south called Elenore came with a proposal:

If you relocate the capital, the nouveau noblesse will support you, and once you take the throne you’ll no longer have to worry about assassination. You need to snatch the reins of the military from Prince Latrielle. Don’t you have any ambition, Prince Auguste?

Felicia gazed into the mirror. The girl who would lock herself in her room reading incredible fairy tales was gone. The full-length mirror showed the first prince of the Belgarian Empire.

“...I am Carlos Liam Auguste de Belgaria... Lillim, your worry is uncalled for. I have no need to feign sickness.”

“Y-Yes... Your Highness.”

Eddie swallowed dryly from his seat to the side. He had known both siblings from a young age, and yet he could barely tell them apart anymore. These days, Felicia’s acting left him in awe.

“Amazing. You have more of a presence than the real Mr. Auguste.”

“Hmph... You are to call me ‘Your Highness’ when we are in public, Eddie.”

“Understood.”



Regis finished changing in the room he'd been afforded.

The second day had passed without incident, but he hadn't managed to gain any major pieces of information. It was already the third day.

“...In the end, I never managed to find the missing piece of the puzzle.”

“Prince Latrielle's plan?”

For some reason, Eric was keeping his back to Regis as he spoke, and the faint sliver of cheek he could see was turning red. Come to think of it, Regis had never seen Eric change in front of other people before; he would always claim he had to wipe down his body and then leave the room, only to return fully changed.

Moreover, whenever Regis changed, Eric would always look away. Not that Regis wanted him to look or anything.

“Eric... Are you perhaps...”

“Um, Mr. Regis?”

“Ah, what's up?”

“Is there a chance that Prince Auguste... isn't a man?”

“...What makes you say that?”

“Ah, well, I don't have any definite evidence, but...” Eric mumbled before quickly falling silent.

Regis arranged his cravat as he gave the suggestion some thought.

“...When a member of royalty is born, their sex is confirmed by the royal doctor. A doctor from the empress's faction and a neutral party would have also been present. With that many people, I highly doubt Auguste's sex could have been mistaken.”

“I-I know... Right.”

“But perhaps that confirmation doesn't apply to the current Prince Auguste.”

“You have your suspicions too?”

“...I’m not too knowledgeable about the prince, but Altina seems to think something’s off.”

He recalled the scene when they had reunited—

Altina had looked rather perplexed.

“Haven’t you... shrunk?”

“H-How in the world would I have shrunk!? Th-The very nerve!”

“And it sounds like your voice is just a tad higher than usual...”

“...!?”

And then Eddie had intervened. “Well, you see, Argentina... Mr. Auguste has been through quite a lot since he collapsed from his illness.”

Regis fastened the golden chains at his chest.

“...Personally, I think that the guard, Sir Eddie, was acting much more bizarrely than Altina and Auguste.”

“You think so?”

“I mean, if we *had* been speaking to the real Prince Auguste, there would have been no need for him to barge into the conversation.”

“Ah...” The blood drained from Eric’s face.

“...Is something wrong?” asked Regis, as he hung his sword from his hip.

“Err... Mr. Regis... Your sheath’s on backwards. The clasp goes on top.”

“...You’re right. Huh.” Regis hurriedly corrected it as Eric took a seat.

“Hm... You’re a commoner, but you’re knowledgeable about nobles, right? Then you must be aware of what happens when a house has no male heirs.”

“...Do you mean for your house in particular, or are you asking more generally?”

Eric pondered for a moment, averting his gaze.

“More generally.”

“...I see... Well, I’m a civil officer, so I made sure to memorize the Empire’s noble law. If a house has no male heirs, it’s customary to marry in the second or third son of another house.”

“You can welcome in a new head, but then they will be the one who decides the house’s customs and policy. While your blood may remain, there’s no telling if your traditions will live on. It is, in essence, the end of a long history.”

“I see.”

“And perhaps someone out there wouldn’t want such a thing to happen.” Eric appeared to choose his words deliberately as if divulging a secret of his own as well. Regis caught onto this at once, but would never dare to pry into another’s personal circumstances.

“...Yeah... So we’re talking about your... acquaintance, right?”

“Right... My acquaintance. And precisely because I know someone in that predicament, there are some things that stand out to me.”

Eric wiped the sweat from his neck. It was gradually becoming clear what he was trying to say.

Regis thumbed through a number of storybooks in his head. Eric had clearly noticed something when he met Auguste.

“...I see. So they’re different people.”

All sorts of people lived in the Belgarian Empire. However, it was widely believed that only the royal lineage could have red eyes. At the very least, Regis had never seen them anywhere else. The rumors of such sightings always ended as rumors.

Eric pulled at the collar of his uniform, bringing his smooth, slender throat into view.

“There are various differences between a man and a woman.”

“Yeah... If you think about it from that angle, some things start to make sense. Prince Auguste was sickly up to the age of twenty-three, then one day coughs up blood and collapses. Doesn’t it seem a little unnatural that someone in his

condition could recover enough to take on public service in only half a year?”

“Certainly.”

“There are some who say the royal family are able to recover abnormally fast, but Altina’s arm took three months to heal, just as the doctor had predicted.”

“That’s true.”

Regis scanned the book collection in his head. He had a feeling that there was quite a similar story among the numerous works about the palace.

“...Yeah. That’s the one.”

“Mr. Regis?”

Regis nodded to himself as he placed a piece of stationery on the table. Eric’s voice became increasingly faint, as though he was standing far off in the distance. This was the same sensation Regis had when he was absorbed in a book.

“...Stories where someone in the royal family isn’t actually who they claim to be aren’t all that rare. I don’t know many where that strategy was used effectively, but... Yeah. A few such instances have even appeared in court records.”

Regis fetched an inkwell and a quill from the nearby shelf and started writing.

“How strange. Well, Mr. Regis, I have a hunch you’ll find a solution.”

“You overestimate me... But what a farce this is. If even on a whim the emperor should name a successor at tonight’s party, the schemes brewing on all sides will have been for naught.”

“Yes, it really is strange when you think about it like that.”

“...It’s almost like a poorly produced comedy—you can guarantee nobody will be laughing. In the end, this is no more than just another power struggle in the imperial court.”

Regis put down his quill.

“Is something the matter?”

“I’m counting on you to make these arrangements precisely as I’ve written

them. Also, I need you to pass a letter to Sir Abidal-Evra outside the palace. If things are going to pan out how I expect they will, we'll need him."

"Got it."

"...Sorry, but we don't have the luxury of any rewrites this time. And I don't want you dying."

"Understood. I plan on returning alive."

They both gave a bitter laugh, recalling their reunion at Fort Sierck. Regis looked between the wall clock and his pocket watch, confirming they were synchronized.

"There are a few other things I still need to do... but nothing we'd need to worry about just yet."

He lowered himself down into a chair and picked up a book. He was planning to read until Altina was ready to go.

"Looks like you're pretty much already packed."

"See, that's the thing—I've done a bit of thinking, and it doesn't look like we'll be able to return with all of our belongings. I'll need to leave this book behind, for example, so I want to read it while I have the chance."

"I see," said Eric, tucking the letter into a leather envelope. He then got his appearance in order and prepared to leave.

"...Oh, right. Eric."

"Yes?"

"Um... About that story... The house that didn't have a male heir..."

"What about it?" Eric looked at him anxiously. He had chosen his words carefully, being deliberately vague so that Regis wouldn't dig too deep.

Regis had realized this, and yet he could feel an eager curiosity emerging within him that surprised even himself.

"About this acquaintance of yours... Couldn't the matter be resolved by finding a groom who values those very traditions she wants to protect? Otherwise, even if she were to marry the eldest son of a noble house, there's

no guarantee her house's traditions would be protected."

Eric looked at him. His hand, which had been reaching for the door handle, was frozen in place.

"Th-That's right... It would be wonderful if she could find such a person."

"It would ease her concerns for sure."

"Someone who values her traditions, and will respect the house he is married into... Who wouldn't ignore or disparage her dear old grandmother and grandfather... If she could find someone like that..."

"Let's give it some good thought once we've returned in one piece."

"Yes, Mr. Regis." There was now a strange heat behind Eric's eyes, which were intently fixed on Regis.

Am I wearing it wrong again? Regis thought as he double-checked that his sword was hanging from his right hip.



An hour later, and the party was about to begin. Regis led Altina and another toward a certain room.

"I hope he hasn't already left..."

"You'll know once you knock," Altina said affably before smacking the thick, glossy door without hesitation.

Well, I guess it would be stranger to hesitate when you're just going to your brother's room... But considering this was the private room of a member of royalty, Regis's pulse was quickening at an alarming rate.

They waited a while for a response but to no avail.

"You reckon he's already gone?"

"...In that case, Altina, I'll need you to call him out from the hall. This is too big of a deal to discuss at the banquet."

Just as Regis finished speaking, the door to the room opened just a crack. The eye peering through the gap belonged to Eddie.

“Ah, it’s just you, Argentina. I thought it was another bandit attack.”

“How are they supposed to launch an attack from inside the palace? Well, in a sense, we might not be much better.”

“What do you mean?”

“Auguste is here, isn’t he? Would you rather we discussed such private matters in the hallway?”

After tentatively checking with the other occupants of the room, Eddie opened the door and beckoned them inside.

The room was splendid and vast, great enough to accommodate a small party. It was furnished with a dresser, an office desk, and a sofa. A door could be seen toward the back that connected to another room further in; assuming the room was constructed similarly to Altina’s, that would lead to the bedroom.

It appeared the only people inside were Eddie, who was fully dressed in his military uniform and had the *Défendre Sept* at his hip; a child maid; and Auguste, who was in his ceremonial garb.

“Argentina. Do you have business with me?”

“Of course. I’m here precisely because I have business with you.”

Accompanying her was not only Regis, as one would expect, but also a... figure, whose hood was pulled low over their eyes. The other party was naturally quite mindful of this enigma, as the look in Auguste’s eyes had grown sharp.

“I’ll overlook your attitude, given that you’re family, but... failing to remove one’s hood in the presence of royalty is quite rude, wouldn’t you say?”

“I’ll take it off now,” said Altina, “I couldn’t let anyone in the palace see who they were on our way here. You should know them well.”

She reached over to the hood obscuring the unknown figure and slowly pulled it back. Regis stood beside her, closely watching the reactions of Auguste and his two companions, all of whom were staring curiously.

As the hood fell back, the hair that had been concealed underneath spilled out—beautiful silver hair that flowed down the figure’s shoulders to their chest.

It was a girl, her eyes wrapped in white bandages usually reserved for wounds and the diseased. Her head gloomily hung down, obscuring her expression beneath her hair.

Auguste swallowed his breath. Eddie took a glance in Auguste's direction, clear unease on his face, while the young maid glared at Regis. These were the exact reactions he was expecting.

"...This individual was found in the home of Second Consort Catherine claiming to be Felicia Sis Célia de Belgaria. But how could this be? She seems to be someone else entirely."

The blindfolded girl fell to her knees on the spot, her shoulders trembling. She whimpered in fear.

"P-Please forgive me. I couldn't stop them. There was nothing I could do."

Auguste turned pale. Eddie's right hand moved toward his hip, but Altina immediately countered by reaching for a sword of her own. However, as she was dressed for a party and was thus unarmed herself, she had gone for the sword hanging from Regis's hip.

"Eddie, you're not going to draw your sword in the palace, are you?" asked Altina.

"I never thought I'd hear something so common-sensical from you, Argentina."

"Just goes to show how much I've grown."

"...Everyone, please calm down," Regis interjected.

He was rather determined to avoid a fight between Altina and Eddie. Not only would it delay his objective, she also had no hope of winning—Regis's sword was a terribly standard-fare decorative piece that would shatter the moment it met Eddie's *Défendre Sept*.

Before tensions could needlessly rise, Regis posed a question to Auguste.

"...You're familiar with this individual claiming to be the fifth princess, aren't you, Princess Felicia?"

"Erk..." The one claiming to be Auguste groaned.

“I knew it.” Regis nodded. “You *are* Princess Felicia.”

“Th-That’s...”

The one taking on Auguste’s form was indeed Felicia; the ghastly shade of white her face had turned proved it. Eddie grit his teeth while the young maid viciously stepped forward.

“What are you trying to do?” she snapped.

“...Who are you?”

“Why, I’m Prince Auguste’s head maid, Lillim!” Her tone was clear and confident, especially given the circumstances.

I see... Regis thought. “Based on my research, neither Prince Auguste nor Princess Felicia held much interest in economics or political matters. Sir Eddie was no different, at least from what the princess has told me. But lately, Prince Auguste has managed to draft up some wonderful resolutions for some incredibly complex disputes.”

Regis looked at the maid. Her skin was tan and her black hair done up in two bunches behind her head. Her eyes, a deep black with a light glimmer of scarlet, glared daggers at Regis, never faltering.

“...I take it you’re the admin officer.”

“I suppose it really is impossible to keep that hidden anymore. Indeed, I have offered my share of proposals to combat the problems we’ve been faced with. Though I must say, when I was looking into Prince Auguste, I examined a number of the disputes you have offered resolutions to, and they were all wonderfully handled. Despite your young appearance, you possess a commendable insight.”

“Hah!? F-Flattery will get you nowhere! Not here, not anywhere!” Lillim immediately looked away.

“Ah... My apologies, we’ve gone off topic.”

Regis gently placed a hand on the back of the silver-haired girl, who was still hanging her head.

“That’s enough.”

“Oh my, it’s over already?”

“That was some splendid acting. I thought the plan was for you to just fall to your knees without a word, but you improvised quite nicely.”

“Dear me, is that so?”

