

V

Author: Yukiya Murasaki

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ALINA

the Sword Princess

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Altina stepped in once again and sliced at Franziska.
She tended to develop serious tunnel vision when in battle,
and was thus completely unaware of everything
going on around her.



Inside the tent,
Clarisse prepared enough teacups for everyone,
placing them on the table without a word.
Now that there was an unfamiliar person around,
she had reverted to being like a clockwork doll.
Without even the slightest trace of a smile on her face,
she retreated to the wall the moment she
had finished her business.

**“It’s a pleasure
to make your
acquaintance,
Lady Marie Quatre!
I’m Vanessa Smith,
Regis’s older sister.”**



“I’m fine, Regis...
Please, do what you
think is best.”

He had almost lost his composure,
but Jerome’s pragmatism and Altina’s trust
had given him a much-needed push.
Regis took a deep breath.
Even when the wind carried the stench of death,
they would need to keep breathing to stay alive,
and to make sure that everyone else survived as well.





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.





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. When the real Auguste was assassinated, his younger sister Felicia stood in and assumed his identity. As of now, she has abandoned her claim to the throne and is living in Fort Volks with Eddie.





Eric Mickaël de Blanchard

A Belgian knight and the grandson of Everard. While serving in Marquis Thénézay's army, he was deeply impressed by Regis's command, and personally volunteered to be sent to the front lines to chase after the man he respected so much.

Jerome Jean de Beilschmidt

Revered as an accomplished general, he was driven to the border by those envious of his achievements. He had spent 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.





Heinrich Trois Bastian de Belgaria

Third prince of the Belgarian Empire. Detesting the very notion of getting involved in power struggles, he left Belgaria to study in High Britannia. Frustrated that his siblings were being handed treasured swords left and right, he may or may not have secretly made off with the Vite Espace Trois.

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.

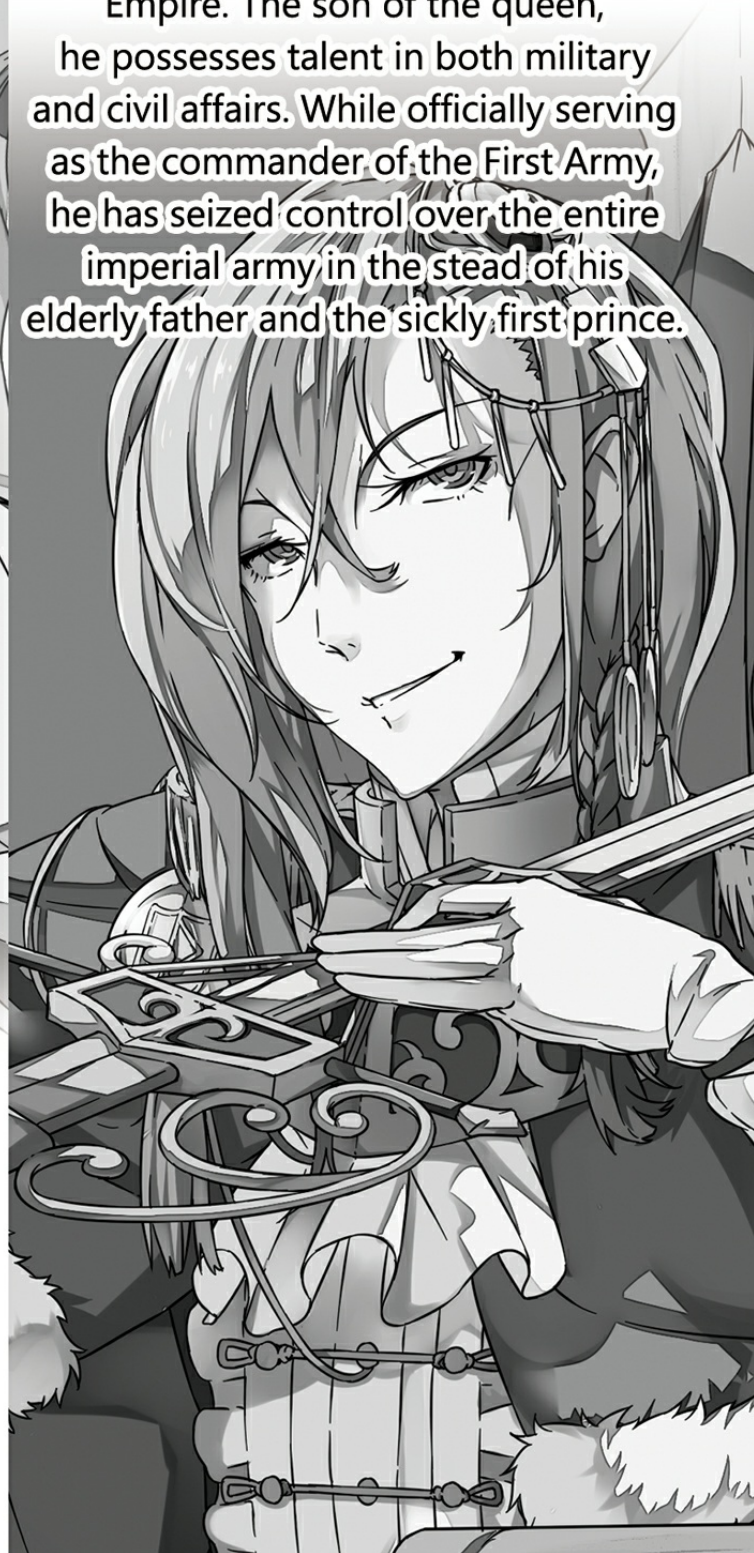




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The story so far—

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 was 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 between internal struggles for power, aspires for 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 sought 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! Taking

inspiration from a plan he had once read in a book, Regis successfully captures the enemy leader, Diethardt, and is able to form a cooperative relationship through negotiation.

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. 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.

Now using Fort Volks as her main base of operations, Altina receives another letter from Latrielle:

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," she proclaims, "Even if nothing but darkness awaits me there!"

And so Altina returns to La Branne, the imperial palace located in the capital, accompanied by Regis, who is nervous but also excited to witness the place where many a tale has been set.

But this was hardly the time to enjoy the sights and celebrations. Latrielle plots to absorb Altina and her growing number of supporters into his own camp, while First Prince Auguste enlarges his faction by allying with the *nouveau noblesse* to the south. Altina is fourth in line to the throne—she can't become empress without overcoming them both.

Regis is initially overwhelmed. That is, until he notices that Auguste is actually the late first prince's younger sister, Felicia, in disguise. Regis uses this fact to topple Latrielle's scheme to secure the throne, breaking through the stalemate and gaining the cooperation of the assertive Elenore Ailred Winn de Tirasolaverde—more commonly known as the Vixen of the South.

The result? Auguste—or at least, who everyone believes to be Auguste—rescinds his right as next in line to the throne, expressing his desire for Altina to take his place.

As tensions rise, Regis and Altina flee the capital on horseback, accompanied by Felicia (who is still posing as the first prince) and her protector, Eddie.

In a desperate attempt to regain control over the situation, Germain—Latrielle's tactician—sends the First Army's White Wolf Brigade to retrieve Auguste, hoping to expose his true identity and undermine his recommendation of Altina. But the plan backfires; Altina's army defeats the White Wolves, further cementing her as a viable candidate to take the throne.

Altina is now closer to her goal of becoming empress than ever before, but an even bigger issue soon arises...

In High Britannia, the death of the previous queen allows the war-supporting Margaret to take the throne, and on April 23rd the nation issues a declaration of war on Belgaria. Thanks to their steam engine and the newly developed cannons in their arsenal, High Britannia is able to one-sidedly pulverize the Belgarian forces stationed at Ciennbourg. A request for reinforcements is issued to Altina's border regiment, but before they can act, the Grand Duchy of Varden's forces reappear in an attempt to recover Fort Volks.

Regis advises a short and decisive battle.

“...I propose we end things tonight.”

Chapter 1: Cannon Fire at Midnight

Imperial Year 851, April 30th—

It happened a little before the noon bell rang. At Fort Volks, a mine that had been repurposed as a sturdy defensive base, a unit of wounded soldiers was carted into the front plaza. These new recruits had gone out to train only to fall victim to a surprise attack from Varden's vanguard. Their pained cries filled the square. So many were injured that it was quite clear night would fall before they could all receive medical treatment. Every able man would have to do his part.

But Regis had a different role to fill.

Fort Volks, command room—

White walls, lined with black pillars and beams—this stark, simple room had barely changed since it had been seized from Varden by Belgaria. A vase had been placed in one corner, and the flowers inside were regularly swapped out for fresh ones, but the refined scent of small red roses was now completely masked by the thick stench of blood; the clothes of everyone present had been stained while treating the wounded.

There was a large table in the center of the room, and the commander sitting in the furthest seat—Altina—let out a sigh. "Why did it have to come to this...?"



Across from her, Jerome slouched his large physique back into his chair. As a seasoned veteran and general, he was considerably calm, not even making an attempt to wipe the blood from his uniform. “Hmph... You won’t get anywhere if you get all depressed every time a few new recruits die,” he said.

“It doesn’t matter that only a few died, or that they were new recruits—we still lost our brothers-in-arms today.”

“Will a princess’s lament bring back the dead? Leave the grieving to their families. If you don’t want any more deaths, concentrate on what you *can* do.”

“Erk... I-I know, but...” It was a cruel thing to ask of the fourteen-year-old Altina, but she definitely needed to change her mindset.

Jerome furrowed his brow, shifting his gaze to her side. “And you too, Regis! How long are you gonna sit around looking all pale!?”

“R-Right... Sorry...”

Regis had participated in battle before and had seen wounded soldiers more times than he could count, but this was the first time he had lost troops to unanticipated circumstances since taking charge as Altina’s tactician. He thought he had been considering every possibility and acting appropriately, but now it was like the dead were condemning his ineptitude. As these thoughts ran through his mind, Regis felt a crushing pain in his chest, growing so intense that he struggled to even breathe.

Then, a firm hand gripped his shoulder; it belonged to Everard, who was sitting beside him. He was an old knight, over forty, characterized by his bald head and thick beard—a large, muscular man who was built like a bear. While he had originally been the regiment’s knight captain, he was now the head of its garrison. “Sir Regis, we are soldiers on the battlefield. We all came here knowing that we might die. This is not a burden for you to shoulder alone,” he said.

“...Thank you. It’s okay, I’m fine.” Regis couldn’t afford not to be. A lapse of concentration would lead to even more deaths; he couldn’t keep hanging his head, fixing his gaze on the contours in the wood grain. Instead, he steadied his breath, looking up and taking in the command room around him.

Altina was seated to his left. She was always overflowing with energy and beautiful enough to cause a stir in the imperial court, but now even she was wearing a pensive expression.

Beside her was her guard officer, Eric. He was a young sixteen-year-old knight who was somewhat lacking in combat experience—or at least, that was the conclusion that Regis had come to. After seeing the injured, Eric had turned just as pale as Regis.

Another seat down was Sir Eddie. He was the young head of the Balzac House, which was widely heralded for its expert swordsmanship, but as he had put it himself: “I’m just not good at the whole killing thing. I’m pretty great when it comes to the close combat stuff though, so how about you put me to good use?”

His sword skills were apparently exceptional, even in a country like Belgaria that was already teeming with seasoned fighters. To Regis, this couldn’t be any more reassuring.

And then there was First Prince Auguste, who, for a particular reason, had relinquished his succession rights before His Majesty the Emperor. This request was granted, meaning he was no longer a candidate for the throne. In reality, however, the person that almost everyone knew as Auguste was actually his younger sister, Princess Felicia, in disguise. The only ones in the fortress who knew were the seven presently in the command room and two special maids.

Were it ever discovered that Auguste was a fraud, then not only would his expression of support for Altina have the opposite effect, Felicia would be sent to the gallows for the heavy sin of deceiving the emperor. To prevent this from happening, she continued to wear Auguste’s clothes and was now taking an extended stay at Fort Volks as a guest of honor.

At present, she was despondent, and heavy shadows were cast across her face. She was usually a rather unaspiring young girl, but right now she was especially listless. “...Do you think my mother’s... all right?” she muttered.

“I’m sure she’s fine. The House of Touranne has its own forces, and the Empire’s Second Army is stationed in the west as well,” Eddie mindfully replied.

Felicia was the daughter of the emperor and his second consort, Catherine.

The territory of Duke Touranne, which was where Felicia's mother called home, was located in the west, precisely where a neighboring country was currently invading. According to the information they had received at Fort Volks, the port city of Ciennbourg on the western coast had fallen seven days ago on April 23rd following an enemy bombardment that very same morning.

The enemy commanded a steamboat from the Queendom of High Britannia, which was equipped with the Type-41 Elswick Cannon—a scaled-up model of what had already been the greatest cannon in the world, improving on both accuracy and output. In contrast, the Belgarian Empire only had sailboats, meaning that any naval battles would be hopeless.

The enemy army had only sent a ten-thousand-man vanguard, but they would undoubtedly send more. It had been on the afternoon of the 23rd that the Empire's Second Army marched to intercept the invaders, and seven days had passed since. Had the battle already been decided?

I can only hope we were able to fight them back, but...

Regis conjectured that a crushing defeat was inevitable: the Empire's Second Army was not prepared to engage foreign powers. It was mainly stationed in the west for political purposes, and its numbers didn't even reach ten thousand. Meanwhile, High Britannia had prepared the latest firearms and cannons, and was using armor made of a new, stronger alloy.

Belgaria's soldiers were veterans—the *crème de la crème*—but only when it came to using spears and bows. The new firearms they were up against would be the greatest hurdle by far... but Regis deliberately cut that train of thought there.

"The west not only has the Second Army, but is also receiving reinforcements from all over the Empire. We've even received an order to mobilize on the northern border. The nearer units should have arrived by now." Regis offered what was ultimately an empty consolation, but what else could he say?

"...Yeah." Felicia nodded.

In Belgaria, it was the emperor who held supreme power over the armed forces. However, as the current emperor, Liam XV, was too old to even reach the front lines, command over the entire Belgarian Army had been passed over

to Second Prince Latrielle, the commander of the First Army. He was the one who had ordered the border regiment to send half of their troops to the western front.

Regis went over the situation once again: “While the Belgarian Empire is known for waging wars on all fronts, a large majority of these are just skirmishes centered around a single stronghold. This time, High Britannia has invaded having prepared for large-scale war. They have a clear intent to capture our territory, or at the very least, that’s what General Latrielle has determined. I share his opinion.”

Altina nodded, and everyone in the room remained silent, motionlessly hearing out his words.

“...Fort Volks is considerably detached from the western battlefield; there’s no guarantee that we’ll make it in time even if we do send out reinforcements. That’s why Latrielle is calling us in as reserves. Strategically speaking, there’s no real need for us to hurry.”

“And if you weren’t speaking strategically?” Altina asked, tilting her head as she prompted Regis to continue his explanation.

“From a political perspective, there is a pressing need for us to hurry. You and Latrielle are caught up in a struggle for power, after all.”

“I see. So whoever performs the best against the invading High Britannian Army will gather the most support.”

“In a nutshell. I don’t know whether half of our regiment would be able to achieve anything great enough to change the course of this war, but... we need to avoid the disaster we’ll inevitably face if we don’t show up at all.”

Altina appeared conflicted. “I see, I see... I agree that we need to get there as fast as possible, but politics? That isn’t the problem here! If our allies need help, then I want to do whatever I can!”

“...Right.”

Altina could be described as virtuous to a fault, and while that made her as straightforward as an infant at times, this unwavering determination was precisely why Regis wanted her to become empress.

“Whatever our reasons, that summarizes the High Britannian situation on the western front. Now onto the army from Varden closing in on our fort: it will be hard for us to dispatch a battalion to the west without doing something about them.”

“Yes, we can hardly be expected to concentrate on an expedition when we have to keep worrying about our backs.”

It wasn't only Altina—Jerome piped up as well. “Like hell we're leaving them be! We'll make them regret not having learned their place! They dared to challenge us, and they'll damn well wish they hadn't when they're lying in their coffins!” He had always been rough around the edges, but it was rare to see him display such intense anger. Despite having moments ago declared that the new recruits weren't worth his concern, he truly did seem to care about his men. He was surely seething inside.

Regis had already selected a number of applicable plans from the books he had read in the past; all that remained was to gather the information required to choose the appropriate strategy. Given that they were now in the middle of a war, the door to the command room had been left wide open. A lone soldier suddenly appeared in the doorway, saluted, and then raised his voice.

“Report! Enemy approaching the b4 area! Three thousand foot soldiers!”

“...So that's the route they're taking. Are they armed with the latest guns and cannons?”

“Not all of them, but some soldiers do have guns!”

He was immediately followed by two more soldiers.

“Enemy spotted in the b3 area! Two thousand foot soldiers!”

“Message in! Two thousand enemy troops in the g5 area! They're hauling the latest cannons along too!”

Information was gradually coming in from those who had been sent out to scout. Upon receiving each report, Regis placed a yellow piece over a map on the desk to signify where the enemy army was.

Altina's expression clouded over. “That sure is a lot. And aren't they

surrounding us?”

“They must have scraped together as many mercenaries as they could. I believe that’s why many of them don’t have guns; mercenaries only use the weapons they’re most accustomed to.”

“But experienced mercenaries are still a formidable threat.”

“Yes, but the more experienced they are, the quicker they’ll be to flee a losing battle. Don’t worry, we’ll have this finished tonight.”

“I know we need to hurry, but do you really...” For a moment, a look of uncertainty crossed Altina’s face, but she quickly shook her head and looked straight at Regis, newfound resolve in her eyes. “Okay! I believe in you, Regis! So tell me, what do you want us to do?”

“Let’s hear this plan of yours, Regis,” Jerome declared, standing from his seat. “I’ll tell you now, though: I won’t permit showing the enemy a shred of mercy. We’ll crush them so thoroughly that Varden will never even consider invading us again!”

Everard stuck out his chest. “The soldiers have trained for this day. Feel free to use them as you see fit!”

“And I’ll definitely protect the princess!” Eric added, leaning forward in anticipation.

Regis noticed that Eddie and Felicia were looking over at him as well. He couldn’t help but wince whenever he became the center of attention; he had to do something about this despair-inducing lack of self-confidence. But all that aside, he already had all of the information he needed to decide on a plan.

Regis touched his finger to the map on the table. “The enemy is bringing the newest cannons, so they must be under the mistaken assumption that these will help them capture our fortress.”

Altina raised her hand. “Regis, as I recall, this fortress should also have the latest cannons, right?”

“It might be hard to tell the difference, but the cannons here are Type-38 Elswicks, whereas the ones Varden have are the latest Type-41s. These have an

advantage over the Type-38s, both in firepower and accuracy.”

“Then doesn’t Varden have the upper hand?”

“...In the aforementioned aspects, yes. But those new-model cannons are also a weakness we can exploit.”

A quizzical look crossed Altina’s face, and the others seemed just as confused. If the cannons at Fort Volks were inferior to those being used by their enemy, how could that be seen as an opportunity?

Regis continued his explanation: “The Type-41 is powerful, but designed to be used on steamboats; transporting it across land is a very slow process. If we put our recon reports together, we can discern that Varden’s forces will regroup at our fortress come nightfall... meaning we have time to prepare. This is a large point in our favor. I’m certain the enemy army is relying on their Type-41s, so if we can show that the cannons aren’t as superior as they think, they should lose their confidence and retreat.”

“I understand how we can use the slow transport times to our advantage, but... under what circumstances is having newer cannons not an advantage? How could we outdo them?” A contemplative scowl creased Altina’s brow, a clear sign that she didn’t understand what Regis meant. But this expression did not take from her beauty—in fact, it even carried a sort of charm.

“Another underhanded scheme!” Jerome exclaimed, slamming his fist onto the table. “The enemy’s cannons are far superior, and yet you mean to shake their superiority? What do you think you can do!?”

“It’s a plan that will only work at night. The construction team is already making headway. Sir Jerome, please take command of the pursuit team.”

Altina suddenly closed in. “I’m going out, too!”

“Pardon me, Princess, but staying in the fortress would definitely—”

“If I act cowardly here, I’ll lose the trust I worked so hard to gain. A commander who hides in her base is no commander at all!”

“Hm...” Altina did have a point: For most of the soldiers who had joined after the occupation, this would be their first operation under Altina. These were

men who had not seen her defeat Jerome, and no matter how many tales of her accomplishments they heard from the other soldiers, the new hands would undoubtedly grow to respect him more upon seeing his prowess on the battlefield. It would be tough to maintain organization if support for the commander grew too thin. "...It just had to be a night battle of all things."

"Regis, a dangerous battle is all the more reason for me to lead the charge!"

"I... Sure, why not. I guess you— Err, no, I mean, I shall respect the princess's esteemed opinion." On her request, Regis usually called the princess "Altina" and treated her as a close friend. A large majority of those present were aware of this fact... but not the elderly knight Everard, who spoke of Altina as a goddess and worshiped her as such.

Altina was definitely attractive, and her pale, slender build carried unimaginable physical might. It was no mystery why the sight of the beautiful young princess swinging around the giant sword known across the Empire inspired divine mystique in the hearts of all those who respected the martial arts. Regis did not even want to imagine the kind of mess he could end up in by speaking to Altina in such a familiar manner in front of her devout adherent Everard. Plus, there was no telling when the next recon report might come in, and if a misunderstanding about their relationship spread among the troops, it would no doubt have a negative impact on morale. Regis was a tactician, but that didn't change the fact that he was still a commoner, and Altina an imperial princess.

"...Very well, Princess... I'll station you here at the main camp." Regis placed a red-colored piece onto the map, outside of Fort Volks. They would intentionally leave the safety of the fortress, risking danger in the hope of settling the matter quickly.



“Are you really all right with this, Princess?” Regis asked, making doubly sure.

Altina clenched her fist. “I am! We’ll fight Varden back tonight, and then it’s off to the west!”



It was a moonless night. The ground almost seemed to shake as Varden’s forces approached; they were still some distance away, but the sound of clattering footsteps was unmistakably clear. They deliberately stayed out of range of Fort Volks’s cannons, setting up camp by the outer edge of the forest. This was practically the same location from which Regis had captured the fortress two months prior.

However, during that attack, Regis only had two thousand soldiers to work with, and the cannons in their possession were small, old, and cheap. From what he could piece together from his recon reports, Varden’s army numbered twenty thousand, and they had prepared twenty Type-41 Elswicks. Only the first wave had arrived so far, but they already numbered four thousand. To say this was a sizable army would be an understatement.

10 arpents (715 m) away, hidden in the forest depths, Regis’s unit stifled their breaths. They were few in number—only two hundred strong—meaning they would be all too easily surrounded and annihilated if spotted by the enemy. Not that this mattered, though: if their attempted ambush was discovered, the plan would fail regardless. For this reason, increasing the number of soldiers only made their mission more dangerous; it was optimum to send only the minimum necessary personnel.

As usual, Regis had taken inspiration from a book. He had studied the situation closely on paper, but the fear of experiencing it first-hand was something else entirely. He felt overwhelmed, like a blade was being held to his neck, and despite how cold it was outside, his hands remained coated in a sticky layer of sweat. In the northern regions, the night air was frigid even as April came to a close. Regis found his sole salvation in the forest, where the trees blocked the wind.

Altina was beside him, her eyes closed, and her body completely still as she waited.

“.....”

A sword taller than she was, the *Grand Tonnerre Quatre*, hung at her hip. As one of the seven swords fashioned by *L’Empereur Flamme*, the first emperor of the Belgarian Empire, it was 26 palms (192 cm) in length, and its glimmering silver blade was tucked into a wide sheath.

The plan had yet to begin. The figure across from Altina was supposed to be Eric, but his features had already melted into the darkness, so much so that Regis could only make out a faint silhouette. That was simply how dark it got on nights when there was no moon.

Eddie was tagging along as a guard, but if everything went as planned, then he would not need to do anything at all. Meanwhile, Felicia had stayed behind in the fortress, unable to hold her own in battle. Altina, Latrielle, and Bastian all possessed superhuman physical prowess, but Felicia had never been blessed with such strength; she was no different from a normal girl.

Everard was commanding the garrison and had been tasked with defending the fortress. While he was far safer in this position than those in the ambush squad, he held an important role in the operation nonetheless.

And then there was the division being led by Jerome. While they were only five hundred men strong, each soldier was a battle-hardened elite, and they had concealed themselves as close to the enemy as they thought possible.

But there was another team who were stationed even closer—so close that they could hear the enemy breathe. A single wrong move would lead to them being discovered, and the entire plan falling apart. They were practically walking on a tightrope, and Regis found himself growing anxious that each breath—each heartbeat—might alert their foe.

Is it time yet? He pulled out a pocket watch; there was no moon out, but under the gentle twinkle of the stars, he could just barely make out what it said. He was depending on the faint rays streaming in through the leaves to read the hands.

“...Now.”

A thunderous roar tore through the silence as the cannons lining Fort Volk’s

outer wall burst into life, one after another. This caused an uproar among the enemy officers: half were surprised, while the other half simply sneered, certain that there was no way the shells would reach. They had once occupied Fort Volks, so they knew first-hand that the cannons stationed there were outdated; at this distance, no shot would ever reach them, no matter how many were fired. At most, one might land just beyond the edge of their formation.

In the darkness, Regis was convinced of victory. Another loud explosion filled the air, coming not from the midway point between the two forces as one might expect, but from the forest behind Varden's main camp. As a huge flaming pillar shot up into the sky, the enemy soldiers immediately understood what had happened—despite the cannons at Fort Volks not having the range to reach them, their shots were somehow reaching the forest behind them.

The shots from the fortress continued. Next, an explosion erupted in the enemy army's right wing. In no time at all, the camp was in a panic, and hysteric screams in Germanian could be heard among the chaos.

«Commander, it's the cannons! The cannons in the fortress! We're in range!»

«That can't be! There's no way the Type-38 can shoot that far!»

«B-But look!»

There was another explosion behind them, even closer than the first one. Given the circumstances, the experienced mercenaries were not going to wait for orders—if they were in range of cannon fire, their only options were to charge forward or to run, and unless there was an explicit order to charge, their natural response would be to fall back. The enemy forces had previously taken on a crescent formation, and now a number of mercenaries were scrambling to escape.

Perhaps the commander suspected that such long-range bombardments were impossible, but Regis had no way to know for sure. Either way, it was irrelevant—a commander's intellect meant nothing when their soldiers were in a panic. No matter how capable a commander was, it was difficult to unify an army that had already started to rout. The cannons that should never have reached were upon them, so taking distance seemed like the most obvious move. Troops would retreat back into the forest to hide from the shells, and the best way the

enemy commander could prevent them from dispersing entirely was by ordering them to retreat.

«Pull back! Retreat deeper into the forest!»

«We've received the order to retreat! All troops, fall back!»

The most loyal of soldiers, who had waited for the commander's orders, raced into the forest as though being set free.

Another volley of fire came from Fort Volks, and a series of explosions went off along the outer edge of the forest. The soldiers likely assumed they would be out of range as long as they could get beyond that point, but the black beast lurked in their path—a ferocious animal who was now on the loose.

Raising a manly cry, the general leading five hundred elites, the hero Jerome, swung his longsword. It was true that they were heavily outnumbered, but a large portion of Varden's soldiers were simply rank and file troops, many of whom had already panicked and started fleeing through the night. They hadn't even considered that the imperial army might already be lurking in the forest behind them.

In a matter of moments, the battle had become one-sided. The Beilschmidt border regiment, led by Jerome, had wrapped white cloth around their sword hands; before moving to attack, their sword stances would show the raised cloth. Whistles were also used to confirm where others were, and thanks to these, the regiment could recognize its own soldiers in the night, both maintaining organization and avoiding striking down comrades.

In contrast, the Grand Duchy of Varden had arrived foreseeing a drawn-out battle, and had not prepared for night warfare. It would be cruel to call the enemy commander incompetent—after employing great numbers of expensive mercenaries, it would not be realistic to spend the additional time and money to prepare for a battle that was not likely to happen.

Even more pillars of fire seemed to erupt from the ground, making the forest more visible. Now that they were able to see, the enemy began its counterattack, but the majority of their soldiers had already retreated. Having been ambushed seemingly out of nowhere, the scattered troops didn't want to risk sticking around in case they were left behind.

“Looks like it’s going well so far, Regis,” Altina said, still visibly tense.

“Yeah... Just have the cannons fire blanks, and the construction team set off explosions near the enemy’s camp.”

“No doubt they’ll think they’re in artillery range.”

“They’d easily be able to notice the gunpowder pouches if it weren’t so dark out.”

Just then, a soldier arrived at Regis’s main camp to deliver a report. “Varden’s main force is moving north-west!”

“Yes, just as the book said. If a single commander is unifying the enemy army, then their movements usually become hard to read. However, when these troops are in a panic, a large majority will come together in one homogenized, simple direction.”

These soldiers fleeing of their own volition would almost certainly run toward the border to Varden; this was basic human psychology. When one’s life was in danger, they had a tendency to head in the general direction of where they lived, or otherwise run the same way as everyone else.

Regis had stationed separate ambushes in their path, and, facing attack upon attack, the enemy troops were rapidly killed or captured. It seemed that Varden had fallen under the delusion that they were surrounded by countless imperial soldiers.

Their formation continued to crumble.



Even though they were on the enemy side, Regis personally wanted to let the fleeing soldiers go free. However, not only would the Beilschmidt border regiment be dispatching half of its troops westward early the next morning, both Altina and Jerome would have to join the expedition; the fortress would be short-handed, so Regis needed some large military gains to make sure Varden could not attack again anytime soon. He understood this, but still couldn’t help but sigh.

“Hah... I’ve always been terrible at pursuing.”

“I’m not fond of attacking retreating foes either. I have to say though, something has been bugging me for a while now—aren’t we stationed a little far away from the action?”

There were some who had sensed the impending ambush, and purposely broken formation to run in the complete opposite direction. Thanks to this, there were occasional skirmishes breaking out at the main camp, but nothing serious enough to warrant Altina getting involved.

“...Does it really matter? Even if you were to join the fight, we’re in the middle of a forest in the dead of the night. The other soldiers aren’t going to see.”

“Err, Regis? Don’t tell me you stationed me here knowing this would happen?”

“You don’t just recklessly move your king onto front ranks. That much is common sense,” Regis replied, speaking softly enough that her guards wouldn’t be able to hear. But Altina clearly didn’t take it well.