The girl removed her blindfold and pulled away what was in fact a silver wig, revealing her hazel eyes and brown hair. She neatened her hair, then offered a courteous curtsy.

“I am a maid in service to Marie Quatre Argentina de Belgaria. You may call me Clarisse. I have already resolved to bear fault for my numerous transgressions.”

“Wha—!?” Felicia gasped, dumbfounded.

Regis lowered his head. “...I’m sorry for deceiving you. We have our reasons. I ask you to please hear us out.”

“What... is the meaning of this?” asked Felicia, nervous and hesitant. Altina, Eddie and Lillim all stared incredulously at Regis.

“...I propose that what you have just witnessed is Prince Latrielle’s plan.”

“Latrielle...”

Felicia, who had been flustered throughout the entire encounter thus far, finally managed to regain her composure. Eddie cocked his head to the side.

“Hm. So, in short, what’s going on, Argentina?”

“Why Eddie, you’ve always been hopeless when it comes to thinking.”

“Are you calling me an idiot...?”

“Perhaps. I mean, you asked *me*, and you know there’s no way I’d be able to give you a coherent explanation.”

“Hey now...”

Eddie looked a little disheartened, but he wasn’t alone; Regis seemed disappointed as well.

“Even after I spent all that time explaining it to you...” he muttered.

Lillim pointed at Clarisse. “In short, Prince Latrielle has noticed that Auguste is actually Felicia in disguise, and he’s planning to thrust some silver-haired imposter at her. Is that what you’re saying?”

“No, not just some imposter. He’s probably going to bring out whoever’s actually serving as Princess Felicia’s standin.”

“That’s crazy talk! Our standin, Eliana, should still be in the duke’s villa.”

“It only takes a little digging to find where Princess Felicia is supposed to be, as well as the fact that she keeps her eyes bandaged because of some disease. It’s cropped up in the weekly newspaper a number of times over the past few years, and has even been included in books compiling information on the royal family. Though I hadn’t known the name of your standin.”

“Eh? In books?”

“Just go to any large bookstore in the capital and you’ll find plenty of them.”

“But why are you so sure this is Prince Latrielle’s plan?” Lillim asked, her head tilted, “He could have thought of absolutely anything else, or perhaps nothing at all. It’s possible he hasn’t even noticed.”

Of course, this was all merely speculation, but Regis did have a basis for his claim.

“It’s rather well known that the west has been politically stable for quite some time thanks to the firm hold the old nobles have over the region, and yet the Second Army was recently deployed there. They may not be as strong as the First Army, but they still have a considerable amount of power—enough to quell any large-scale internal confrontation. Furthermore, the Second Army is commanded by two members from the Beaumarchais household. That is, the brothers of Prince Latrielle’s staff officer, Sir Germain.”

“That could very well be a coincidence!”

“And not a single member of the House of Touranne has been present over the last couple of days. Could something have arisen that is preventing them from attending? For instance, perhaps their residence is currently under siege by the Second Army?”

“That can’t be true!” Felicia exclaimed.

This entire time the pressure had simply continued to pile down on her. Seeing such a young girl on the verge of tears did pain Regis’s heart, but this was inevitable. After all, it was a part of the plan.

“According to the register, they were supposed to attend on the first day. But perhaps you received notice of their absence and this is a misunderstanding on my part.”

Lillim gave a very unchildlike sigh. “We didn’t receive any notice. We did send messengers to check on the situation there, but a round trip to the House of Touranne takes ten days at the very least.”

“What about the second consort?”

“She returned to her manor around the start of February. She was scheduled to return for the commemoration ceremony.”

“...I guess she didn’t want to be around for the sixth consort’s wedding.”

Lillim nodded. “Very likely.”

“It makes perfect sense,” Altina loudly proclaimed, “He may be emperor, but no one would ever want to celebrate their husband being married to another woman!”

Felicia, and even Clarisse, nodded in agreement. It wasn’t as if Regis or Eddie had done anything wrong, but the boys found themselves feeling dubiously ashamed.

“Err... A-All that aside... I don’t think I’m wrong about what’s happening. Given the movements of the Second Army, to say it’s all irrelevant to Prince Latrielle’s plan would be way too optimistic.”

Lillim drooped her shoulders. “I didn’t know the Second Army had been dispatched there, and I didn’t know it was commanded by the brothers of Prince Latrielle’s admin officer.”

“Who could expect you to? You’re not in the military, after all.”

“I understand your point. It’s very appropriate to think that Prince Latrielle has learned of Auguste’s true identity.”

“If our main concern is him finding out, he probably figured it out quite a long time ago,” said Regis, “Altina was suspicious, and she had only just met her.”

“What!?”

Felicia’s head snapped toward Altina, on the verge of tears once more. The usually rowdy princess was awkwardly scratching her head.

“Well, it looks like he’s, uh, no longer with us, so I don’t want to speak ill of him, but... Auguste was a real piece of work. He used to mock me and call me ‘peasant spawn.’”

“Th-There’s no way... My brother wouldn’t...”

“I’m talking about when we were kids. We all grew up, and he stopped calling me names eventually. But we didn’t have a great relationship, and not once have I ever called Auguste my brother.”

Regis recalled when the two had parted ways after their reunion just days ago —

“Well then, dear brother, let us meet again at dinner.”

“All right. Take care.”

Auguste had shown absolutely no reaction to her calling him “dear brother,” despite the fact she would have been acting in a way she never had before.

“I wasn’t convinced you weren’t really Auguste, but something clicked when I heard it from Regis.”

“S-So that’s why... W-We never really played together, so I c-couldn’t...”

Transparent droplets started to spill from Felicia’s eyes, and Altina placed a comforting hand on her silver head.

“Right. You were always just watching from your room... I’m sorry. We should have played together more.”

Eddie stared across the room with a pensive expression on his face, looking as though he was trying to recall something, until all of a sudden he clapped his

hands together.

“Oh yeah, that’s right. You really haven’t called him your brother before.”

“How remarkably useless you are!” Lillim declared, causing the dejected Eddie to drop to his knees.

“You can’t blame him for it,” said Altina, waving her hand dismissively, “Eddie’s even stupider than I am.”

“Gn... I don’t want to accept that, but now I can’t really deny it...”

It was time for Regis to get the conversation back on track.

“...Anyhow, I presume Prince Latrielle noticed the fake quite early in the game, though he couldn’t do much without evidence. After all, it would be easy for Prince Auguste to excuse himself from the palace under the guise of his worsening health.”

“Yes.” Felicia nodded. “If he had started to make such unsubstantiated accusations... that was how I intended to avoid him.”

If she could run away long enough for the emperor to pass away, the natural order of succession would see Auguste become Emperor.

“Without evidence, Prince Latrielle wouldn’t be able to act. But with evidence, he would have a very powerful card up his sleeve. Exposing the prince’s true identity would lead to a certain victory. He just needed to use it effectively... and he chose this party as the best opportunity.”

“Despicable, but... I can see him doing it...”

“Personally, I feel Prince Latrielle has gotten too greedy.”

“You... think so?” Felicia asked.

Regis nodded. “Prince Latrielle is planning to reveal Auguste’s deception to simultaneously eradicate both him and the undecided column. By guiding the *nouveau noblesse* with a large influence over the south into supporting you, he’s made them a part of the first faction.”

“Ah...” Felicia realized what was going on, and her voice turned weak.

“Kh... If Prince Auguste’s true identity gets out, there will be no forces left

capable of opposing Latrielle,” said Lillim, thoroughly vexed.

Eddie stood up suddenly. “But what can we do about that now? It’s Mr. Latrielle’s strategic victory, ain’t it? Our princess is set for the gallows or the guillotine the moment she’s found out. We’ve gotta run while we have the chance.”

“Please wait.”

“Why are you stopping me? Don’t you care what happens to Felicia?”

“If we run here, we’ll just be fugitives on the run from the imperial army.”

Eddie’s right hand was already on his sword. “So what? No matter how many they send at us, I won’t let them have Felicia. That’s my promise.”

“E-Eddie...” Felicia blushed. Altina and Lillim had gone a similar shade of red, while Clarisse just smiled.

Eloping lovers made for a fine story, but that wasn’t the outcome Regis needed. He shook his head.

“...If you’re already set on running away then why not give my idea a chance. You’ll still have time to flee afterward; worst case scenario, the outcome will be the same.”

“You have a plan?”

Eddie removed his hand from his sword, and Lillim leaned in.

“Is there a chance we won’t have to run?”

“Of course.” Regis turned to the princess posing as Auguste. This was the important part. “...Princess Felicia... They say His Highness poisoned your brother. You must desire revenge. You wouldn’t want Prince Latrielle to succeed the throne, would you?”

She nodded without hesitation. “What do I have to do?”

“That’s exactly what I wanted to hear.”

Having cleared a large hurdle of his own, Regis let a small smile cross his face. Altina and Clarisse began to whisper behind him.

“...Hey, hey. Isn’t Regis getting kinda dark? He just smirked, you know. One of

those bad-guy smirks.”

“...Princess, deceiving women is a gentleman’s business.”

“...He’s kinda scary.”

“And that’s why, as you know, the only one you should trust is me. You’re my own personal princess.”

“...O-Okay?”

Altina was being led astray once more by Clarisse’s spell-like words. Regis very deliberately cleared his throat. *We’re negotiating here; deceit doesn’t even come into the equation.*

“Are you ready to hear my plan?”

“Oh, sure!” Altina sat up straight, while Clarisse curtsied with an amused grin and took a step back.

And so Regis unveiled his thoughts before the five, just as the fanfare signaling the start of the third day’s party blared in the distance.



“First Prince Carlos Liam Auguste de Belgaria and Fourth Princess Marie Quatre Argentina de Belgaria have arrived,” the old butler informed the hall.

The nobles were astir at this rather queer combination and many watched carefully as the duo entered, Eddie and Regis following closely behind.

Auguste carried a completely different air about him than usual, while Altina stood by his side as though she belonged there, taking those around by surprise.

At the end of the disguised Felicia’s gaze lay Latrielle, who approached with a leisurely strut. He had a fearless smile on his face.

“Why, dear brother, how is your health?”

“These warm days are doing wonders for me, Latrielle.”

“Fufu. Is that so? I’m glad to hear it.”

He surely knew the Auguste he was speaking to was actually Felicia; his

conversation came across as forced, like he was trying to prove a point.

Altina sighed. “You know, I’ve been thinking. That way of speaking really doesn’t suit you, Latrielle.”

“Hm.”

“Hey, be honest with me, Latrielle. During that banquet in July... did you commit a terrible crime right before my very eyes?” Altina glared at him as she spoke; her brilliant crimson eyes blazed ferociously, making her quite the intimidating presence.

Latrielle remained silent for a moment. “...Humans cling to their own perception of what’s true. No matter what I say, it shall not change the truth you’ve fostered within yourself.”

“*Oui ou non?* Answer me, you twisted bastard.”

“Hmph. There’s only one other person who’s ever called me that.”

“Is that so? Everyone’s thinking it, though. They’re just not saying it.”

“They only hold their tongues because no one would dare be so outspoken in the face of royalty,” Auguste sneered, “I’m sure even you could figure that out, Latrielle.”

“Hah. Even if that’s so, you aren’t ones to talk; the two of you are in the exact same position,” Latrielle said, raising his wine glass to his lips.

Altina frowned. “Mn? My subordinates call me reckless, imprudent, short-tempered, and thoughtless.”

“...!?”

The two princes—well, one prince and a disguised princess—exchanged a look as though they had just witnessed the impossible.

“Are you referring to Sir Jerome?” Latrielle asked, but Altina simply shook her head.

“Ever since I won our duel, Jerome’s become relatively compliant. But Regis can be pretty frank.”

“So it’s your strategist...” Latrielle glanced across the room to Regis, who was

standing by the wall chatting to a beautiful woman in a black dress.

“I heard he was a commoner,” said Auguste, an anxious look on his face.

“That’s what he says,” Altina responded.

“Does he not fear being punished for such blasphemous words?”

“Who can say? But don’t you think his honesty is a good thing?”

Latrielle and Auguste’s expressions made it clear that they failed to comprehend.

“It’s a commander’s duty to keep their subordinates in line.”

“...Love is blind, they say.”

“Hey! Hold on, how did we get there? What I’m trying to say is—”

Altina panicked as the conversation suddenly became two-on-one for the most trivial reason.



Shortly after entering the party, Regis made his way over to the wall with a glass of white wine in one hand.

“Good day.”

“Oh, Regis. Are you finally ready to accept my proposition?” Elenore asked, raising her glass of red wine in greeting. The dress she was wearing today was the same deep black as the one she had been wearing before but was cut much lower; her pale skin stood out in contrast to the dark cloth, further emphasizing her already pronounced curves.

Regis pulled his eyes from her, leaning back against the wall.

“...I have no such plans, as of right now.”

“That may change by tomorrow. The emperor and the sixth consort should be here soon, and just you wait...”

“...The Ministry of Ceremonies must have quite a few loose-lipped officials.”

The empress herself was already here, so the arrival of the sixth consort would only lead to a clash over status. The empress was sure to be in a terrible

mood, though that wasn't something that really concerned Regis.

Elenore touched her glass to her lips, staining its rim with a deep rouge tint.

"Fufu. When you see what's about to happen on stage, I'll no doubt be at least... thirty percent more appealing to you."

"You're already plenty appealing, madame."

"But evidently not as appealing as Marie Quatre. Tell me, do you have a preference for younger women?"

"Th-That— Definitely not. I don't even consider the princess a member of the opposite sex."

Elenore scoffed. "Unfortunately, it looks like that sentiment doesn't go both ways."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Fufu. It means, Regis my boy, that I can't count on your services tonight."

"...Hm? But I pull all-nighters all the time. I'll admit, I do sometimes fall asleep at my desk, but... Well, that's beside the point. About what you're going to do on stage—I came to propose a slight amendment to the script."

"Dear me, you have a complaint about my performance?"

"Well, I should say the amendment has already been made. And it's not so much an amendment as a complete overhaul."

The smile vanished from Elenore's face. Her sharp eyes sent a shiver down Regis's spine.

"What did you do, Regis?"

"...Do you remember what we discussed last night? A counter should be met with a counter, and the loser is the one who runs out of moves. That's what you said."

"Of course I remember."

"My apologies, but... I wasn't being completely honest. Rather than finding a way to counter a counter, I would much rather outmaneuver my enemy before they have the chance to strike in the first place."

“Hm?”

Regis sipped from his glass to remedy the dryness in his throat. The temperature in the hall was mild at best, and yet he was sweating uncontrollably. As much as he wanted to wipe his damp brow on his sleeve, he couldn't dare to sully his ceremonial uniform.

He glanced toward the stage.

“If I were to launch an attack... I would determine my opponent's next move and make sure it was already accounted for.”

“Fufu. So you fool your opponent into dancing to your own tune. But how can you ensure it'll work out?”

“I can't, which is why I won't attack unless victory is assured. Many lives are entrusted to the command of a tactician; I could never tell those under my orders that they're going to die because I couldn't think of a way to retaliate, especially when I'm the one who started the battle.”

“Are you saying we merchants don't also risk our lives?”

“I wouldn't speak so generally, but... Mrs. Elenore, your house has wealth to spare. I take it you weigh up your losses and gains, and so long as your gains outweigh your losses, that's considered successful business. But how many times have you made a deal where failure would cost you your life?”

“You're mocking me. You're far too green, Regis.”

While Elenore's tone was calm, Regis could detect a hint of annoyance in her expression. His knees trembled as her glaring eyes focused on him. It was like when he had confronted the wolves back in the winter.

I see. No wonder they call her the Vixen of the South...

Regis had no intention of angering Elenore; her cooperation would no doubt prove indispensable not only now, but in the future as well. He needed to face her in earnest.

“...Revealing to you how I would handle your situation is my way of apologizing for my slight dishonesty last night.”

“I'll concede your sincerity, but don't expect me to play the fool. Answer me

one question, Regis—what did you do?”

“...Mrs. Elenore, do you notice anything off about Prince Auguste?”

“I do.”

She made no effort to deny it, likely having sensed that attempting to haggle by playing dumb would get her nowhere. That made things a lot easier.

“The Auguste standing over there is... actually Princess Felicia.”

“What?” Elenore’s voice came out stiff, and she glared at him with bloodshot eyes. The red wine in her glass shook ever so slightly.

“I’m sure you already had an inkling that something was amiss. But to complicate matters further, it is exceedingly likely that Prince Latrielle has found evidence that can prove it.”

“No, that can’t be true... If that were the case, he would have come forward immediately to remove Prince Auguste from the running.”

“It’s his trump card, and he’s using it strategically to reap the greatest rewards. He was waiting for the undecided column to join the faction supporting the first prince. And now Latrielle has him right before His Majesty, where Auguste will be unable to excuse himself...”

It seemed that, prior to their conversation, Elenore had never considered that she might be a target as well. That was the one point on which she had been far too naïve.

“...Regis, you knew the whole time?” her voice trembled.

“I only noticed today, at noon. It was actually a companion of mine who drew the matter to my attention.”

“Kh.” Elenore faltered.

Regis supported her shoulder in a panic, taking the wine glass that was about to fall out of her hand.

“A-Are you okay!?”

“...You fool... How could I be okay?”

“Let me get you a chair.”

A nearby waiter quickly raced over. When Regis mentioned Elenore was drunk and asked whether there was somewhere she could be seated, they were immediately led to a two-person sofa in one corner of the hall. As it was still rather early, no one else was using the chairs in the vicinity.

Regis supported Elenore's back as he sat her down before taking the seat beside her. Even beneath her silk gloves, her hands were visibly trembling. Regis placed his own hand over hers, squeezing it gently to help calm her down.

"Elenore... You need to breathe."

"What am I... What am I supposed to say to the nobles of the Gaillarte Garden Party? A large number of them are our business partners, and I've made them an enemy of Latrielle... If that man becomes emperor, they'll all lose their standing. I'll have essentially caused them a huge loss. No, even worse than that."

"It's going to be all right."

"I don't need your consolation."

"No, it really will be fine. I know it will be."

"What?"

"Trust me. I have a countermeasure prepared. And its success should be ensured so long as I have your cooperation."

Elenore's breathing gradually calmed down, and she steadied her quivering hands.

"You told me Prince Auguste is a fake, and that the enemy has evidence to prove it. Despite all that, you still have a plan. Is that correct?"

"Yes. Though, to be more precise... I have knowledge about a plan that is applicable to our situation."

Regis had read about a similar situation once before.

Elenore looked at him curiously.

"You don't expect me to hold out on those words alone, I hope."

"Of course. I'll tell you all you need to know. I need your cooperation, Mrs.

Elenore. And I'm sure you need mine."

"Let's hear it, then."

Regis looked around cautiously before revealing his plan. It wasn't particularly complicated—he mostly just needed to ensure her story was consistent with Auguste's and Altina's. However, he would need a proclamation to be made on behalf of the Gaillarte Garden Party, making Elenore's grandfather an invaluable asset.

By the time Regis finished his explanation, Elenore seemed completely calm. She spent a long moment deep in thought. Was she scrutinizing his plan?

"Hm. I won't say it's foolproof, but I can't think of anything else."

"...If we had more time to work with, perhaps we could have made a better move. But the stage curtains have already been drawn, and the show must go on."

"I see. So this is a tactician's insight. You really have prepared a counter for me."

"You may be reluctant to help me out, but I'm sure we're on the same page in not wanting Prince Latrielle to succeed the throne."

"Indeed. I shall play along, but there's one amendment I need to make."

"Oh?"

"My grandfather shall have to give up his part. He's a virtuous man not tempted by desire, but he is also a coward."

Regis's plan had called for Elenore's grandfather to take the stage. That was why he had asked her to persuade him.

"Then don't tell me... you're going to make the proclamation yourself?"

"What other choice do we have?"

She fell silent and closed her eyes. Regis grew anxious. What could she be thinking about? Had she thought up a different plan entirely? As he was mid-speculation, Elenore's eyes opened, and she immediately closed in on him. Regis was taken by complete surprise; he reflexively tried to pull back, only to

be stopped by the chair's luxurious armrest.

"...Wh-What are you doing?"

"Fufu. I'm not meek enough to just do as I've been told," she purred, her fingers brushing Regis's cheek, "I've been labeled a vixen for a reason."

"Um... People are looking..."

"Let them watch."

"Th-This is rather troubling..."

"Regis, your scheme would have worked with or without our participation. The reason you went out of your way to get me on board is because you want the Gaillarte Garden Party to voice its support for the fourth princess. Were Auguste's secret to be revealed, the old nobles of the west would be removed from the board. You want to keep us in play."

"...I won't deny it."

"If you put a woman on the spot, you should take care not to embarrass her, Regis."

"Wait, I'm—"

Regis paled as this tale right out of an amorous novel was forced into his carefully prepared game of chess.

"Just leave the rest to me." Elenore leaned forward, pressing her body against his. Her lips touched his cheek, planting a kiss right beside his lips.

"Wha—!?"

"Mn."

He gave off a small sound like a mouse's squeak.

As she slowly pulled back, she looked down on him with the look of a fox that had captured its prey. From there, she cast her eyes to the center of the hall; Regis's gaze frantically followed.

Altina was looking on blankly, while the disguised Felicia had gone red in the face. The other nobles watched carefully, their eyes filled with intrigue.

Regis was a tactician of common upbringing. Elenore was not only a lady of an esteemed house, she was married too. And yet here they were, publicly engaging in such a brazen display of affection.

Elenore licked the corner of her lips. “Fufu. I settled for your cheek, Regis. I thought I should save the lips for a more... intimate encounter.”

Regis hadn’t moved an inch, and yet his heart was pounding faster now than it had when he had raced all the way from the basement to the top floor of Fort Volks. His breathing was all over the place.

“...Hah... Hah... What are you trying to do...? That was... incomprehensible.”

“You’re as timid as a small rabbit. How cute.”

“Mrs. Elenore, what were you thi—”

“They’re here.”

As she glared toward the stage, a grand fanfare erupted. The old butler raised his voice:

“His Majesty Emperor Liam Fernandi de Belgaria and Her Highness Sixth Consort Juhaprecia Octovia de Belgaria have arrived!”

As the hall broke out in applause, Regis froze up. How many times had this title cropped up on the pages in his books? How many conversations had it snuck its way into?

Emperor of the Belgarian Empire.

He wasn’t merely watching a parade or listening to a public speech; Regis was attending the same party as the emperor. He was a wrinkled, white-haired old man, dressed in clothes of mostly red. With slow, composed steps he walked over to the throne that had been prepared for him and lowered himself down onto it.

The young sixth consort sat down in the chair beside him. Her gown glimmered so dazzlingly that it was more as if she was wearing gemstones than an actual dress.

Regis stood up. There were no walls of soldiers between him and the emperor; Regis could approach without needing to fear being arrested. He could join the line of nobles who had gathered to offer congratulatory words on the emperor's good health and the health of the nation. A commoner like him.

Regis's lips curled into a cynical smile as he pictured it. *Me? Congratulate the emperor on his health and his nation?* But his wandering mind cooled as reason took over once more. He couldn't allow himself to be caught up in the atmosphere. After all, his role as Altina's tactician was to help her seize that throne.

"Hah." He took a deep breath.

"Fufu. Don't start daydreaming now, Regis."

Elenore poked the corner of her own lips and, noticing what the gesture meant, Regis hurriedly wiped his cheek. His hand was stained a deep rouge.

"Erk... I really can't tell what's on your mind, Mrs. Elenore."

"... Your plan will have me stand before a cunning old badger and a young lioness. Can't I take a little courage with me?"

"Th-That's..."

Real battles never played out as simply as a game of chess, and the same went for power struggles in the court. Elenore proceeded down the hall with the face of a soldier set for combat, pressing forward without turning back.



In lieu of the emperor, who was too old to raise his voice, the minister of ceremonies read out his divine will. Once he was finished, the emperor raised a golden chalice from his seat; the nobles raised their glasses together in a toast, erupting in cheers.

"Vive l'empereur!!"

As the applause subsided, the aristocrats formed a line to the platform, offering the emperor their congratulations for his health and the longevity of his empire. While it appeared to be first come first served, that couldn't have been further from the truth—those of higher status simply cut ahead of anyone

below them as though it were only natural. The officers of ceremonies did what they could to alleviate the inevitable tension, but there were uneasy glares being exchanged all around.

As the salutations began to slow, Auguste stepped up to the stage—or at least, Fifth Princess Felicia did. Eddie was beside her.

Meanwhile, by one side of the stage, Altina and Elenore were ferociously whispering over something. *Are they discussing the plan? Was there something I didn't explain well enough?* Those were Regis's first concerns, not even considering that their heated debate could have been due to the lipstick smeared across his cheek.

And on the opposite side was Latrielle, who was with Germain and two other officers. These were presumably the other two Beaumarchais brothers. They stood around a white-robed figure, escorting them along. This figure was dressed similarly to the imposter Regis had set up, though she was a little shorter than Clarisse.

As strange of a description as it may be, this was undoubtedly the real fake. Her name was Eliana, if memory served.

If she was revealed here, Auguste would be forced to prove his innocence, and that would be impossible. Worst case scenario, the nobles of the west and the *nouveau noblesse* of the Gaillarte Garden Party would lose face for supporting a false prince, and Latrielle would be recognized as next in line to the throne.

This was the enemy's decisive trump card.

Guards lined the party hall, and given that they were before His Majesty a forceful resolution was the last thing they wanted. Unless something were to stop Latrielle from playing his card, Regis's side had no chance.

Auguste saluted the emperor on stage. "Father, allow me to congratulate you on your good health, and for leading the nation to its anniversary."

"...Indeed. I echo the sentiment," the emperor answered in a withered voice, nodding his head.

He had offered little more than a silent nod to the majority of the other

nobles. It seemed being the first prince really did afford him some special treatment.

Auguste's nervous voice grew stiff. "I have a plea to make, Your Majesty. A matter I hope you will recognize before the eyes of the lords gathered."

"...Speak."

Silence fell over the hall as the emperor spoke; no one even dared to move in fear that the sound of their footsteps might drown him out. It was so quiet that Regis could clearly hear each palpitation as his heart hammered against his chest.

Under Elenore's original plan, this was where Auguste would report his amazing recovery and request that the post of commander be returned to him. Latrielle would then counter by revealing the false Felicia, interrogating Auguste into revealing his true identity.

It was a scene that would have changed the Empire forever. Regis had since rewritten the script, but would it really be for the better...?

Felicia, dressed in Auguste's clothes, parted her lips to speak. "My health has not improved. I fear it never will. I beg you to rescind my right to the throne."

The room broke into a complete uproar. At least three nobles swooned, and innumerable wine glasses shattered to pieces as they fell to the floor. The emperor glanced at his ministers around him.

The empress was the first one to answer his questioning eyes. She had apparently been standing right in front of the stage this entire time. Once the nobles receded, it was as if her surroundings had become a stage of their own.

"Hohoho. Why not permit it, Your Majesty? I see no reason to force your sickly child to carry such a hardship. Brothers should strive to help one another... The younger brother shall take on what his elder cannot."