“I was tricked again! Regis tricked me!”

“I wouldn’t say I went that far.”

“Liar.”

“I stationed you outside the fortress, just as you asked. You’re still on the battlefield, you know; don’t let your guard down too much. There’s no guarantee that something won’t happen.”

“...!!” Altina’s eyes shot open, and she drew the large regalia hanging from her hip. Its new scabbard had been open the whole time, allowing the weapon to be unsheathed at a moment’s notice. There was a quick glimmer of silver, and Regis was sadly, mercilessly beheaded for his crimes—or at least, that was what he thought was about to happen. Instead, the sword grazed the tip of his nose, then immediately sailed past him. There was a sudden metallic *clang*, and then something fell at Regis’s feet. It was an arrow.

«Phwoo!» A cheerful whistle came from high up in the nearby trees, completely out of place on a bloody battlefield. Moments later, a person climbed down from the treetops as nimbly as a monkey. It was... a child? That was Regis’s first thought, given their small build.

«Not bad at all! I'd taken you by surprise *and* it's really dark out, so I never imagined you'd strike my arrow down!» The voice clearly belonged to a woman, and she spoke in Germanian.

Altina readied her sword, replying in Belgarian: "I'd hardly call that taking me by surprise—you just attacked me head-on! And no matter how dark it gets, it doesn't take long for my eyes to adjust."

Regis had been outside for just as long as Altina, but he couldn't feel his eyes adjusting to the darkness, nor had he been able to notice the arrow flying toward them... Either she was especially skilled, or he was particularly hopeless. It was likely a combination of both.

Their opponent sauntered out from the shadows. Her features were illuminated by the starlight, and it quickly became apparent that she was holding a small crossbow and had a quiver of arrows on her back. She was clearly a young woman, though her attitude was so bold and fearless that this was hard to believe; her perfect composure didn't so much as waver as Altina's heavily-armored guards drew their swords.

«Ahahahah! Belgaria's got quite an interesting princess!»

"You're pretty calm for someone in the middle of an enemy camp."

«Of course I am! I mean, there's no way I'm going to lose!»

The girl swept aside her hair, part of which was tied into two low ponytails, and then flashed a cheerful grin. Was this a bluff, or was she really that confident? A silver necklace dangled around her neck, and under the meager starlight, the glint of metal could barely be made out as a fox suspended upside-down. Regis immediately recalled something he had once seen in a book.

"Wait, are you with Renard Pendu!?"

She looked at him curiously. «You sure know your stuff. Or does my reputation precede me?»

"What's that supposed to mean!?" Altina exclaimed, struggling to follow what was going on.

"They're a mercenary brigade who have accomplished a great deal in the

Germanian Federation. Up until now, they were only taking part in the civil wars up north...”

«We’re not really fixated on civil wars or anything. Since the Belgarian warfront was stagnant, the pay wasn’t worth the effort. But the work is just flying in now that you lot have taken our fortress. So yeah, I’m here to kill your princess and make it big!»

“You fool! That’s what they call selling the bearskin before you’ve killed the bear.”

«Ahahahah! My big brother scolds me all the time, saying that it’s always too early to claim it’s a good day. Are you trying to be my brother?»

“I don’t even know your brother!”

«Well you should! His name’s Gilbert, and he’s super-duper cool!»

It was a name famous enough for Regis to recognize: Gilbert Schweinzeberg was the captain of the mercenary brigade known as Renard Pendu, and had earned himself the moniker of “Mercenary King.” He was undefeated in both one-on-one and group combat, and even excelled when it came to negotiations. As far as rumors went, he was a large one-eyed man who fought using a trident.

“He’s your brother? Does that make you the younger sister, Jessica?”

«Oh no, that’s my big sis. I’m the second sister, Franziska. And whoa, you really do know your stuff. Are you a fan? Do you want to shake my hand? Ahaha!»

Despite her playful laugh, Franziska had already nocked an arrow and was aiming her crossbow. It was a model that used short arrows and favored rapid fire over power, and the string could be drawn simply by pulling a lever at the crossbow’s base.

Altina darted forward before it could be fired, yelling “I won’t lose to a crossbow at this distance!” Despite having a number of heavily armored guards at her disposal, she had decided to charge in alone. Perhaps she was in dire need of a lecture on what guards were for.

Altina thrust her treasured sword straight out, aiming for Franziska, when—

“There are more enemies in the trees!” Regis cried.

While Franziska had been the only one to come down from the tree, they couldn’t ignore the possibility that she had comrades lying in wait. The best course of action would be to act with that in mind—after all, maybe Franziska was simply acting as bait to lure them out.

As expected, a second arrow came down from above. Altina forcefully pulled back her sword mid-thrust, using the flat of her blade to block it. Another arrow shot toward Regis, but moments before it could make contact, Eric stepped in and knocked it away using his shield.

“Are you all right, Mr. Regis!?”

“You saved me there, Eric. Please help the princess!”

“Got it!”

A number of Altina’s guards were injured in the sudden barrage of arrows from the trees. It was hard to block projectiles fired from such close range, especially in the dark of night. However, despite their situation, no one seemed inclined to retreat and leave the commander behind.

“Return fire! Return fire!” Eric yelled. “Protect the princess, and show them how strong the Empire really is!”

“GRAAAAAAH!!” The guards let out a determined roar in response.

Altina stepped in once again and sliced at Franziska. She tended to develop serious tunnel vision when in battle, and was thus completely unaware of everything going on around her. The princess let out a thunderous cry as her sword came down...

“HYAAAAAAH!!”

«Whoa there.»

...But her attack was easily dodged. Franziska was fearsomely fast; while Altina’s swings were relatively slow, one had to move back a considerable distance to avoid her sword’s reach. Dodging was not as easy as it seemed, especially in a dark forest.

«You’ve got some bite to you! Coming here was a good move for sure—I got

to play with a fun opponent, and once I kill Belgaria's princess, I'll be swimming in gold!»

“Over my dead body!” Altina shouted, swinging her sword once again. But as Franziska dodged to the side, Eric thrust his sword in her path.

“Hah!”

«What's this!? Don't get in my way!» Franziska exclaimed, throwing herself onto the ground to avoid the attack. In this very same motion, she released the bolt nocked in her crossbow.

“Erk!”

For a moment, Eric stopped moving entirely. Regis could feel the sweat trickling down his back, overcome with shame, while Altina, who had seen the attack up close, called the young knight's name. But before Eric could offer any response, he had collapsed onto the ground.

“Someone! Get over here!” Regis cried.

The soldiers who raced over to help were once again met with a volley of arrows from up above. One landed right at Regis's feet, and he hurried behind a nearby tree trunk for cover—sustaining an injury here would just make him a hindrance. Were the archers in the trees relying on sound and the dim starlight to aim their shots? They were from a famous mercenary brigade to be sure, having amassed considerable talent.

However, Belgaria's soldiers were not so weak as to be one-sidedly taken out. They returned fire, sending a few dozen arrows into the treetops where the enemy presumably lay. A second later, a number of weak cries could be heard, and three enemy attackers immediately fell from above. More were soon to follow. The poor visibility made it impossible to tell whether that had been all of them, but whatever the case, this afforded Altina's soldiers enough time to reach Eric.

Please be alive... Regis could do nothing but pray.

Altina continued her battle against Franziska. The two remained in such close quarters that nobody on either side dared to aim their gun or bow in case they hit the wrong target. What's more, with Altina waving such a large sword

around, any rash attempts to approach would lead to even ally soldiers being cut down.

“How dare you!”

«Too slow!»

Franziska lowered her stance to evade a horizontal swipe. It would usually be impossible to counterattack from such an awkward position, forcing her onto the defensive, but her weapon was a small crossbow—at the pull of a trigger, she could send out an arrow faster than the thrust of the finest knight.

«I’ve got my bearskin!» She fired an iron crossbow bolt, which was essentially just a giant needle. Its point encroached on Altina’s right eye.

“Like hell you do!” Altina ducked her head to the side, narrowly avoiding a point-blank arrow to the face. Her fiery red hair flowed behind her, standing out against the dark forest backdrop.

«You’ve got to be kidding me!»

“I’ve got you now!” Even though it was designed to prioritize firing speed, the crossbow was useless unless loaded and drawn.

«Kuh...» Franziska stepped back, ready to flee. Knowing that there was no risk of a counterattack, Altina was able to charge forward without hesitation. She swung her sword, its glistening silver blade drawing a large arc through the air before encroaching on Franziska’s torso. But right before it reached skin, her opponent disappeared into the sky.

«Ahahahah!»

“What!?”

Keeping ahold of her crossbow in her left hand, Franziska had used her right to snatch the branch of a nearby tree. Then, she had flung her body up into the air to avoid the blade. It was no different from a bird soaring up into the sky to escape.

The powerful attack from the royal sword cut straight into the tree’s trunk, and Altina’s expression warped. “Argh!!” In most cases, striking a tree with a sword would either lead to the wielder’s hands getting injured from the recoil,

or the blade cutting too deep to be retrieved.

Having been hanging by her right arm, Franziska leapt down and spun through the air. In that time, the lever had been pulled. The moment she hit the ground, she slammed in another arrow from the quiver on her back.

«Ahahahah! It's always a good day for me!»

Altina frantically tugged at her sword, eventually managing to slice through the trunk and wrench her blade from its wooden prison. As it came free, the weapon let off an ominously dull *clunk*. She thought she had drawn it from the trunk, but that wasn't quite the case... Her regalia, the treasured *Grand Tonnerre Quatre*, had bent near the hilt. The darkness made it hard to make out what exactly was wrong, but the blade was clearly dangling at an irregular angle, its tip dragging along the ground.

The emperor's sword... had broken?

"N-No way..." Altina's eyes opened wide, and there was a clear sense of dismay in her voice.

Not one to let such an opportunity slip by, Franziska unleashed another bolt at the princess. Regis was certain his heart was about to stop, when a man clad in black suddenly stepped in.

It was Eddie Fabio de Balzac—a tall man with broad shoulders, wearing a black military uniform beneath a tattered robe. Using *L'Empereur Flamme's* seventh sword, the *Défendre Sept*—a wide, rather bizarre-looking blade with comb-like notches along its spine—he had knocked the flying arrow out of the air.



“Hey now, Argentina, are you playing around?”

“I-I’m not!”

“But weren’t you almost killed there?”

“Urk...”

As childhood friends, the words they exchanged were casually playful.

Now standing between Altina and Franziska, Eddie turned to face his foe and readied his sword. Franziska had already loaded her next arrow, but refrained from firing it; sensing that she was up against someone of considerable skill, she didn’t want to attack carelessly.

«And... who are you supposed to be!?»

“I am Duke Balzac. If you’re a mercenary, maybe you’ve heard the name?”

«Hm. So you’re the Dull-Blade Duke.»

“That’s one way to put it.”

While Eddie was lauded for his excellent swordsmanship, word had spread that he would never attack another human on the battlefield. This had led to him earning quite the shameful moniker.

«So, what, you’re scared to fight to the death? What a laugh!»

“Well... not exactly.”

«I have to kill that princess. Out of my way!»

Franziska suddenly closed the distance. Her weapon was a long-ranged crossbow, so no one had expected her to actually charge her opponent; Eddie quickly swiped his sword horizontally to force her back, but she simply dropped down to avoid it. Her aim was already set behind him, locking onto Altina who had nothing but a broken weapon. Surely there was nothing the princess could do to block an attack.

«I’m back, bearskin!»

“Erk!”

A metallic *twang* echoed out as Franziska pulled the trigger. Altina winced,

trying to brace herself... but no arrow came.

«What now!?!»

Franziska looked at her crossbow in shock, only to see that its bowstring had been severed. Their exchange just moments ago flashed through her mind—that was the only time it could have sustained damage.

«Y-You...!?!» She hurriedly moved back, glaring at Eddie.

“Sorry about that. That’s a dangerous weapon you’ve got there, so I took the liberty of putting it out of action.”

«No way! I thought you were supposed to be the Dull-Blade Duke... What gives!?!»

“I think you’ve misunderstood... I refuse to injure others not because I’m scared of dying myself, but because I don’t want to kill anyone.”

«Wh-What’s up with that!? Are you mocking me or something!?!» Franziska grit her teeth; she was so worked up that she had turned completely red in the face.

Seeing that the enemy could no longer use her weapon, the armored Belgian infantry scrambled to close in on her.

“Take her down!”

“Surround her! Don’t let her get away!”

«*Scheiße!!*»

The soldiers were quickly cutting off Franziska’s means of escape. She kicked off of the ground, evading their sword swipes as fluidly as if she had done this a thousand times before. Engaging in close combat armed with nothing but a crossbow meant she had to dodge each incoming attack without using a sword or shield—it wasn’t something any normal person could accomplish.

A few swift movements later, she had slipped through the encirclement. Had their encounter taken place during the day, she could have easily been sniped down as she ran... but they were in the middle of a forest at night, so she immediately melted away into the darkness.

The Belgian soldiers aimlessly fired a few arrows into the trees, hoping to strike her by chance, but all that returned was Franziska's spiteful voice.

«I'll get you next time, princess! And your little Duke Balzac, too!» The words echoing through the forest sounded like a witch's curse.

Eddie sheathed his sword. "If possible, I would rather not meet you again."

Regis ordered the troops to move at once; the enemy now knew where their main camp was located. Once he had ensured that they were on their way, he raced over to Eric, who was already undergoing treatment.



Fort Volks, infirmary—

A white coat, glasses, and short, evenly-cut hair—the person before them was both a woman and a doctor, which was a rare sight in the Empire.

"It'll leave a scar," she said.

"...I'm... alive?" Eric muttered, gazing up at the ceiling. A sheet of white cloth had been hung around the bed he was on, acting as a curtain to separate him from the other injured soldiers; the lady doctor must have taken his unique circumstances into consideration.



As a mere fifth-grade combat officer, Eric was still considered a junior officer—under normal circumstances, he would have been treated at a field hospital consisting of no more than a tarp spread across the ground.

Several layers of cloth had been wrapped around his left shoulder, securing his upper arm to his torso. His fingertips were gradually starting to go numb, and while he could still move his arm from the elbow down, he couldn't help but feel a bit like a stone statue.

Back in the forest, he had been too slow in raising his shield. Franziska's arrow had pierced his left shoulder, but just a little more to the right and it would have gone through his heart.

The doctor had already gone to see the patient in the next bed over. "You're lucky we won the battle, otherwise we wouldn't have been able to treat you in time. You probably would have died."

"...We won the battle...? Does that mean the princess...?"

"She's somewhat depressed, but managed to walk away with little more than a scratch," the doctor replied through the curtain.

"Is that so... That's good news... It truly is..." Eric breathed a sigh of relief; as her guard officer, that was all he could have hoped for.

"Sir Everard wasn't the only one who came to visit—the princess and tactician came to see you as well. I'd already heard about your body, so I drove them out when it was time to treat you. Want me to tell them you're awake?"

"...No. They'll be departing west in the morning. It looks like I won't be able to join them... There is no need to waste their valuable time on a good-for-nothing."

"Hey now... 'Good-for-nothing' is... Well, it's your choice." The doctor held her tongue, choosing to abstain from the lecture she was about to give and instead focus on treating the patient in the next bed over.

Eric held his right hand over his eyes and clenched his teeth, then pulled the blanket up over his face. Tears began to well up in his eyes, and he was overcome by a deep pain not related to his injuries.

“Snff... Uuu...”

Perhaps the lady doctor could hear him—if so, she was pretending not to notice and simply continuing her work.

Some time later, Eric’s attention was caught by the doctor’s voice. He could hear her speaking to someone beyond the curtain.

“Mn, what’s this? How nice of you to visit, Tactician.”

“I see you’re working hard,” a male voice responded. It was Regis.

Eric could feel his entire body tense up. He hadn’t been able to serve as the princess’s shield. What sort of a guard officer did that make him? *He must be terribly disappointed in me*, he thought, too nervous to even poke his head out from beneath the covers. Instead, he just lay there, cowering in place.

“What are you here for?” the lady doctor asked Regis.

“The sun’s starting to rise, so we should get ready to depart.”

“Oh, it’s that time already? Sorry you had to come and get me. Are you sure you don’t need to sleep?”

“Lack of sleep shouldn’t be an issue for our troops: aside from the princess and Sir Jerome, the unit going on this expedition is composed of soldiers who did not participate in last night’s battle. Though I am sorry that we’re leaving before you’ve had a chance to sleep.”

“You’re the one I’m worried about, Tactician. I can always sleep in the carriage on the way there.”

“Hah... Well, I’ll be in the carriage too.”

“Oh right, of course.”

“How is Eric doing?”

Upon hearing Regis mention his name, Eric swallowed hard. There was a short pause before the lady doctor replied: “Seems like he’s still asleep.”

“...I see.”

“I wouldn’t advise bringing him along—it’ll be about a month before his

wound heals, and another month before he regains his strength.”

“Yeah, I thought as much. I just wanted to give him my thanks.”

“Your thanks? He charged the enemy only to end up getting shot—is that not what happened?”

“Before he was injured, he protected me. Had he not been there, I’d be the one on that bed right now.”

“I see. The fact that you don’t wear armor makes me think you’d be in a casket instead.”

“Urk... Perhaps.”

“That’d mean less work for me, though.”

“H-Haha... Well, I’d rather not give more work to the priest either...”

“Why don’t you at least put on some light armor?”

“No, I can’t do that. If the troops see their tactician wearing armor, they’ll assume that we’re expecting the enemy to come for the main camp and start worrying. It gives off the impression that I have no confidence in my plan.”

“What’s the real reason?”

“...Truth be told, I can barely even stand up when I’m wearing armor.”

“Just how feeble are you!?”

“Haha, err... In any case, I came to thank Eric. I don’t think it’s major enough to warrant waking him up though, so maybe I’ll leave him a letter?”

“Why not just wait until you’ve returned from the expedition? I think this is something you should say to him in person.”

“I see... Then that’s what I’ll do. Well then, Doctor, when you’re ready to depart, please come to the plaza on the first floor.”

“Yes, I know.”

At that, the two bid each other goodbye, and the sound of Regis’s footsteps grew quieter and quieter. A short while passed before the lady doctor opened the curtain around Eric’s bed. A sob immediately escaped his lips.

“Waah...”

“Hey, some people see what really matters. Don’t get too down.”

“Snff... Yeah...”

“I have to accompany the princess, so I’ll leave the rest to my assistant. You are to listen to their instructions, and get better before the tactician returns.” This time, when she spoke, her voice was unusually kind.

“Kh... I... I want to get stronger... I want to... be more useful...” Eric wept.

But the lady doctor said nothing in response, instead just placing her hand on Eric’s head and gently tousling his hair.

Chapter 2: The Sister of a Bibliophage

It was early in the morning when the Beilschmidt border regiment departed from Fort Volks to answer the request for reinforcements, and residual heat from the battle mere hours ago still lingered in the air. While Regis was seated in a carriage, the commander, Altina, was riding a chestnut horse. Both its mane and tail were golden, and its left hind leg was white from the knee down—it was the burly, intelligent steed that Altina had been gifted on her last visit to the capital.

Now that I think about it, did she ever give it a name? Regis wondered.

Walking beside Altina was the black horse belonging to Jerome, the former commander of the border regiment who now led the five hundred horsemen of the Black Knight Brigade as knight captain. In their current expedition, these horsemen served as the vanguard. They were followed by one thousand foot soldiers, two thousand mercenaries, and five hundred personnel specialized in logistics. They had deliberately refrained from bringing artillery as they had a long journey ahead and speed was the priority, not to mention that their cannons wouldn't stand a chance against High Britannia's. That was what Regis had concluded.

At the center of the foot soldiers was a beautiful white box-shaped carriage drawn by four horses. It was large enough to accommodate six people, with each seat facing toward the middle—it was essentially a command room on wheels. At the moment, only Regis and Clarisse were inside.

They were heading to the warzone, but there was still plenty of imperial territory to cross. It was a drearily peaceful passage. Outside the window, the rocky cliffs of Fort Volks glistened under the morning light.

Clarisse ran her finger down the glass of the window; the cold air outside caused a white mist to form around wherever she touched. Glass was a luxury item, and for this reason the military tended to favor simple, canopied carriages. And yet, by a twist of fate, they were currently riding in a carriage

that had six windows in total. The glass panels were fixed in place by wooden frames, which allowed them to be removed and stowed away during wartime. Not only would this prevent them from shattering, but it would allow orders and reports to carry through the openings. The cabman's perch, however, was still outside.

This was the latest model of luxury carriage—one that a simple border regiment would never normally be able to afford. It had arrived the week before and was personally addressed to Regis from a rising noble in the south. That noble was Elenore Ailred Winn de Tirasio Laverde—the granddaughter of a duke and a burgeoning young woman who was for all intents and purposes the actual head of her house. She owned vast tracts of land, and was a wealthy merchant who made money from large-scale plantations and other specialty products native to her region.

The last time she and Regis had met was during a ceremony to commemorate the day Belgaria had been founded, at which she had very nearly caused her own demise. It was only thanks to Regis's scheme that she had been saved, and as a show of appreciation, she had given the regiment financial support—as well as a new, luxurious carriage.

She's very generous, that's for sure... That was the impression that Regis got.

"This is my first time riding alone in a carriage with you, Mr. Regis," Clarisse muttered, watching as Fort Volks gradually disappeared over the horizon.

"Yeah. We had Altina, Eric, and the guards with us last time."

Her cheeks flushed ever so slightly. "It's a little embarrassing being alone with you..."

"Y-You think so?" Regis produced a book from his leather satchel, quickly using it to conceal his odd sense of elation. This earned him a rather surprised look from Clarisse.

"You're going to read even in a situation like this, Mr. Regis?"

"...Yes. This is a book about the west, you see, and I figured this would be my last opportunity to read it."

"Perhaps you're right. After all, we're going to war—there's plenty we should

look into before we arrive.”

“Well, I don’t really know how useful it would be when it comes to battle... It’s a supernatural thriller based on an old western legend.”

“Is that so?”

“It’s a story about a group of young boys and girls whose souls end up being swapped, all caused by an unknown— Oh, since we’re stuck here, why not give it a read? We have a long journey ahead of us.”

“If I may be so bold as to ask, did you eat breakfast this morning, Mr. Regis?”

“Me? No... I barely even slept, so it doesn’t really feel like morning to me.”

“Then how about you get some rest instead of reading?”

“I’m all right. When I’m really in need of sleep, I’m the sort who will automatically shut down. I’ve fallen asleep walking down the stairs before... Right, that one was particularly dangerous.”

“That doesn’t sound all right to me. What if you become unwell along the way? I’ll prepare something simple for you to eat, so at least have some breakfast.”

“Mn... When my stomach’s full, I usually get a strong urge to sleep.”

“In that case, you really should get some rest.”

“But I finally have some time to read my books... It feels like such a waste to sleep it away.”

“.....” Clarisse fell silent, a smile still plastered across her face.

How peculiar, Regis thought. Her expression was so gentle, and yet for some reason he could feel a chill run down his spine.

Clarisse picked up the basket down by her feet, placed it on her lap, and opened the lid. There was bread, dried meat, and sliced fruit inside. Even as she passed them over, she did so without a word, all the while wearing that simple yet sickly-sweet smile. Ignoring her to continue reading his book was a move that required more courage than Regis could muster.

“I-In that case... I’ll eat a little.”

“Oh dear. If you don’t want to eat, then there’s no need to force yourself.”

“...I do want something to eat.”

“Fufufu. Is that so?”

Regis reached into the basket and pulled out a bread roll. The bread made in other countries was usually soft, but in Belgaria it always had an especially hard crust, so crisp that it would make a loud *crackle* when split. This unique texture was apparently due to the particular species of wheat and processing methods used in Belgaria.

“I’ve heard you can get the flour to make soft bread in the west,” Regis blurted out.

“Yes, it’s preferred by those in the imperial court.”

“I imagine that’s because most of the old nobles are from the west. I just hope the day comes when commoners can choose to have soft bread as well.”

“Oh, that sounds rather exciting.”

“...But for now, we should be thankful we have any bread to eat.”

“We had an excellent harvest last year, so the price of wheat has gone down. Let’s pray that it continues for another year.”

“You know, Professor Boutter once wrote a book called *Southern Reform*. According to his research, a bad harvest that leads to a thirty percent reduction in crop yield will apparently lead to a hundred thousand imperials dying of starvation. I do think it’s an exaggeration, but considering the worsening state of public order, I can’t just write it off as a joke.”

“I don’t know a thing about politics.”

“I’d say you’re on the more knowledgeable side, Ms. Clarisse.” Being able to immediately pick up on the political undertones of what Regis had said required a moderate grasp of politics. Having finished his bread, Regis bit into a piece of dried meat. It was nicely salted and fairly tasty. “Speaking of which, Ms. Clarisse—have you always been a maid in the imperial court?”

“Yes. My mother and my grandmother were maids as well.”

“What about your father?”

Clarisse stayed silent for a moment, and then her cheeks flushed again. “Oh my, would you like to meet him? We are due to pass through the capital, after all. But do you have that much time to spare? Oh, but Mr. Regis, I didn’t bring my good clothes... How embarrassing...”

“Err... Unfortunately, we do not plan on stopping at the capital.”

“Fufu, what a shame. My father is a commoner and a soldier; when he met my mother, he was a guard at the palace.”

“A spot of romance in the royal palace, eh?”

“When my mother caught my father trying to sneak some food that was due to be served at a banquet, she marched up to him in a huff and demanded that he marry her or else she’d call the other guards.”

“I’m sorry, I’ve never read that one before.”

“Fufu. I’m only joking.”

“...Which part of that was a joke?”

“The parts from when I said: ‘It’s a little embarrassing being alone with you.’”

“So almost everything!?”

Clarisse started to giggle uncontrollably. She seemed to be laughing a lot more than usual today. “Mr. Regis, it’s quite amusing that you actually tolerate talking to me.”

“Do other people not?”

“Well... they get fed up, and usually angry.”

“There are plenty of people who can’t take a joke, but in your case, I’d say it’s because you tease too much.”

“Yes, that’s why I only tease you now.”

“Oh, I see... What about Altina?”

“A maid teasing a princess? I would never do something so impudent.”

“...Eh?” *But it’s not impudent to hold and stroke her like a cat? ...Well,*

whatever.

Regis stifled a yawn; a nice meal and some friendly conversation had proven even more effective than counting sheep. Meanwhile, Clarisse began to sing soothingly.

“Fais dodo~♪ Fais dodo~♪”



It was a lullaby—one that a sister would sing to lull her little brother to sleep. By the time Regis realized it, things were already panning out exactly as Clarisse wanted: he had eaten breakfast and was moments away from falling fast asleep.

But that's not so bad... Regis thought as he sank back into the seat of the shaky carriage. When he eventually woke up, the convoy had already stopped for its third break.



Imperial Year 851, May 15th—

Led by Altina, the Beilschmidt border regiment marched through the rain, passing right by the imperial palace. There was little need for them to stop; both Second Prince Latrielle and the Empire's First Army were absent, having already set off toward the west, and in an exceptionally rare display, the emperor himself had personally ordered their dispatch. Surely the civilians sensed that this war with High Britannia was completely unlike any of the skirmishes they were used to. Under such circumstances, it was imperative that the border regiment leave a good impression on the already uneasy citizens. They intended to demonstrate their haste by continuing west without stopping to enjoy the luxuries of the capital, but the army still required rest and replenishment. For this reason, they headed for the nearby city of Rouenne, setting up camp on the southern outskirts of town.

It was five in the afternoon, and preparations for supper were beginning here and there around camp. A large tent had been set up to be used as headquarters, the entrance of which was guarded by heavily armored foot soldiers. Regis was, as of yet, still rather unaccustomed to their gallant, rousing salutes. Inside the main tent, the simple lack of wind and rain did wonders to alleviate the biting cold.

Stripping away her damp outer robe, Altina stretched out like a cat. "Haah, that was tiring!"

"Splendid work, Princess," Clarisse said, pouring the princess a cup of tea to

accompany the biscuits she had already set out on a small platter.

“Thank you! Would you care for some tea, Regis?”

“It smells delightful; I would love some.”

“Two straight weeks on the road really is harsh. And if I’m finding things this bad on horseback, I’m sure the foot soldiers have it even worse.”

“Right... On such a long expedition, we’ll be run ragged before we’ve even reached the battlefield. We really must take care to time the confrontation just right.”

Regis sat down in a chair and spread a map over the conference table. All of these furnishings could easily be disassembled, and were being carted around in the same wagon as the tent. Meanwhile, Altina was busy removing the armor covering her chest and shoulders. A number of its straps were hard to reach, and so she required Clarisse’s assistance.

The three of them were the only ones present in the room.

“...Come to think of it, where’s Sir Jerome?” Regis asked.

“He said he’d be swinging his spear around till dinner. Given how long he’s had to sit still, I’m sure his body was just aching to move.”

“Ah. Did you not want to train as well?”

“Well, my sword is, err... a tad broken...”

Altina glanced toward the center of the tent, where her blade lay at rest in a large casket-like box. Regis silently nodded.

As the border regiment fought back the Grand Duchy of Varden’s vanguard, the *Grand Tonnerre Quatre* had been damaged in the midst of a battle against Franziska from the mercenary brigade Renard Pendu. As the symbol of the regiment, it had been brought on the expedition anyway, but was otherwise unusable in combat. In its place, Altina now carried a normal longsword, but she could not muster the motivation to bring it out into the rain for training. Her spirits had been down ever since she had lost her trusty blade.

Regis spread out a note beside the map, immediately catching Altina’s eye.

“What’s that?”

“Orders from General Latrielle. I received them not too long ago. He says that we must, and I quote, ‘Stay in Rouenne, and meet up with the Empire’s Seventh Army on the 16th.’”

“Oh, the Seventh Army is coming?”

“So it seems.”

The Seventh Army was primarily focused on the war on the eastern front. There, battles were often waged in the forests and mountains, so there were barely any cavalry among their ranks. At twenty thousand men strong, they were mainly composed of infantry soldiers.

“They’re going to join us?”

“Yeah... He said he wants me to act as a strategy officer. Lieutenant General Bargesonne is getting on in years, and his soldiers aren’t accustomed to fighting on the open plains.”

“Sir Bargesonne? Can’t say I’m too fond of him...”

“Oh really?”

“Well, we’ve met at court parties once or twice, and... y’know...” She let out a light sigh. Whether it stemmed from her gender or her lineage was hard to say, but he evidently held some form of prejudice against her. This wasn’t a rare find among Belgarian nobles.

“...We are only a few days from the battlefield. We should be able to cooperate well enough since we have a common foe.”

“Let’s hope so.”

Both in history and legend, there were plenty of cases one could point to where internal conflicts had caused an army to lose a crucial battle. Regis had a feeling that he would have to conduct himself carefully, so as to avoid becoming yet another example.

It was around this time that some sort of ruckus could be heard brewing outside the tent. “Pardon, sir!” a guard called from outside, “There is a civilian demanding an audience.”

“Really? What sort of civilian? We’ve already met the city’s representative...”

They had discussed matters with Rouenne’s mayor before setting up camp, and both the merchant and mercenary guilds had been present. Normally, they would expect a visit from the feudal lord as well, but the city was in the territory under the emperor’s direct control.

As Regis pondered who it could possibly be, he received a rather hesitant report.

“Well, about that... They’ve specifically asked to meet with you, Tactician.”

“Me? A merchant with a deal, perhaps? We have enough supplies, and it’s getting dark out... Tell them to leave a name and we’ll handle matters tomorrow.”

But no sooner had Regis given the order than a woman’s voice came from outside the tent. “Is that Reggie I hear!?”

“Huh!?”

“Get out here this instant, Reggie! Don’t act like you don’t know who I am! If you even try something like that, you’d best believe I’m going to turn out the lights!”

A familiar voice, paired with an abnormal threat. “D-Don’t tell me...”

“If you don’t hurry up, I’ll start divulging every last bit of your embarrassing past! Still not coming? Right, so our story begins in the springtime during Reggie’s twelfth year. Just imagine—a boy who would be going to military academy the very next summer, and there he was—!”

“Waah!” Without a moment’s hesitation, Regis threw open the tent’s entrance flap and raced outside. “Wh-Why, if it isn’t my sister! What a pleasure to see you!”

“‘Sister’...? Regis’s sister?” Altina and Clarisse exchanged a look.

“He did say she married a blacksmith in Rouenne.”



There was a single woman standing outside the tent, and despite being

surrounded by four heavily armored soldiers, she didn't seem the slightest bit shaken. She was wearing a formal, well-tailored dress and a scarf over her dark-greenish hair. As for whether or not she bore any resemblance to Regis, their similarities went no further than the color of their hair and the shape of their ears—in fact, the neighborhood they had grown up in had come to know them as “the siblings as similar as a tigress and turtle.”

This former tigress, now the wife of a blacksmith, smiled from ear to ear as she waved both hands. “Oh my, Reggie! It really is you! What a welcome surprise!”



Regis immediately slumped over, feeling as though the full weight of the fifteen-day journey had been placed on his shoulders all at once. “Really now... We’d be in a right mess if you’d had the wrong guy.”

“Ahahaha! There’s no way I’d ever mistake your voice, Reggie! It’s your fault for taking so long.”

“Err... This is the regiment’s main camp... where the most important member of our unit is protected by four thousand soldiers. I’m pretty certain it’s not the kind of place a civilian can just prance into willy-nilly...”

“Then you should have come to us! Why, when I heard that Lady Marie Quatre’s army was coming to Rouenne and you’d be with them, I waited and waited for you to drop by. And then, guess what? I don’t see head nor tail of you! So I had no choice but to come and see you myself. So, how are you going to make this up to me!?”

“This is my fault!?”

“Well of course.”

“Hah... You’re right; it *is* my fault. Ah, Princess!?”

Having overheard the ruckus outside, Altina marched through the tent flaps. She had only just taken off her armor, leaving her in her loungewear. “What are you doing, Regis?”

“M-My apologies! I’ll be back inside at once.”

“Idiot,” she muttered, before turning to Regis’s sister. “If you’re family to our strategist, then consider yourself our guest.”

“I wouldn’t really— Mmph!?” Regis went to speak, but his sister quickly clapped a hand over his mouth to silence him, then pushed him away and closed in on Altina.

“Kyaah!? Marie Quatre!? In the flesh!? Oh, you’ve done so, so much for our little Reggie here!”

What are the guards doing!? Regis screamed on the inside, though he couldn’t blame them for being so taken aback. His sister had the bold temperament of a mother raised in the countryside, and now that the princess

was treating her as a guest, the soldiers on guard made no further attempts to detain her.

Altina casually beckoned her into the tent. “Please come in, Sister. I’d love to hear everything you’ve got to say.”

“Oh, dear me, then I suppose I’ll just go right ahead.”

“Especially when it comes to Regis’s past escapades.”

“But of course! I have enough stories to last us till morning!”

“Stop!” Regis yelled, but his protest fell on deaf ears. He considered running away, but knew deep down that doing so would make the whole ordeal all the more terrifying. So Regis reluctantly tagged along, having no other choice in the matter.

Inside the tent, Clarisse prepared enough teacups for everyone, placing them on the table without a word. Now that there was an unfamiliar person around, she had reverted to being like a clockwork doll. Without even the slightest trace of a smile on her face, she retreated to the wall the moment she had finished her business.

As the remaining three sat around the conference table, Regis’s sister reverently lowered her head. “It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Lady Marie Quatre! I’m Vanessa Smith, Regis’s older sister. I can’t thank you enough for taking my little brother under your wing.”

“The pleasure’s all mine. And there’s no need to worry—Regis is always saving me.”

Vanessa immediately waved her hand, dismissing the notion entirely. “Oh, no need to prop him up! ‘Saving’ is a pretty strong word.”

“But it’s true.”

“I pray to the Goddess every single day, showing her my appreciation that the military hasn’t yet sacked little Reggie here.”

“I’m just as perplexed as you are,” Regis interjected. “Back at the academy, I never actually thought I’d be able to earn a salary in the army.”

The siblings' gazes grew distant as they reminisced over a sour past, but Altina simply shrugged. "I've got to admit, he's no good when it comes to swords or horses, but it takes more than that to run an army. I trust in Regis as much as he trusts in me."

"...We did make a promise."

As Regis and Altina exchanged a pleasant smile, Vanessa looked as astonished as a fish that had just been hoisted onto dry land. "To think... someone actually places their trust in our Reggie..."

"Sis? I'm not going to be a child forever."

"Impossible! This is the kid who very nearly starved to death because he spent three straight days and nights reading in the study!"

"Hahaha... That part hasn't changed, but..."

"And when nudity was so much as mentioned in a book, he'd run off and hide, or continue reading with one eye closed like that actually made a difference!"

"I-I-I did no such thing!"

"He even called himself 'the Legendary—'"

"Riiight, so, you said you were here to see me! Did you come by to make sure I was doing okay? Well, I was doing just fine! Yes—*was*!" Regis made sure to emphasize that he was speaking in the past tense. Right now, he was practically exhausted.

Vanessa made an expression suggesting she had fallen into deep thought, before eventually clapping her hands together. "Right, right! Seeing Reggie was only partly the reason I came here."

"So you're here for something else?"

Vanessa's eyes flitted around the tent. "Where is it?"

"Where's what?"

Vanessa raised and then lowered her hands, trying to draw some sort of shape in the air, before eventually saying, "The sword! Marie Quatre's sword! I

hear it got seriously mangled.”

“Erk!” Altina let out a sudden groan and hung her head, one hand clasping her chest.

That reaction was more than enough for Vanessa to understand. “Oh, dear me, Marie Quatre... did it really break?” she inquired.

“Yes... somewhat.”

“Like a ‘*snap!*’ Just like that?”

“I-It’s not that bad! Just a bit, uh... At the hilt... It’s sort of...” Altina attempted to draw a shape as well, but her attempts amounted to little more than vague gestures. Even so, Vanessa responded with heated fervor.

“So the sword is bent at the hilt? In that case...” Her expression had undergone a complete change from just moments ago when she had been deep in thought. This was no longer a sister teasing her brother; she now had the aura of a merchant engaging in negotiations.

Given Belgaria’s strong patriarchal tendencies, a woman was seldom involved in her husband’s occupation—especially when her husband was a skilled craftsman. However, that was only true for normal women, and this hardy sister was brimming with far too much spontaneity to be bound by societal norms.

“Where did you learn about the princess’s sword?” Regis asked her.

“Secret.”

“...I see. On a side note, and this has absolutely nothing to do with what we were talking about, but... I happen to be the person in charge of this regiment’s finances. Any business negotiations will have to go through me.”

Vanessa’s eyes shot open wide, and she took an unsteady step back. “I never knew I’d raised a kid who would threaten his own sister!”

“Don’t just play the sister card when it’s convenient to you. If you have something to say about the *Grand Tonnerre Quatre*, I’ll hear you out. But before that, where did you find out that it was broken? I’d really like to know.”

“...Well, since it’s a request from my dear brother... I guess it doesn’t really

matter if I tell you. But don't expect any big surprises, okay? The story's gotten pretty famous among mercenaries. That's how it reached this town, at least."

"I see, so that's what happened. You reckon Renard Pendu spread that rumor themselves?" Regis asked.

"That's what I'm thinking," his sister replied.

Altina turned to Regis, the chagrin visible on her face: "Khh... But it's none of their business!"

"It was bound to happen," Regis said frankly. "Mercenaries have to do everything they can to get their name out there, as this allows them to secure more lucrative contracts."

"In that case, we should've hired them ourselves."

"That wouldn't have been feasible; they're based in Germania, and even if we rule out that Franziska girl, hiring the entirety of Renard Pendu definitely isn't within our budget. Mercenary King Gilbert alone is known as the most expensive man on the continent."

"Grr..."

As this exchange went on, Vanessa stood up from her seat and approached the coffin-like case in the center of the tent. It seemed that she had already figured things out. "It's in here, isn't it, Reggie?"

"...Princess, would it be all right if we show her?"

"I don't know what you're hoping to do with it, but go ahead. It's not like I've got anything to lose by showing you."

"Thank you so much, Marie Quatre!" Vanessa responded, placing her hands together in a show of gratitude before opening the box. Regis had considered offering to help her as its lid was heavy and considerably sturdy, but this had quickly proven unnecessary. He was beginning to feel that she had gotten even stronger in the three years since she had been married.

"Oh dear, it really is bent!"

"Yes, the rumors were true. Satisfied?" Altina asked with a sigh, only for Vanessa to shake her head.

“I have yet to make my proposition, O noble Marie Quatre! For you see, this town houses the best blacksmith in the empire—nay, the continent! The world, even! Won’t you consider entrusting your sword to him!?”

“Hm? A blacksmith?”

“Yes! My husband, Enzo Bardot Smith, owns a large workshop in Rouenne.”

“Right...” Altina hesitantly turned her eyes to the sword. “Come to think of it, I do remember hearing about that...”

Regis had been expecting this, and so wasn’t the least bit surprised. This wasn’t something he could decide for Altina, though; all he could do was patiently await her response.

“So you’re telling me... he can repair my sword?” she asked, making sure she had understood.

“Of course he can!” Vanessa declared, firmly nodding her head. But given how abruptly the proposition had come up, Altina seemed hesitant to make a decision.

“Regis, what do you think?”

“Let’s see... Under normal circumstances, the Empire’s treasured swords would be entrusted to a craftsman of considerable merit. But unfortunately, the highly skilled ones are all in the pocket of some high noble or another.”

While Altina had gained noble supporters who could presumably introduce her to an accomplished blacksmith, none had any connections to workshops situated near Fort Volks on the furthest border. Using a blacksmith located anywhere else would require them to correspond via letters. Then, assuming the response was positive, they would have to transport the sword over to the workshop for repairs, only to continue negotiations once it was done. The whole process would take months.

That said, this level of precaution was more than necessary—a treasured sword handed down from the days of the first emperor held tremendous historic value, so shoddy repairs were unforgivable. But above all else, this was a sword that Altina entrusted her life to. Regis had considered it boorish for him to weigh in on such a personal matter unprompted, but now that Altina was

asking for his advice, he could say precisely what was on his mind.

“...I think that you should have the sword repaired as soon as possible. However, Princess, you must be the one to decide who you can entrust the task to. Not only would inadequate repairs put your life at risk on the battlefield, but you would have to shoulder the blame if something happened to His Majesty’s heirloom.”

“So you’re saying the problem is whether or not I can trust him... and that my fate is on the line here.”

“That’s right. Please ignore the fact that he is my brother-in-law and consider things objectively.”

“Well, I won’t know whether I can trust him unless I meet him! Regis, we won’t be leaving Rouenne until noon tomorrow, right?”

“If all goes according to plan.”

They would be meeting the Seventh Army at noon—that much was certain. The only variable was their enemy. Regis had sent out numerous scouts to gather information, as the regiment would need to adjust their preparations depending on how quickly the enemy was advancing. That being said, the High Britannian Army was also transporting cannons, so it was hard to believe that they would be able to travel much faster than expected.

Altina rose from her seat. “Then we’ll go there tonight! Come on, let’s get a move on!”

“Eeh!?” Vanessa was the only one to cry out in surprise. Regis merely sighed, having already predicted exactly what the princess would say.

“Princess, wouldn’t you usually call the blacksmith to you?”

“What a waste of time! If we’re going to ask him to work on it, we’ll have to take it to him anyway.”

“Then at least allow the soldiers to carry it for you.”

“Why? The least I can do is carry my own sword. In fact, it’d be shameful to have my subordinates carry it instead.”

“...I suppose.”

Bringing along carriers and enough guards to protect them would make for a sizable entourage, and putting on too much of a show would garner unnecessary attention. The last time Altina had come to the capital, they had purposely used a stagecoach to make her appear modest and frugal. As having her walk around accompanied by an excessive number of soldiers would only undermine that image, it was something that had to be avoided at all costs.

“...Very well, then,” Regis conceded. “But at the very least, bring along some guards.”

“Will do!”

“It’s at times like these that I wish Eric were here... He’s so unimposing; he’d be the perfect guard to accompany you into town.”

“You’re not wrong there.”

“Well, there’s no point bemoaning what happened. Ah, no, that’s a very rude way to put it... I suppose Sir Abidal-Evra did quite a good job last time, so how about we ask him to accompany us?”

“I’ll leave those arrangements to you. I’m going to wrap the sword in cloth; it’ll be a pain to carry around if we keep it in that box.”

That was when Clarisse, who had been silently standing by the wall this entire time, quietly called out, “Princess, shall I prepare your clothes?”

“Mn? Oh, you’re right; I can’t really go out dressed like this. I’m sorry to ask when you’ve only just removed it, but could you help me put my armor on?”

“Very well.”

Vanessa froze up, at a complete loss for words.

“What’s wrong, Sis? It’s rare to see you space out.”

“M-Marie Quatre’s coming to our place!?”

“Is that not what you were hoping for when you came here?”

“I mean, people normally call the blacksmith to them! Nobles even send for one over something as small as fixing a pair of scissors!”

“Well, I can’t argue there. Our princess is a bit of a strange one.”

“Ah, so that’s why you haven’t been sacked yet, Reggie!”

“...Yes, perhaps.” Rather than admit that he was Altina’s strategist, or that he was the regiment’s only administrative officer, Regis found it much easier to state that his continued employment was simply down to his quirky commander. No matter the circumstances, he always struggled when it came to self-confidence.

“I’ll be back soon.”

As Regis walked out into the drizzling rain, the four guards standing outside saw him off with crisp salutes.



Rouenne was situated half a day’s walk west from the imperial capital of Versailles. It was close enough that one could visit on a day trip by carriage, and felt somewhat more like an extension of the capital than a separate city. In this regard, some considered it a detached suburb, as while the capital was full of mansions owned by the rich and stores representing the Empire, Rouenne was a city of commoners dominated by housing complexes and street stalls.

The sun was beginning to set, and the rain meant that most stalls on the main road had packed up for the day. Altina paid no mind to the weather, however—she was wearing her usual clothes, covered only by the few pieces of armor she had deemed necessary. The treasured sword was slung over her shoulder—a blade so massive that it prevented her from wearing a standard raincoat on top, as one would usually do to keep their weapon dry.

Abidal-Evra and his ten-or-so men were also only wearing light armor, having reasoned that it would be unacceptable for the princess to brave the rain alone. Regis and Vanessa, on the other hand, had opted to wear rain gear, while Clarisse had stayed behind. Their group was composed of as few people as possible, allowing them to proceed down the main road without drawing too much attention to themselves.

“It looks like there are a few stalls that are still open, but they have barely any customers,” Altina said, curiously taking in her surroundings.

“Yes, the city streets are normally busy late into the night, but... everyone’s

scared. It's been over a decade since an enemy army has come this deep into our territory," Vanessa explained. She was walking beside Altina, acting as her guide through the city.

There was no denying that the Belgarian Empire was strong. War was common, and usually took place alongside negotiations before the Empire ultimately crushed their opposition with overwhelming might. For this reason, they were generally the ones venturing out into foreign lands.

There were times where Belgarian-occupied territory was taken back by other nations, but it was rare for invaders to come so close to the capital—so rare, in fact, that its neighboring cities had seldom had to pay attention to the movements of enemy armies at all.

Regis shrugged. "It's true that we've been invaded, but our enemy is still over 50 lieue (222 km) away. Even by carriage, it would take around three days to cover that kind of distance. We've mobilized close to one hundred thousand soldiers to fight them off; I don't think they'll make it to Rouenne."

"Yeah, hopefully not." Vanessa returned a shrug. Upon noticing that the gestures they had made were almost identical, Altina couldn't help but giggle to herself.

Before long, they had arrived at a workshop facing the main road. "Well, it certainly looks the part!" Altina exclaimed, appearing to have taken a liking to its storefront.

The building was made of brick, and a column of black smoke rose from the hefty smokestack atop its triangular roof; most standard households used but a single fireplace and so only had small chimneys, but the intense flames used in the workshop necessitated something much larger. The main entrance was a thick iron door—an uncommon sight, even for a workshop—above which hung a skillfully crafted metal sign reading "*Le forgeron d'Enzo Bardot Smith.*" The clatter of metal being struck could be heard on the other side, but rather than leading them in through the main entrance, Vanessa guided them to a side door.

"Thank you so much for making the trek, Lady Marie Quatre. We may not have much space to offer, but please, make yourself at home."

“Oh, is this where you bring customers?”

“No, this is our humble abode. The workshop is in no state to welcome royalty, so...”

“I’m not asking for a leather chair or a fancy glass table. Are you telling me that your workshop is so disorganized that I can’t even look inside?”

“Oh, no, not at all! ...But we may have to tidy up a little to accommodate so many people.”

“In that case, my guards shall wait outside. Our soldiers are not so feeble as to be bothered by a spot of rain.”

Abidal-Evra and his men saluted behind her and, moments later, were standing in a horizontal line outside the smithy, keeping a watchful eye on their surroundings. Regis noticed a curious child poke his head out the window to see what was going on, only to be hurriedly pulled back in by his mother.

We really weren’t supposed to stand out... he sighed.

Altina turned her gaze to the workshop. “I want to repair the emperor’s sword. If you mean to say that there is someone in there who is capable of doing that, I shall wait here until he is ready to see me. After all, I can’t make a decision unless I meet him.”

“N-No way! I can’t have a princess waiting in the rain!”

“I need a sword repaired, and you have a blacksmith here. Then is it not common courtesy for me to pay my respects?”

Because smithing was so labor-intensive, it was a job expected to be handled by commoners. However, Belgaria had been at war for so long that skilled smiths had become very valuable assets. Those who established enough of a reputation for themselves had a chance of being invited to a noble’s territory; here they would receive various benefits, such as exemption from tax or their own free workshop. Exceptionally well-made equipment was treated like fine art, consequently allowing it to be traded for exorbitant sums of money.

Enzo, however, had no major achievements, so his reputation was not very impressive at all. Vanessa’s confusion was understandable.

But Altina refused to move from the rain. “I can’t bring about change on my own. That’s why, whenever I think I need someone, I do everything I can to get them on my side. It may come to pass that I’ve misplaced my expectations, but having to sit and wait, not knowing for sure... That’s just as bad as being locked in a prison cell.”

Regis removed his hood, causing the water that had pooled over his head to run down his back. “...Sis, how about you just speak to Enzo? When the princess gets like this, not even a horse would be able to drag her away.”

“Hold on, Regis! You’re making me sound as stubborn as a plow ox.”

“Even an ox would move if offered the right bait.”

“Right. One moment, please!” Vanessa cried, before racing into the house. She had intended to use her brother’s connections to secure work negotiations, but had never expected to be given the chance to make a sales pitch to the princess herself. And now that very same princess had endured the rain to visit their humble workshop.

Altina’s assertiveness never fails to amaze me, Regis thought.

A few moments later, the sound of metal being struck stopped, and a commotion could be heard coming from inside. Then, the iron door that was the workshop’s main entrance swung open. Kneeling by the doorway, his head bowed in reverence, was a topless bear of a man who had a piece of cloth wrapped around his waist. His hair was cut short, his face was clean-shaven, and while he appeared to be somewhat overweight, it was clear that there was a great deal of muscle beneath his plump exterior. Regis hadn’t seen the man since his sister’s wedding, making this their first encounter in three years.

Vanessa was behind the man, standing to his right. “P-Please, come on in!” she stammered.

“Thank you.” Altina boldly marched in, showing no reservations despite this being the first time she had come here. Regis wondered whether he should attribute this fearlessness to her status as a royal.

The workshop was considerably vast; it was comparable in size to the senior officers’ dining hall at Fort Volks, which was large enough to accommodate

forty people at once. However, the various tools scattered about and the furnace in the back used to heat metal made the place feel a lot smaller, and despite it only being May, the inside was hot enough to make one instantly break out in a sweat.

There were about six young men in the workshop, all of whom wore thick aprons over their shirts. With their hammers and tongs still in hand, they stared nervously at the newcomers.

Standing next to Altina, Regis formed a sociable smile. “It’s been a while, brother-in-law. Princess, this is the blacksmith, Enzo Bardot Smith.”

Enzo’s lips bent into a strange, crooked shape as he was introduced. Perhaps it was intended to be a smile. Regis had purposely emphasized their familial relation to ease the mood as much as possible, but Altina remained the epitome of seriousness—so much so that she actually looked enraged.

In stark contrast, Enzo was frozen in place, his expression so anxious that one might assume he was unwell. “I-It is an honor to have you here today.”

“I hear you can fix my treasured sword.”

“...Might I see it?”

“Of course.”

As it turned out, one workbench wasn’t enough to hold the blade. On Enzo’s orders, his apprentices immediately pushed two together, allowing Altina to place the *Grand Tonnerre Quatre* on top. She had wrapped it in white cloth to conceal the bend and protect the sword from the rain, but now started to unravel it. Enzo and his apprentices gulped, completely transfixed. By the time Altina had completely removed the cloth, their eyes were wide open. Some even sighed longingly.

“How does it look?” Altina asked.

“...May I touch it?”

The moment the sword was in front of him, Enzo’s expression changed from that of a sick patient to the inquisitive glare of a craftsman. Altina nodded in response to his question, at which point Enzo delicately grabbed the sword by

its scabbard and raised it into the air.

This time, it was Altina whose eyes widened in shock; this man was lifting her sword using only one hand, picking it up by the scabbard as if handling a regular longsword before grasping the hilt with his other hand to draw the blade. Even in the Beilschmidt border regiment, there weren't many who possessed such incredible physical might. It seemed this man's impressive build wasn't just for show.

Having drawn the blade, Enzo studied it for a moment before placing it back on the workbench. The process had taken him longer than usual as the *Grand Tonnerre Quatre* was quite a bit longer than a normal longsword, but he had managed to handle it without any assistance.

"...It's heavy."

"It is."

"And the balance is completely off."

It was clear that nearly everyone wanted to gasp at that remark, but no one dared make a sound. Enzo's apprentices had turned pale. Criticizing one of the Empire's treasured swords before the royal family was no different than insulting the Empire itself; based on what he said next, it wouldn't have been strange if Enzo was charged for blasphemy. Even Abidal-Evra must have heard it from outside, as he was glaring into the workshop rather angrily.

"M-My humblest apologies! Our smith doesn't know how to choose his words!" Vanessa hurriedly interjected, but Altina merely raised her hand.

"I'm speaking with the blacksmith."

"A-Ah... Of course."

Altina leaned in toward Enzo. To those who didn't know her, she must have seemed furious. "Please, tell me what you mean," she said.

"The hilt is far too short for the blade, and the material being used here is far too brittle. This was presumably done to minimize the weight," he declared readily. "I'm surprised that something like this can be considered the emperor's regalia."

The atmosphere grew even more tense. Small cries escaped from the lips of Enzo's apprentices, and Abidal-Evra's face turned even redder, making it seem as though he would draw his sword at any moment. Meanwhile, Vanessa had gone so pale that she looked like she was on the verge of collapsing. Regis supported her by the shoulder, then whispered into her ear:

"...It'll be fine, Sis."

"Wha— Huh?"

Altina slammed a hand down on the workbench, raising a tremendous *bang*. The room immediately fell into anxious silence; all eyes were on her. The apprentices were waiting for the verdict to be handed down, the soldiers were readying themselves for the order to draw, and Vanessa was praying to God. It seemed that Regis was the only one who wasn't worried in the slightest.

Then came Altina's booming voice: "You'd think so, wouldn't you!? This sword is preposterous!"

Regis immediately understood what she meant, and Enzo nodded in understanding a beat later. "I'd never seen any of the first emperor's swords before now, but I've handled a few from his time. They were all sturdy and practical—made to survive an era of war. I understand the ornaments, given that this is an emperor's sword and all, but even taking that into consideration, this one is... off. In battle, they say that *L'Empereur Flamme* stood in the vanguard, right? There's no way such a hero would be swinging around something so useless!"

"My thoughts exactly! It really is ridiculously hard to use!"

"And then there's you, missy—I'm surprised you're able to swing this thing around."

"Well, what else can I do? The emperor himself lent it to me. And explaining that it's hard to use just isn't an option; they'd all think I was just making an excuse and that it was too heavy for me. Not on my life!"

"Hahaha! No doubt about that!"

"Well, can you fix it?"

“As a decorative piece, or as a weapon?”

“As a weapon, of course!”

Everyone nearby had borne witness to a commoner blacksmith addressing Altina as casually as he would a good friend, paying no mind to the expected formalities. He had even gone so far as to address the fourth princess and major general of the imperial army as “missy.” His apprentices had turned as white as freshly washed bed sheets, while Vanessa actually looked rather serene. It seemed that she had already accepted the worst, and she now wore a resolved expression like a widow stopping by her ex-lover’s grave. Meanwhile, the guards were holding their heads in their hands. As they had previously accompanied the princess to the capital, they had a slight grasp of her personality—in particular the fact that she did not discriminate against commoners.

Regis sighed. It seemed that an understanding had been reached, and it would be cruel to ignore the panic that his sister and Enzo’s disciples were clearly in. And then there was Abidal-Evra and his men, who were still out in the rain. To put them all at ease, Regis interrupted Altina, who was continuing to grow evermore heated over the treasured sword.

“...Princess, you’re shocking everyone. Also, what I know about your sword might prove useful. How about we move somewhere you can calm down before we continue these talks?”

“You know something about my sword, Regis?”

“...I’ve done some research.”

“Hm... All right, you have a point. We shouldn’t keep people waiting in the rain, and we’re getting in the way of the smithy’s work. Sister, may we borrow someplace to talk?” Altina asked.

“Eh!? Oh, yes, of course!”

Just then, a look of realization crossed Enzo’s face, almost immediately followed by an awkward smile. “Ah... How discourteous of me! I, err... When it comes to talking about weapons, I lose all reservations... I can’t believe I spoke to a princess in such an improper tone...” He had caught himself much too late,

but Altina just responded with a cheerful laugh.

“Ahahaha! I don’t care about that. We have enough sticklers for etiquette in the Ministry of Ceremonies; we don’t need any more. I sought out a blacksmith for his skill in smithery!”

At those words, Enzo shrunk back, his expression a mix of gratitude and awe.



The living space beside the workshop contained a living room large enough to accommodate the entire unit, but Abidal-Evra ordered that only three guards could go inside. The rest continued surveillance outside, albeit only standing where there was a roof over their heads.

In an admirable display, Abidal-Evra himself volunteered to stay among those stuck outside. It was a dreary night in the middle of May, and he was no doubt fatigued from five consecutive days of marching, but he willingly stood outside regardless. He definitely would have preferred to wait inside and enjoy the warmth of the fireplace, and that was precisely why he had afforded the luxury to his men instead. Was this his way of realizing Altina’s motto that the best way to gain support was by taking the initiative where others would refuse? If only there were more officers like him on their side...

Meanwhile, Regis and Altina settled down inside the brick house, seating themselves at a table large enough for ten. The apprentices presumably ate with the family on a regular basis.

As he looked around the room, Regis noticed a shelf lined with children’s toys shaped out of iron. *Now that I think about it, I’ve never actually seen my nephews’ faces before. I hope they’re doing well...* he thought. His sister, Vanessa, had two children.

His brother-in-law’s smithing business seemed to be turning a good profit; they had hired three housekeepers, and had put together quite a lavish meal of steamed potatoes, grilled pork sausages, a salty soup, and shredded wild plants. Vanessa had seemed terribly apologetic when she told them that they didn’t really have anything prepared, but Altina was simply exuberant, looking forward to tasting the food of a commoner for the first time.

“We intruded so suddenly, and yet you even prepared dinner for us. You have my thanks,” Altina said humbly.

“It was no trouble at all, honestly! That I was even granted the opportunity to serve a meal to Lady Marie Quatre herself will be the highlight of my life!”

Altina laughed. “Oh, surely you’re exaggerating!”

Were her life story ever to be chronicled, this episode would surely serve as a brief vignette illustrating her character—that was the way Regis saw it, at least. Whether it was depicted as a disingenuous deed intended to make light of the royal family’s authority or an example of how she did indeed treat commoners as equals would entirely depend on the writer’s opinion.

Vanessa returned to the kitchen for more food; she would need to prepare some for the apprentices as well. Only Altina, Regis, and Enzo were seated at the table. The guards who had stayed inside were waiting in another room.

Once they had said a prayer, the meal began. Altina immediately brought a spoonful of soup to her lips before speaking. “I imagine that you’ll feel a lot more comfortable speaking more casually, Mr. Smith. Let’s drop the needless formalities. That’s why I sent my guards away.”