A smile of pure ecstasy was spread across her face. Auguste's secession would place Latrielle as next in line to the throne; there was no longer any need for them to proclaim Auguste was a fake.

Confused as he was by this unanticipated development, Latrielle did not present his robed piece of evidence. No voices were raised in opposition to the empress, and the ministers waited with bated breath.

“...If that is your wish,” said the emperor with a nod. “I shall permit it, my first son.”

“You have my utmost gratitude, Father. Concerning my absence, I wish to recommend a candidate to take my place in line to the throne.”

“...A successor?”

The hall was astir again. The nobles had all assumed Latrielle had already won the throne. That was precisely why the empress had agreed to let Auguste abdicate his right.

Auguste gestured to the side of the stage.

“Yes. I would like to nominate Marie Quatre Argentina as my successor. Our younger sister has proven her military might through her recent victories, possesses wide support from the people, and more than anything boasts magnificent red hair. This must be proof that the blood of our forefather, *L’Empereur Flamme*, runs strong through her veins.”

“...Hm. Marie Quatre, you say.”

“I strongly believe that those who supported me in the running will honor my will, and offer their aide to our sister.”

The commotion among the nobles finally grew so loud that not even the royals could be heard. This was the measure Regis had taken; the enemy may have held a decisive trump card, but if its target had already stepped down, it was impossible to eliminate what had already disappeared.

Latrielle had put a number of plans to work. He had prepared not only Auguste, but also Altina as a receptacle for the undecided support, to then take them in by reconciling and making her his queen. When it came to battle, incorporating larger numbers strengthened a warfront... But here it was a double-edged sword. The way Latrielle had propped up Altina’s qualifications for succession only lent credibility to Regis’s scheme, meaning no one questioned her actual candidacy. And it was because of Latrielle that Second

Consort Catherine and the House of Touranne, who would have been most opposed to Auguste renouncing his succession, were unable to attend.

It was a delicate procedure, like working with fine thread or walking a tightrope. But so far it had been successful.

The emperor glanced to the side of the stage. Altina, her mouth in a tight knot, planted a firm foot onto the red-carpeted step before her.

“Father... Err, I... I shall—!!”

“Start by paying your respects... Daughter, you are too quick to act. If you want to become empress, be as *La Demeure Blanche*, the great white mountain.”

“Y-Yes! I shall become empress!”

Even then, she still forgot to pay her respects. She was a princess, a commander, and a skilled swordsman, but she was still a fourteen-year-old girl—it would be unreasonable to expect her not to be nervous here.

The atmosphere had already been hectic, but Altina’s proclamation had truly rocked the hall. As the commotion continued, another stepped up onto the stage without a moment’s delay. It was Lady Elenore in her black dress.

“Your Highness, it is an honor to make your acquaintance. I am Elenore of Duke Tiraso Laverde’s house, representing the Gaillarte Garden Party’s alliance of nobles from the south.”

The emperor listened in silence.

Without faltering in the slightest, Elenore continued to speak. She carried herself more confidently than anyone else who had stood before the emperor today.

“In accordance with Prince Auguste’s will, we would like, in Your Majesty’s presence, to voice our support of Princess Argentina as successor to the throne. I am counting on your wise decision to bring never-ending peace and prosperity to the Empire.” She then punctuated her words with an elegant bow, as if she had sung the last note of an act to an opera.

“...I shall consider it.” His voice speaking volumes to his fatigue, the old

emperor entrusted his body to the back of his throne before breathing a pained sigh. "...There were once five heirs to my throne... Now only two remain. Latrielle, Argentina... Take care not to do anything rash... In fifty years' time, you'll think back on these days as though they were a dream."

Auguste deeply lowered his head. "Father, I am grateful and overjoyed you could hear out my request."

The surrounding nobles mimicked him, and Altina lowered her head too. Regis bowed beside the stage, squeezing his fists in success. The plan had run smoothly from Auguste's request up to his closing show of gratitude, giving Latrielle no chance to intervene. Both the second prince and the empress were left silently gazing at the stage.

The air was only broken by the shrill cry of Germain. "P-Please wait, Your Majesty! There are doubts surrounding Prince Auguste that simply must be laid to rest."

Auguste merely scoffed. "I've conceded to retire despite my young age, having become aware of so many of my own inadequacies over the years that I would willingly discard my succession rights. I'm sure you have some choice words for me—I'm sure you all do—but are the likes of my affairs so great that you must inconvenience His Majesty?"

"Erk!?"

Naturally so. Having seceded his right to the throne, Prince Auguste was now no different from a standard noble. No matter what suspicions were placed upon him, they were ultimately a personal problem—a topic far from worthy of disturbing the highest authority in the Empire over.

"You seem to be somewhat ignorant when it comes to our customs in the palace," Auguste remarked, going on the offensive, "Good sir, might I ask which lord you serve?"

"Urk..." Germain's lips trembled.

Latrielle took half a step forward and reached an arm in front of Germain. "Stand down. You may return to your room." His voice was cold and low.

The pale Germain bowed, before promptly making his way to the exit. Along

the way, for one brief moment, he turned back and directed an angry glare toward the stage. The Beaumarchais brothers hurriedly followed after him, thrusting aside the robed girl who had now lost all purpose.

“Ahem.” Latrielle loudly cleared his throat to rein in the noisy hall. “I apologize for my subordinate’s discourtesy. He is, at times, perhaps too faithful to his duties... Dear brother of mine, I am overcome with surprise and a touch of rejection at your decision. But I vow that Argentina and I shall shoulder the Empire’s future. Please do prioritize your health.”

“Indeed. I leave father and the Empire to you. If I might add, while your own competence may be recognized by all... perhaps you would do well to keep a closer eye on your subordinates.”

“...I appreciate the kind warning.” Latrielle forced out empty words of gratitude, his lips twisted into a bitter smile. How would the nobles see him now? Those who considered Latrielle’s succession to be set in stone were likely a minority.

Soon, the emperor demanded a glass of water, as if to say he was sick and tired of the strained atmosphere. Sixth Consort Juhaprecia, who was seated beside him, leaned over like a child.

“Ufufu. Don’t be so down, Liam! You just have to make a sixth child with me. How ’bout it?”

“...Hm.”

A great many nobles openly frowned at her conduct. The newer nobles from the east gathered around the stage, thinking their time had come.

At that point, Auguste and Eddie left together. While the first prince had carried himself firmly, he seemed considerably exhausted. Altina had also been pushed to her limit, and her face was haggard as she stepped down from the stage. Regis was sure she’d walk over to him, but—

She came to a stop some distance away, making eye contact with Regis. There was a moment of silence between them—although that wasn’t unexpected, as they were too far apart for words to reach. After a moment, Altina pointed a finger to the corner of her mouth. The finger then slid up her cheek, pulling

down the skin under one of her eyes as she stuck out her tongue. Then, cheeks puffed out, the princess marched off toward the exit alone.

“W-Wait... Alt— This... This is just—!” Regis panicked. He tried to chase after her only for his legs to freeze up.

Latrielle was fixing Regis with a murderous glare, his eyes piercing him like arrows. Judging by his expression, it wouldn't be strange for him to draw the *Armée Victoire Volonté* right here and now.

Perhaps the Regis from half a year ago would have fallen unconscious here, but his experience on the border had tempered his force of will; instead, he simply buckled at the knees and crumbled onto a nearby sofa.

“...I was certain I was going to die.”

Regis was petrified, like a small frog caught in the sights of a snake, when all of a sudden his vision was obscured by a woman wearing a dress that emphasized her chest.

“Oh, Regis. How cute. You were waiting for me?” Elenore teased.

“You couldn't be further off the mark!”

Whatever the case, she had temporarily shielded him from Latrielle's gaze. *I can't stay here. This is far from over!* Regis thought as he stood up from the sofa and hastily passed Elenore by.

“Leaving already? What a boisterous fellow.”

“By my read, we're not out of the woods just yet. Ah, that's right... Mrs. Elenore, I have a request.”

Elenore's lips curled into a playful smile. “Oh, I thought you'd never ask. Of course you can stop by my room tonight.”

“Ah, my apologies—I'm afraid I'll need to leave the capital at once. Do you see that girl wearing the robe over there? Could I ask you to look after her? Her name's Eliana.”

Having been abandoned by those who had dragged her here, the girl now wandered aimlessly around the nobles. Latrielle was already headed for the door, paying her absolutely no mind; by now, she was a nobody needed by no

one. Regis wasn't able to take her into his care, but if he was right about what was to come...

"You need her for something?" Elenore asked.

"...She'll be worth the investment; the western nobles shall be in your debt."

"Fufu. Say no more."

"Thank you."

His business in the hall now complete, Regis quickly made for the exit.

Chapter 5: White Wolves Unleashed

Regis didn't return to his room. Instead, he opened the brown door to a room called the Atlas Chamber.

"You're late!"

A firm finger was thrust at him by the princess, who had already finished changing. She was now wearing her usual high-mobility dress, the *Grand Tonnerre Quatre* hanging by her hip—she was once again the form that the people of the capital had come to know as the "Arrow-Sparrow Princess." Though there were few who would call her that now.

Also in the room was Eddie, who had changed from his ceremonial uniform into unornamented military clothes and had the *Défendre Sept* sheathed at his side. Beside him was Felicia, still disguised in Auguste's formal wear.

Regis could see his usual uniform was also in the room. His eyes flicked to his pocket watch.

"I don't have time to change."

"At least wipe your face!" Altina snapped, using her handkerchief to remove the lipstick from his cheek.

"Wah..."

"Keep still." Her tone was now suddenly calm, in complete contrast to the fury that was raging in her eyes. She showed no restraint as she mercilessly wiped all around Regis's mouth.

"...Th-That hurts."

"What was that? Are you saying you don't want it gone?"

"Nn... It doesn't hurt at all. Please continue."

"Thought so."

It took a lot of rubbing, but Elenore's lipstick mark eventually came off.

Altina's disgruntled face glared fixedly at him.

"Regis, do you like older women?"

"...What are you talking about? I've never even thought about my taste in women."

"But there are a lot of women in your stories, aren't there? Which of them do you like the most?"

"The most? Well, I'd have to think about that... but it's probably Giddy from Count Ludosel's *Envoy of the Stars*—a wonderful, novel, groundbreaking heroine. Who would have thought mist could be so truly fantastic!?"

"Mist? I thought you said her name was Giddy?"

"Hm? Oh, no, she's a sentient creature of mist. But differences in race are trivial matters. Why, the protagonist, Groys, was a tortoise, after all!"

"...At least keep your examples human."

"Ah, in that case—there's this story where a man rents a room in the capital, only for a female ghost to appear, claiming to be the previous resident. Oh, and the ghost's a pankration master who breaks the protagonist's arm! Her name's —"

"I don't consider ghosts to be human."

Regis couldn't stop himself when he started talking about books. He enjoyed them far too much. But they had no time to stand around and chat here. He stepped properly into the room.

"Hey, Regis. Yo." Eddie tilted his head. "Are we really in danger if we don't run?"

For some reason, he was speaking in a casual tone as though they were close friends. But Eddie was older than Regis—not to mention a duke—so Regis made sure to continue watching his own words. That aside, the question was unavoidable. They had managed to carry the conversation at the party perfectly. Auguste was now free from the power struggle, while Altina on the contrary now had the support of many nobles.

"...Under normal circumstances we would be able to leave through the front

gate, but after everything that has happened tonight I'm afraid it might not be so simple."

Auguste— That is, *Felicia*, closed her eyes. "Do you mean I... took things too far?"

"...No matter the plan, there is always a better one out there. If we wracked our brains for another minute or so, perhaps we would think of a resolution that will fix everything like magic. But then again, we might also come up with nothing and end up having wasted crucial time. In the end, we can only take what we see as the best action in the moment. Now is no different."

All of a sudden, a boisterous din rang out from the corridor, followed by the distinctive footsteps of people wearing heavy armor. Altina and Eddie, most accustomed to the noise, tensed up.

"Heavy armor in the palace!?"

"Hey now, don't tell me they're searching for us?"

"...We can't be sure, but..." Regis paused for a moment. "Well, unless anyone wants to pop out and ask..."

Eddie shook his head. "I'd rather not take that chance. For now, we're better off running. We can tell Mr. Latrielle we had an upset stomach after the fact."

Altina offered a wry smile. "Eddie, I see you're still devoted to that stomach ache excuse."

"It's more convincing than a cold, ain't it?"

"Oh, sure. I'm just surprised you think you actually fooled anyone with it. Especially when you use it *every single time*."

"Eh? No way."

As Eddie started to realize just how conspicuous the excuse had been, Regis pulled the thick curtains back a little and pushed open the window. A cold wind seeped in. The sun was disappearing over the horizon to the west, and while it was still rather bright outside, dark clouds were quickly rolling in. It looked like it was going to rain tonight.

"...We can make it to the courtyard through here. That's where we're

supposed to meet up with our comrades.”

Felicia edged over to get a better look out of the window, the gold decorations on her male ceremonial uniform jangling as her shoulders bumped against Regis’s. The sudden noise took Regis by surprise; he lurched back defensively, but Felicia continued to move nearer, coming so close that their chests were almost touching.

Though she was still disguised as a man, now that he was looking at Felicia so close up he couldn’t deny that she was a terribly beautiful young woman. She was Altina’s sister, but the two weren’t alike in the slightest; Altina was boisterous, robust, and full of energy, while Felicia was like a serene lake hidden in the depths of a forest. She was like a flower blooming on an otherwise barren plateau, or a sheet of freshly fallen snow—an ephemeral existence that could be gone by the next day.

Felicia looked out the window and swallowed her breath, trying hard to appear unfazed. “...So we’re climbing down from here?”