Enzo seemed nervous, but he would hopefully open up as the conversation went on. For that reason, it would probably be best to begin by speaking casually. Even Regis very much wanted to be able to relax.

“Let’s continue where we left off, then...” Regis said, and Altina quickly swallowed the piece of potato in her mouth before jumping in.

“Right—you know something about my sword?”

“Yes, though I feel that I have to preface this by saying that I wasn’t deliberately hiding this from you... Around three hundred years ago, there was a period where Belgaria maintained quite favorable relations with its neighboring countries. The Germanian Federation had not yet come into existence, the small northern countries were too preoccupied waging war on one another, and the mountains separating us from the east and south made war and trade with these regions unfeasible.”

“How so?”

“Carriages were heavier back then, and horses were weaker. The large horses we regularly use for labor were few in number.”

“Oh, I see. So what you’re saying is...”

“War was so rare in Belgaria that the country decided to focus on developing its culture instead, such as through ceremonies and services. It really was a period of arts. Historic paintings and sculptures, plays and compositions—the works produced in this era were very rich in culture. Even knights began to prioritize the fine arts above the martial arts, and weapons started to be judged based on their aesthetics rather than their practicality in battle.”

“But weapons are weapons, aren’t they?” Altina asked, earning her a nod of agreement from Enzo.

But Regis shook his head. “No, a weapon is a tool used to win a war, and wars are waged to protect the people one holds dear. In a time where beauty determined one’s place in society, which in turn determined how secure you were, an exquisite weapon was an amazing thing to have.”

“Mn... When you put it like that, I guess I can see what you mean... Those nobles in high society all carry swords that have so much gold slapped on them that I can’t tell whether they’re even usable anymore.”

“Since we’re at war right now, impractical weapons aren’t very desirable... But three hundred years ago, when appearances were valued above all else, the *Grand Tonnerre Quatre* received an overhaul.”

“What did they change?”

“The blade couldn’t be changed as it is made of trystie, but the hilt is only made of wood and leather—two materials that must occasionally be replaced. Instead of having the hilt restored, as was standard, it was ordered to be completely remade in accordance with the values held at the time. Well, rumor has it that the emperor who ruled during this period actually asked to have the sword remade because it was too heavy for him to pick up, so he wanted to make it as light as possible.”

Altina looked at Regis, clearly displeased. “If you can’t pick it up, then train till you can!”

“Tell that to the late emperor.”

“Right. When I’m up in heaven, the first thing I’m going to do is give him a piece of my mind.”

Regis immediately pictured the emperor of a peaceful era being chased around by warrior princess Altina and couldn’t help but feel ever so slightly sorry for him.

“Books weren’t very common at the time, so there aren’t any proper records... but given that it was an era where art flourished, there should at least be a painting of the *Grand Tonnerre Quatre* before it was overhauled.”

That said, the artwork produced in times of peace was generally characterized by dramatization over realism, so the accuracy of any paintings they found would depend entirely on the artist. People generally saw the world around them as stagnant and uninteresting during times of prolonged peace, and so created their own stories to compensate. In contrast, during times of war, people were taught to treasure what they had. That was precisely why Regis preferred fictional works full of dreams over bleak realisms; delusions were the product of peace.

“...Now, I’ve never seen it myself, but there should be a painting in the imperial museum that would make for a good reference.”

“Off we go, then!”

Regis hurriedly stopped Altina before she could jump to her feet. “Hold on... You still have a job to do here. Don’t forget that you’re leading the Beilschmidt border regiment.”

“Erk... Right. What should I do?”

“Commoners can’t enter the museum, so I think we should first use your name and status to secure a permit. After all, my brother-in-law is the one who really needs to see the painting... assuming he accepts the job, that is.” Regis turned his gaze to Enzo, who was listening with deep intrigue.

“The emperor’s prized sword—a mistake three hundred years in the making—corrected by my hand! Sounds amazing!”

“So you’ll do it?”

“Of course!”

“Thank you! In that case, I’ll leave everything to you!”

Regis was beginning to feel that Altina and Enzo were on the same wavelength, but whatever the case, what mattered was that they seemed to have reached an agreement. But as important as that was, it did not entirely resolve the problem.

Regis stood from his seat, putting his dinner on hold. “Enzo, might I be so obliged as to discuss something with you in private?”

“Yeah?”

“This way, if you will,” he said, before leading Enzo into a separate room.

“Hey now, Reggie...” Enzo replied, a puzzled look on his face. “Back there, you were speaking normally to a princess, of all people, so don’t get all stiff and formal when you’re talking to me. How am I even supposed to respond?”

“...You have a point.”

“Still, what a shocker. Don’t get me wrong, I’d heard that you were working as a tactician for the princess, but I just kinda figured you’d be one of many, many others—just as a little helper or something. But look at you; it’s almost like you’re her friend.”

“Right. There’d be a much more distinct command hierarchy in the army of a regular noble, but...” Regis started, trying to explain himself. He didn’t want Enzo to think that all armies were this disorganized.

“She’s taken quite a liking to you.”

“Maybe. I don’t think she dislikes me, but... You see, a few things happened back when we first met, and...” Since Altina had first appeared before Regis disguised as a cab driver, he had spoken to her as he would any younger girl, and that casualness had become the norm from that point onward.

Altina had been longing for someone whom she could talk openly and frankly with, which Regis suspected was because she saw formal language and flowery words as nothing more than a way to hide one’s true intentions. He could guess

that this was most likely a mentality she had picked up after spending so long in the courts surrounded by nothing but enemies. Knowing this, Regis couldn't help but pity her.

To think a commoner would be pitying a princess... What a farce, Regis thought, a cynical smirk creeping onto his face.

As he was now alone with Enzo, Regis could begin the negotiations. "What I want to discuss pertains to your payment."

"That's... Well, you know... If you want me to fix up a sword like that, it's gonna cost quite a pretty penny."

"You're doing some impressive work here at your forge, Enzo; don't you think it's about time that you made a name for yourself? Repairing the emperor's sword is a huge job that would be spoken of all through the Empire."

"Yeah, I understand that much."

"So, considering the impact that this job will have on your future, don't you think you should give us even just a small discount? Yes, how would you feel about giving us a family discount?"

"Hm... A family discount? But we're gonna need gold and gemstones for the ornamentation..."

"We can put down a deposit, if necessary."

"Huh? A deposit...!? Gn... I see..."

"Rest assured, we'll pay for the finished product in full."

"...Thank God. I don't think I could stomach another tab."

It was common practice for craftsmen to open tabs for their customers, meaning that the smith wasn't paid on the completion of each task, but was rather obligated to go around collecting payments at the end of each month or year. One reason for this was that nobles lived on taxes, and so would only have money readily available when the taxation cycle came to a close. It naturally followed suit that craftsmen and other servants who did work for these nobles were paid on a similar system. Whether or not the buyer had enough money on them was seldom considered when a purchase was deemed necessary, and

paying using money that one did not have was a common thread throughout history.

But from the perspective of a craftsman, this practice was akin to giving out a loan without charging interest. Plus, due to their weak standing as commoners, most would have to jump through many irritating hoops to collect money from a noble.

Enzo wasn't much of a talker, and so Regis had presumed that he was enduring his fair share of hardships. It seemed he was right on the money.

"Enzo, if you're having trouble collecting any particular debts, we can buy them off of you."

The look on Enzo's face immediately changed. Even without words, it was clear what was on his mind; he must have had quite a few debts piled up, and, while Regis didn't hold anything against his virtuous nature, this man was not suited for business negotiations.

"Truth be told, I haven't been able to collect even half of what we're owed from our noble clientele..."

"That sounds serious. Well, don't worry—we'll take over from here. Now, about the cost of repairing the treasured sword..."

"Right. I'm gonna give it a good look over before I give you an estimate. Give me a minute. I'll try to keep it as cheap as possible."

"Please go easy on us."

Those nobles stalling payment were in for a surprise, as the mere commoner blacksmith they had considered so lightly was about to be replaced by a Belgianian princess eager to stake her claims.



Altina sat alone, chewing a mouthful of potato. It had been a considerably long time since she had eaten by herself, without even Clarisse accompanying her, and was reminiscent of her days in the imperial court.

Vanessa walked in from the kitchen, carrying a bottle of wine and some glasses. "Oh?"

“If you’re wondering where Regis and Mr. Smith have gone, they’re having a secret discussion in another room.”

“Dear me! Leaving the princess alone!?”

“If my absence aids the negotiations, then I don’t mind. Anyway, forget about that. I’d love to hear some of your stories, Sister.”

“With pleasure.”

Despite Vanessa being part of a commoner family, the glasses she had brought in were almost completely transparent—a testament to just how successful the smithy was. She started to fill one with a red liquid.

“Sorry in advance; it’s cheap...”

“Just because something is more expensive doesn’t mean it automatically tastes better.”

No matter what exquisite drink was being offered in the court, it was always poured over insidious curses on hushed breath. It was as pleasant as being served mud. Being able to chat to someone who regarded her without scorn or disgust was a fresh and exciting experience for Altina.

“So, you want to hear about what Reggie used to get up to?”

“Right. He hardly ever talks about himself. I haven’t heard a word about his parents, for example.”

“Ah... Our parents passed when he was only eight. They were victims of an epidemic.”

“Oh, I see...”

“Even back then, Reggie was a bookworm. He was always holed up in our father’s study and barely left the house, so he had no friends in our neighborhood. I worried about him...”

“Fufu... So he hasn’t changed much.”

“They were all really complicated books that I couldn’t read, too. And I’m older than him.”

“I heard that he joined the military to cover his living expenses.”

“If all he wanted was to get by, then he could have followed my example and served under a noble. But servants must work from dawn to dusk.”

“It’s not an easy job, is it?”

“Right... He said that he wouldn’t have enough time to read, and that the salary wouldn’t cover his books.”

“Now that you mention it, he mentioned that he wanted to be a librarian at the military library.”

“That really is all he thinks about. That idiot...” Vanessa sighed.

But Altina didn’t see his obsession as a bad thing; she knew that it was because of Regis’s keen interest in books that she now had a knowledgeable strategist on her side.

“That couldn’t have been easy on you, Sister.”

“Fufu... You’re right. Reggie was nothing but trouble. He went off to the military academy, but no matter how long he spent there, he’d come home with nothing but stories of how useless and hopeless he was. I was always worrying that he’d drop out.”

Altina nodded. Regis’s swordplay was worse than that of a child, and his horseback riding skills were despair-inducingly poor; she was surprised that he had even managed to graduate from such a notoriously difficult academy. It was presumably because he was outstanding enough in one subject to cover for his shortcomings in the rest.

“But he was unmatched when it came to strategizing?”

“Yes—within the academy, at least.”

“Then he lost to someone outside the school?”

“Mhm. There was one time when they held a match against another academy. Reggie was chosen as one of his school’s representatives... and apparently lost to the son of Count Vicente.”

“Huh. Well, color me impressed.”

“Oh, people say that kid has God-given talent, among other things, but there

were definitely some... suspicious circumstances... Ah, Marie Quatre, do you know how strategy matches work?”

“I don’t know the specifics. I wasn’t able to go to military academy, though I definitely would have, had I been born a man!”

“Same!” The two shared a passionate nod, before Vanessa continued. “Strategy matches are quite a bit different from your standard game of chess, for example—each side must argue what they believe the correct course of action would be given a particular state of a war, and a referee then determines the victor.”

“Oh, so it’s a competitive debate?”

“Something like that. At the time, an officer came all the way from the eastern front to act as the judge, but, the thing is... that officer belonged to the same unit as Count Vicente himself!”

Altina grimaced. “You’re telling me the judge was his father’s colleague?”

“His direct subordinate.”

“That makes his judgment rather suspect. I mean, I can’t say for sure whether there was actually any favoritism or not, but...”

“It was definitely suspect; I very nearly demanded a do-over! The moment that Regis told me about it, I was so disheartened, but he just said that I was making too big of a deal over a game!”

“Ahaha... That sounds like Regis, all right.”

“My thoughts exactly!”

“He was still undefeated at his academy, though... Isn’t that a splendid accomplishment to be proud of? His lack of self-confidence really is a mystery; you’d think that having something he’s really good at would at least boost his self-esteem a little.”

“Is Reggie’s self-confidence really that low?”

“Yep. And he’s as dense as a brick.”

“Pardon?”

“Ah, no... What I mean is... T-To me, Regis is a precious subordinate whom I’ve entrusted with a vital role. That’s why I’m so concerned about his mental wellbeing.”

“To have a princess worry about him... That boy’s really lucky.”

Altina gave a wry smile. “Ahaha... It’s really not a big deal.”

Vanessa’s eyes grew distant as she stared at a distant past. “Let’s see... The reason Reggie’s so insecure... Maybe I’m partly to blame.”

“Did something happen?”

“I was only twelve when our parents passed. We had no choice but to use up our savings and sell what was in the house to get by.”

“...That sounds harsh.”

“Yeah... But I was at an age where I could go into service, and we were fortunate enough to be acquainted with the kind wife of a nobleman who had known our parents, so we somehow managed to get by. It was all so new to me, though, and I was always making mistakes. I would often come home feeling down and depressed... and even then, little Reggie would be reading his books in the study.”

“Mhm...?”

“And he knew all kinds of things that I didn’t know. He probably knew as much as the teachers at school.”

“So he’s always been like that...”

“There was this one day, for instance—an adult came by the house and told us that our roof was worn down. He said that, unless we had it fixed immediately, it would leak and rot the pillars underneath, meaning we’d have to rebuild the entire house.”

“No way! That sounds serious!”

“Then ten-year-old Reggie immediately replied: ‘Is that true, mister? We had the roof repaired just last year. We’ll be in a lot of trouble if we were ripped off... I need to report this to the authorities. Can you come with me and explain the situation to them?’”

“...He said that as a kid?”

“Yes. I remember being in such a panic, but... the adult just made a troubled face and said, ‘Oh, you just had it repaired? I must have made a mistake then. Hahaha... Pardon me!’ Then he practically ran away.”

“Eh? What does that mean!?”

“Once the adult was gone, Reggie told me that the man was trying to scam us.”

“Eh!? That was a scam!? Then you really should have gone to the authorities!”

“That wouldn’t have done much, unfortunately. The man wasn’t lying—our roof was far from new, and there was a real risk that it would leak and cause the pillars to rot unless we had it repaired. The scam was making people think that it was going to happen much sooner than it actually was.”

“Wait... Shouldn’t you have gotten it repaired then?”

“Regis told me that roofs can always be fixed after they’ve started leaking. That’s what it said in one of his books, at least.”

Altina didn’t respond, looking completely dumbfounded.

“Of course, our roof wasn’t newly repaired,” Vanessa said with a sigh. “That was just a lie to chase the scammer away.”

“Regis tricked a scammer!?”

“That’s right.”

“That sounds pretty impressive to me! Why would something like that make him insecure?”

“Well... I was working so hard to support him. And Regis was knowledgeable and eloquent enough to put adults to shame. He wouldn’t even brag about it. That’s why I ended up saying something to him...”

“What did you say?”

“‘You’re so feeble and useless, Reggie! You can’t do anything without me!’ ...Something along those lines.”

“...Huh?” Altina blinked in surprise, and Vanessa averted her eyes.

“I mean, I just had to bring him down a notch... There was no way I could keep going otherwise. Regis was amazing... He was so clever, and so reliable... There was no way that twelve-year-old me would have the strength to keep going while that was true!”

“I see...”

“I never thought my words would stick with him into adulthood.”

“Right.”

Her conduct was definitely reprehensible, but these were the actions of a twelve-year-old girl doing whatever she could to endure the harsh living situation that she had been so suddenly thrown into. No one could blame her for the way she had acted. And for Regis to take the heated words of a young girl to heart, clinging onto them into his adult years to the point where he developed an inferiority complex was—

“Hold on. It’s true that he’s weak and all, but isn’t that his own fault?”

“Ah, you’re right! I bought some wheat at the market this one time, and the moment I handed the bag to him, he toppled over and was almost crushed by it.”

“He’s way too weak...”

“It’s because he spends all of his time reading books.”

“He really should go out and train from time to time!”

“Exactly! I think that’s why I came to like men who aren’t so... eloquent. Men who have plenty of muscle and bulk and— Ah, so attractive! Just like my husband,” Vanessa said, completely fawning over the verbal picture she had just painted. “Oh my, how embarrassing... To think I let myself get so carried away in front of the princess!”

“Err, right...”

A short while later, Regis returned to the dining room. “We’ve finished our discussion. My brother-in-law has gone to look at your sword. His estimate should hopefully be within our budget.”

Altina looked over, then fell into thought for a moment. What would have happened had Regis not been with her? At the very least, these business negotiations wouldn't have worked out. Maybe she would have still been at Fort Volks, trying to hold back the soldiers attacking from Varden.

No—now that she thought about it, without Regis, she wouldn't have been able to take the fortress in the first place. She had already relied on him so many times there was little point in her trying to list every single instance.

It seemed that similar thoughts were also running through Vanessa's mind as, much like Altina, her gaze was fixed on Regis. A brief, awkward silence fell over the room.

"Is something the matter?" Regis faltered.

"Mm... We were just talking about how Regises will be Regises," Altina muttered, keeping her eyes fixed on him.

"...Say again?"

Regis was now wearing such a blank expression that Altina couldn't help but laugh.

"Oh, Reggie!" Vanessa exclaimed as she suddenly stood from her seat. "You should go and see your nephews! You haven't met them yet, have you?"

"Ah, you're right; I haven't."

"Fufu... The youngest is still just a baby."

Altina shot to her feet as well, then leaned in close to Vanessa. "U-Um... I want to see them too..."

The reaction took Vanessa by surprise, but her lips quickly curled into a smile as warm and soothing as the rising sun. This wasn't the expression of an enthusiastic merchant or a strong-willed sister—it was the face of a mother.

"You're more than welcome to. In fact, it would be an honor."

Chapter 3: The Empire's Seventh Army

The next day—

When midday had passed, the Empire's Seventh Army finally appeared in Rouenne. They were an infantry-centered force, lacking a substantial cavalry and composed of stalwart men from the eastern war front—a line that was almost as intensely fought over as its northern counterpart.

The Seventh Army had Duke Bargesonne's personal army at its core, which was five thousand strong. There were no mercenaries in their ranks—the majority were trained soldiers, while the rest were farmers conscripted from the territory who made up their light infantry. Whatever the case, they were all seasoned veterans; each and every soldier carried the air of a general.

The Beilschmidt border regiment had set up camp south of Rouenne, and these newcomers had now completely encircled them. As she watched this happen, Altina furrowed her brow.

"What's their game? There's open space to set up camp to the north, east, and west of town. Why have they come here?"

"They probably intend to intimidate us..."

Regis decided to say no more than that. Given their circumstances, there would be nothing more foolish than starting a fight between allies. Lieutenant General Bargesonne surely understood this as well. Making such a deliberate effort to agitate an allied unit was pointless—detrimental, even—so he must have had a good reason for his actions. The wisest response was to pay it no mind.

Altina, however, seemed unsettled.

"Shall we go and protest?"

"...There is no need for us to rise to every childish provocation. Worst-case scenario, they might turn our words against us and accuse us of overstepping

our authority.”

“Ah, yeah. I can see that happening. Especially with that guy in charge.”

“I don’t know much about Lieutenant General Bargesonne’s character but, from what you’ve said, he sounds like someone I would rather not meet.”

“Oh? It’s rare to hear that there’s something you don’t know, Regis.”

“You can read critiques and biographies on the Empire’s nobles, but they’re all replete with flowery language, and so are useless as points of reference.”

“I’m sure it’s all exaggerated, too.”

“...If you take the stories circulating about our country’s nobles at face value, then our enemies are somehow still fighting despite their soldiers having been completely obliterated three times over.”

“How idiotic.”

As they were talking, a horseman galloped over waving the flag of the Seventh Army—a messenger, no doubt. The heavily armored knight reached the border regiment’s main camp in no time at all, but the imposing way in which he conducted himself suggested that he was no normal messenger. This man was in fact a noble and an officer.

He was an ally to be sure, but the Seventh Army’s pointless provocations had put the regiment’s soldiers on edge. They surrounded him, keeping their guard up as if dealing with an envoy of an enemy nation.

The messenger, however, seemed to pay it no mind. He dismounted from his horse and kneeled, then declared, “I come bearing orders from Lieutenant General Bargesonne!”

Bargesonne outranked Altina, so he did technically have the authority to issue orders to her. But their armies were separate entities, and it was common courtesy to first go through the proper procedures before taking someone else’s troops under your command.

Altina made no attempt to conceal the grimace seeping into her expression.

As much as I don’t want to stand out, I don’t want any trouble here, Regis thought as he stepped forward. “Let’s hear these orders.”

“A war council shall convene at once. Major General Belgaria, promptly make your way to the Seventh Army’s main camp.”

“Orders received. We will attend with all due haste,” Regis replied. *...And overlook your complete lack of consideration for us.*

Regis’s general lack of self-respect meant that he wasn’t particularly fazed by the man’s pompous tone, but he couldn’t help but wonder why Bargesonne was going so far to assert his dominance. As far as he was concerned, power struggles between allies were like scuffles between stray dogs—so inconsequential that one couldn’t possibly be expected to take them seriously.

Regis produced a pocket watch from his uniform and checked the time. “We will be there by one o’clock. Please pass on the message.”

“Understood.” The messenger knight stood, then ran his eyes across troops around him. “I had wondered what manner of men supported the northern front and captured Fort Volks, but they seem remarkably unspectacular,” he scoffed.

Tensions immediately rose to such a degree that it seemed likely that weapons could be drawn at any moment. Knowing how prone to outbursts Altina was, Regis decided to act before she could.

This really isn’t my sort of role, but... “Was giving your opinion on our regiment a part of Lieutenant General Bargesonne’s orders?”

“...It was not.”

“Then please let the lieutenant general know that he would do well to avoid using messengers who can’t hold their tongues.”

Had Regis not said at least that much, it would have impacted troop morale. The messenger knight was evidently not so foolish as to ignore the warning; he gave an empty salute, then retreated in a huff as the soldiers around him cheered and sneered.

Altina sighed. “Thank you, Regis.”

“We traveled for two whole weeks only to get into an argument with our allies. It’s so pathetic that it almost brings tears to my eyes.”

“But had you not said that, I would have drawn my sword.”

“We’re going to meet the lieutenant general, so some self-control would be appreciated.”

“Who would’ve thought we’d come across such a formidable foe before we even engaged High Britannia?”

The fact that Altina wasn’t joking in the slightest brought a throbbing pain to Regis’s temple.



“Welcome. We are much obliged,” Bargesonne said, not bothering to bow his head. He remained seated in a chair that had a rather large backrest, and while his words were courteous enough, his attitude made it clear that they weren’t welcome in the slightest.

He was a white-haired old man sporting a thick mustache, and the deep wrinkles creasing his brow made his stern expression seem even sterner. There was a sharp glint in his eyes, and his perfectly straight back told a tale of regular training—after all, the lieutenant general was a seasoned veteran who had been in the military since before Regis was born.

A chamberlain was standing by Bargesonne’s side, armed with a pike.

Altina touched her right hand to her chest in salute. “Lieutenant General Bargesonne, before I place my troops under your command, there is something that I must make clear.”

Regis was taken aback. What was she going to say? The impromptu announcement sent a shiver down his spine.

Altina and Regis were the only ones who had actually ventured into the Seventh Army’s main camp; the few guards who had accompanied them were waiting outside. Regis had wanted Jerome to come in the hope that his reputation would afford them some more leeway, but the man had refused, proclaiming that the summons was nothing but a pain.

The tent that they were currently standing in was much larger than the one being used by the border regiment. It served as more of an audience chamber

than a conference room, with the lieutenant general seated all the way at the back. A large, empty space stretched between him and the entrance, on either side of which a number of senior officers were standing at attention. There were around thirty in total—too many for what should have been a simple meeting.

Altina stepped into the empty space and looked straight at Bargesonne, earning her cold glares from the surrounding officers. As much as Regis wanted to revoke her statement, it was impossible for him to do something so unseemly.

Despite the number of judging eyes upon her, Altina carried on, unperturbed. “Lieutenant General, I am aware that you do not recognize my authority. I am also aware that you are a part of Latrielle’s faction. Neither of these facts bother me. But should you issue an order in bad faith to purposely cripple the Beilschmidt border regiment during this battle—should you act to serve the interest of our enemy—it will be seen as treason toward the Belgarian Empire.”

She had spoken calmly, but her words were so brazen that they were sure to be struck from the record. Regis was so on edge that he was surprised he hadn’t started frothing at the mouth or collapsed; Altina hadn’t necessarily said anything wrong, but he had no idea how her opponent would respond. As a strategist, it was his job to predict how a foe would react ahead of time, but these sudden developments were bad for his health.

A brief moment passed, then Bargesonne opened his mouth to speak. “You are ten years too young to speak to me about the Empire. Now get in line.”

“...Yes, sir.” With a reluctant salute, Altina took her place beside the senior officers.

So he’s more than just a soldier... Regis mused. Bargesonne was older than them both, and that was something that Altina couldn’t change no matter what. As soon as he brought up his seniority, whatever argument they might have had was rendered moot. He hadn’t even acknowledged Altina’s demand for him to keep his personal and political biases separate from military matters, instead just clinging to her use of the word “Empire” to make it seem as though he had given a response.

Had they been of equal standing, she could have pointed out his attempt to dodge the matter, but as a lower-ranking officer arguing against her superior, the odds were not in her favor. This old man was clearly rather cunning.

An old-looking strategist stepped forward to give a report. “The High Britannian Army has occupied the port town of Ciennbourg in the territory of Duke Touranne. Thirty thousand men have already landed on our shores and have all but annihilated the Second Army on the western line. Thankfully, Lieutenant General Beaumarchais has survived. The enemy army has divided into three units, two of which are occupying forts and cities as they march deeper into imperial territory. We must vanquish these unjust invaders in the name of the emperor.”

“That’s right!” one officer called out from the line.

“Hear, hear!” cried another.

As much as Regis understood and respected that each army had its own practices, he couldn’t see himself getting used to the blatant appeal to emotion. At the very least, he would have liked them to clearly separate it from the factual report, not that there was much of one—the old strategist had already returned to his place in line without giving any extra details.

“Our chief strategist shall explain the rest. Second-Grade Admin Officer Vicente.”

“Sir!”

I guess they’re more particular about how their work is divided, Regis thought.

Once the general situation had been explained, someone else stepped forward. It was a young admin officer who had short hair and narrow eyes—a man who came off as more sickly than sharp. “I will hereby explain the details of this operation,” he said.

“...Hm?” Regis had thought that the name sounded familiar, but seeing the young man’s face made him even more certain.

“Is that the same Vicente from your time at the academy?” Altina quietly whispered in his ear.

“Probably...”

Vicente was the star cadet of another prestigious academy. Regis had only ever faced off against him once before, when he was representing his own school in a strategy match. He had never lost to anyone in his time at the academy, but it was against Vicente that he first experienced defeat. And while the circumstances were subject to criticism, a loss was a loss. Regis had never thought that they would reunite here, of all places. He was just happy to see that at least one of his old acquaintances was alive and well.

On Vicente’s order, a map of the area around the capital was brought in and displayed. Red pins had been used to indicate where the Seventh Army and the Beilschmidt border regiment were stationed—which was just outside of Rouenne—while blue ones were used to show the enemy army coming in from the west.

“According to our scouts, there are ten thousand High Britannian soldiers marching on our capital. We, the Seventh Army, number twenty-five thousand. The plains of war may differ from the eastern front we have grown accustomed to, but our guaranteed victory remains unshaken!”

Once again, the senior officers raised a spirited cry.

The report didn’t offer anything more than what Regis had already learned from his own regiment’s reconnaissance, so he couldn’t quite say that he understood the situation any better. Most importantly, his main concern had yet to be addressed: the reason why the enemy had chosen to divide themselves into three smaller units, each of which could be outnumbered by the Belgarian Army.

Concentrating one’s allies and dispersing your enemies make up the fundamentals of any strategy, so why would they deliberately divide themselves?

Regis thought back to the books he had read once upon a time. Publications on war and war-related tactics were so abundant in the Belgarian Empire that he wouldn’t doubt if someone said they were the best in the world. He made his regular pilgrimage through the massive bookshelves in his head, thumbing through innumerable pages as he went. Then, a single question came to mind:

“...Is the unit really only ten thousand strong?”

Regis’s murmur caused everyone around him to fall silent, as the officers who had been cheering just moments ago immediately closed their mouths. By the time he noticed it, a great many eyes were focused on him.

Now I’ve done it... He hadn’t intended to say that out loud.

Vicente’s glare pierced straight through him. “Do you have something to say, Fifth-Grade Admin Officer Regis Aurick? Feel free to speak your mind. You may be the lowest ranking officer here, but we take all opinions into consideration.”

Regis wasn’t great at speaking to crowds, but, as the Belgian border regiment’s strategist, it was his duty to express any doubts he had. He had no choice but to continue.

“...I also received a report that the High Britannian Army had split into three units, but their reason for doing so remains unclear. It goes against all common sense. I have to wonder, is the unit marching toward us really only ten thousand strong?”

“Hm. You meant to say that you do not trust our army’s reconnaissance efforts?”

“...I am a coward, you see. I can never simply lay my worries to rest.”

“The enemy’s second division is due to meet with thirty thousand Belgian soldiers, at the core of which stands the First Army. With General Latrielle leading the charge, our victory is certain. The remaining division stationed at the western port are presumably reserve forces.”

“...An entire third of their army are reserves?”

“Is it not reasonable for a country invading an unfamiliar land to prepare so many reserves? The High Britannian commander must be a cautious man.”

Vicente brought out a second map, this one extending all the way to the western coast. He placed it next to the first map, then stuck in three pins to represent the enemy’s forces. It was clear to see that the enemy was advancing east like a two-headed serpent, and that the imperial army was similarly splitting up to intercept them. Latrielle’s First Army was due to take on the

northern head, while the Seventh Army would take on the southern one.

Each pin represented ten thousand soldiers, and the enemy only had one pin in each unit. The imperial army, on the other hand, had three pins in their northern unit, and another three lagging behind in various places as reserve forces.

In actuality, these reserve forces were simply the units who had been unable to join up with the main army. The reason for their delays varied; some had simply taken too long to prepare, while other, less enthusiastic units had deliberately fallen back to avoid depleting their forces. Whatever the case, those who were late would likely be subject to harsh criticism later on, and had the Beilschmidt border regiment not managed to push back Varden, they would have likely been among them.

Incidentally, while the Empire had invested one hundred thousand troops in this battle, they only had eight pins on the map. This was because the unit stationed on the western front, as well as the Second Army, had been completely wiped out, losing twenty thousand men in total.

Regis stared at the second map. "...Should the enemy's northernmost division turn south and their rear unit move forward, then their forces might concentrate on our weaker southern side. In that case, our twenty-five thousand soldiers could be faced with thirty thousand enemy troops."

That said, this figure also included each side's logistics teams, so the number of soldiers actually fighting would be significantly lower.

"You haven't changed in the slightest," Vicente scoffed. "They 'might' target our southern side. We 'could' face thirty thousand troops. You always speak with such cowardly uncertainty. Need I remind you that the High Britannian Army is traveling through unfamiliar lands? It would be impossible for them to advance so quickly."

It seemed that he remembered Regis as well. For a moment, their exchange during their past strategy match ran through Regis's mind, but he had no time to steep in memories.

"...Is it really impossible, though? High Britannia is transporting soldiers and supplies via steamboat; even when fully loaded, it can make the round trip from

their motherland in less than ten days. The invasion began on April 23rd, and it is already May 16th. Knowing that, should we not assume that they are better prepared than our intel would suggest? They could have transported their war horses over in that time, for instance.”

The distance from the occupied port of Ciennbourg to High Britannia was said to be roughly 150 lieue (666 km). A fully-loaded sailing boat could travel 30 lieue (133 km) in a day, and a steamboat was even faster than that—not to mention that the vessel would be empty on the return trip. Regis thought it dangerous to conclude that the High Britannian Army still consisted of no more than thirty thousand foot soldiers.

“The figure I gave you already takes the steamboat’s transport capabilities into account. Wasn’t that obvious?” Vicente’s tone as he replied was similar to a professor addressing an inept student.

“The last I heard, the Belgarian Empire had yet to obtain such details about High Britannia’s steamboats. Did we happen to come by this information recently?”

“The steamboat can accelerate without wind, but as the ship’s center must be occupied by its engine and an adequate amount of coal, its transportation capabilities are meager compared to what its size might suggest. This is something that we are all well aware of.”

The Belgarian Empire had been trying to create their own steamboat—namely one that was propelled by paddle wheels, which were attached on either side of the hull. It worked well on windless days, but also burned through an excessive amount of expensive coal and had a disappointing loading capacity, in part because the areas where one would usually store cargo were taken up by the engine and coal supply. It was subsequently determined to have no practical use. A screw propeller had been proposed as an alternative, but was almost instantly turned down; it required a hole to be kept open in the bottom of the ship to allow the rotating axis to turn, which was just asking for disaster.

“It has not yet garnered much interest in Belgaria, but... I read a dissertation that explained how they had managed to improve the propeller and maintain greater speeds while simultaneously downsizing the engine in recent years.”

While the propeller had originally been designed to mimic the action of manually rowing a boat, the latest version apparently focused on creating a current differential between both sides of the blade, which generated a lift that could be converted into propulsion.

It was said that this new design originated from an accident that had occurred during experimentation, in which the blades of a boat's propeller came too close to the riverbed and snapped. Against all expectations, the shortened blades actually caused the boat to move faster. Up to that point, propeller blades had been long and narrow like oars, but it was now clear that shorter blades spun at much higher speeds and thus generated stronger thrust. The accident had happened a few years prior, but had only recently received a logical explanation.

This information had come in the form of a minor detail in a book that Regis had purchased and arranged to be shipped to Fort Volks during his trip to the capital in April. It was a laid-back romp set on the high seas, in which the protagonist was the leader of a pirate crew of young boys aboard a mighty sailing ship. Their enemy employed the top battleship equipped with the latest propeller, which the author described as the one "currently being implemented in High Britannia."

I can't imagine they'll appreciate me citing a work of fiction, though, so I'll just keep that part a secret.

"Hmph. In that case, I would love to hear you unveil whatever lofty plans are running through your head."

This false praise only made it harder for Regis to answer, but he couldn't falter here. For one, the slightest hesitation would damage not only his own reputation, but Altina's as well. But, more importantly, the Empire's current formation was rife with danger, and he had been given a rare chance to change that.

"I... propose that we send the Seventh Army north to join the First Army. We can then confront the enemy with a force of over fifty thousand."

As the senior officers began to stir, Vicente's lips curled into a smile. "So your plan is to make our certain victory even more certain. But if we go north to join

the First Army, who will defend the capital?”

“The thirty thousand soldiers we have as reserve should be able to hold out for our return.”

“But our reserves have not yet arrived. By the time they do, the enemy will have progressed enough that the defense line will need to be set up quite close to the capital.”

“As long as they win, it shouldn’t matter where the defense line is.”

“Ah, I see. So it doesn’t matter where the battle takes place, so long as we’re victorious? Of course a commoner would believe something so erroneous. You completely fail to comprehend the true nature of war!”

“...Evidently.” Regis made no attempt to refute this, and Vicente continued into an eloquent speech.

“The Belgarian Empire must be overwhelming in its might! To allow our enemy to march right under the capital’s nose is a disgrace that should never come to be. Let alone, to permit the enemy’s invasion of the southern line we were entrusted to! What contempt you must hold for the dignity of the Seventh Army!”

The officers grunted in agreement.

You were the ones showing contempt... but I can’t really blame you for wanting to push ahead if you’re fighting for honor and glory. “...Very well, then. If we need to achieve victory on the southern line, then we should make sure we have the high ground. There are a few hills where we can set up formation.”

Vicente paused for a moment, then nodded. “That is something I’ve considered. Our enemy has no choice but to march across the vast expanses of the Empire’s territory. As their supply line grows increasingly long, they will be seeking a short and decisive battle. For this reason, I have no doubt that they will approach us even if they’re fighting at a disadvantage.”

“I’m sure the battle would be simple enough if all we needed to do was claim the high ground, but I can’t imagine it’ll be that easy this time...”

“Indeed. The High Britannian Army apparently has the latest guns and

cannons, which means they could strike preemptively. However! Our force will be twice as large as theirs. We shall charge straight toward our foes, and trample them down before they even have a chance to use their artillery! What other manner of warfare could better suit the mighty Belgian Empire!?”

“...That sounds reasonable enough.”

There was nothing strange or unreasonable about his plan—in fact, it was a well-known tactical maneuver. But this was precisely why the enemy was sure to see it coming. Why would they march ten thousand men to the capital, knowing that they would be drawn into a head-on battle against superior numbers? There had to be a reason. Did they believe that they could win despite their numerical disadvantage? Were they really that confident in the latest guns and cannons? Or could it be that they had some secret ploy to stack the odds in their favor?

We don't have enough information, Regis thought. Scouts had been dispatched to observe the known units, but they had yet to report any notable developments. And while Regis had invested quite a bit into reconnaissance—especially given the increasing scope of the border regiment—he didn't have nearly enough men to keep tabs on everything that was happening in the Empire.

What concerned him more than a lack of information, however, was the possibility of mistaken intel. It was no simple task to increase the number of scouts who could give accurate reports; theirs was a job that demanded courage, adaptability, discernment, reason, and loyalty, among a multitude of other attributes. What's more, there was no prestige in their line of work. Despite their invaluable contributions, the stars of the battlefield would always be the cavalry and spearmen who led the first charge.

Seeing that Regis and Vicente's conversation had come to a close, Lieutenant General Bargesonne raised a hand from his seat. Then, once the senior officers had stood at attention, he spoke.

“We will implement Second-Grade Admin Officer Vicente's plan.”

From there, Bargesonne called the commanding officers of each battalion one by one and assigned them to their stations. *They're not going to put our*

regiment in the vanguard, are they? Regis worried.

Altina was the last person to be called.

“Major General Belgaria, your soldiers will be stationed in the rearguard. From there, you can observe what it truly means to fight a war.”

“Understood,” she said with a salute.

The surrounding officers suppressed the urge to laugh. From their point of view, this war was as good as won. The Belgarian Army was a force to be reckoned with, and they had twice the manpower of the enemy. High Britannia might have had the latest model of artillery and weapons forged of a newly discovered alloy, but the Seventh Army simply couldn’t imagine losing. They were so sure of victory, in fact, that they were treating the enemy like they were an assortment of cakes or fine meats at a banquet. Meanwhile, the outsider had been seated far away from the meal, where she wouldn’t even receive table scraps. But as far as Regis was concerned, there was no guarantee that the enemy would be the ones being served up on a silver platter.

Altina shot each line of officers a powerful glare. “While I have no intention of getting in your way, I won’t hesitate to step in if you’re about to lose, so you’d best not disgrace yourselves.”

“Hmph. That goes without saying. Don’t you worry—the Arrow-Sparrow Princess shall return north without a single merit to her name!” one man spat. On closer inspection, it appeared to be the messenger knight who had delivered their summons. He was, it seemed, the commanding officer of a battalion.

It had been quite some time since Regis had heard that defamatory nickname. The image it brought to mind caused him to remember her treasured sword, and he wondered whether his brother-in-law had managed to enter the imperial museum without issue. *He was planning to go there this morning to look at the paintings and see what the sword originally looked like.*

Despite already knowing that his efforts would be in vain, Regis raised his hand. “The enemy army must have some ulterior motive. I propose we strengthen our reconnaissance measures.”

“An ulterior motive? And what might that be?” Vicente replied, sounding

thoroughly fed up. But Regis refused to back down.

“We don’t know, and that’s precisely why we should be more cautious.”

“Hmph. To think that a military strategist would admit to his own ignorance so readily...”

Well, it’s better—and less dangerous—than pretending to know... Not that the proper conduct of a strategist is something we should be discussing right now.

“In that case, Chief Strategist, have you determined the enemy army’s motive?”

Vicente returned a rapturous smile. “The High Britannian Army only invaded because they have developed new guns and cannons, so it stands to reason that their strategy will be heavily centered around them. Every type of weapon has a scenario in which it is most applicable; a cannon, for example, is especially effective against armies of a thousand men or more. Unfortunately for High Britannia, their soldiers hail from a small island nation, and are thus unaccustomed to battles against such large armies. When they come up against one hundred thousand imperial soldiers, they will cower and run away before they even have the chance to open fire. That’s why the enemy divided themselves into three separate divisions of ten thousand a piece—they hope to fully utilize the cannons they’re so proud of, while keeping each battle small enough that their soldiers won’t panic.”

He spoke so confidently and with such gravitas that Bargesonne and his officers immediately accepted his words, all wearing expressions of complete understanding.

“As expected of our chief strategist!” one man cried.

“That’s our tactician!” added another.

Regis opened his mouth to respond, but Vicente continued on. “Fifth-Grade Admin Officer Regis Aurick, should your cowardice infect our army, it will spread like a disease and lower troop morale. Please refrain from making any rash statements.”

“...Understood.” Having been cautioned by his superior, Regis had no choice but to comply. “You can rest assured that the Beilschmidt border regiment will

remain on standby in the rearguard, taking the utmost care not to get in the way of our allies.”

The surrounding officers sneered, no doubt comparing him to an obedient new recruit.

Barguesonne gave a nod, and in no time at all, the Seventh Army’s strategy meeting switched to a conversation about what would be for dinner.



Clunk!

Altina picked up a stone about the size of her fist, then punted it. A brief moment passed before it struck the ground with a dull *thud*. It had traveled so far that one would think she had used a catapult.

“...Are you testing out a new technique?” Regis asked.

“Gaaah! This is so irritating!”

They were making their way back from the Seventh Army’s camp. While both the Seventh Army and the Belgarian border regiment served under the Belgarian Army, the two were so far divided that not even an arrow would be able to cover the distance between them. The soldiers from the regiment who had accompanied them on the way there were following behind, but were far away enough that they wouldn’t hear what Altina was saying unless she really raised her voice.

Altina kicked a second stone. “What’s their problem!? If that was all the meeting was going to be, they might as well have just had their messenger tell us to stay in the rear. That would have been more than enough! What’s the point in bringing us all the way over there if you’re not even going to talk to us!?”

“...Yes, it feels like they didn’t acknowledge me at all.”

While Regis and Vicente had exchanged words, no real conversation had taken place. The Seventh Army had made up their minds before the discussion happened, and had likely only arranged the meeting so that they could dismiss whatever Altina or Regis had to say.

“They’re mocking us!” Altina exclaimed.

“I can’t say I disagree... The meeting was probably entirely for show. I imagine that they’ll say everyone was given a chance to speak, but that there were no worthwhile contributions. Maybe they just wanted to reassure themselves?”

“What does that even mean!?”

A meeting full of rejection and dismissal would not only waste time, but would chip away at the morale of everyone involved. Surely they knew that much.

“This would be the worst possible outcome for us if so, but... I have a sneaking suspicion that the Seventh Army were completely unaware that they were going into that meeting with the intention of rejecting us.”

“Huh?” Altina looked dumbfounded; how could they have been unaware when they had so openly dismissed everything that Regis and Altina had said?

“Those in a debate want nothing less than to concede to the other side’s point of view. To some, having to admit that they were wrong is almost painful. The notion that a discussion can result in someone quickly changing their mind as though they’ve suddenly woken up to an entirely new way of thinking is a complete fantasy. Instead, people cling to the same opinion, and do whatever they can to affirm it to themselves. Validation feels pretty good, after all.”

“I get where you’re coming from, but...”

“Let’s look at it another way. Say you decide to embrace an opinion that isn’t your own. By willingly obeying the beliefs of someone else, you’re denying your own thoughts. It’s an act akin to sealing away a part of your own mind, and nobody wants to do that.”

“You think so? But I quite like hearing what you have to say, Regis.”

“That’s when I’m answering your questions. It’s absolute bliss to have someone relieve you of a pressing doubt, but that’s not what I’m referring to. I’m talking about the pain that follows when you bring up something that you feel so strongly about, only for me to refute it. Take, for example, the time when I stood against your decision to become empress. Or when I opposed your desire to duel Sir Jerome. Or when you told me that you wanted to charge

straight into Fort Volks, and—”

“Okay, okay! I get it!” Altina interjected, dismissively waving her hand. “It hurts just remembering it. There’s no need to keep going!”

“...Well, despite those exchanges, we can still hold a proper conversation.”

“Oh, you’re right. I wonder why.”

“The pain of rejecting one’s own beliefs comes from taking in the thoughts of someone else—an exchange of ideas, if you will. To successfully pull that off, you have to enter the conversation with respect, taking on the mindset that the other person is superior to you. At the very least, you would need to accept that the other person might be better than you in some regards. Once you believe that there’s something to be gained, you can proactively swap views, and only then can you bear the pain of rejecting your own opinions.”

Altina gazed at him in interest. Were these the eyes of someone who genuinely respected his opinions? Regis couldn’t help but feel a little embarrassed.

“Well said, Regis!”

“...Thank you.”

“So, in short, the reason that they’ll deny whatever we say is because they think so little of us!”

“That’s the gist of it. It isn’t just limited to conversation, though—the same goes for reading. If you start a book under the preconception that it’s full of nothing but worthless nonsense, then even the greatest works can seem mediocre. On the other hand, if you dive into a book with an open mind, then... Ah, that’s right... Yes, and then there’s—! Oh, and I couldn’t forget about—!”

“Um... What?”

“There are just so many amazing books in the world...” Regis said with a nostalgic sigh, quickly becoming lost in fond memories.

Altina sighed. “I know that my mother was a commoner and all... but that’s no reason for them to dismiss me right away...”

“Hm... I don’t think that’s the only reason they look down on you.”

“Really? Is it because I’m a woman, then? Or because I’m so young?”

These were also reasonable assumptions, but Regis believed that the crux of the matter lay elsewhere. “The Seventh Army probably look down on everyone but themselves.”

“How does that work? Does that mean they look down on Latrielle, too?”

“Someone like Latrielle would be considered a special case. They abide by a hierarchy of sorts, you see. These special cases are placed at the top—and are thus considered the most important—followed by the Seventh Army themselves, and then everybody else.”

Though strictly speaking, those in the Seventh Army weren’t all considered equal—there was most likely a separate hierarchy within their ranks, and perhaps even one for those who were considered outsiders. Altina didn’t seem to understand, as she simply cocked her head to the side.

“They value these ‘special cases’ more than military ranks and noble peerage?”

“Yes, but I have a feeling that these arrogant beliefs are subconscious. When a group sticks to the same members, there’s much less chance that they’ll encounter any meaningful opposition. Over time, they’ll continue to validate each other’s opinions, sometimes to the point where they’ll immediately deny anyone who they don’t consider an ally.”

“There’s nothing wrong with supporting your comrades, but why would they deny any outsiders?”

“Well, you’re disgusted by the Seventh Army right now, aren’t you? You think they’re wrong.”

“Of course!”

“Your comrades in the Beilschmidt border regiment will surely agree, and when they do, you’ll see them in an even more favorable light. ‘My comrades are such wonderful people,’ you might think.”

“...I might.”

“And then, when someone appears from who knows where to disparage the

opinions of your comrades, how would you feel?”

“That’s... Ah!” Altina could be incredibly straightforward, but she was no fool; she realized that it was very easy for her to make the same mistake. “R-Right...” she said with a frown, “If an outsider came and rejected one of your opinions, for example, I might immediately turn against them.”

“That’s because we’ve built up a mutual sense of trust. But that’s no reason to automatically reject the person opposing me.”

“You’ve got a point... I trust and think highly of my allies in the regiment, but to disregard someone just because they disagree with my comrades is... Well, it’s just strange.”

“‘Strange’ is right; it’s important to separate an argument from the person giving it.”

“It is?”

“Well, it’s pretty common to believe an argument just because it’s come from a person you trust, which is a shame, really. It’s only a few steps away from authoritarianism, and should be rejected as a reason for siding with someone in an actual debate.”

“So we shouldn’t accept what someone says just because we trust them? But if you’re saying one thing and another person is saying something else, then it’s obvious which side I would lean toward.”

“That’s only human. But all opinions should be given equal consideration, and I want to become the sort of person who puts that into practice. It’s called *illuminisme*—the principles of the Enlightenment.”

“‘All opinions should be given equal consideration’... Even the opinions of an emperor and a commoner?”

“Yes, that’s right. There are a few books on the subject... There was even a renowned *illuminisme* scholar who tried to consider the opinions of a barking dog that had found its way into his house, but his assistants intervened.”

“Oh really... You won’t end up like that, right, Regis?” Altina asked worriedly. She was looking at him in the same way that one might look at a sick person,

and frankly, he was a little offended.

Was that not a splendid anecdote...?

“Who knows? You might find more worth in a dog’s barks than my words.”

“Wait, that’s not the Enlightenment—that’s just your sister’s influence shining through again!”



The evening of May 18th—

News had just come in that the ten thousand High Britannian soldiers marching north had suddenly turned south. Regis’s fears had been realized. But despite this, Vicente, the Seventh Army’s chief strategist, saw no reason to adjust their plan.

“We now see the enemy army’s true intentions, but their coordination is poor. They will not arrive before we engage the southern unit. Our victory remains unchanged.”

It was as he said—the enemy’s northern unit wasn’t expected to join their southern forces until two days’ time. And as the southern front was only half a day’s march from the Belgarian camps, the battle would probably begin as early as tomorrow.

Vicente went on. “We, the Seventh Army, shall crush the southern battalion tomorrow, on the 19th. On the 20th, we shall intercept the northern unit marching south. Meanwhile, General Latrielle’s First Army will be coming in from the north, allowing us to trap our foes in a pincer movement. And so, the High Britannian Army will be annihilated without question!”

Regis’s concerns were unending. “...Sure, if all goes well, this will be a picture-perfect divide and conquer. But would the enemy really march to their deaths so willingly?”

It seemed that High Britannia was playing straight into their hands, and nothing could have been more of a cause for alarm. Unfortunately, Regis and Altina had not been granted the authority to change the plans of the Seventh

Army, let alone the imperial army as a whole.

The ten thousand soldiers occupying Ciennbourg showed no signs of movement. Belgarian scouts traveling by boat had recorded that the enemy had six battleships anchored off shore, but no transport ships—these were presumably making another return trip to High Britannia. An attempt had been made by the Belgarian Navy to destroy these transport ships, thus cutting off High Britannia's supply chain, and what followed was known as the Battle of Touranne.

Belgaria had sent a fleet of twenty-four ships, the flagship of which was an Aeterna-class—a three-masted ship of the line about 120 cubits (53 m) across. Aeterna-classes were the pride of the Belgarian Navy; they had a three-layer gundeck, and eighty cannons spread across their castle-like broadside. Alongside these massive cannons, the ships also carried mortars that could fire explosive shells. These would detonate on impact, causing serious damage to enemy ships, but were unfortunately very inaccurate and relatively short-range.

Indeed, these large naval cannons boasted more firepower than any other weapon in the Empire. But even then, they were front-loaded smoothbore models that were terribly behind the times in comparison to the weapons being used by their enemy.

The High Britannian Royal Navy—commonly referred to as “the Queen's Navy”—had beat its neighboring nations to the punch in loading their weapons with all sorts of new technologies. Their transport ships were guarded by six steam-powered Princess-classes, each of which sported seventy-four cannons. These were, for the most part, Type-41 Elswicks.

In terms of weapon range, output, and ship speed, High Britannia completely outclassed Belgaria .

On May 13th, the Belgarian Navy anticipated the route of a High Britannian transport ship. They lay in wait, then ambushed from the windward side.

The plan was close to perfect, but when pitted against the strongest warships in the world, the inferior imperial navy was forced to retreat without any significant strategic gains. The naval battle had ended in complete and utter failure.

Belgaria was already determined to send in their treasured Poseidon-class, 120-cannon ship of the line, but it would be quite some time before it could be deployed on the war front; this particular class of ship moved so slowly that it was mockingly referred to as a floating fortress.

For the time being, it was a pipe dream to expect any support from the coast.



Imperial Year 851, May 19th—

The sky was dark and cloudy; it looked as though it could rain at any moment. Twenty-two thousand Belgian soldiers stood in formation atop a hill in the upland region of La Frenge. Their logistics team had already retreated to the back line.

A unit of imperial foot soldiers would usually be led by a line of musketeers, but as the weapons being used by High Britannia were so vastly superior, there was little point here. The musketeers would simply be asking to be shot, and would only get in the way of the army's charge.

There was no chance that a unit of regular foot soldiers would come out victorious—in fact, this was thought to be why the Second Army had been defeated in the first engagement in Ciennbourg. That was precisely why, in this battle, they had stationed shock troops armed with long spears in the vanguard. The soldiers were spread out in orderly lines like a rectangular carpet draped over the hill.

Afternoon came.

Below them, around 50 arpents (3574 m) away, was High Britannia's army of ten thousand. Their front line consisted of soldiers equipped with their latest firearm—the Snider. This make of rifle was weatherproof, and truly excelled when it came to consecutive fire; it was said that it could fire thrice in the time it would take an imperial soldier to reload.

Behind this front line stood troops armed with large shields. It was usually standard practice to station spearmen there in preparation for close-quarters combat, but... behind this wall of shields were the cannoneers, manning what

appeared to be around two hundred cannons. These were probably Type-41 Elswicks. By establishing a sturdy rampart protecting a line of cannons, High Britannia practically had a fortress creeping along the ground.

The Battle of Ciennbourg had made it clear that the Type-41s had a range of around 45 arpents (3216 m), so they wouldn't be able to reach the Belgian Army from where they currently were. And given that their foe was above them, they would need to be even closer than they would on flat land.

For the Belgian Army, this height advantage gave their cannons greater range than usual. But, unfortunately, the mid-sized cannons brought by the Seventh Army only had a range of 28 arpents (2000 m); the Type-41s would likely reach them first, even from the bottom of the hill.

As for the Beilschmidt border regiment, they were stationed quite a way behind the Seventh Army, and totaled three thousand excluding the logistics team and the rearguard. While the main camp was also usually set up closer to the rearguard, it had deliberately been moved to the vanguard in this battle.

Altina was clad in heavy armor for once, while Regis wore the same uniform as usual. They were joined by an armor-clad Jerome as well.

"Hmph. Cannons that can't even reach the enemy are only gonna get in the way. Why'd they even bring them?"

"The Seventh Army's strategist likes to play by the book."

Unfortunately, that book didn't say anything about what to do when the enemy brought cannons that performed several tiers above one's own.

"A book? Surely that's right up your alley, then," Jerome snarked.

"Yes, well... while I do enjoy reading textbooks, I won't use the tactics detailed in them."

"Oh?"

"The way I see it, in regard to both offense and defense, the most important thing is to make sure that your enemy can't discern what you intend to do. Not only is it scary not knowing what your foe's next move is, but it makes counteracting them especially hard."

“My thoughts exactly.”

“What’s written in the textbook is probably reasonable, but... just the fact that it breeds predictability makes following it a poor move.”

“Pff...” A rare, amused smile crossed Jerome’s face.

Come to think of it, I think I’m getting more chances to discuss strategy with Jerome... Their discussions hadn’t been limited to specific plans, either—they had gotten to talking about some more abstract concepts, too.

“Ah!” Altina raised her voice. “They’re moving!”

“So it begins...” Regis said with a nod, glancing toward the front line.

As the High Britannian Army slowly closed the distance, the Seventh Army commenced its march to meet them. Their main force consisted of nineteen thousand, but they did not rush the enemy. Instead, they proceeded at a brisk walking pace.

“Aren’t they going to get shot doing that?” Altina asked, cocking her head to the side.

“They are, but there isn’t much they can do about that... Even when going downhill, the furthest a soldier can reasonably sprint is around 5 arpents (357 m). Sure, this doesn’t seem like a time for a leisurely stroll, but they’ll tire out otherwise. They have to save their charge for when they’re within shooting range. Otherwise, the casualties will be greater than anything the cannons can do to them.”

“I see!”

Oh, right... This is probably the first time that Altina’s witnessed two large armies colliding on an open plain.

As the Beilschmidt border regiment strongly utilized the Black Knight Brigade led by the hero Jerome, they employed tactics centered around cavalry, and their numbers weren’t close to anything that could be considered a large army.

“Get a good eyeful, Altina—the Seventh Army supposedly uses their infantry better than any other army in the Empire.”

“Barguesonne did say that I should get a look at what it truly means to fight a

war...”

“...Let’s hope that looking is all we have to do.”

The backs of the Seventh Army grew more and more distant as they continued to advance.

“Do you think they’ll win?” Altina asked.

“If the two armies collide head-on, then yes. Even if High Britannia’s guns and cannons manage to cut our numbers in half—even if the enemy’s weapons are made of a new alloy—I don’t think the highly-trained Seventh Army will lose. However...”

“However?”

“High Britannia’s commander should know that, too. There’s no way he came without a plan.”

At the moment, things were going exactly as Vicente had predicted—the Seventh Army would crush the enemy in direct combat, pincer the forces marching down from the north, and then celebrate a massive victory. Assuming that happened, Regis—as someone who had continuously voiced his doubts—would be labeled a coward, and that would be that.

But the port was assaulted concurrently with the new queen’s coronation. Plus, it was hard to believe that an enemy commander who was thorough enough to also instigate an attack by Belgaria’s other neighboring nations to delay the Empire’s response would do something as drastic as give up his own battlefield.

Once again, Altina tilted her head. “Is there another enemy hiding?”

“I doubt there’ll be an ambush. The Seventh Army probably scouted quite thoroughly, and I know they didn’t let up on their intelligence efforts. Speaking of intelligence...” Regis decided to change the topic. “We’ve figured out who the commander of High Britannia’s southern unit is. His name’s Oswald Coulthard, apparently. He holds the rank of colonel, which would put him on the level of a first-grade combat officer in the Empire. It’s not too high of a position, and he’s still rather young, but it seems their leaders are still moving under his orders.”

“Doesn’t that mean he’s a tactician, then?”

“Sure, anyone can propose a plan regardless of rank. Take me, for instance. But this Oswald fellow seems to be giving the actual orders—based on what our reports say, at least.”

“And if he’s the one giving the orders, that makes him the commander.”

“Right. Though, on paper, their commander is an elderly gentleman who holds the rank of general.”

Even though Oswald had taken charge, he was apparently just a staff officer.

“I don’t get it... How does that work? Is he a high noble or something?”

Military rank was distinctly separated from noble peerage, and the military had its own rigid chain of command—at least, that was how it was supposed to be. In reality, the line between the two could get somewhat muddled. There were times where peerage proved far more important than rank, which was especially the case in Belgaria, where nobles could maintain their own armies.

High Britannia did not allow nobles to have their own personal armies, and Regis hadn’t heard of any cases where someone had been granted command privileges based on pedigree. The reason Oswald carried himself like a commander remained unknown.

“His lineage is still under investigation, and, while this information is highly suspect... there are rumors that he is accompanied by the new queen, Margaret Stillart.”

“What!?”

“In Belgaria, the emperor may go out onto the front line so long as he’s in good health. But High Britannia has been ruled by queens for generations, so that kind of thing is considerably rare there...”

“If what you’re saying is true, then she must be quite the proactive woman. I kinda want to meet her.”

“Yes, preferably in more peaceful times...”

“How skilled do you think she is with a sword?” Altina asked eagerly. Perhaps she was feeling some degree of kinship to the High Britannian queen, as she

really seemed to be looking forward to their potential encounter.

Regis gave a wry smile. "...I don't think she's *that* sort of woman."

Belgaria's royal family was special; Regis hadn't heard anything about the High Britannian royal lineage possessing any superhuman abilities.

"Another interesting thing to note is that High Britannia's southern unit seems to consist entirely of their standing army, while their northern unit marching south is mainly composed of mercenaries. It's standard practice to keep the standing army at the core of any unit and then hire mercenaries to reinforce their ranks, but I think they've kept the two separate for a reason..."

"What reason would that be?"

"A unit made entirely of soldiers from the standing army can be expected to have higher morale and better coordination. Mercenaries, on the other hand, rely more on individual strength. Hm... Perhaps this lack of coordination is why it took their northern unit so long to march south... Ah, but... No, that can't be true."

"Why not?"

"They may be a full unit of mercenaries, but word is that their commander is Mercenary King Gilbert Schweinzeberg."

The name alone caused Altina to knit her brow in an unpleasant scowl. She must have remembered when Eric was shot, and her sword broken. "Weren't they Germanian?"