“That was the plan, but...”

A few years ago, Floream Jean de Weiler had released a best-seller set in the palace called *The Lost Pearl Necklace Was in My Pocket*. It included a scene where a princess escaped to the courtyard through the window of this very chamber, but... the room was on the third floor, which height-wise would have been the fifth floor of a normal building. They had to be around 30 cubits (13 m) off of the ground.

You’re truly insane, Mr. Floream!

What was presumably the windowsill she had used as a foothold was too narrow for even a rat to cross—it was more of a pattern on the wall than an actual edge. Regis couldn’t see any uneven features on the facade that they would be able to hold onto, let alone set foot on.

The princess in the book had then climbed down a pillar to reach the ground, but the wall was so smooth that she would have needed to carve holds for herself using her bare hands. And the book definitely didn’t mention her having the brute strength that would be required for that.

“How could this be...? I should have done some research myself... I never would have guessed that a best-selling author hadn’t properly checked these details...”

Altina came up beside him and peered down across the courtyard. “Huh? What’s up, Regis? Was the writer lying?”

“N-No, I wouldn’t say he was lying... Besides, factual accuracy alone does not a good story make. In fact, fantasy is the first step to wonderment!”

“Why do you look like you’re going to cry? I’m not really sure what’s going on here, but we just need to climb down from here, right?”

“...That was the plan.”

“And we need to get down quickly, yeah?”

Regis nodded. “Y-Yeah.”

Seemingly in response to their conversation, Eddie suddenly threw the window all the way open; a strong wind barreled in, forcing back the curtains. “I’ll be going ahead then,” he said, before taking Felicia by the waist. She had been nervously looking down at the courtyard, and the sudden contact took her by surprise.

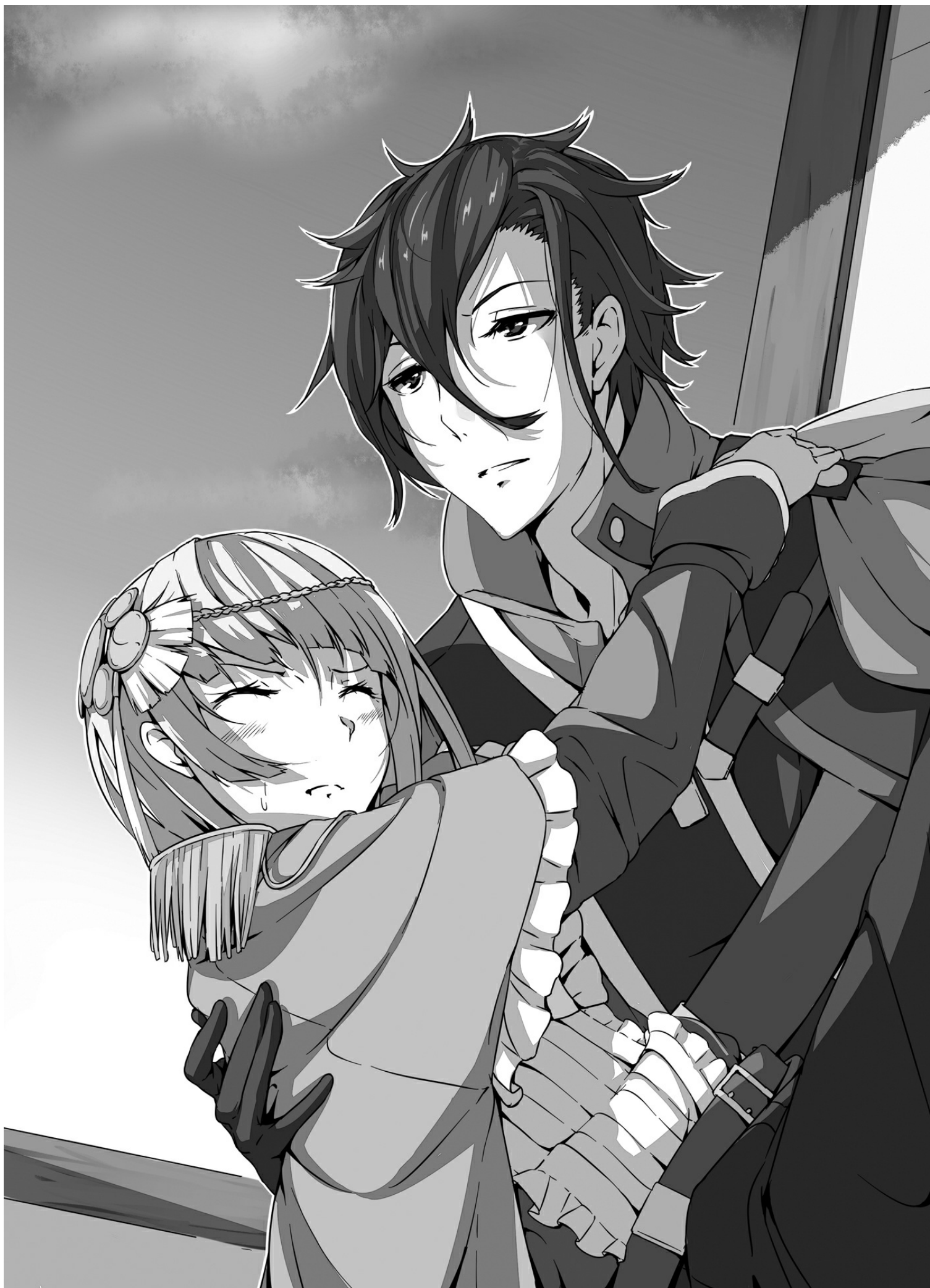
“Hyah!?”

“Felicia... I won’t ask you to hold on tight, but please keep your mouth and eyes closed.”

“O-Okay. Thank you.”

“It’s no big deal.”

He gently picked her up, placing one hand around her back and the other under her knees to support her weight. This was apparently—and very appropriately—called the princess carry.



And so, Felicia instinctively clinging to his shoulder, Eddie jumped out the window as casually as one would take the stairs.

“Hup.”

He jumped without a plan!? Regis hurriedly peered out the window, watching in horror as they fell. Even if Eddie could endure the drop, Felicia would surely be hurt by the sudden impact.

However, at about 15 cubits (7 m) from the ground, Eddie kicked the wall. The speed of their descent suddenly slowed and they landed safely on the ground.

I-Is this some kind of magic...!?

Though a little shaken up, Felicia looked absolutely fine. She was lowered onto the ground, and then waved back up at the window, right as rain.

“...What did he just do?” Regis had to doubt his eyes.

“He kicked off the windowsill. Didn’t you see?”

“...The windowsill? You mean the one that’s too thin for even a rat to walk on?”

“Yeah. As long as it’s at least a finger’s width, you can use it to slow a fall.”

“And he managed that while falling at that speed? That’d be impossible for me... Altina, I don’t think I can get down from here. Our time together may not have been long, but I’ll never forget the days I spent with you. Oh, but, uh... I suppose I won’t be remembering long if they end up killing me immediately. Hey, um, Altina? What do you think you’re—!?”

Altina took off the *Grand Tonnerre Quatre* and chucked it out the window scabbard and all. A thunderous roar rang out as it struck the ground below.

“All right, your turn!”

“Wh-What are you going to do to me!? I just said I can’t go down that way. It’d be impossible, so don’t even—”

She pulled Regis over by his waist and swept him up, supporting him under his back and knees.

“Close your mouth, close your eyes. O-Oh... But you can hold me if you want.”

“S-Stop!!”

Holding Regis in a princess carry, Altina jumped out the window.

HNNNN—!! The deafening howl of rushing wind filled his ears, and he felt as though he was floating through the air. All the while he could see the ground coming closer, and closer...

Then he was struck by two sudden impacts in quick succession, the last blow forcing all the air from his lungs. Regis was thrown out onto the ground.

“.....”

“Regis, does it hurt anywhere?”

“...I was so sure I was dead.”

“You look alive to me.”

“...H-How reckless can you be!?”

Before Regis could even pick himself up, Altina had already re-equipped the sword she had dropped.

“Me and Eddie would’ve been fine even without kicking the wall... But we’re in a hurry, aren’t we?”

“...Yeah, that’s right,” said Regis. This had all happened because he had relied too much on his book and neglected to do his own research.

Eddie lent him a hand, and Regis was back on his feet. The shaking in his knees had nothing to do with the sudden impact; it was simply the fear that he was about to die.

“...Hah... Let’s hurry across the courtyard.”

“This way! You can trust me to lead. I know this place like the back of my hand; it’s my own backyard, after all.”

Though, to her slight embarrassment, it appeared some fences had been added without her knowledge. But they posed little more than a mild inconvenience, as Altina smashed them down using the emperor’s sword.



There were three horses waiting for them in a designated spot in the courtyard, and they greeted the group with a loud snort as they approached.

Eric was there already. "I'm glad you're all right," he said, very clearly relieved.

Regis shook his head. "...We were just lucky that our enemy never anticipated we would leap down from the third floor. We haven't been spotted yet, but in town we'll stick out like a sore thumb."

"So this is the real challenge..."

As she looked over the horses, a smile spread over Altina's lips. "Oh, this kid is the same one Latrielle gave me. I wasn't sure I'd ever see her again."

It was a burly chestnut warhorse. Its mane and tail were a dusty gold, and a patch of white covered its left hind leg from the knee down.

"I had my doubts as well, but the stable hands were very cooperative."

"I see. That's fantastic!"

When one of Altina's subordinates had said they needed three horses, it was possible a sympathetic stable hand had understood the crisis they were in. But at the same time, the fact the enemy hadn't already secured the stables made Regis feel as though everything was going much too smoothly. He could only hope that things would continue as such until they were at least out of the capital.

"...Let's hurry."

"Um, Mr. Regis..." There was a touch of remorse in Eric's voice.

"What is it?"

"Truth be told, I was unable to get us a light carriage. They only had slower, more extravagant ones, which wouldn't have been any use to us."

"...I see. Well, there's nothing we can do about that. It's my fault for not being able to ride a horse."

Then I suppose this is where we part ways... Regis realized. He could hardly be tasked to escape on foot. *I'll have Altina escape on the horse, and I'll stay here*

and find a house to lay low in.

Felicia hung her head. "...I can't ride either."

"Oh, is that so? Then you can ride with me."

Eddie grabbed Felicia by the waist and hoisted her up to get onto his horse as though she weighed nothing at all.

"Hyah!?"

"Easy now, otherwise you'll be bucked off."

Felicia immediately fell silent. Once she had mounted the horse, Eddie jumped on behind her. The well-trained warhorse remained unperturbed by the added weight.

"Good, good... That's a good boy. Horse, Felicia—you'd both do well to follow my words."

Regis was having a terrible premonition when, all of a sudden, a hand gripped onto his belt and tugged him forward.

"W-Wait, Altina! Even if your horse can support both of our weights, you also need to consider how heavy your sword is!"

"Don't be stupid, Regis. I'd always choose you, even if it meant having to leave my sword behind."

"...Please don't do that."

"Then quit your jabbering and keep quiet like Felicia."

"...G-Got it." Regis finally resigned himself, and with Altina's assistance he managed to straddle the horse. Whenever he had mounted a horse in the past, this was the point where it would grow irritated and rear him off. But this time, that didn't happen.

"Why hasn't it...?"

"Probably because you're always so reluctant to get on. They find that insulting, you know."

"I'm reluctant because I know how much it hurts if you fall off."

“But when you’re riding it’s nice and comfortable. It’s worth the risk, if you ask me.”

“...I’ve never actually ridden before, so I wouldn’t know.”

“Well that’s about to change.”

The three horses were ready to depart. Regis and Altina were on one, Felicia and Eddie on another, and Eric sat alone on the third.

Altina used the reins to turn her horse. In fact, she didn’t even appear to have pulled the reins; the horse seemed to be turning on its own.

“Clever girl.”

“Looks like it.”

“I’ll have to think of a name for her.”

“...Once we’re back in one piece, sure.”

They ran alongside the palace wall. Even the courtyard alone was considerably vast. Altina spurred on her horse, and Eddie’s and Eric’s mounts sped up to match her pace. The white palace, the fences, the grass, the flower beds, the soldiers on watch... All of the scenery disappeared behind them.

Felicia looked like she was about to cry, and Regis could barely stop his eyes from watering either. Given the situation, he couldn’t really ask Altina to slow down, but they were going so fast it terrified him.

“Ah, that’s right, Mr. Regis!” Eric called out, his horse drawing closer.

“W-W-Waah!?”

Not only did they have to endure the repeated bouncing as they rode, the heavy beat of hooves meant they needed to shout to hear one another.

“I entrusted Ms. Clarisse and Lillim to Abidal-Evra!”

“Ah, yah!”

Unaccustomed to the shaking, Regis found himself unable to form words. But all was well so long as the two girls were able to escape safely too.

Assuming everything had gone to plan, Abidal-Evra and his men would have

already fled the capital by now. A mere eight horsemen weren't going to make much of a difference for what Regis had planned, and he didn't want to risk making any unnecessary sacrifices. So long as Altina and Felicia could get away, it was their victory.

Though he doubted it would be as simple as strolling through the main gate; they passed through the courtyard and into the backyard, charging toward the service entrance used by freight wagons and servants.

"Knights up ahead!" screamed Eric.

There were roughly ten knights armed with spears manning the gate, all clad in blue-colored armor. Regis was finally getting acclimated to the horse's bouncing. He looked up, the gears in his head once again starting to turn.

"It's the capital garrison!" he shouted, "I don't know how much they've heard about us, but there'll be serious trouble if they stop us!"

"Are they strong!?" asked Altina.