"They're mercenaries, so anybody can hire them as long as they're willing to pay the right amount. According to our report, the mercenary brigade Renard Pendu makes up the core of the northern unit. Gilbert is far more accomplished than your average commander, so there's no chance that he'd make such an amateurish mistake."

"But the whole unit can't consist of their mercenaries, right?"

"You have a point. I don't have any exact figures, but I'd estimate that Renard Pendu only makes up around a thousand of their troops. The remaining nine thousand are probably mercenaries hired from elsewhere."

“They don’t sound like the type who would obey orders.”

Even with Gilbert leading them, there was no telling whether the other mercenaries that High Britannia had scraped together would listen to him.

“...In that case, I’m sure the southern unit would have marched north to meet them instead. Their men are well disciplined and it would be easy to calculate their movement speed, so that would have been the more appropriate measure.”

“Haven’t they messed up, then?”

“...They’ve deployed thirty thousand troops; I can’t imagine they’d make such a rookie mistake.”

“But their units didn’t meet up in time.”

“That’s correct.”

The battle was already underway. Cannons roared to life as they started their bombardment, the very air seeming to tremble under their ferocious might.

It was a one-sided offensive—it had to be. The enemy could begin their bombardment from 40 arpents (2858 m) away, and it would take the Seventh Army twenty minutes to span this distance. As they made their advance, the troops could do nothing but accept the oncoming onslaught, during which countless men would be shot, injured, and killed. For this reason, foot soldiers had come to know this maneuver as the *marché de la mort*—the death march.

Cannonballs from High Britannia’s Type-41 Elswicks tore through their ranks. They were lumps of solid iron, each one roughly as big as the skull of a child, and one direct hit was enough to kill a soldier instantly.

It was a gruesome sight; scattered limbs and remnants of armor from those who had been struck littered the battlefield, while those who pushed onward were assailed by the devastating blast waves as shells continued to fall around them. This was an era when infantry soldiers marched shoulder to shoulder with their spears, stepping in perfect unison as they continued forward like a wall.

Belgaria’s main concern was losing too many men in the advance; the last

thing they wanted was each soldier having to take on two, or even three combatants by themselves when they reached the enemy's tight-knit formation. To prevent this from happening, the marching troops had to ensure that there were no gaps in their ranks, even while High Britannia's cannonballs—shells that could shatter even a castle's ramparts—rained down upon them.

But physical injury wasn't the only danger—the deafening booms of cannon fire, the agonized screams of their allies, and the fear of impending death all chipped away at the soldiers' spirits. Some cowered and froze in fear, while others tried speeding up so that they could begin the charge sooner. The only thing that kept the crumbling formation firmly held together was the strong encouragement of the commanding officers placed at key points along the advancing line. Their unyielding discipline truly was admirable.

The Seventh Army was used to taking on small nations like the Kingdom of Estaburg, and while they were not easy battles by any means, those enemies were not armed with the latest cannons. The marching soldiers were faced with an unknown threat, but even so, they continued pushing forward.

The distance between the two armies shortened second by second, and eventually Belgaria started to fire back. Despite the bombardment, High Britannia held their position, unmoving. They weren't showing their backs, making it clear that they weren't going to retreat, but they had halted their advance. They were probably buying time before the northern unit arrived.

Belgaria's soldiers continued to advance. 25 arpents (1787 m) remained between them. The Seventh Army had suffered casualties that were devastating beyond words; it was like they were marching on an impenetrable fortress. It was impossible to fire accurately at such a distance, even when using the newest cannons, but the blast waves alone were enough to cause heavy damage.

Soldiers praying for God's salvation suddenly found themselves on His doorstep, and captains barking out orders to continue the advance were instantaneously blown into pieces. The limbs and entrails of allied soldiers flew through the air, and those who lost their nerves and collapsed perished as they were trampled by the troops marching behind them. But even as they stepped over their comrades' corpses, the Belgian Army continued pressing on

through the rain of cannon fire.



As her regiment advanced to fill the gaps left by the Seventh Army's absence, Altina looked over the enduring battle from atop the hill. "Urp..." She clapped a hand over her mouth, her eyes tearing up as she desperately tried to contain her nausea. The action was happening far away enough that it would be hard to make out any details, but, to Altina's misfortune, her eyesight was much greater than that of any ordinary person.

Regis also swallowed down his urge to throw up; they couldn't show too much weakness in front of the troops as they needed to maintain Altina's noble, dignified appearance.

"...This isn't your first time witnessing death, is it?"

"I... I've just never seen anything quite this horrible..."

"Yeah. Me neither."

"Are you okay, Regis?"

"...Do I look okay?"

Regis had always deliberately tried to hide any unrest that he was feeling, but whenever he came out onto the battlefield, he would always be beset by uncontrollable shivers. Even in cases where one side wasn't using the latest cannons, the front line was always abound with tragic sights aplenty—sights that would make anybody scream if they witnessed them in the middle of a town. The very prospect that people were dying was enough to make his mouth go dry, and a simple change of setting didn't immediately make it all right.

No matter who it came to, death was terrifying; it was a devastating, irreversible loss. With each explosive impact, it seemed as though more and more blood was mixing into the air. Regis could feel a new death enter his body with each breath he took, making him reluctant to even breathe at all.

"Hah!" Jerome exclaimed, scattering the morose air. "Quit getting into a rut over every little thing! Be it now or later, here or there, a human's eventually going to croak! It's only a matter of when."

“I know you’re right, but—”

“If you let yourself get caught up thinking about such nonsense, you’ll much sooner be joining them on the other side!”

“...Right.” Regis shook his head. He couldn’t allow himself to be swallowed up by the atmosphere of war. As the border regiment’s strategist, a single lapse of judgment could lead to a great many soldiers, officers, or even Altina herself joining the ranks of the dead.

He had to start thinking straight. His hands trembled out of nervousness and fear, and it was then that Altina reached out and firmly gripped his fingers.

“Regis...”

“Yes? U-Um... Altina...?”

While their guards were some distance away and wouldn’t be able to hear their conversation, they would at least be able to make out what was going on. Regis didn’t know what to say about her grabbing his hand so suddenly.

Yes, certain rumors could have an impact on troop morale... Regis thought as he watched her serious gaze. ...She really is quite beautiful, though. And her hand is so warm.

“I’m fine, Regis... Please, do what you think is best.”

“...Understood.”

He had almost lost his composure, but Jerome’s pragmatism and Altina’s trust had given him a much-needed push. Regis took a deep breath. Even when the wind carried the stench of death, they would need to keep breathing to stay alive, and to make sure that everyone else survived as well. To this end, he made a deliberate effort to harden his heart.

“The High Britannian Army is plotting something... I just know it. At this rate, we’re going to lose,” Regis said. Now more than ever, he needed to figure out their plan and act accordingly. He looked out across the battlefield once more, this time doing his best to drive the idea of soldiers losing their lives from his mind.

Keep your feelings under control. Imagine you’re looking at a chess board.

Think calmly.

As the Seventh Army descended the hill, the square carpet that was their formation had gradually been eaten away by moths. They numbered perhaps sixteen thousand now.

Meanwhile, the High Britannian Army was arranged in a wide semicircle. Their frontmost line was composed of riflemen, behind which was a line of shield bearers. They were gradually moving their cannons back, replacing them with another line of riflemen each time, but as these cannons had such excellent range, the bombardment continued almost uninterrupted.

There had to be a reason for this behavior. Their main camp was likely at the center of their formation—the place most guarded by soldiers in heavy armor.

Regis searched the library in his mind, flipping through page after page... but unfortunately, none of the books he had read contained tactics that accounted for such advanced cannons and guns.

“No, but... This formation... I’ve seen it before... But where...?”

Altina continued to grip Regis’s hand as he mumbled to himself, while Jerome simply waited in silence. Regis was seeking a book that would explain all of the enemy’s actions thus far, but again, these new forms of artillery hadn’t appeared in any of the stories he had read.

Is there really nothing I can do? I don’t know of any tactics that could be used against weapons no one has ever seen before, and I’m useless when I don’t have knowledge to fall back on.

“Where? *Where?* ...Ah! O-Of course! It’s *magic!*”

“Uh... Regis?”

Regis suddenly turned to Altina, whose eyes were open wide in surprise, and declared in all seriousness: “It all makes sense! *I Am the Legendary Wizard!*”

“Wh-What are you saying, Regis!? Is your head on backwards!?”

“Ah, no, that’s the title—*I Am the Legendary Wizard* by Orenburke. He’s an author known for the vast, fantastical worlds he creates, and the army of a magic state from one of his works fought just like this.”

“Y-Yeah?” Altina cocked her head, rather concerned that Regis was suddenly talking about magic. Jerome, meanwhile, was looking at him as though he was a walking heap of garbage.

“Oi, Regis! Is that ‘magic’ stuff going to be of any use in battle? I’m open to anything as long as it’s got some value, but useless trash goes straight in the fire!”

“Yes, of course it’s going to be of use. The particulars may differ, but the key events are the same. In which case, we’re short on time. I’ll explain on the way. Ah, but we had our carriage retreat along with the logistics team...”

Regis had entrusted the luxury carriage he had been gifted to the transporters, who were also taking care of Clarisse. He wasn’t very confident about his stamina, but as he couldn’t ride a horse, Regis would have to march with the infantry soldiers and explain the plan to Altina and Jerome as they rode beside him on horseback. He wasn’t carrying a heavy weapon or wearing any heavy armor that would tire him out, so he was sure that he could manage it... Well, he was hopeful, at least.

“You can ride on Caracarla, then,” Altina suggested, bringing her horse close.

“Is that what you named her?”

“Yep! Isn’t it cute?”

“Sure... But isn’t it a bad idea to have me ride with you...?” Regis asked hesitantly. But for once, Jerome fully supported Altina’s idea.

“Off you go! The princess doesn’t have her famous sword, and when she’s wielding a weapon she’s not used to, she’ll only be a hindrance on the front line. Take Regis, and stay in the rear!”

I really hope this doesn’t lead to any rumors... Regis thought, before nodding in compliance.

“Grr... You’re in cahoots, the lot of you,” Altina grumbled. “Everyone keeps telling me to stay back and watch.”

Had Altina been permitted to act as she pleased, Regis could definitely see her charging to the front line.

“Well, I’m all yours, Altina. I’ll explain the plan along the way.”

“Great!”

“Oi, Regis! You want the troops to advance, yeah!?”

“That’s right. Just down to the center of the hill, staying out of cannon range. Once there, we’ll take a detour. It’ll be another five minutes or so before we know whether we’ll need to move left or right, so for now, just march forward.”

“Five minutes? Tsk, you and your nonsense...” But despite his complaints, Jerome leapt onto his trusted steed, raising his cavalry lance *Les Cheveux d’une Dame* up into the air. “Alright, men—naptime’s over! We’re marching forward!”

“S-Sir, yes, sir!”

It seemed that a lot of soldiers had expected to remain on standby, as their response was tinged with surprise and came a little later than usual.

“Well, what are you waiting for!? Our strategist just proclaimed himself to be a legendary wizard, so unless you want to be turned into a frog, you’ll start moving! Follow the princess!”

The soldiers began to stir. Rumors had been going around for a while now. Barbarians being turned into allies, the impregnable Fort Volks being seized, a blazing bog turning an entire brigade of knights to cinders... Was this man a monster or a wizard?

Ever since its early days, Belgaria had only worshiped and revered what they saw as the one true God. By the tenets of this religion, monsters were seen as enemies of God, while wizards were wise sages who offered counsel to true believers.

However, these sages did more than just offer advice—they also carried out divine retribution unto fools who turned their backs on the holy word, and, to this end, were particularly known for turning villains into frogs. As children, many of these soldiers would have most likely been told stories of misbehaving kids being turned into frogs by a wizard.

But that seemed to be the extent of what wizards did as far as religion was concerned. *In fiction, they get more interesting spells like “Draconic Lightning”*

and “Unholy Burst.” Overall, they’re just a bit more transcendent.

That said, to most soldiers, the term “wizard” meant someone from the holy scriptures. Jerome wasn’t usually one to jest, and so the more religious ones among them paled.

“I-Is he for real!?”

“A wizard, he says...”

“I knew it!”

The soldiers could be heard quietly whispering among themselves.

“Hold on! That’s just the title of—!”

Regis attempted to correct the misunderstanding but was interrupted partway through as Altina forced him onto her horse, using her tremendous strength to hoist him up as easily as one might move a small piece of luggage. The exact same thing had happened last time, too, and all Regis could do now was cling on and pray.

Altina gracefully leaped up behind him. “Looks like you’re getting used to riding!”

“This is definitely not how you’re supposed to ride a horse...”

At that, Altina took a deep breath, then yelled to her soldiers at the top of her lungs. “Is everyone ready!?”

“UOOH!!”

This time, they all replied at once, their voices coming together in a mighty cry that could have shaken the earth.

“The enemy is planning something dastardly, but Regis will handle all the complicated stuff! Just put your all into it, and march!”

“UOOOOH!!”

In a grand gesture, Altina drew the longsword at her hip and pointed it forward, lightly pressing her heels into the chestnut warhorse Caracarla’s flank to get her to walk.

The only thing blocking Regis’s view of the battlefield below was the back of

the horse's head. Around it he could see the large hill leading into an open plain, a rising cloud of dust, and the backs of his fellow soldiers pressing on.

The horse started to move faster, three thousand soldiers following behind. Meanwhile, Jerome's horse kept pace beside them, fortifying their outer ranks with cavalry from the Black Knight Brigade.

Swept up in the soldiers' invigorating cries and the quickening clatter of hooves, Regis could feel his heart racing.

Chapter 4: The Sun Begins to Set

The resonant thunder of cannon fire echoed across the battlefield, interspersed with the screams and yells of men. High Britannia's southern unit—the First Division—were continuing their scathing bombardment, but this did little to deter Belgaria's Seventh Army, who continued to march toward them.

They were about 1000 yards (914 m) away—still too great of a distance for the High Britannian Army to start using their rifles. If angled properly, their shots might have been able to reach, but a lead bullet shot upward would not be enough to take out an armored soldier.

While the new Snider had an increased shooting range compared to their old muskets, this only went as far as 200 yards (182 m) at most, and it was unknown how many shots they would be able to get in while the imperial army charged them.

The Belgarian Army came ever closer. Having lost so many comrades to cannon fire, they moved like a wild beast driven only by rage and revenge. Their murderous intent almost seemed to appear as a pitch-black shadow around them. What's more, even though High Britannia had managed to kill thousands in the bombardment, the imperial army still outnumbered them.

The newest Elswicks were by no means omnipotent—in fact, they would be near unusable once the enemy was in close enough range, as the risk of friendly fire would be too great. The cannons could be angled to shoot over their own troops, which would allow them a minimum firing distance of roughly 500 yards (457 m), but their immense weight meant that they took a long time to reposition, and aiming them any lower would undoubtedly lead to unwanted casualties.

The monster-like visages of enemy troops could finally be made out in detail, trampling over death and devastation to deliver it in kind.

A bugle sounded, and the platoon commanders started issuing orders.

“Ready! Aim!”

The riflemen on the front line loaded their Sniders, swinging open a hinged lid on top of the barrels—the breechblock—to reveal the chamber where the metal cartridge was inserted. Loading was complete once the breeches were closed and double-checked to make sure they were locked, at which point they could be aimed at the enemy. The simplicity and brevity of the process was worlds apart from the old flintlock models.

The soldiers took aim at the Empire’s ranks. Their guns felt several times heavier than they had during practice; their trembling arms and legs were making it hard to keep steady. They didn’t feel guilty about the killing—in fact, most of the High Britannian troops saw foreigners as no different than beasts. It was the knowledge and the fear that they would be the ones losing their lives if they didn’t pull the trigger that snatched away their rational thought.

The imperial army continued to advance, but the order to open fire didn’t come. The High Britannian troops grew more anxious by the minute. Once their guns were up, these men weren’t even permitted to wipe the sweat from their brow.

Behind this line of infantrymen was the First Division’s main camp, where a man in white knights’ clothing was stationed. He was tall with proportionately long limbs; his hair was ashen gray, and his eyes were an icy blue. His right wrist was wrapped in a bandage, but this couldn’t be seen under his uniform.

This was Oswald Coulthard. While he only held the position of strategy officer, he essentially conducted himself as the commander. He had just finished receiving a report from a subordinate, to whom he gave an understanding nod before responding.

“It seems that things are proceeding quite smoothly... In that case, as per the schedule, have the riflemen open fire when the enemy is 200 yards (182 m) away. The imperial army will have already started their charge by then, so take care not to panic and shoot too early.”

His tone was courteous, even when speaking to his men.

“Yes, sir!” The messenger touched his right hand to his temple in salute

before making a dash for the front unit.

A general and several other high-ranking staff officers were also stationed at the main camp, but they were all just nervously watching the enemy. They weren't particularly competent as far as Oswald was concerned, but they had been granted considerably important roles, and were thus meaningful pieces to him.

The state of the war was progressing smoothly. Soon, the crucial moment that would decide the victor would be upon them.

That was when Oswald heard someone say his name from behind him.

"Hey, Oswald... Aren't you going to start shooting?"

The listless voice came from a cabriolet—a light, two-wheeled carriage for two. It was small enough to be pulled by a human, but was instead fastened to a single horse. While the carriage was painted an inconspicuous black, its silver ornaments and silk interior made it obvious that this was the vehicle of a noble. And inside, on her sofa throne, a beautiful young woman was seated with one knee drawn up.

Her skirt was raised enough to reveal her pale legs, and her scarlet dress would have greatly exposed both her shoulders and chest had she not also been wearing a white shawl on top. Her glossy black hair flowed down her torso like a waterfall, and as she narrowed her amber eyes, her expression became similar to a mischief-loving cat.

She was Margaret Stillart, the new queen of High Britannia.



“Oswald, you really should just start shooting already. I’m sure our new guns will be able to reach them from here. I’ve grown weary of the sound of cannon fire.”

It was true that the bullets would travel far enough to reach the approaching Belgian soldiers, but there was no guarantee that they would actually strike their targets. And even if they did manage to, it was very unlikely that the injuries would be lethal; the enemy was simply too far away.

These new guns had two major flaws:

First of all, the metal bullets took considerable time and labor to manufacture, so High Britannia did not have many in reserve. Firing in an arc was always an option to increase the firing distance of rifles and cannons, but it was much harder to shoot accurately while doing so. Oswald wanted to get in as many shots as possible before the enemy reached them, but as ammunition was in such short supply, he needed to avoid wasting rounds. For this reason, it was necessary that he wait until the enemy had started their charge before giving the order to open fire.

Second, the bullets scraped away at the spiraling grooves carved on the inside of the barrel—known as the rifling—when fired, which lowered the gun’s durability compared to smooth barrels.

I cannot open fire so recklessly just because Her Majesty is bored, but...

Oswald reverently lowered his head. “You ask for me to begin firing? Certainly. The words of the wise Queen Margaret are akin to a revelation from God. They are the flame that drives away the darkness that is ignorance from one as crudely unenlightened as I. Indeed, were this petty officer to equate it to something, it would be like sailing the seas without a moon or stars to guide me, only to come across a lone lighthouse that—”

“Just fire already.”

“As you wish.”

Oswald gave a deep bow, then beckoned over a messenger who had been waiting quietly nearby. The young messenger ran up and saluted, ready to receive an order.

“An order for the line of riflemen,” Oswald began. “Please open fire at once. If you all run out of ammunition, then split down the middle and make a detour around our unit as you retreat. At that point, the second line should then step forward to take your place.”

Had they followed the plan, it was near impossible that High Britannia would have run out of bullets; the charging enemy would either reach their ranks or crumble beforehand. They had already practiced what to do on the off chance that they did run out of ammunition, but this unlikely outcome was starting to seem more and more likely—after all, they were about to start opening fire on the enemy from a much greater distance than they had accounted for.

The young messenger looked doubtful. He repeated the entire order to verify that he had memorized it, then loudly proclaimed, “Thus are the details of my message! Shall I proceed, sir?”

The officers in the main camp started murmuring to each other nervously, but not a single one spoke up against the decision. This was what made them pieces—not assets—in Oswald’s eyes.

As the disgruntled whispers continued, the young messenger spoke up again. “Err... Do you really want me to deliver that order? I reckon the enemy’s still pretty far away...”

“Oh? Is the messenger questioning an order from this petty officer? An order that is in accordance with the wishes of Her Highness, the supreme Queen Margaret? What is your name? Where do you come from?”

“Erk! I-I’m... Lance Corporal William McColley. Born and raised in Queensthames, sir.”

Queensthames was the city that housed the royal palace of Queenstower. If this young messenger had been born there, then that meant he was probably the son of some well-off family, and a true High Britannian in heart and mind. He was probably around eighteen years old.

Oswald glanced over at Margaret, who was staring back at him rather amusedly. Not just the firing order, but the entire war with Belgaria was simply a means to stave off her boredom, and having her demand questioned by the likes of a mere messenger was simply a small, entertaining bonus. However, she

was quick to grow weary of such one-off occurrences, and was prone to seeking out cruel conclusions to them that would make everyone around her scowl in disgust.

Oswald pointed toward the enemy army. “Worry not—this order is just, and shall lead our forces to victory. Please fulfill your duty and pass it on.”

“Understood, sir!” At that, the young orderly, William, ran off. A few moments later, the riflemen started to open fire.

The enemy was approximately 500 yards (457 m) away—quite a bit further than the 200 yards (182 m) they were originally going to start shooting at. They would need to prepare to move soon.

The cabriolet only seated two people, meaning one of them would have to drive. Once Oswald had climbed in, taking the leftmost seat to accommodate the longsword on his hip, Margaret let out a delighted laugh. She immediately snuggled up to him, grabbing his right arm and pulling it into her chest, forcing Oswald to hold the reins using just one hand.

“My humblest apologies; the carriage will be a little shaky. I hope you can forgive me for the inconvenience.”

“Fufufu... You think I’m a real pain, don’t you, Oswald?”

“...What might you be referring to? You believe that this petty, lowly officer sees the magnificent Queen Margaret as a pain? What could have possibly transpired for me to be accused of such insolence?”

“I mean, I *do* keep intruding on your grand plans... Surely you’re annoyed that I’ve ruined everything. You see me as a stupid pussycat who makes a mess of the house whenever you leave me home alone.”

She was so self-aware, and yet continued to interfere... This girl clearly wasn’t normal—after all, losing this war would mean death.

Oswald shook his head. “This petty officer’s sole reason for existing is to carry out the one and only Queen Margaret’s divine will. If Her Majesty were to reach out her hand to accomplish a task, would her fingers ever voice their opposition? No, that would be simply unheard of.”

“Hm? You mean to say that you’re like my fingers?”

“That is correct.”

“Fufufu... You say that, and yet you never touch me. Isn’t that strange? If you’re a part of my own body, then where might these reservations come from?”

Margaret looked up at Oswald, moving her face close enough that he could feel her breath touch his cheek. While Oswald was wearing a full military uniform, Margaret was in nothing more than a thin silk dress and a light shawl, so her body heat could easily be felt as she pressed herself against him. Her skirt had rolled up her raised leg, exposing her pale thigh.

A heated breath leaked from Margaret’s lips as she whispered in his ear. “Hey... A lot of people are dying.”

“That is correct.”

“...It’s making me all hot and bothered.”

“I see... Well, we are only halfway through May. All this exposure to the cool air must be taking a toll on your health, so please, for the sake of peace and prosperity in our country, take extra care of yourself.”

Oswald reached into his seat pocket and pulled out a silk lap blanket embroidered with the flag of High Britannia: two red stripes across a white background. Margaret puffed out her cheeks as he draped it over her knees, clearly dissatisfied.

“Hmph.”

“The time has come. Now, let us intercept the Belgarian Army.”

“Hm. Am I going to see anything interesting?”

To his mild surprise, Oswald found his lips curling into a smile. *I see... So I am sharing in Her Majesty’s elation.*

“There will be much to see, and it will all prove that spears and swords have no place on the modern-day battlefield. War has changed, and the total annihilation of the antiquated imperial army shall prove that.”

“You know, Oswald...”

“Yes, Your Majesty?”

“Fufufu... You never give the most important orders when I’m around.”

“...That is definitely not true. I have simply delegated the finer details to First Lieutenant Glenda Graham. That is all there is to that matter.”

“Hm...” Margaret offered no more than a small noise in response, reaching out her hand and pressing a finger against Oswald’s lips.



The Seventh Army’s fighting spirit had reached its climax. Chief Strategist Vicente rode atop his trusted steed, following closely behind his foot soldiers. He was clad in light, silver-colored armor, and brandished a sword of dark steel. Beside him, the commanding lieutenant general Bargesonne urged on his black warhorse in a show of expert horsemanship not expected of a man as old as he was.

Despite being a noble, Bargesonne detested unnecessary expenses and would make use of whatever scraps he could. Then, once those scraps were unusable, he would have them repaired so that he could continue using them; even when they had deteriorated to a point where they seemed to be beyond hope, he would work his wit to somehow keep them operational. This was a philosophy that had worked for him throughout his entire career thus far.

This mindset even applied to the plate armor he was currently wearing: it had been gifted to him thirty-five years prior so that he would look presentable during his first campaign, and while its design was now antiquated, he continued to wear and maintain it. Plate armor was expensive, so this behavior was expected of regular knights who would usually pass their armor down to the next generation as a family heirloom, but Bargesonne was the head of a duke household—it was expected that someone in his position would simply have their armor remade whenever it showed signs of wear.

Ten years ago, back when Emperor Liam XV had played a much more active role in the nation’s affairs, a parade had been held to evaluate the Seventh Army. In all truth, it was more of a show than an inspection, as the army would

simply march down the main street of the town they were stationed in. Not only was His Majesty himself going to be in attendance, but also the nobles and commoners had gathered for the spectacle.

It was normal to wear elaborate, decorative attire to these events, and a general such as Bargesonne would surely want his weapon and armor to be no less impressive than a fine work of art. And so, a great number of merchants decided to seize this wonderful opportunity, touting their services like their very lives were on the line. But Bargesonne simply drove them away, firmly declaring that “A man’s vanity does not keep a nation safe.”

As their commander had decided to put on the same old armor he always wore, the men of the Seventh Army didn’t dare to dress themselves up; the vast majority just gave their usual iron armor a good polish and took part in the parade wearing that.

The nobles from the capital snickered among themselves at the abject lack of elegance. “How can one have dignity without beauty?” they scoffed.

But when Emperor Liam XV was asked for his opinion, he merely answered, “I have seen many armies in my time, but this is the first one that is truly going to war.” Was he praising them for their extreme discipline, or was he perhaps criticizing their uncouth attire? One could surely argue either way.

No matter how many years passed, Bargesonne’s stance remained unchanged; frugality and practicality were as important to him as the blood that coursed through his veins. He valued tradition, respected pedigree, and, above all, revered consistency, for a consistent world was one in which the Empire would never fall.

These values were the reason he had appointed the still-young Vicente as his chief strategist. Vicente’s father had served as Bargesonne’s previous chief strategist and close aid for many years, and while they had admittedly only ever fought against the small nations in the east, he had proven to be both indomitable and undefeated as a tactician. Bargesonne expected the same indomitability from Vicente, and enough had happened in the three years since the young man had been appointed to convince him that these expectations had not been misplaced.

This engagement with the High Britannian Army was the perfect opportunity to make Vicente a household name—not only on the eastern front, but across the entire empire. He was a confident strategist, so much so that the troops and officers of the Seventh Army fully believed they were going to come out victorious.

A scout sprinted over to Bargesonne. “Report! Our vanguard has crossed the 7 arpent (500 m) line!”

Bargesonne gave a nod. “Very good.”

“Even with the latest cannons, there is nothing they can do to hinder our advance,” Vicente said, unsurprised that his strategy was proceeding so smoothly.

But no sooner had the words passed his lips than an unexpected sound echoed across the battlefield. It was a loud *crack*, like a massive dry branch had just been snapped—a sharp contrast to the heavy thundering of the High Britannian cannons.

Gunfire!?

Vicente was stunned. For a moment, he was certain that his heart had stopped. He focused his gaze on the enemy, and noticed white smoke rising from the guns held by their front line. “Inconceivable! They’ve started firing already!?” he exclaimed.

Bargesonne narrowed his eyes. “None of our reports mentioned that these new firearms had this much range...”

These guns were beyond all expectations; assuming that this wasn’t just a bluff, their firing range had to be more than double what the Seventh Army’s intel had suggested. Vicente had anticipated perhaps five thousand casualties at most, but now there was a good chance that this number would be twice as high.

But changing course here wasn’t an option—not only would the Seventh Army’s defeat be all but inevitable, but Vicente would be deemed fully accountable for having drafted and coordinated such a naïve plan. Sweat soaked his clothes. His stomach started to churn and he swallowed back the bile

rising in his throat, burning his windpipe and leaving a bitter taste in his mouth.

“...How many casualties have we suffered so far?”

“Someone go and take a look!”

On Bargesonne's order, one of the knights whipped his horse and raced to the front. All the while, the sound of gunfire continued. Just how many men had fallen? How many more would follow?

But when the knight returned, he looked terribly unconcerned. “Damages are light, sir! There is nothing worth reporting!”

A wave of relief washed over the senior officers gathered, striking Vicente harder than anyone else. In his head, he was practically jumping for joy as he cursed the enemy army. *All that worry over nothing! You absolute buffoons! High Britannian blockheads!*

“Ha... It seems that our advance was so intense that the enemy lost their nerve and ended up making a foolish mistake. Or perhaps they simply don't understand the basics of warfare.”

“So their guns really couldn't reach us. How... anticlimactic.” Rather than looking relieved, Bargesonne actually seemed quite displeased by the enemy commander's failed ploy.

“Oh? Were you hoping for a decisive battle in which both sides put everything on the line, sir?”

“Defeating an oblivious fresh recruit is nothing to be proud of.”

“Well, there's little we can do about that. It just goes to show that the High Britannian Army is little more than a gathering of new conscripts. We'll proudly display their corpses as proof that we have defended our great nation.”

“I was hoping for an enemy with backbone. It's been quite some time...”

The commander had full confidence in himself, longing for a far more formidable foe, while his men burst into laughter at the enemy's overeagerness. An anxious air still hung over the troops due to the considerable losses they had taken from the cannons, but everyone was now certain that any result other than victory was impossible.

Vicente had been nervous for quite some time now, but even he patted his chest in relief. “Then we shall proceed on schedule.”

“Indeed. There is no need for us to match the enemy’s failure in kind. Make certain there are no fools among us who panic and decide to begin the charge prematurely.”

“Understood.”

On Bargesonne’s order, Vicente called in a messenger. “Relay this directive: Troops are to maintain their current speed until further orders are given! Any who take independent action will be harshly reprimanded!”

“Yes, sir!” The messenger thumped his right fist against his chest in salute, then ran off.

The roar of gunfire continued. The Seventh Army would no doubt suffer considerable casualties once they were close enough, but their enemy’s actions were working to their advantage—it was harder to load bullets into a gun that was red-hot from repeated firing, and barrels that ended up bending from the heat could hardly be expected to hit their mark.

Bargesonne firmly squeezed his horse’s reins, certain of victory.

Soon, the distance between the two front lines was only 4 arpents (286 m). Injury and death had brought the Seventh Army down from nineteen thousand men to fifteen thousand, while the High Britannian Army had suffered no casualties and remained at ten thousand. But this didn’t seem to have weakened the Belgarian soldiers’ certainty that they would win.

Bargesonne raised his hand. “Charge.”

The bugler immediately began to sound the assault, but was quickly drowned out as frenzied cries tore the heavens asunder—screams as primal as the roar of a wild animal. The air seemed to shake harder than it ever had from the cannon fire, and the ground rumbled so ferociously as the assault troops trampled across the battlefield that even Vicente could feel it atop his horse.

“Move! Move!” The officers urged the troops forward, and, like starved beasts released from their cages, they charged toward the enemy with spears in hand. The second and third lines of soldiers were running closely behind,

followed by the heavily armored soldiers defending the main camp.

Barguesonne whipped his horse into a gallop, and Vicente beside him did the same.



As the death rate of assault troops was terrifyingly high, their ranks were often composed of sinners or farmers who couldn't pay their taxes. Dukas, who would turn thirty this year, was no exception—his fields had been ravaged by a pest infestation, and the financial hardships that resulted had ended in him being forced to join the military.

Why did such a huge battle have to happen the one bloody year I couldn't afford to pay up? I really am outta luck...

While the imperial army was known for its strength, that was mostly due to its overwhelming numbers and well-trained standing soldiers. Neither changed the fact that spears and bullets were lethal.

As soon as the charge began, the man running beside Dukas was shot. He was a good-natured fellow who had willingly shared the salt he brought from his hometown back when they were in training together. A single bullet to the throat was all it had taken to kill him. A short while later, the voice belonging to the head of the platoon—a man who had generously offered Dukas some fruit when he caught a cold—disappeared.

Everyone was dying.

Dukas pictured the face of his wife, who was waiting for him back home. She was pregnant with their fourth child, and had energetically waved as she told him to come home safe. He remembered his three beautiful children, and his elderly parents as well.

“GRAAAAAAH!!”

He screamed at the top of his lungs, trying to drown out his fear as he continued to charge. His iron spear and chain armor felt so heavy, but stopping would mean certain death. He was growing closer to the enemy, and each step made him an easier target. The last thing he wanted was to become a sitting duck. That was why he had to take down the enemy. Unless he killed this man,

he would be shot.

His breathing turned shallow. Once upon a time, he had been so impatiently waiting for the order to charge... but now he suspected that it had been issued too early. There was still a ways to go before they reached the enemy camp.

The soldier beside him ran ahead. *Am I not running fast enough?* Dukas wondered, doubting himself. He knew that a slow soldier was a soldier in the way, and that those who failed to keep up could expect a spear in the back. He didn't want to die, but he could feel his legs tangling beneath him. If he fell, he would be trampled by those charging behind. But that was far too dishonorable—in fact, it was deemed the most deplorable way to die.

Dukas was terrified that he would be deemed nothing more than a hindrance and then stabbed by the soldiers running behind him. *Don't write me off just yet... I can still run! I just stumbled over a rock, that's all. I can still run, I tell you! I can keep up!*

The enemy soldiers were in sight. They screamed something as they fired their guns.

I see the smoke, so... Ha, the bullet didn't hit me? You lousy shot, where are you aiming!?

If what he had been taught during training was right, then the reloading process that was about to follow would be a long one. His foe would need to stand his gun vertically, then insert gunpowder and a bullet, ram them both down the barrel using a ramrod, then pour gunpowder into the priming pan where the flint would spark and...

That wasn't the case. The High Britannian Army's vanguard, paying absolutely no heed to the scorching-hot gun barrel, opened the breechblock and inserted a round from their pocket. They were aiming their weapons again in no time at all.

Goddammit, you've gotta be screwing with me! It's that easy!? Why the hell is it that easy!? You cowards! You bloody cowards!

The guns fired once again, and a sudden, excruciating burning sensation spread through Dukas's left ear.

H-He hit me? I've been shot!?

Something detestably hot poured down his nape, accompanied by a sound—a burbling from his left side, like he was standing near a waterfall. What was happening?

For a brief moment, he could have sworn that he heard someone scream, “No, don’t stop!” And so, his legs continued to move. He knew that he couldn’t stop running; the moment he did, he would be trampled to death by his own allies.

“Get back at them!” a different voice cried out.

That’s right. My ear hurts like hell. I’ve gotta return this pain. I need to avenge my fallen comrades!

The enemy soldiers were close enough that Dukas could see the whites of their eyes. He remembered the soldier who had ran ahead, only to realize that he was nowhere to be seen.

Where did he go...? No, there’s no time to think about that.

His foe was right before him—a young soldier with blond hair and blue eyes, stationed on the High Britannian Army’s front line.

This is the enemy I need to kill. He’s holding up his gun. He’s going to shoot me again.

...He missed. Hah! How are you expecting to hit anything when your hands are shaking that much!?

The young soldier pulled another round out of his pocket as he once again opened the rifle’s breech... but the bullet slipped through his fingers. Dukas immediately thrust with his spear, screaming so loudly that his throat ached.

“Meurs, salaud!”

Its tip extended toward the young man’s torso, then pierced straight through his stomach, right below his ribs. The spear went in much easier than it had gone into the wood he had practiced on during his training, but offered more resistance than a bundle of straw. Then came a sudden, hard impact; he had struck bone.

«Gah...» Bright red blood spurted from the soldier's mouth as he let out a subdued cry. His eyes were open wide, frozen in terror.

Dukas immediately retracted his spear; he wouldn't be able to deal with the other enemies while it was embedded in the young man's stomach. Blood gushed from the deep, open wound as soon as the spearhead came out, and the enemy soldier immediately crumpled to the ground.

«Momma...» One final word leaked from his lips, and then he moved no more.

A fierce sandstorm continued to surge in Dukas's left ear as it throbbed with pain. *It's all because this bastard shot me... Wait, was it even his bullet? Doesn't matter. On to the next one.*

Behind High Britannia's front line of riflemen was a row of soldiers carrying oversized shields. With only a few steps to build up momentum, Dukas thrust his spear forward once again. It simply let off a dull *twang* as it struck the shield, not piercing through.

It chipped the tip!?

The enemy soldier retreated back a step.

You're running away!?

If they allowed the enemy to retreat, then the imperial army would have to go through another *marché de la mort* to approach them. The Belgarian bugle sounded once again, signaling them to continue their charge.

When the enemy pulls back, march forth! March forth!

“HRAAAAAAH!!”

«You damn brute!» A curse in Britannian came from beyond the shield.

“Kill them! Don't let them get away!”

Dukas thrust his spear forward again, but his attack was again blocked by the barricade. Then, another gunshot rang out. Were they firing from behind their shields? Another ally was taken out.

The enemy retreated, farther and farther back. Normally, stabbing a fleeing

foe in the back was easier than hunting a beast in the backwaters, and yet... these large, sturdy shields, reinforced by the gunmen who were firing through the gaps between them, seemed almost impenetrable.

“Damn it! Damn it! Don’t run! Die! You cowards!”

«Retreat! Retreat! Pick up the pace!»

Dukas boldly stepped forward. *Like hell I’m going through the march of death again. I have a family waiting for me. All I need are my fields!*

“Tsaaaah!!”

He slammed his full bodyweight against the shield, pushing it over. This was his opportunity—there was a gap in the enemy’s ranks. He immediately thrust out his spear, its tip just barely skimming the shield’s rim before sinking into the chest of the enemy soldier hiding behind it.

«Guh!?»

The enemy line grew rowdy.

«I’m down!»

«Fall back! Fall back!»

«Close the gap! Don’t break formation!»

Seeing the opening, one of Dukas’s comrades trampled over the fallen soldier, throwing down his spear and pulling out the sword at his waist. Perhaps he thought that, so long as there was a gap in the enemy’s formation, their tall, hard-to-maneuver shields could easily be dealt with by slashing the soldiers behind them from the side. But the Belgian soldier was quickly met with a wave of concentrated fire from even farther back, and a bullet tore through his head before he could slice even a single foe.

The hole that Dukas had made quickly disappeared as the shield bearers closed in from both sides. Their pace at which they were retreating hadn’t changed. He was back where he had started, and yet, for some reason, Dukas found himself laughing.

“Pff... Hahah! I’ll kill even more of you, you cowards! I just need to do the same thing! That’s all I’ve gotta do!”

Once again, he threw himself at one of the shields, keeping his spear at the ready. So long as he lunged at the soldier behind it head-on, using him as cover, he wouldn't need to worry about the bullets. His weight was enough to knock over the shield bearer, and, with a triumphant laugh, he thrust out his weapon once more.

“Fwahahahahah!”

That's the third one! We can do this! We're gonna take down their shields!

The next moment, another scream was raised—this time, in Belgian. “We're surrounded!”

We're surrounded? Who's surrounding us?

Dukas couldn't understand what the man meant; the enemy troops with their shields were standing right in front of him.

The sound of gunfire continued to thunder all around.



“Our men keep fleeing, Oswald. Are we going to lose?”

“The elegant Queen Margaret need only take care not to bite her tongue. We will stand our ground soon.”

“Oh dear, so you don't need to run away anymore?” Margaret asked, brushing off some dust with her hand as she continued pulling Oswald's right arm into her chest.

“We were never running away; these movements were all a part of my plan. Our forces face Belgaria's assault troops head on while falling back—that is the role played by our shield bearers. Meanwhile, the units behind them divide themselves in two, then flank the enemy on both sides.”

The High Britannian army took on the shape of a “U,” enclosing the Belgian troops.

“When a pie crust is too thin, its contents will burst out, Oswald,” Margaret said quizzically, cocking her head to one side. While this girl often acted like a fool, she truly did understand war. As a child, she was too wise, too skillful, and too blessed—so much so that she quickly grew tired of the world. Perhaps this

was only a matter of course.

Oswald nodded. “Certainly. Not only is the Belgarian Army known for its unrivaled strength, but we are attempting an encirclement while we are at a numerical disadvantage. Most might consider this to be a terrible move, but I would argue that they are too caught up in the era of the sword and spear. Our army carries firearms that can be reloaded in no time at all. A spear can be blocked by a shield, but what can block a bullet? With enemies closing in on both sides, the Empire’s army will be forced to regroup. In a battle of spears, they could simply have those on the outermost edge hold the enemy back while those inside changed their formation... but how effective would that plan be if they’re being assailed by bullets?”

“Fufufu... I can’t help but laugh as I imagine you at your desk, racking your brain over these silly notions.”

“That is more than this petty officer deserves. I am unable to bear the shame of having my sorry state weigh on the mind of the gentle Queen Margaret. Let us pray that this plan is more than just an empty theory that only works on paper.”

“You sound confident.”

“This is a war held in the name of the radiant Queen Margaret. This petty officer spared no effort in his preparations.”

Oswald wasn’t one to rely on theories and speculation alone; the effectiveness of using shield bearers alongside the latest firearms had already been thoroughly tested during High Britannia’s internal conflicts. He had provoked a rebellion in a bordering territory with which they already had strained relations, and then sent in his riflemen under the guise of suppressing it. In essence, Oswald had been using the people of High Britannia as test subjects, and he was deliberately making sure that this despicable truth didn’t reach Margaret’s ears...

As far as Oswald was concerned, it was a necessary sacrifice. New weapons could be used quite freely, but exposing a new strategy too early would lower its practical value; testing it on other nations just wasn’t an option. This time around, he had opted to use shield-bearing soldiers as living—or, perhaps by

this point, dead—impediments, but anything would work so long as it slowed the enemy's advance. Once the tide of battle turned, even the corpses of the Belgarians' own allies would become obstacles working to his advantage.

"That's a big no-no, Oswald," Margaret whispered into his ear. "To think that you would spark a civil war, killing the nation's—no, *my* people for your little games..."

"...That is..."

"I won't forgive you for monopolizing something so amusing..." she continued, before biting down on his ear with enough force that Oswald feared it was about to be ripped off.

"I-I hope you do not find it audacious of me to presume that you are referring to our recent efforts to suppress internal turmoil... I must offer my humblest apologies for being so late to report on the matter. I will henceforth exercise the utmost caution to curtail the loss of our breth—!?"

His words were cut short as Margaret swiped her tongue over his bite wound. A stinging pain coursed through his ear, and the sound of gunfire was quickly muffled by a wet squelching noise.

Squirch... "Dear me, you're bleeding..." *Slurp...*

"As it was done by the sacred Queen Margaret, I could not be happier. Even if you were to rip out my entrails, this petty officer would consider it a blessing."

"Hey, Oswald..."

"Yes, Your Majesty?"

"How many people have we killed?"

"...Four thousand before the Belgian Army began their charge, two thousand during... and I would anticipate another three thousand since our troops encircled them."

"Don't withhold information from me, Oswald."

"My deepest apologies. We are also expecting two thousand deaths on our side."

“Oh, that’s quite low...” Margaret responded, sounding disappointed. Even Oswald wasn’t sure whether he should apologize for that.

The High Britannian vanguard had been deliberately composed of line infantry, both to cut down the number of Belgarian soldiers during their advance and to bait them into charging, Oswald had estimated that their death count would be close to one thousand, but once they swapped places with the shield bearers to protect them from the Belgarian spears, they would be able to kill three times that number of imperial troops.

Simultaneously pitting the Empire’s spearmen against shield bearers and riflemen put the High Britannian Army at a clear advantage—while a spear could be blocked by a shield, a bullet could pierce even the thickest parts of plate armor. The Belgarian Army had surely thought that their better-trained soldiers would lead them to an indisputable victory in close-quarters combat, even if they lost their numerical advantage during the charge, but the reality was that the High Britannian Army had completely overwhelmed them.

Oswald had even prepared a second line of shield bearers and gunmen in case the first one crumbled, though these troops were intended to serve as little more than a distraction while the other soldiers flanked the enemy. Meanwhile, the cannons had been repositioned so that they could now begin firing again, and the Belgarian Army’s tight-knit formation made this bombardment especially effective.

There are around ten thousand Belgarian soldiers left, and eight thousand High Britannians...

Oswald had to laud the enemy forces; they were clearly in an unfavorable predicament, and yet they continued to fight with order and discipline. When he had tested these tactics during internal disputes, the opposing army would always flee in fear of the gunfire the moment that the assault troops fell. The Belgarian Army would have no doubt realized that their defeat was inevitable by now, but even so, they fought on.

Such wonderful morale. What thorough drilling they must have gone through.

Oswald was overcome by a slight feeling of intoxication. It was as though he had stumbled across a ceramic masterpiece—one that was the product of an

unspeakable amount of time and passion—and could take great pleasure in shattering it with his own two hands.



Vicente let out a gasp as the Seventh Army was driven into numerical inferiority. It was his role to compose the plans, but when it came to the battle itself, he was no more than the commander's adviser. The fact that he had fallen victim to unforeseen circumstances already made him second-rate as a strategist, and if the entire Seventh Army crumbled as a result, then he would be unable to escape punishment—assuming he even escaped the battle alive, that is.

“Don't falter! Show them the true might of an imperial soldier!” Bargesonne barked.

“Yes, sir!”

But despite their spirited reply, those who answered were blocked by the enemy's shields. There was little they could do to turn the tide of war, and, as if that wasn't bad enough, their main camp was also being assailed by gunfire. The Seventh Army was being fired at from three sides, and while many soldiers were lucky enough to avoid the storm of bullets, they all knew that it was only a matter of time before one found its mark. What's more, the enemy's shots were oftentimes fatal, while it took the imperial army a number of successful strikes to take out just one enemy.

Vicente's lip quivered. “Th-This can't be... Aren't Belgarian soldiers unparalleled on the open plains?”

Up until this battle—no, up until the moment when their assault troops had been mowed down by the enemy's line infantry—he had envisioned a glimmering future ahead, in which he would be showered with words of praise and admiration. But now, that once certain future had been sealed away in darkness.

“This... is all wrong...”

While he could understand being late to react when fighting in the forest, on the sea, or on other unfamiliar terrain, this was a clash on the open plains.

Belgaria's infantry was supposed to be undefeatable.

Didn't we have an absolute advantage? Haven't we won all of our battles on the eastern front? ...What were we so proud of?

"...That's why... I proposed and believed in... a direct confrontation..."

"Vicente! Quit spacing out!" Bargesonne yelled.

Disappointing his lieutenant general was the one thing that Vicente knew he would never be able to live down; he saw the man as a second father. Flustered, he quickly began to make excuses.

"If we can just get close enough, then the newest cannons and guns will mean nothing! The Empire's soldiers will overwhelm them!' That's what the battalion captains told me! That's why I—!"

"What are you on about!?"

"That's why I... I didn't do anything wrong, Lieutenant General Bargesonne! I mean, it's the others who were wrong!"

"....." Bargesonne looked at him, deep sorrow in his eyes.

"Th-That's right! It was Regis from that remote regiment of who-knows-where! It's because his pessimistic words decreased the morale of our troops! That's why this happened! I knew that we never should have taken those outsiders under our wing! It's possible that he colluded with the enemy out of envy of my success. Yes, that must be the reason! That's why things have ended up like this!"

"That's enough."

"Do you see it now, Lieutenant General!?"

"I see that I need to teach you how to show some backbone!"

"Guh!?"

Bargesonne's criticism was so harsh that Vicente felt as though he had just been sentenced to death. It was like the old man's spear had gone straight through his heart.

"...And that's why I can't let you die here."

“H-Huh...?”

“With those of proven bloodlines as my staff officers, I earnestly held discussion after discussion, and entered this war with the plan I thought best. I am the commanding officer, which means this outcome is mine to bear. You, on the other hand, are merely a chief strategist. Do you honestly believe that the blame rests on your shoulders? Know your place!”

“Barguesonne...”

The lieutenant general turned his back to Vicente, signaling that their conversation was over, then addressed his soldiers in a loud, powerful voice. “Ignore the small fries to your sides! Divide the enemy in two, so that you might live to die another day! Show them just how much valor and dignity the Seventh Army has! All troops, march forward! Even if you do lay down your life here, know that you are doing so for the sake of your country!”

“UOOOOOOH!!”

His fearless order even rekindled the fighting spirit of those who had lost all hope. If death was inevitable, then the least they could do was die as heroes, giving up their lives for the sake of their country and comrades. And now that the farmers and sinners had fallen, the Belgarian front line was composed of professional soldiers who had spent years honing their skills, which only further bolstered their confidence.

“Charge! Attack! March on! Crush the enemy beneath you! Trample those who can no longer press on! All troops, move out!” As he screamed, Barguesonne personally made for the frontmost line. The officers and guards he overtook hurriedly raced forward; this was never supposed to happen.

Word spread among the soldiers like wildfire.

“The general went to the front line!”

“He’s leading the charge!”

“We’ve gotta follow him!”

Barguesonne called out once more. “Forward, men! This country shall be safeguarded by none other than the Seventh Army! No death will be in vain!

Lay waste to our enemy!”

The assault infantry on the frontmost line closed in on the barrier of shields, desperately forcing their spears into whatever gaps they could find. Their attacks were met with gunfire. One Belgian soldier was shot through the head, only for another to immediately surge in from behind, kicking aside his lifeless body and taking his place.

Another cast down his spear and grabbed an enemy’s shield with both hands, using as much strength as he could muster to raise it above his head. A bullet immediately caught him in the flank, but his rushing adrenaline and unyielding sense of martyrdom numbed the pain. The enemy soldier released his shield in a panic the moment that his feet started to leave the ground, and within seconds, both he and the rifleman hiding behind him were pierced by several spears.

Crush the enemy beneath you.

The Belgian Army had been gradually losing troops since the battle started, and while their numbers were now decreasing at almost double the pace, they were managing to break through the enemy’s line of shields. That was when a shout came from among High Britannia’s ranks.

«Retreat! Retreat!»

The realization that they just might succeed reinvigorated the Belgian soldiers, lessening their fatigue and bolstering their concentration. The force of their charge truly had reached its peak.

As close as could be to the front line, Bargesonne raised his voice. “March forward! Do not falter! Just one more push! One more strike! Crush—!!”

All of a sudden, he felt a searing pain in his torso, as if someone had poured hot coals into his chest. A bullet had pierced Bargesonne’s breastplate. He could no longer breathe.

They got me in the lung, did they?

A punctured lung was almost always fatal; no matter how much the wounded person tried to breathe, they would only suck in blood. It was said to be a death as terrifying as drowning.

Barguesonne had taken the lives of a great many foes on the battlefield... and he realized that his own time had come. He instantly tightened his legs around his warhorse, before fixing his spear under his arm so that its tip would continue to point forward. Then, instead of grabbing onto the horse's reins, he gripped onto its mane to ensure that his torso stayed upright.

Blood had filled both his mouth and lungs, making it so that he could no longer speak. His lips were firmly sealed. His eyes were wide open. His mind was slowly fading to nothingness. And so, entrusting his trusty steed to continue to advance, Barguesonne secretly slipped away.



A messenger raced up to Oswald and Margaret's cabriolet. "Sir! The enemy army continues to push forward!" he exclaimed.

"That does seem to be the case."

"Our front won't hold!"

The High Britannian Army had organized their formation in the shape of a "U." In response, the Belgarian Army had maintained a square formation, completely ignoring the enemies on either side of them in an attempt to break through the front. They knew that being shot at from three sides meant certain death, and so they were doing all that they could to escape.

"Dear, oh dear... How bothersome. They're going to get through at this rate," Margaret said blankly, her tone making it clear that these were nothing more than empty words of concern. She would have surely sounded a little more involved if she had left her laundry out in the rain.

"That they are. In which case, it would be a gentleman's duty to let them through."

"You've thought this through, I see."

"Naturally. The principle has held since ancient times to *let a cornered enemy flee*, for, when cornered, an enemy knows that they must fight to their last breath. Furthermore, while the Belgarian Army excels in charging straight ahead, they are terrible when it comes to changing their course. By reinforcing the units attacking their flanks and thinning out our front line, we can easily

control where they'll attempt to breach.”

Just as planned, the High Britannian front line opened up like a leaky bucket. The Belgarian Army, believing that they had broken through, raised cheers as they continued to advance.

Oswald gave a wry smile. “I had expected true war to be just a little less predictable. What a shame...”

“Am I going to be bored again?”

“Let us pray that is not the case.”

Right on cue, the soldiers firing on the Belgarian Army from either side gathered in orderly rank and file, and the High Britannian Army's main camp slowly started to move. In no time at all, the U had been reversed, now wrapping around behind the Belgarian troops.

Everything had gone as planned. The enemy was exhausted from their charge, dragging their feet as they lugged their heavy armor and spears. All that the High Britannian Army needed to do now was shoot their retreating foe in the back.

“I wonder why they didn't simply retreat from the start...” Margaret said over a yawn. “Perhaps they were too proud. It's quite a bother when such things are valued more than one's own life.”

“They are soldiers, you see.”

It was true that immediately pulling back would have been the proper course of action for the Belgarian Army—while they would have lost the battle, they would have suffered far fewer casualties. By deciding to force their way through the High Britannian Army's front line, they had played right into their enemy's hands.

Perhaps the Belgarian Army did not fully understand the situation they were in. Or perhaps they thought that the High Britannian Army's main camp was still within reach, just beyond the barricade—that their charge would amount to something. But Oswald had long since moved the camp into his army's left flank. The front line, where it was easy to concentrate the enemy's attacks, was no more than a decoy; it was intended to be breached from the very start.

Oswald gave an order to a messenger. “There is no reason to drag this out any longer. Annihilate the enemy at once. Move the riflemen up front and give pursuit.”

“Yes, sir!”

But just as one messenger departed, another frantically rushed over, yelling at the top of his voice. “There’s an ambush! An enemy attack! From the flank— Err, no, since you’re here, I guess that would mean they’re coming from behind! Five hundred horsemen!”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I-It’s the imperial army’s... Black Knight Brigade!”

“Hm!?” Oswald shot forward so suddenly that, had Margaret not been gripping his right arm so firmly, he might have fallen from the carriage. He quickly tried to compose himself, taking a deep breath to clear his mind and calm his restless heart. “Phew... Those numbers are nothing we can’t handle. Tell the left flank’s fourth battalion to inter—”

He was interrupted by a sudden cacophony of screams.

They’ve already made their way through!? Just how wide do you think my surveillance net is!? This is all happening too quickly!

“How...!?”

“Ahahaha!” Margaret started to laugh as she saw the look on Oswald’s face, causing him to immediately put a hand over his mouth in an attempt to hide it.

To think that I would speak so inappropriately and show such an unsightly expression in her presence...!

As the clatter of hooves grew nearer and nearer, Oswald contained his surging emotions and raised his voice. “Tell Glenda’s unit to provide urgent backup. The guards here must protect Her Majesty until they arrive.” Then, he delicately removed Margaret’s hand from his right arm and nimbly jumped down from the carriage. “Your Highness, it may get a bit noisy, but... please wait here.”

“That’s unfortunate, Oswald; you were finally starting to look like a man.

What shall I do now? How will you compensate me for this?"

"Oh... I offer my deepest apologies for letting you see such a deplorable side of myself," Oswald said, forcing a remorseful expression.

Margaret lay down across the cabriolet seat. "As you should. You're unsightly when you're not smiling. It's hilarious, in a way—you're like a little rabbit that should be cowering in its hole, but is instead trying to be a lion."

"...For the radiant Queen Margaret to bestow such words upon one as undeserving as myself... I truly am humbled." Oswald offered a gentle smile, then gave a reverent salute before heading behind the cabriolet.

The Black Knight Brigade had already engaged those guarding the main camp.

Chapter 5: The Battle of La Frengé

“‘Arrogance’ is the word that I would use to describe it,” Regis answered, having been asked why the Belgian Army was losing so badly.

Altina nodded in response. “Would things have turned out differently had they fought more cautiously?”

“Their conviction that victory was guaranteed as long as they could make contact with the enemy was unfortunately presumptuous, though even I didn’t expect things to get this bad...” Regis said, swaying unsteadily atop Caracarla. “Still, when up against a weapon of unknown potential, there surely could have been a better plan. We had the numerical advantage, and the High Britannian Army is depending on a lengthy supply chain; the way I see it, a direct confrontation should have been saved as a last resort.”

The Beilschmidt border regiment had finally stepped onto the battlefield and was making its way over to the Seventh Army as they continued their advance. As they reached halfway down the hill, they could see the enemy move into a “U” shape. It was clear from their orderly movements that this was not the result of them breaking formation—no, this was something that had been planned in advance.

It was true that the Seventh Army had succeeded in breaking through the enemy’s front line, but it all seemed too convenient. Rather than the Belgian troops having to slowly hack and slash their way through, it was more like the High Britannian Army had opened a path for them.

As soon as they breached the enemy formation, the “U” turned into just two columns, each firing upon the Belgian soldiers now trapped between them. The battle was now as one-sided as a fox hunt. It wasn’t hard to imagine that the Seventh Army would be forced to retreat, but this would make them even easier targets as they could be attacked from behind.

There was no doubt about it—this was a complete and utter defeat.

“The regret’s eating away at you, isn’t it, Regis?” Altina asked from behind.

“...It is. We should have joined with the northern forces as I had suggested. If we had played our cards right, then we even could have pincerred the enemy’s south-marching unit as we did so.”

Even with the enemy using the latest firearms, the Belgarian Army could have turned the tide of battle with an attack from both sides. They would have had an overwhelming numerical advantage with fifty thousand troops against the enemy’s ten thousand, and while the Seventh Army was composed almost entirely of slow-moving foot soldiers, the First Army had three thousand horsemen at their disposal.

No, wait... One of the First Army’s three cavalry units was partially incinerated.

The First Army had around twenty-five hundred cavalry now, but with the Beilschmidt border regiment’s Black Knight Brigade joining their ranks, it still added up to three thousand. Plus, by taking a detour around the battlefield and targeting their enemy’s flanks, the Belgarian Army would have suffered far fewer casualties than they had from the *marché de la mort*.

Regis had proposed this strategy during their first meeting with Bargesonne, but it had been rejected after barely any consideration. “...Would things have turned out differently had I phrased my plan better?” he wondered.

“What use is worrying about it now?”

“No, but—”

“Rather than regretting what’s already said and done, concentrate on what’s happening before your eyes! There’s still something we can do, right!?”

“...Yeah.”

It was easy enough for Regis to spot where the enemy’s main headquarters was, as he could see a black, one-horse carriage. They presumably had a noble tagging along with them, and the intelligence that Regis had collected led him to believe that it was the new queen of High Britannia—Margaret Stillart.

There was absolutely no doubt that High Britannia’s commanding officer,

Oswald Coulthard, understood how strong Belgaria's infantry was. He would know that, while they were bad at changing course, the force of their charge was second to none. For this reason, he couldn't possibly keep the main camp at the front where it was the most dangerous. And so, as his forces formed its "U" formation, they would move their headquarters to one side.

Regis watched the war progress until, as expected, the enemy started to move its headquarters to its left flank.

"...Now's about right."

"What happens now, Regis?"

"It's time for us to start moving as well." Regis timidly raised his hand to catch the attention of Jerome, who was riding beside them. "Excuse me!"

"The plan!? Took you long enough!"

"Err, yes... We're ready now."

"Tsk... Speak with some dignity, won't you!?"

"I'll do my best..."

"Goodness gracious, is that really important right now!?" Altina exclaimed. "Just get to it, Regis!"

"Um... The Black Knight Brigade will take the lead, charging at the enemy's left wing. That black carriage is where the enemy's main camp is."

"Right. So we'll be fighting our way through their left flank!"