"They're sons of well-to-do families who haven't seen a day of real battle in their lives!"

"I see!"

"Please don't go too hard on them...!"

"So you're saying they're an easy win!"

"Wait, Altina!"

"Duck!"

Before the words had even passed her lips, Altina had already pushed Regis forward so that he was leaning against the horse's neck.

"...Erk."

"Have at thee! Chaaargeee!!" She bellowed as if she was rallying an army of ten thousand men even though only Eddie and Eric were riding behind her.

The garrison knights hurriedly readied their lances. They would normally only be pointed at someone approaching from the outside, but...

"H-Halt!"

As expected, it seemed they had been ordered not to let them pass.

...Not that there was any chance Altina would listen to them. Her horse didn't even slow down.

"I am Marie Quatre Argentina de Belgaria! If my name alone isn't enough to move you, then I shall spare you no mercy!"

At her command, five of the men stepped back. But the remaining five still pointed their spears.

Altina released the reins, using her knees to grip the horse's torso to support herself. Then, she raised the *Grand Tonnerre Quatre* in both hands.

"Haaaaaaaah!!"

She brought her sword down, cutting through the line of spears before her in one fell swoop.

Regis held his head in his hands. Altina's decision to aim for their weapons and push through was a reckless one, let alone doing so while on horseback. Speaking of which, this chestnut horse seemed to be just as careless. This was only the second time she had ridden the horse, and yet it was already charging fearlessly into spears following its master's will.

"How do you have such a close bond already!?"

"Oh, I've been tending to her every morning, you know?"

"Now it makes sense!"

That would have explained why the stable hands had been so kind. *But if she'd wanted me to charge... Forget three days, you could look after me for three years and I wouldn't run headlong into spears*, thought Regis.

"That sure is a convenient sword!" Eddie commented as he gave chase.

"Want to swap!?"

"Hah! Don't think I'd even be able to lift it, so no can do!"

"Ahahahah!"

Eddie wasn't joking. It was a sword so heavy that any normal person would struggle to even carry it around. Had they been riding any other horse, it would

have likely been impossible to swing from horseback. But it was also because of this weight that the blade had such immense destructive power. It struck as ferociously as lightning; in a single sweep, Altina had cleaved the garrison's spears and scattered its troops. Granted, the garrison had gained a reputation as an army for show, lacking in all experience, but the princess was a force to be reckoned with nonetheless.

As they breached the service gate, Regis pointed ahead. "Keep going! Down the north street!"

"Understood!"

"...Though I imagine we'll be pursued. And by real knights this time," Regis sighed. *Though I hope I'm wrong on that one...*

But unfortunately, it all played out just as he had feared. They had galloped down the main street and made it outside the capital, but the moment they cleared the first hill a group on horseback gave chase, kicking up a cloud of dust behind them.

Regis turned his head, looking back to confirm his suspicions. Under the pale westering sun, their white metal armor appeared to be tinted red.

"...They're not hoisting a flag, but there's no mistaking it... It's the White Wolf Brigade!"

They were recognized as the central pillar of the First Army.

"Those are the knights who came out to greet us when we first arrived, right? You think they're here to see us off?"

"Want to try asking?"

"We might as well. If they can catch us, that is."

Armored cavalry were usually relatively slow compared to other mounted riders, but as both Altina's and Eddie's horses were carrying the weight of an extra person, the distance between them and their pursuers was gradually closing.

Regis closed his eyes tight, opening a map in his head that he had burned into his memory. Then, he pointed in the direction Altina should proceed.

“Go to that hill over there!”

“Why there!?”

“It’s our only chance of survival.”

“Regis, the horse is nearing its limit.”

“If we can just reach the top...”

“If we push her that far, we’ll lose our best means of escape!”

Despite this, they headed for the hill that looked no different from any other. From the perspective of the advancing knights, perhaps it looked as though they had strayed from the path and were now running aimlessly. It was one of many plain hills surrounding the capital, and consisted of nothing but low grass; it wasn’t the sort of place where someone could hide.

The horse’s hooves kicked up mud as they passed through a strip of wetland, deep enough that even a warhorse would be slowed. Their pursuers hadn’t opted to use guns or bows yet, so it seemed they had been ordered to bring the prince and princess back alive. In order for Latrielle to regain his lost ground, he needed to capture Auguste and reveal once and for all that he was a fake. This would invalidate his recommendation of Altina, removing the main obstacle in his path to the throne.

Still clinging to the bounding horse, Regis mumbled to himself. “...Prince Latrielle, you are a military man—one who will ultimately fall back onto his troops. It is only natural that I anticipate and prepare for this situation. No, are these Sir Germain’s tactics?”

The scent of oil struck his nose as the horse dragged its muddy hooves through the remaining marsh, finally reaching the crown of the hill. The world around them was already being shrouded in twilight.

“...If we had a little more time, I’d have liked to ride a carriage.”

“Not everything can go as planned.”

“That’s very true. But for us, it seems that everything is going *exactly* as planned.”

Eddie’s horse arrived at the summit, Felicia still clinging on, shortly followed

by Eric's. The horses were very clearly worn down, and were breathing very heavily.

The White Wolf Brigade cleared the wetland and began the climb themselves. Had they been granted permission to use arrows, they would have attacked by now; they were close enough that a clean shot would be easy. Leading the charge was what appeared to be the knight captain, and Regis watched as his white steel armor shone under the fading light of dusk.

"My name is Constant Felix de Bartouli!" the white armor-clad man announced, "Prince Auguste, I ask that you please return to the capital at once!"

"I refuse!" called Eddie, responding in Felicia's place.

It seemed their decision ultimately meant very little to the White Wolf Brigade, as Knight Captain Constant immediately loosed his longsword from his hip. It glimmered a radiant silver.

"Then we shall bring you back by force!" he yelled, spurring the knights behind him to draw their swords in unison.

The enemy numbered around a thousand. They had cleared around three hills since leaving the capital, but their numbers didn't appear to have waned in the slightest; as expected of the Empire's strongest elites.

Altina raised her sword into the air. "I assume you know who I am. Despite that, you say you will force me to bend to your will? Are you truly knights of Belgaria, or have you become little more than Latrielle's private army?"

"Prince Auguste must be brought back for the sake of the Empire!" Constant declared, "That is what I believe!"

"Then act on your faith! But know that I won't yield, no matter my foe!"



“Gnn!”

Words were no longer needed. Constant raised his arm to order the attack, and the muddy White Wolves charged up the hill at once. Those leading the charge were close enough that Regis was sure he would be able to tell the colors of their eyes; retreat was now impossible.

Altina lowered her massive sword. That was the signal. A roar rose behind her, quickly followed by a thunder of hooves as an army of knights wearing black armor came into view.

Taken by surprise, the enemy charge lost all momentum.

“...Jerome’s Black Knight Brigade!?” Constant groaned, “So they baited us... but they’re still only five hundred country knights! Our elites shall not lose! Charge! Chaaarge! Don’t let Prince Auguste get away!”

Just as he tried to reinvigorate the charge, a flaming arrow landed among the White Wolves. It had been fired from the Black Knights. A flame arrow was generally ineffective against cavalry, and so would have been of very little concern, but some were finally beginning to notice the offensive odor clinging to them.

“It’s oil!” A voice rose from among the White Wolf Brigade’s ranks, but it was already too late. The strip of wetland had been lain with vegetable oil, a substance that used rapeseed as its base component and could be purchased for dirt cheap around the capital. It didn’t matter whether it was fish oil or lard—any oil burned terribly well, and a number of barrels’ worth had been emptied.

The marsh erupted into a glorious pillar of crimson flame, accompanied by a cacophony of agonized screams. Inside the red inferno floated the shadows of writhing horsemen. Some who had managed to stay on horseback had made it out relatively unscathed, only to be faced with the lances of the Black Knights.

Constant’s breath caught in his throat. His men were on fire. Elites were being turned to ash or impaled on spears without so much as a chance to brandish the skills they had tempered all their lives.

“O-Oooooooooohh—!” he screamed, his voice breaking in a mix of rage and

lament.

A black shadow appeared right before his eyes. “Hmph. Fool. If you knew how to issue any order other than ‘charge’ then your men wouldn’t have become firewood.”

“Black Knight Jerome... You... You coward! Have you strayed from the path of a knight and become a demon!?”

“Kukukuh... It just so happens that our tactician is great at thinking up these deplorable measures. Of course, if you had noticed the oil and halted your charge, the flames would have been no more than a hindrance.” Jerome raised his spear, *Les Cheveux d’une Dame*. “You really are incompetent!”

Constant readied his own sword. “You’re a greenhorn who’s let praise get to his head! A hero? Don’t make me laugh! Your achievements are only because the Germanian Federation is a gathering of weaklings!”

“Kukukuh... Well, I hear they laud you lot as the Empire’s strongest. But what have you accomplished these past three years? A troupe of fools who shamble about the nation parading their flag.”

“You mock the Empire’s First Army!?”

“Guhahah! Most of that army you’re so proud of is burning alive thanks to your complete lack of brains!”

“You bastard!”

Constant thrust out his longsword, his eyes bloodshot. It was a sharp lunge, as to be expected of someone who had climbed to the rank of knight captain, but Jerome simply parried the attack with his lance’s armguard, all while urging his horse to pull back a little. After all, lances were most effective at a distance.

“Hah!” Jerome then pushed forward, driving into three—perhaps even four—thrusts in an instant. It was the same attack that had butchered an enemy knight in the battle to take Fort Volks.

“Too slow, Jerome! Is that all you’ve got!?” Constant released the reins of his horse and drew a second sword, now wielding one in each hand, which he used to deflect the flurry of attacks.

“Hm. I assumed the palace wine would have dulled your skills, but...”

“I don’t drink!”

“My apologies for assuming. So you were stupid to begin with.”

“Shut it, you half-wit!” Constant had caught Jerome’s lance with his left sword, while his right was aimed directly at his opponent’s heart.

Jerome smirked. “...Trying to ward off my attack with a single hand? You take me too lightly.”

“...!?”

He thrust his spear forward at the same speed as before, but the force behind the attack was completely different. His first strike caused a crack down the blade of Constant’s left sword, and the second shattered it completely. And before Constant could reposition his remaining sword to defend himself, Jerome moved into a third strike, piercing the white steel armor like paper.

“Gphh!?”

“You know, I forgot to ask. The Empire’s First Army has three knight brigades; where does yours rank among them? Don’t you dare disappoint me and say you’re the strongest... Mn?”

The knight captain of the White Wolf Brigade offered no response. He was dead. As Jerome pulled his lance from the man’s chest, Constant fell from his horse.

“Tsk, how unsightly... A rider who keeps his legs firm won’t be taken from the saddle, even in death. You say the Germanians are weak, but their knight returned on his trusty steed.”

Had Regis not been riding with her, would Altina have charged into battle herself? She had watched Jerome and Constant’s battle without so much as blinking.

“He’s incredible, that man.”

“...Sir Jerome is indeed strong... Though that exchange was much too quick for me to follow.”

“Was he holding back when he fought me?”

“Well, given the difference between your weapons and your fighting styles, it would depend on the circumstances. If you were on horseback, Sir Jerome would most likely be stronger than you.”

“Do you think he’s stronger than Latrielle?”

“...Don’t ask me.”

“I reckon Sir Jerome would win in a battle on horseback, and Mr. Latrielle in an up-close duel,” Eddie answered in his place, “And while a lance is stronger on the battlefield, a battle indoors or somewhere in close quarters would be a different story.”

“I see.”

“Though your giant sword is a special case, Argentina. It can’t really be used as reference,” Eddie added with a shrug, bringing the topic of conversation to an end.

“All that aside, was this fire your idea, Regis?” Altina asked.

“Yes. I thought there was a decent chance we would be pursued by the Empire’s First Army.”

“How did you foresee something like that!?”

“Well, he went out of his way to summon us to the capital, so surely Prince Latrielle had some kind of scheme in mind. In that case, if we were able to evade what he had planned or even turn the tables on him, there was a good chance we’d end up ruining our foe’s reputation in the process. Whether you consider it from an emotional or a rational point of view, a man who controls the armies would no doubt rely on them in the end. Is that not an obvious conclusion to reach?”

Eddie cocked his head to the side. “O-Obvious? Uh, yeah...”

Meanwhile, Felicia appeared completely disengaged from the conversation.

“It does sound obvious when you put it like that, but it never would have occurred to me.” Altina gave a resigned shrug. “You never know what’ll happen once you set out, so the most I figured I could do was be as careful as I could.”

“...Is that so?”

“Did you have a reason to use fire in particular?”

“I did. The First Army largely follows the knights’ code, and they’re a prideful bunch. Based on how much they value fighting honorably, I was pretty sure they wouldn’t consider an oil trap.”

“Jerome might be right. That really is deplorable.”

“Well, personally, I’d say when you’ve got an army of a thousand knights chasing five people, all notions of acting fair and square go right out the window.”

“...You do have a point.”

“Now then, Altina, let’s fall back a little.”

“But that’ll make it hard to see the enemy.”

“We’ve already dealt with the bulk of them. Jerome should have trumpeters among his ranks, so let’s fall back to them and have them blow the signal to retreat.”

“We’re retreating already?”

“Yeah, we have to. If we push back any more, we’ll be going too far. We need them to return to the capital in some shape or form.”

Interlude

On the last day of the commemoration festival, the capital was even merrier than usual. That is, until the oil lamps brought the figures of defeated knights retreating down the main road into view. The merrymakers stopped their singing and put down their bottles, watching in surprise as the knights returned, dragging their feet. Their faces were sunken, pained by loss and despair.

They were the knights belonging to the First Army—the symbol of the Empire’s strength. Those with sharp ears had already heard the news.

“They fought the hero Jerome’s Black Knight Brigade! Marie Quatre’s Army!”

Customers flocked around the information broker who had stampeded into the bar.

“C-Civil war!? A rebellion!?”

“No, Prince Auguste relinquished his succession rights and recommended the fourth princess in his place! And so Prince Latrielle sicced the First Army on ’em, but ended up losing!”

“Even the Black Knights shouldn’t be *that* strong.”

“Oh, but you see, Marie Quatre’s Army has the tactician Regis! All eyewitness accounts say the bog blazed up like magic and scorched the knights to cinders.”

“The bog was on fire!?”

“Magic, eh...? Wouldn’t surprise me. I hear he captured Fort Volks with only two thousand men.”

“I heard it was two hundred.”

“Two hundred? Oh, come on. That just ain’t possible.”

“They all said Prince Latrielle would become emperor, but... think of all the wars we’re fightin’. If she’s the strongest royal, then we’re better off with Marie Quatre.”

“Don’t be stupid. If it weren’t for Prince Latrielle, the Empire would have fallen a long time ago.”

“Now is the time for the sovereignty of our nation to fall to the people! Democracy!”

“Oh, shut it you!”

“C’mon now...”

“Wait, hold up!”

The uproar didn’t seem like it would die down for a long while to come.



Imperial Palace Le Branne—

Bizarre as it was, not a single noble remained in the party hall. Prince Auguste had abdicated his succession rights and nominated Princess Argentina in his place. Then, the Empire’s First Army had been mobilized only to suffer a crushing defeat.

The future that had been so meticulously planned for had been upended in a single night, and the nobles had all gathered with their like-minded fellows to discuss what they would do from here.

Picking up one of the many copious bottles of wine that remained, Latrielle poured its red contents into his glass.

“.....”

He was alone, and had been for quite some time, before he was visited by a man who was as pale as a ghost. His gait was unsteady, his once vibrant orange hair now dulled close to white. It was Germain.

“M-My lord...”

“...What happened, my tactician?”

“A-At the very least... please execute me by your own hands.” He was prostrated before him, his shoulders quivering uncontrollably.

Latrielle raised the glass in his hands to his lips, wetting his throat. “Execute you? I know not the offense.”

“I... I... In an attempt to remedy my failure... I sent out the First Army...”

“Yes, they were sent out and then defeated. Who would have guessed that man would set up a trap so close to the capital? Fufu... He surely is a monster.”

“...Your trust... Your trust in me... I’ve tarnished it.”

“Hm. Are the nobles saying I am no longer suitable to become emperor?”

“Kh... Snff... G-Ghh...” The white-haired Germain sobbed, his forehead pressed to the floor.

Latrielle slowly finished his wine. “Fufufu. You say such strange things, dear Germain. Even if what you say is true, this is all my sin. Why should you be executed?”

“...Why?” Germain looked up.

Latrielle filled his glass once more then tilted it to the side, allowing the wine to spill onto the floor. It splattered as it struck the ground, spreading and seeping into the carpet below. Unable to discern the prince’s intentions, Germain fixed his eyes on the growing red stain.



“U-Um...?”

“You see, spilled wine can be drunk no longer. Perhaps the stain it leaves will never fade. But as long as you have the glass, you can always pour more.” He poured wine into his empty glass yet again. “Tell me, Germain, is the color any different to the wine that was spilled? Is the taste any worse?”

“...It... It is no different.”

“See? There is no need to break the glass just because its contents have been spilled once. What we must do is pour it anew. Do you understand, Germain? This is one thing you should never forget. Not only you—it is something we must all keep in mind.”

“Nn... Nng... Waaaaaaaah...!” Germain wailed.

Latrielle, seemingly unfazed, simply swirled the wine in his glass, gazing out across the twinkling town just outside the open window.

Chapter 6: The Queen's Navy

A week later, at Fort Volks—

Once he'd finished his lunch, Regis made for the command room, a bundle of papers under his arm. The door was already half-open, and he could hear a cutesy hum coming from inside.

"Hmm~♪ Hm, hmm~♪"

When he peeked inside, a maid with hazel eyes and brown hair bundled behind her head was wiping the command room table. She twirled in a circle as she sang to herself; as usual, she seemed to be enjoying her cleaning. It was rather hard to find the right moment to interrupt her.

"....."

"Mmm~♪ Hm-hmm~♪ La, lalalaaa~♪ Day by day, I clean and sweep~♪ While Mr. Regis likes to peep~♪"

"Hey! If you'd already noticed me, you could have said something."

"Oh, why if it isn't Mr. Regis. Good day to you."

"...Why are you acting as if you only just noticed me?"

"Isn't your meeting scheduled for a little later on?"

"It is, but I thought I should get the documents in order beforehand. If I drag the report on too long, Sir Jerome will become irritable and Altina will probably fall asleep..."

"My, my... What enthusiastic workers we have."

"I'll say."

"Then is there really any point in you making a report at all?"

"...Please, don't... Just don't. I feel like something precious inside of me almost collapsed." He leaned his elbows on the table to prop himself up and

held his palms over his eyes.

Meanwhile, Clarisse was chuckling away to herself. “There’s no need to worry, Mr. Regis. Believe it or not, the princess is a very keen listener.”

“You think so?”

“I do. Whenever I bring her the menu, she listens with extra care to each and every item I read out.”

“...I guess that makes sense. It’s important to pay attention to what you eat.”

“Then may I assume you are taking care to eat properly as well, Mr. Regis?”

“Of course. I, uh...” Just as he was about to answer, Regis realized he couldn’t even remember what he had eaten for breakfast. These days, he was so caught up in his reading and his work that he was simply cramming whatever food was brought out to him into his mouth.

“...Sorry. I should stop taking my meals for granted.”

“Fufu. It doesn’t bother me. Though, on a more important note, I heard something nice from the princess...”

“What was that?”

“That you like older women.”

“Oh... That.”

Regis was already used to this from Clarisse; he had expected her to bring it up eventually. Though, she looked rather unsatisfied.

“You’re unfazed.”

“I’m a grown-up. I can’t go losing my head over every little remark you make... What you’re referring to was just Mrs. Elenore teasing me. Besides, she already has three husbands, you know.”

“And yet she still kissed you?”

“I’m telling you, that was just a joke. She was teasing me.”

“I see, I see.” Clarisse nodded. Did she finally follow? Regis felt relieved that the misunderstanding had finally been resolved.

“So what you’re saying is, I can kiss you too as long as it’s a joke.”

“Eh?”

Clarisse reached out her hand and stroked Regis’s cheek.

“Don’t worry, I’ll make sure the princess knows it was just a joke.”

“W-Wait, no. That’s... That’s not something you should do as a joke.”

“Oh dear... Then should I do it seriously?”

“Eeh!? Wh-What are you saying?”

Regis met Clarisse’s gaze. Her hazel eyes were close enough that he could see his own reflection in them.

She really is quite pretty...

Her breath brushed his cheek as her lips leaked a heated voice. “...Are you sure about this, Mr. Regis? Have you made up your mind?”

“...Um, Ms. Clarisse... You almost make it sound like you’d want to kiss someone like me.”

“Do you really need me to say it...?”

Regis fell into deep thought, once again scanning over the bookshelves in his mind as he searched for an appropriate answer.

“If you’re doing this as a joke, then I think you’re seriously undervaluing what is a very intimate display of affection.”

“And if I’m being serious?”

“...If you’re being serious, then I think you’re seriously undervaluing yourself. Clarisse, you’re a beautiful young woman; you should find yourself someone you can really entrust your future to.”

Clarisse frowned. Had he angered her with what was practically a lecture? Regis continued in a desperate attempt to remedy the situation.

“...Well, you see, I’ve got no future prospects, so I wouldn’t be a very appealing option... I’m not strong, nor do I have money, and I can’t ride a horse —”

“Good grief. You really are such a Regis.”

“...Pardon?”

Her cold fingertip ran down his cheek and brushed his lips, sending an icy shiver down his spine.

“If you’ll let me have a word, Mr. Regis... You’re not someone who would treat a woman as livestock or a possession, but also you wouldn’t become too reliant on her either. When you’re in a bad mood, you wouldn’t take your anger out on her, and you wouldn’t drink yourself silly and get violent.”

“Yeah, I get the feeling my sister did all that...”

“You must have had quite the teacher. Though not in a good sense.”

“Hahahah... Well, she’s still the person who raised me. I’m grateful for everything she’s done for me.”

Though it was definitely his sister’s fault that he was no good with older women.

“The Belgarian Empire is a military state, so intellectual men such as yourself are rare,” Clarisse whispered, caressing his ear as she spoke. It tickled.

“Yeah, I know... I’m aware that I’m a hopeless, weak-armed man. There’s no need for you to spell it out.”

Clarisse’s head suddenly slumped down, powerless and defeated.

Huh? Regis cocked his head to the side in confusion. An awkward silence fell over the room, interrupted moments later by a loud entrance from Altina.

“Oh, you’re early! I was sure I’d be the first one here. Hey, hey, listen to this—there was a fish in the underground canal! A huge one! I was talking with the head cook about catching it and having it served up for our next meal. It was so big and red!”

Clarisse swiftly closed in and locked Altina in a firm embrace.

“Waah... Princess... You’re my only comfort...”

“Y-Yeah?” Altina said, dumbfounded, “As I was saying, the fish, it—”

Regis sighed. “Yeah, yeah.”

As that conversation continued, Jerome, Everard and Eric showed up. They were accompanied by Eddie as well as Felicia, who was still wearing Auguste's clothes.

"Is it really all right for me to be here?" Felicia asked.

"Right, I should be asking that too," Eddie added, "Am I really of any use here?"

"We don't want you picking up work elsewhere," answered Regis, "Were Prince Auguste's identity to be leaked to the world, we'd be in quite the predicament, so it would be a huge help if you just stayed with us for the time being. We'll probably need to borrow your strength eventually."

"Say what you will. Regis, I need to... repay you for saving me," said Felicia.

"Me? Oh, don't worry about it... I was only able to evade Prince Latrielle's schemes thanks to you and Sir Eddie."

"Come to think of it, I heard you were rather good at chess, Regis. Would you care to play a game?"

"Are you serious? I'd love to."

In part because both Regis and Felicia boasted very introverted personalities, it seemed that they shared some hobbies.

Altina tapped Regis on the shoulder. "Regis, err... what about fishing? Would you wanna go fishing?"

"Eh, fishing? Well..."

"Hah! So this is what people mean when they say that some like 'em young!"

"...I think you need to calm down, Altina. Take a seat there, and maybe think before you speak next time."

"...Hmph."

Bang! Jerome violently slammed the pommel of his dagger against the table before roaring "Start the meeting already!"

"Y-Yes!"

Everyone hurried to their seats.



A thick fog was rolling in over Ciennbourg, a medium-sized city with a large harbor, located in the territory of Duke Touranne. It had a naval port boasting three warships and ten cannons, but maintained a favorable relationship with High Britannia across the sea. Over the last few years, the city had completely removed itself from all major wars. Though this only made its residents all the more anxious when the Empire's Second Army had been deployed there half a month prior.

It was seven in the morning, about time for the fishermen's ships to return to port. The weather suggested there wouldn't be any major problems; the winds were low and the sea calm, and while the fog was starting to settle in, a large bonfire had been lit on the docks to guide boats safely back to shore.

Rodolphe stood on a wooden lookout platform at the harbor, gazing out across the sea as he did every day. He was a young man due to turn twenty-two that year. He wasn't a soldier but a merchant, working in the port's trade committee.

"I can't see a thing today..."

On days like this, the risk of ships colliding with one another was especially high. In response to the poor visibility afforded by the fog, Rodolphe concentrated not on his eyes, but his ears. It was then that he noticed an unfamiliar sound. One that he could only liken to the groaning of some large animal.

Pushing its way through the ocean mist, something larger than he had ever seen before was making its way to the port.

"...What's that?"

The dark shadow began to surface through the fog.

"A boat?"

But it had no sail. *Then a shipwreck, perhaps?* That didn't seem to be the case either.

Rodolphe's eyes opened wide as the mysterious form became clear. It was

indeed a boat—a massive ship possessing a lone, thick mast, from which billowed a plume of dense black smoke.

A steam ship.

It took a brief moment for Rodolphe to recall the rumors he had heard. There were test pieces being manufactured in the Belgarian Empire, but nobody had yet seen a working model—especially not in a backwater harbor such as this one. Such technology simply hadn't developed enough yet.

A thunderous roar boomed across the bay. A mere second later, a battleship moored at the naval port was enveloped in a dazzling light. It had exploded. Rodolphe's lookout post was some distance away, but he was still pushed back by the tremendous blast wave.

“Gwah!?”

A merchant like Rodolphe could only watch, but the stationed soldiers were quick to react. They scrambled out of the barracks in haste, and moments later the ten cannons lining the port were firing round after round. Thunderous booms tore through the air but nothing more; the shots couldn't reach the enemy ship.

Once again, a shell flew from the mysterious ship, and another military ship was blown to shreds. This was an overwhelming disparity in firepower. Belgaria's vessels were being one-sidedly obliterated. What's more, the giant ship could move around freely, not seeming to depend on the wind. It was fast. It was maneuverable.

Rodolphe stood frozen atop his lookout. Black smoke filled the air; every military ship in the port was in flames. The cannons had been destroyed as well, the men who had armed them just moments ago now nowhere to be seen. Those who tried to retaliate using their own small firearms received an unequal response in the form of powerful cannon blasts. It was as though they were facing the very wrath of God.

The Belgarian Army had been completely overrun. They no longer had any means to resist.

Then, the storm-like bombardment suddenly stopped. As the mysterious ship

slowly approached, the veil of mist parted around it.

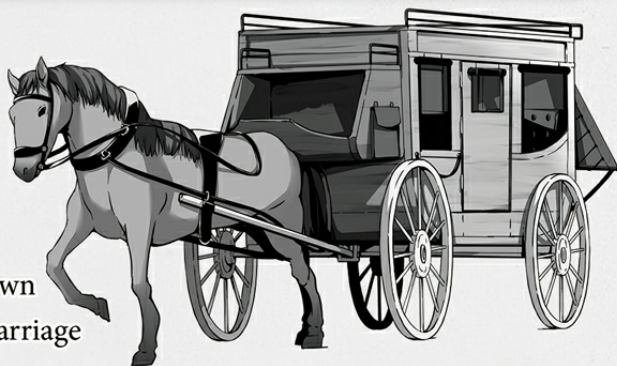
What Rodolphe saw next only confirmed what he had suspected as he watched the battle. The ship flew the flag of High Britannia—the country across the sea that was ruled by a queen.

In less than half an hour, a medium-sized port town in western Belgaria had been reduced to absolute ruin by a single ship. No post nor perch was spared from its unrelenting destruction.

A History of the Belgarian Empire

Carriages

In the year 851 on the Belgarian imperial calendar, the horse-drawn carriage occupied the same place in society as the modern-day automobile; they were indispensable to the movement of people and goods. The horses tasked with pulling these carriages were known as “carriage horses,” and the most desirable traits for a carriage horse were strength, toughness, and stamina.



However, for horses used in combat, these traits meant nothing unless they could brave the fire of guns and cannons. Horses that underwent special training for this were known as “warhorses.” A knight’s mount, meanwhile, also needed to display intelligence, and an additional emphasis was placed on its coloring and physique. An excellent mount could easily cost more than a house.

There were a number of ways in which one could classify a carriage: the number of horses it was pulled by, the size of the cart, the material used for the roof, and whether or not it had spring suspension. Words such as “buggy,” “cabriolet,” “coupe,” and “wagon,” which are now used to refer to cars, were originally used for carriages.

While a slight detour, let us also use this space to discuss the carriage used by Marie Quatre—a four-horse, large-scale carriage which was considered top-class as a stagecoach. Its canopied roof was relatively standard fare, but its box-shaped cabin was considered one of the most effective designs at the time when it came to user safety. A pole extended forward from either side of the chassis, to which the horses’ harnesses were attached. There was, however, no roof over the cabman’s perch, so when it rained, the driver would have to wear a hood.

The roof of a cabin was generally used to store luggage, though it was only designed with leather cases and bags in mind. Under the unwieldy weight of the emperor’s treasured sword, it must have grated and jarred fearsomely. As with other stagecoaches frequently used by commoners, it had no suspension and the metal bearings were bolted directly to the wooden chassis.

By regularly swapping out its horses, a stagecoach could maintain an average speed of around fifteen kilometers per hour, and could travel nearly a hundred kilometers a day. Carriages that did not use this system could only manage around half of that at most.

Unlike the stagecoach, the carriage prepared for Altina by Latrielle did have suspension; it was the sort of exorbitant luxury only afforded to nobles, and like most forms of suspension in the era, made use of what are known as “leaf springs.” A series of metal plates were fastened to the base, and then connected to the wheels. As these plates bent, any impact was absorbed and dampened.

Despite horses supporting humanity’s transportation needs for over two thousand years, they were gradually phased out as the invention of steam and internal combustion engines came along.

Class

Belgaria's imperial army followed a strict ranking system. In order from most to least important, these were: field marshal, general, lieutenant general, major general, brigadier general, first-grade, second-grade, third-grade, fourth-grade, fifth-grade, sixth-grade, head trooper, trooper first-grade, and finally just plain old trooper.

The emperor—or the marshal general acting in his stead—is not included in this hierarchy as they are considered the supreme commanding authority, and neither are recruits as they are not yet fully-fledged soldiers.

Commissioned officers—that is, field marshals, generals, lieutenant generals, major generals, and brigadier generals—are able to command over a thousand men. While it was also accepted for them to keep a private army, in order to do so, they would need to hold the title of “viscount” or higher.

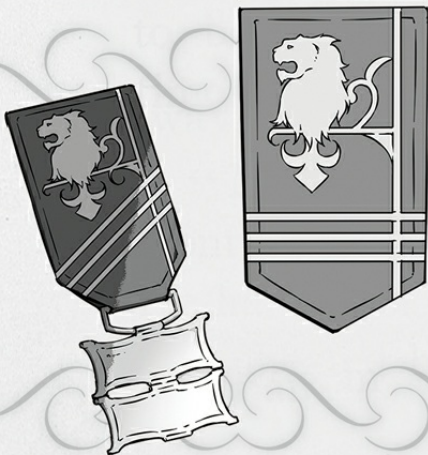
Senior non-commissioned officers (namely those recognized as first-grade, second-grade, and third-grade) would receive orders from their commissioned higher-up, and command a portion of their own subordinates (composed of junior officers and troopers) to carry out said order. For instance, in this volume, Second-Grade Combat Officer Abidal-Evra was assigned a long-term guard mission. It was also possible for senior non-commissioned officers to serve as an adviser to their superior, much like First-Grade Administrative Officer Germain.

It was standard practice for senior officers to have some form of peerage, and should a commoner climb to such a rank, he was generally knighted and given the rank of “chevalier.” While Prince Latrielle did say he would promote Regis Aurick to a third-grade administrative officer, he did not have the authority to issue such a peerage. He would have needed to go through the Ministry of Military Affairs to send a petition to the Ministry of Nobility, which would then need the approval of a minister. It was a very lengthy process.

Junior officers (who held the ranks of fourth-grade, fifth-grade, and sixth-grade) were not permitted to take unsupervised command for long periods of time, and were simply expected to make sure the troops executed their superiors' orders.

Assuming they were accomplished enough, even a common soldier could receive a field promotion to sixth-grade and higher. These positions overlap with sergeants and sergeant majors in the modern military.

First-grade to sixth-grade officers were divided between those who served on the battlefield, and those who carried out administrative work. This was an era where working for the government meant one was either in the military or a noble. Therefore, even the clerk at any government office and all library workers were either administrative officers or nobles (or their servants).



Basic soldier positions (your head troopers, trooper first-grades, and troopers) were mostly made up of commoners, and troopers were, for the most part, temporary soldiers gathered through conscription. Soldiers in the regular army could occasionally start off as trooper first-grades if they passed inspection. Authority and equipment didn't change much between this and a standard trooper; the main difference between them was the salary. Head troopers, on the other hand, were afforded more control; they not only worked as soldiers, but also managed men and trained new recruits.

Afterword

Thank you for reading *Altina the Sword Princess III*.

This is the author, Yukiya Murasaki.

This third volume covered the power struggles within the palace, developments that—as far as I know—haven’t taken center stage in many light novels as of late. I can only hope you enjoyed it.

While the contents of the fourth volume haven’t been finalized yet, the story has been set in motion. The Belgarian Empire is thrust into a large-scale war with a neighboring nation whose technological might has been bolstered by the industrial revolution.

This series apparently falls under the military fantasy genre, but if you want military fantasy with Famitsu Bunko, you’ve gotta check out Kou Maisaka. His new series, *The Night Mistress and the Six Princess Knights of the Fallen Nation*, is releasing in July! I can’t wait to read it.

I’ve recently started a few new series with other companies. I’m writing *Gindan Gunswordia* with MF Bunko, *Winter Academy’s Alice and Shirley* with Overlap Bunko, and *The Devils Think My Room Is Their Hang-Out* with Ichijinsha Bunko. I hope you’ll support me in these endeavors as well.

My thanks—

To my illustrator, himesuz-sensei, thank you for always providing such refreshing illustrations. Your vibrant colors, and the atmosphere carried by each piece—they’re all remarkable!

To Yamazaki-sama and Nishino-sama at Afterglow, thank you for yet another wonderful design.

To my editor, Wada-sama, it’s all thanks to you that the book could be

published without issue.

To everyone in the Famitsu Bunko editorial department, everyone involved, and to my family and friends who supported me.

And of course, my greatest thanks to you, dear reader, for reading this far!
Thank you!

Yukiya Murasaki

Congrats on releasing volume 3,
and thank you for purchasing it!

Somebody
once told me
they had a hard time
imagining me
ever drawing in
a chibi style, so
I tried giving
it a go. Looks
like I've still got
much to learn...

Clatisse
this time :p



Ohimeur

Yukiya Murasaki-san,
Editor Wada-san,
many thanks for your work.
I had a lot of fun drawing
this time as well.

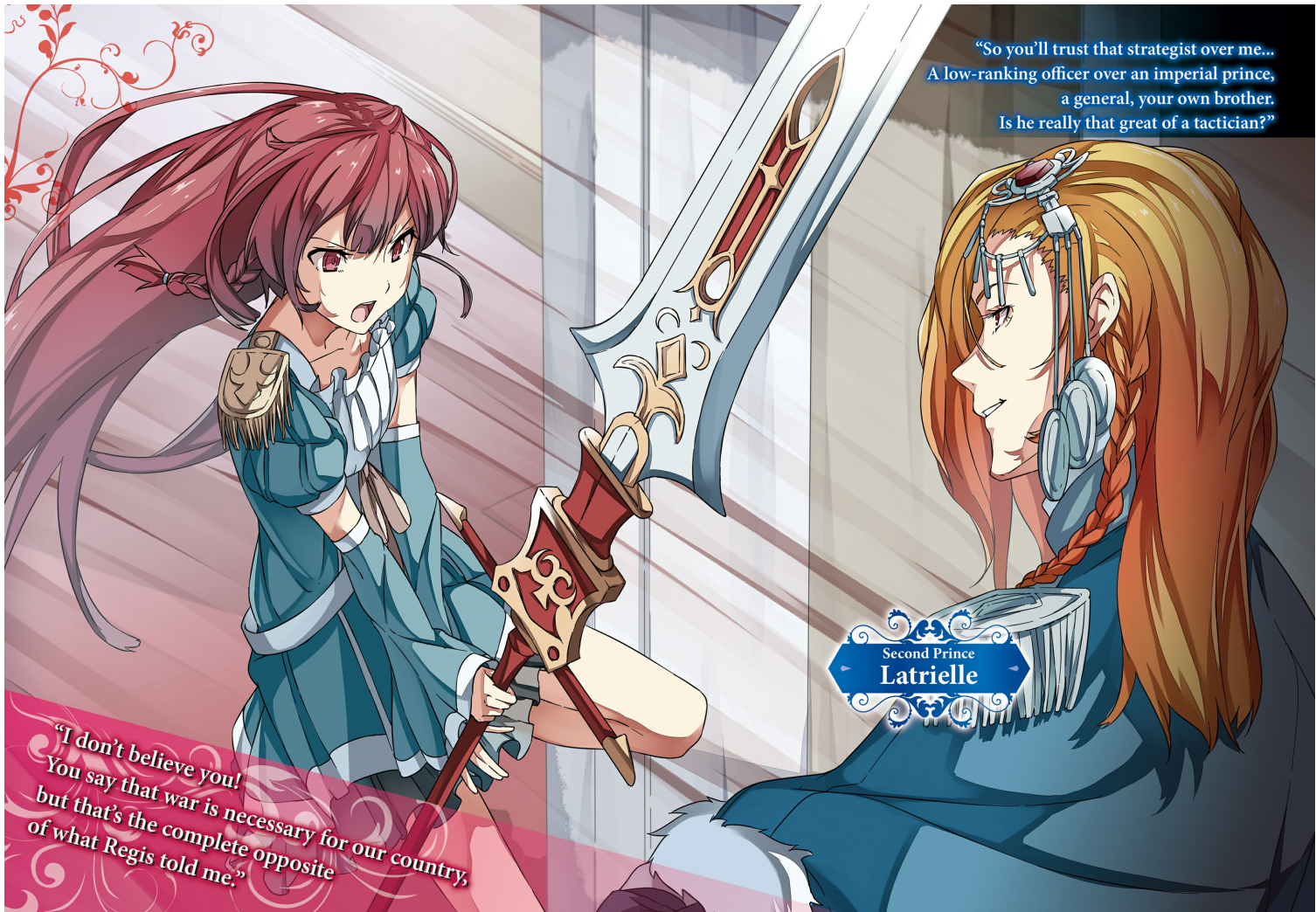


Beautiful New Knight
Eric

Whimsical Maid
Clarisse

Sword-Wielding Princess
Altina

Bibliophagic Tactician
Regis



“So you’ll trust that strategist over me...
A low-ranking officer over an imperial prince,
a general, your own brother.
Is he really that great of a tactician?”

Second Prince
Latrielle

“I don’t believe you!
You say that war is necessary for our country,
but that’s the complete opposite
of what Regis told me.”



First Prince
Auguste

“Ahem...
The Gaillarte
Garden Party...
is counting on
First Prince
Auguste to
become
the next
emperor.”

“Now this is a troublesome
development, wouldn’t you agree?
Just listen to them, Sir Regis.
They haven’t even familiarized themselves
with our basic rules of etiquette.
What a noisy bunch they are.”

“I shall become
the magnificent emperor
you so desire. If you would please
accompany me along
the way!”

Was this just a front?
Did Latrielle have
some kind of plan?

Vixen of the South
Elenore

Advisor to the Second Prince
Germain





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Altina the Sword Princess: Volume 3

by Yukiya Murasaki

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HAKEN NO KOUKI ALTINA Vol. 3

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Ebook edition 1.0: April 2020