"Not quite. The enemy army will presumably have their backs turned, so they won't even see you. It depends on how quickly their messengers relay information, but there should be some time between the cavalry being spotted and the news being reported back, so if you rush past while that happens, they won't be able to change direction in time."

This was the main flaw in strategies that involved large formation changes and moving the main camp—it was hard to maintain a surveillance network. The lines of soldiers moved so fluidly that there weren't any gaps between them, and this obstructed the messengers. This was especially true during a formation change, when the location of the main camp and the route to reach it

changed second by second. During this time, the enemy army was as good as blind.

This was precisely why it was so beneficial to station one's headquarters on higher ground—it provided an excellent view of what was happening on the battlefield. The High Britannian Army, however, had set up camp on the base of the hill.

Jerome cocked his head. “They’ll have their backs turned? What kind of magic are you using here?”

“P-Please, enough of this whole magic thing... It’s honestly just something that I read in a book—”

“Kukukuh... Well, so be it. Even if they’re waiting for us with their guns and cannons at the ready, I’ll tear them all to shreds!”

“Ah, also, don’t attack from the front. Circumvent them and come in from the left.”

“Hm? Hah, so that’s your game... Just leave it to me!” Jerome raised his spear and started picking up speed. “Black Knights, follow me! We’ve got an army to crush!”

“UOOOOH!!”

Clad in black-painted armor, Jerome’s knights galloped toward the enemy camp. The thundering of their horses’ hooves grew louder and louder. On a quieter battlefield, the High Britannian Army surely would have noticed so many horsemen approaching them from behind, but they were partway through changing formation. It was near impossible to distinguish the noise from the loud clatter of several thousand armored soldiers marching in unison, and even if somebody did notice the oncoming cavalry, trying to coordinate a defensive line would be no easy feat.

Regis passed an order to Altina behind him as well. “Have the infantry advance at full speed.”

“Are you sure about that? We’re still about 10 arpents (715 m) away. Won’t that tire them out?”

“We’re not going to engage the enemy directly, so our troops won’t need to run that far. Once they’ve noticed the Black Knight Brigade, the enemy will move their headquarters to their right flank. That’s where we’ll aim our bows.”

“Huh...? How do you know they’re gonna do that!?”

“It’s simple enough: to protect someone from an oncoming cavalry attack, you simply move them out of the way of the charge, right?”

“Right. It’s pointless to move somewhere that’s still going to be in the path of the horsemen, but how do you know that they’ll not only go to their right flank, but also enter our firing range?”

Altina’s concern was understandable, but Regis had read enough on this particular scenario to know that they needed to take the initiative.

“The Black Knight Brigade will cross straight through the enemy camp. Each High Britannian soldier is armed with a rifle powerful enough to take out a knight in a single shot, so it is a dangerous role.”

“That’d be a concern if our cavalymen were staying still, sure, but it’s hard to hit a charging horseman!”

“That’s right.”

For now, Regis could only pray that they returned in one piece. But whatever the case, the Black Knight Brigade was going to suddenly appear on the enemy’s left, so it made sense that they would try and move their headquarters to the right.

“So we’re going to be firing our bows at that black carriage, then?” Altina asked.

“...To be more precise, we’re going to be pretending to fire.”

“What!?”

“If we move too close then I fear the enemy will counterattack. We just need to help the Seventh Army and the Black Knight Brigade retreat. If our foe is so focused on protecting their headquarters, then any orders to pursue the retreating army will be delayed. After all, they only have so many messengers.”

“.....”

Altina fell silent. This time, it was Regis who was anxious.

“...Err, did I say something strange? Is there something that I’ve overlooked?”

“When you think of war, you’d usually just picture a clash between armies, right?”

“You think so?”

“But you’re thinking about ways to obstruct the commander himself, not just his army.”

“Oh, yes, that’s right. A book is often written from the perspective of an individual, not an army, and they’re often about commanders and officers. The parts I remember most are usually things like the least opportune time to deal with a cavalry attack, and how to shake things up to delay an enemy’s response.”

“Is that what’s written in your strategy books?”

“...No, but it’s very much the case in fictional stories. Take a play, for example—the protagonist is more often a knight or a prince than a soldier, right?”

“Is that also true for the books written by the wizard you mentioned earlier?”

“...Well, he also has stories like *The Angelia Chronicles*. That book has armies composed entirely of little girls.”

“Hah? Why only girls?”

“Because girls are cute, aren’t they?”

“Hm... Well, that’s definitely not something I ever expected to hear from you, Regis.”

“Please don’t make it sound like I’m completely devoid of emotion. I’m awestruck whenever I come across wonderful scenery, and I do find small cats and dogs to be cute.”

“And girls, right? That’s what you said.”

“...Perhaps.”

“So girls are no different from pets to you...”

“W-Wait! That makes me sound like some sort of deviant!”

Altina chuckled and then jumped up, actually standing on horseback. She drew the longsword at her hip, then thrust it out to the heavens above. “All troops, full-speed march! We’re supporting Sir Jerome!”

The soldiers cheered in response. “*Vive Marie Quatre!*”

“Keep advancing until further orders! When you hear the horn sound, fire your arrows at the enemy formation!”

The troops raised their voices again.

Advance, retreat, change formation, draw bow, charge... The soldiers had been trained so that simple orders could be communicated through the tune of a bugle, allowing the entire army to respond swiftly and in unison. That said, they now had mercenaries among their ranks, and there was no telling how well they would react.

When Altina swung her sword, the bugle bellowed to advance. Caracarla immediately picked up speed, and, for a second, Regis wondered whether the horse really could understand human speech. The foot soldiers behind them matched their speed, moving at a pace that was quick but not so unreasonable that they would tire before clearing the full 7 arpents (500 m). Was Altina deliberately guiding them at this speed? There was no doubt in Regis’s mind. She really was quite something.



Oswald fired off order after order as he watched the enemy cavalry pick up momentum. “Move the main camp to higher ground! Up the slope to the north! As soon as possible!”

“Understood!”

The messenger ran off and a bugle sounded, but they were too slow. Margaret was gradually being moved, her black carriage being pulled by two soldiers at a time, but there was no guarantee that she would make it to safety in time; the guards in heavy armor were being scattered all too easily.

“They’re not supposed to be that weak...” Oswald murmured.

High Britannia's riflemen and shield bearers were perfectly capable when fighting in the formation that they had trained for, but when attacked from an unanticipated direction, they were frail.

They displayed this weakness when Belgaria's Third Prince Bastian attacked Fort Greybridge, too... The young boy had gotten through easier than expected, giving him the chance to do something as unforgivable as point a gun at Margaret.

"Hm... As long as one doesn't panic, they shouldn't be too hard to handle, but..."

This just goes to show how big of a difference experience can make.

Oswald walked toward the back line of the unit embroiled in combat, bringing no guards with him. He stopped when he was at a moderate distance. As the cavalry grew closer and closer, his soldiers seemed to wither away, looking on in fear as if caught up in some terrifying spectacle.

"Excuse me, good sir, but would you be so kind as to lend me your rifle?"

"Mn? Wha—!? C-C-Commander!?"

"Oh, no—I am but a petty strategy officer."

At that, Oswald took the gun from the rifleman. He wasn't forceful enough for one to say that he stole it, but he by no means had the time to wait for it to be handed over. Oswald wasn't used to having to act in such a hurry, and slowly but surely, the gears in his head were turning astray.

"This cavalry has no clear direction. No aim. It is an unmitigated force. If I can just take down its leader..."

Oswald opened the breechblock and confirmed that there was a bullet loaded, then carefully closed the lid before taking aim at the horseman leading the charge. There was a line of High Britannian soldiers between them, meaning that he would have to shoot between their heads, but this wasn't an issue—Oswald was taller than most soldiers, and he knew how to use a gun. On top of that, his foe was on horseback, which gave him an even clearer line of fire.

That glimmering silver jousting lance must be Les Cheveux d'une Dame, which

means that's the famed Black Knight, Margrave Jerome Jean de Beilschmidt. But no matter how great his lancing skills are, a bullet can kill any mortal man. We all die too easily.

Oswald took a deep breath and pulled the trigger. The hammer on the right side of the rifle swung down and struck the firing pin, which pierced the primer on the base of the bullet casing and induced a spark. An explosion burst forth within the breech, and the concentrated force rocketed the bullet out of the only possible exit point: the muzzle. The grooves inside the gun barrel imparted a spin on the bullet as it passed through, and the resulting gyroscopic effect helped it travel in a near-perfectly straight path that was sure to lead straight through the Black Knight's skull.

...But Jerome moved the very instant that Oswald fired, and the bullet breezed through thin air.

“...Simply marvelous!”

«Come out here if you're that eager to die!» Jerome yelled in Belgian as he mowed down the line of High Britannian soldiers before him.

How did he dodge that...? Instinct? Experience?

Jerome had already been moving around in such a way that he was a hard target, but Oswald had accounted for that before he fired. It was like the man had noticed that he was being aimed at and had dodged accordingly.

Coincidence or not, I suppose that much can be expected of a hero.

Oswald returned the gun to the soldier he had taken it from. It was useless to him while it wasn't loaded, and he didn't make a habit of carrying around ammunition.

“He's not an easy opponent... Shield bearers, form a line here! There is no need to block the Black Knight Brigade's advance! We simply need to divert them from our main camp! It is regrettable that I must resort to orders I have not trained you for, but it is all to protect Her Majesty!”

“Y-Yes, sir!”

“Pass the message on to as many people as you can! A wall! A wall to protect

Her Majesty!”

There was no time for messengers or bugles; he would get the soldiers into formation through word of mouth alone.

How slow they are compared to the movements we've rehearsed...

They had already been trained to take on a cavalry charge, and while this was merely a slight alteration to the situation they were prepared for, that seemed to be enough to throw them off. Their movements were hesitant, and the wall they formed was greatly misshapen.

Is that going to hold?

Oswald reached his right hand for his sword. His wrist ached, and as he tightened his grip around its hilt, the white cloth wrapped around his arm oozed with blood. This was the wound from when he had been sliced by the third prince of the Belgarian Empire just half a month prior. It seemed that the recoil from the gun had reopened it.

Oswald sneered. “Pfft... So this is how the prince protects his homeland.” He could feel his plan slowly falling apart, like a clock that was missing a crucial gear.

The riflemen frantically fired their weapons as the enemy cavalry continued to advance, while the shield bearers let out frightened screams. Jerome was drawing nearer and nearer. He locked eyes with Oswald for a brief moment, radiating the ferociousness of a wild beast, and appeared to mouth something. “Oh, so you’re Oswald?” he seemed to say.

Jerome was galloping like the wind, moving as fast as he would have on an open, empty plain. The soldiers had been trained to always aim for the horseman leading the charge, yet the shots aimed at Jerome had no effect whatsoever. It was like the bullets were avoiding him. One would graze his armor on occasion, but it would never pierce through.

His armor is so strong... Is that our new alloy?

It was a material that could only be produced in High Britannia, but there was no way to guarantee that its distribution had been completely contained. It was more than likely that some merchant might have sold some to an enemy nation

with no consideration for the consequences, and, assuming that was the case, it would not be strange for a Belgian noble to have it made into plate armor.

The Black Knight Brigade had been charging through the High Britannian Army like a raging tempest, but ultimately moved straight past the main camp. It seemed that the hastily constructed wall had served its purpose.

Were they just pretending to attack the main camp to exhaust us and disrupt our formation? Even if that's true, we can just shoot them as they retreat.

But before Oswald could give the order, he heard a voice.

"Enemy infantry! They're firing arrows!"

"What!?"

The dust that had been raised by the cavalry had settled to reveal lines upon lines of foot soldiers, all poised with their bows. But before Oswald could even speak, somebody screamed "Protect the Queen!"

I see. So the reason why our soldiers were able to manage despite their shoddy formation was due to personal motivation.

The shield bearers instinctively moved to protect the main camp, while the riflemen took aim at their enemy. At this rate, it would be quite an ordeal for the commander to regain control.

Oswald placed a hand over his mouth. "I see... A battle really can end up outside of one's expectations."

The sudden clatter of metal armor heralded the approach of a knight, and was quickly followed by a familiar voice.

"Oswald!"

It was Glenda, fully prepared for battle. She was usually seen carrying around an absurd number of weapons, and now that she had come out onto the battlefield, that number had increased even more. There was a long spear on her back, four pistols on her waist, and rows of ammunition slung along her breastplate and arm guards. With so much added weight, one would expect her to be extremely slow, but she had moved so quickly that it took a moment for her guards wearing light armor to catch up. They were gasping for air.

“I am very sorry for my tardiness!” Glenda apologetically declared.

“No need to apologize; there is no harm done.”

They had succeeded in keeping the Black Knight Brigade away from the main camp, and the arrival of Glenda’s unit prevented the troops from falling into a panic. It presumably wouldn’t be long before the enemy cavalry started to retreat.

I would love to pursue them, but...

The soldiers seemed entranced by the Belgarian archers who had appeared in the complete opposite direction. It appeared that Glenda had noticed them as well, as she immediately said, “We will return fire at once.”

But Oswald shook his head. “Calm down, Lieutenant... Their arrows can’t reach us from that distance—at least, they won’t reach the main camp.”

“Oh, you’re right.”

The enemy was still close to 200 yards (183 m) away, and while a particularly strong bow might have been able to skim the outermost rim of their formation, there was no way that their arrows would be able to reach the main camp. Returning fire wasn’t much of an option, either; while the High Britannian troops could technically reach the archers from this distance using their new guns, they were far away enough that their shots would be inaccurate.

“They are a threat whose aim is purely to cause chaos.”

“I-I see.” Realizing that she had fallen for it spectacularly, Glenda’s cheeks flushed ever so slightly red.

“If someone draws a bow on you, then it is only natural to think that their arrows will reach you. Regular soldiers have no way of measuring distance.”

That was why a professional tactician would survey the battlefield first, and firing would begin only when the commander gave the order. In armies where the soldiers were skilled enough to measure the distance themselves, all the commander would have to do was tell them where to fire.

“The enemy army is pulling back!” Glenda pointed.

“Yes, because the Black Knight Brigade has retreated. The Seventh Army too,

unfortunately.”

“Ah!?” By the time Glenda had turned, the Seventh Army was too far away for adequate pursuit. Her expression darkened. “Is this what the horsemen and the archers were aiming for?”

“They deliberately chose to trail the Seventh Army while we were changing formation, then had the Black Knight Brigade charge us. And then, as their cavalry retreated, they made a show of their archers to confuse us.”

“The enemy must have a clever tactician.”

“Why, of course; the Belgarian Empire reigns supreme over the entire continent.”

“Y-Yes... That’s right.” In the heat of such a one-sided victory, she had forgotten the true might of their opponent.

Oswald solemnly stared at the flag being flown by the Belgarian archery unit, which was now taking distance as well. It was a shield over a green background.

“That flag... As I recall, it belongs to the Beilschmidt border regiment. So not only the Black Knight Brigade, but even the infantry are theirs.”

“I’m sure that I’ve heard that name somewhere before...”

“They are the unit who captured Fort Volks. I requested for Varden to stall them just in case, and even sent them cannons for the task, but...”

It appeared that they had been completely useless. Perhaps they hadn’t attacked the fortress at all, in which case he would need to dole out appropriate punishment.

Glenda angrily placed her hands on her hips. “So those people from Varden weren’t able to keep them at bay. What a pathetic bunch!”

“Don’t be too hard on them; that unit seems to be quite skilled. Why, we’ve just experienced that first-hand.”

“Y-Yes... If I remember correctly, their commander is an imperial princess.”

“That’s right. It looks like you’ve done your homework, Lieutenant. The Beilschmidt border regiment’s commander is the fourth princess of the

Belgarian Empire, Marie Quatre Argentina de Belgaria... but I would argue that the real threat here is her strategist.”

“Oh, that’s right! I’ve heard of him too! His name was... Um... Err...” Glenda groaned, her face turning a deep red. Her martial arts were a cut above the rest, and her loyalty was stronger than steel, but her intelligence could sometimes be a bit... lacking. She was lost in thought like a student who had been given a hard arithmetic problem. This must have been a considerably rare display for her, as her light-armored guards had their eyes open wide in shock.

Just then, a messenger raced over, immediately dropping to one knee before Oswald. “I carry orders for our strategy officer from Her Majesty!”

“Is something the matter?”

“Err... ‘I’ve grown deathly tired of waiting’... That’s what she says...”

“...That is more of a message than an order. Very well. I salute your service.”

The messenger reverently bowed his head in response.

Oswald turned to Glenda. “Lieutenant, this petty officer must return to the queen’s side. Organize the soldiers here. We will begin our march soon.”

“Understood!” Glenda saluted, then lowered her voice considerably and started grumbling under her breath. “...If Oswald had just stayed in command the whole time, then there never would have been an opening for that imperial strategist. It’s all because she came out onto the battlefield...” It seemed that she was quite displeased about him being with Margaret.

Oswald simply shrugged. “Oh no, I am only myself when I am with Her Majesty. In this battle, we struck down twice our number of Belgarian soldiers and opened a path to the capital. What is there to regret? We should puff out our chests and sing the song of victory.”

“Y-Yes, sir!” At those words, Glenda’s cheeks flushed and a broad smile spread across her face. It was an expression that could quite easily be described as that of an innocent maiden, but the reality was proof that one shouldn’t judge a book by its cover; on the battlefield, she was known as “the Ogre.”

Oswald returned her salute, then began his walk back to the black carriage,

chanting the name of the enemy strategist in his heart the entire way.



The Battle of La Frenge—fought on May 19th in the year 851 on the Belgarian imperial calendar—was a complete victory for the High Britannian Army from beginning to end, and resulted in the Belgarian Empire’s front lines being pushed back considerably. This battle once again proved to the world, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that the gun was the star of the battlefield, and things would remain this way for many centuries to come.



Not much time had passed since High Britannia’s First Division had defeated the Seventh Army in battle, but they were already marching for the capital. They were currently camped out atop a hill not particularly far away, with their riflemen on watch and their cannons lined at the ready. It would not be easy to approach them, by any means.

Following their defeat, the Seventh Army had been reduced to a mere shadow of what they had once been. The loss of their commander had been especially hard-hitting. They had managed to outrun the enemy, but now they were too drained to even move. They had no defenses and no plan; they were completely and utterly powerless.

That evening, they joined with the logistics team who had circumvented the battlefield. At the very least, their wounds were being treated and they were being supplied with food. It was more of a refugee camp than a military camp.

As they hadn’t received word from the Seventh Army, Regis and Altina were visiting to draft up countermeasures. Once again, Jerome was not accompanying them; he was a strong warrior, but even he had sustained an injury during the battle and was currently undergoing treatment. It thankfully hadn’t been anything serious, but his Black Knight Brigade had suffered a fair few casualties. They were still trying to grasp the exact number, but they seemed to have lost around a hundred men.

Regis and Altina walked between the lines of exhausted soldiers toward a large tent—the only one that appeared to have been properly assembled. Once they had permission from the soldier on watch, they went inside.

“...Thank you,” Regis politely called back as he stepped through the cloth that served as its door.

The senior officers immediately turned to look at them. Altina frowned; their dark expressions looked grimmer than corpses, and Bargesonne’s chair was empty. The knight who had mocked them before the battle was still there, and even though he was averting his eyes, there didn’t seem to be anybody else they could talk to.

“The lieutenant general died in the line of duty, did he?” Altina asked to be sure.

“Kh...” He nodded.

“What of the others? What happened to the strategist?”

“The chief strategist... Vicente... has become like a child.”

“...Explain.”

“Like an infant who can’t comprehend that his mother has died, he keeps talking to the lieutenant general’s corpse... He’s a goner.”

“Good Lord,” Altina sighed, placing a hand on her brow.

As tragic as Bargesonne’s death is, his sacrifice will have been for nothing if the survivors stay like this. Regis closed his eyes. *A moment for those we have lost...*

Altina walked to the back of the tent and stood before the senior officers. “For starters, I am a major general. Now that Lieutenant General Bargesonne is gone, that makes me the highest ranking person here. Am I mistaken?”

“...N-No.” The knight who had mentioned Vicente’s condition was the only one who dared respond. His language had been vitriolic before the battle, but it seemed that his poison had run out.

“It looks like you’ve still got your tongue. What’s your name?” Altina asked.

“Coigniera. No, I mean— My name is Coigniera, ma’am.”

“I see. I saw the state of the army on the way here. You have two choices: return to your base on the eastern front, or choose a new commander and

continue fighting High Britannia.”

The officers merely exchanged hollow looks; they didn’t have enough willpower to argue back. Meanwhile, Coignière’s gaze dropped to the ground. “...Would retreating go against our orders?”

“I should think not. Your commander is gone, and no one would blame you for it. Deciding whether your retreat would count as a breach of orders is Latrielle’s job, but we don’t know whether he’ll be in his right mind to condemn you.”

This time, there was a stir. “What does that—!?”

“We received a message. The First Army engaged the enemy as well, and while they made significant military gains, their commander was injured. It’s not too often that an army wins when its commander is out of commission.”

Given the disastrous state of the Seventh Army, it was easy to imagine what sort of position the First Army was in. At the very least, this was far from the overwhelming victory that they had expected before the battle started. More than anything though, the soldiers would surely be discouraged by the fact that Latrielle, the emperor’s own proxy, had been injured. Many would no doubt be convinced that the Empire was going to lose the war.

Regis scratched his head. *I wonder how many of the survivors are going to desert tonight. Out here in these parts, the only real options that await a deserter are dying in a ditch or becoming a bandit.* His head started to hurt as he considered what that would mean for the surrounding villages.

“Latrielle apparently intends to rendezvous with us,” Altina continued. “He should be here by tomorrow night, so if you’re going to return to base, you’d better be gone before he gets here.”

Now that the Seventh Army had lost their commander, there was a good chance that they would be placed under the First Army’s command. Now was their last chance for someone to step up as acting commander and order a retreat.

Coignière finally looked up from the ground. “We... We’ve lost... Lieutenant General Bargesonne!”

“...You have.”

“He died to protect the Empire!”

Altina nodded, while Regis remained silent, allowing the man to continue speaking.

“We lost way too much and fought even harder to compensate! Isn’t that enough!? You can hardly even call us an army anymore! With the miserable state we’re in, how am I supposed to tell the soldiers to march back into battle!? We’ll be returning to base!”

At that, the senior officers who had stayed silent finally spoke up.

“Th-That’s right... We should go.”

“We, uh... need to hold a funeral for the lieutenant general.”

“Defending the capital is the First Army’s responsibility.”

Altina held her tongue, but her lips were sullenly tapered.

Regis sighed. “Looks like it’s not going to work, then...”

“Talk about spineless.”

“It just goes to show how terrifying of an ordeal it must have been.”

“And the source of that terror is currently heading straight for—!”

“Just drop it, Princess. There’s nothing more dangerous than leading soldiers into battle who don’t want to fight.”

“I know.”

That was why she had given them two options.

Coignière started making his way out of the tent. “We’ll be leaving tomorrow morning. I’ll inform the soldiers now; I’m sure that those who don’t know any better will attempt to run tonight, otherwise.”

The other senior officers all expressed quiet words of agreement and, with somber expressions, followed Coignière outside. Regis and Altina joined them; there was no point in staying here.



The senior officers halted as soon as they exited the tent. Much to their surprise, they had been confronted by a single soldier—a large, well-built man. His upper body was bare, revealing his sturdy, armor-like muscles, and his chest, shoulders, and arms were wrapped in white bandages. They were wrapped around his head as well, and judging by the contour and bloodstains, he had lost his left ear. Just how many bullets had this man taken?

“I heard what youse were saying.”

“Who are you?” Coignière asked.

The soldier introduced himself as: “Dukas, farmer from the boonies.”

“...I see. And what business does a farmer have with a senior officer?”

“Is it true that we’re gonna run away? Back to base?”

Knowing that he was speaking to someone of a much lower status than himself, Coignière’s dark expression twisted into one of haughty arrogance. ““Run’...? This is a strategic retreat! A conscripted farmer might not understand, but stepping back into battle in our current state is much harder than it appears to be! Protecting the capital should be the duty of the First Army! What’s more, there are thirty thousand troops worth of reserves on the way!”

Dukas glared at him. “Hmph... Wasn’t the Empire’s Seventh Army supposed to be unbeatable on the open plains? You were all so full o’ yourselves before the war began, but now look atcha... Thirty thousand troops on the way? Screw that. The Seventh Army had twenty thousand men and didn’t stand a chance!”

“S-Say what you want, but... Wh-What did you expect us to do!? No one fully understood the might of the enemy’s new weapons!”

“Hah! And what’s returning east gonna do for ya!? Are those High Britannians gonna go home once the capital falls!? Or are they gonna come right after us!? Over there, we already have enemies like Estaburg at our throat. Bring in a second enemy who we couldn’t even beat alone and then what? Ya think you can still protect the east then!?”

“Grr... If you’re so confident, then... then why don’t you take them on alone!? The enemy’s right there, up on that hill. If you want to charge to your death, then go ahead. Nobody’s going to stop you!”

“Quit spewing nonsense! I’m asking if you lot are gonna protect my homeland! I charged, and I killed, and I took every bullet that came my way, all because you said you were gonna keep it safe! All those men who died... Every single one of them... They all died on your orders, goddammit! You’re incompetents, the lot of you!”

Coignière’s face turned red, and he immediately drew his sword. “Y-You lowly wretch... You’re nothing but a conscript! Do you really think you can get away with insulting a knight!?”

The senior officers frozen behind him cautiously stepped back, while the nearby soldiers were watching with bated breath. Coignière’s silver blade was glowing red under the sinking evening sun. His intent to kill was real, and yet Dukas didn’t falter.

“Pfft. What, you gonna kill me? Go on then. I was supposed to die this afternoon! That’s what I’ve gotta do to protect my homeland, right!?”

“What!?”

“My wife’s giving birth to our fourth kid this July. I’ve got three sons. They’re all waiting for me back home... You said you’re a knight. Can you promise me you’re gonna protect them? If so, I’ll gladly give up my life! Cut me down!” Dukas spread out his arms. Tears were streaming down his face, and his voice was quivering. “Wh-What are we supposed to do...? You’re the officers, ain’t you...? Protect them... The Empire’s strong, ain’t it...? Can’t ya... protect my family...?”

“Urgh...”

“Can’t ya send those High Britannians packing!?” Dukas shouted through heavy sobs.

“How the hell are we supposed to do that!?” Coignière screamed back. “That... Those... *things!* Those weapons! We lost! This war is the Empire’s loss!”

Just then, they were interrupted by a third voice. “...No, I’m pretty sure we can win.”

Everything went silent. Dukas’s bloodshot eyes shifted, Coignière and the senior officers turned around, and even the nearby soldiers who had been

watching the commotion from a distance looked over. The only one who didn't react was Altina; in fact, she looked quite unperturbed.

Regis scratched his head. "...Truth be told, I had only intended to bring it up if the Seventh Army chose to cooperate with us."

"You!!" A voice almost loud enough to make the ground tremble escaped from Dukas's lips.

"...Yes?" Regis asked, faltering a little.

"We can... We can... seriously win? And protect our homes!?"

"Well, we can at least force the High Britannian Army to retreat. I can't really take responsibility for what the other countries on the eastern front might do..."

Dukas ran up, shoving Coigniera out of the way. The large, robust man then got on his knees, clasping his hands together like he was praying to God.

"Please! I'm begging you! Save them! My... My family! My kids!"

"O-Of course..." The talk of children made Regis think of his two nephews. If the High Britannian Army continued on, then they would reach Rouenne before long.

Altina placed a hand on the farmer's shoulder. "You are all citizens of the Empire! We will do whatever it takes to protect you and your families, so please, lend me your aid!"

"Hm...?"

Come to think of it, the soldiers of the Seventh Army were never actually told who she was. It looks like they thought she was a maid or an attendant of some sort. I mean, what else would an underage girl be doing this close to the battlefield?

The girl with red hair and crimson eyes stuck out her chest. "I am the commander of the Beilschmidt border regiment: Marie Quatre Argentina de Belgaria, fourth princess of the Belgarian Empire!" Then, she firmly patted Regis on the shoulder. "And this is my strategist, Regis Aurick!"



A commotion spread through the gathered soldiers. While they hadn't known what Altina looked like, they had heard of her exploits. The commander and her strategist who had captured the impregnable Fort Volks. The two who led the Beilschmidt border regiment that aided the Seventh Army's retreat.

Coignière marched up to her, still gripping his sword. "Quit spewing nonsense! That's a lie! These swindlers are lying to you! If you really were able to protect us, then why didn't we win today!? All you did was stay on the back line and watch!"

"Yes, because Lieutenant General Bargesonne ordered us to!" Altina refuted. Coignière was but a young knight himself, so to a spectator they must have looked like squabbling children.

"Now, now..." Regis interjected, doing his best to ease the tension. "I, err... I was being honest when I said that we could win. I wasn't just being presumptuous; I know a method that's proven to work."

"Liar!" Coignière raised his sword, barking like a feral dog, but Altina shot him a sharp glare.

"Coignière, could you shut up and listen? Just a moment ago, you called this man 'nothing but a conscript,' and while I would rather not say this... from my position, you are nothing but a knight. Am I wrong?"

"Urrgh...!" He was being disciplined by a member of the royal family, so there was nothing he could say in response.

Regis kept his voice as tranquil as possible. "...You just suffered a tragic defeat; I cannot blame you for being emotional. However, this is a matter where lives are on the line. Surely it warrants a proper discussion...? We must consider this calmly and rationally. Now, we were talking about how to defeat the High Britannian Army, weren't we?"

Coignière kept his mouth shut while Dukas nodded several times, urging Regis to continue.

"Um, well... It would be troublesome if the plan were to be leaked to the enemy so I won't go into much detail, but, to put it simply..." Regis pulled a small, dull-looking piece of metal from his pocket, around the size of a human

finger. “These are the bullets used by the High Britannian Army.”

Dukas and the other soldiers grimaced in disgust. So many of their friends had been killed by these bullets, and it was only by sheer luck that they hadn’t died along with them.

“A metal cartridge,” Regis went on. “I must say, this bullet and the technology used to produce it is far more revolutionary than the rifle itself. They are made by feeding sheet metal into a press, where—”

“Keep it brief, Regis!” Altina interrupted, clearly the most impatient person there.

Regis found himself scratching his head yet again. “So, uh, anyway... This is the enemy’s weak point. Something this complicated cannot be procured or produced on-site, which means their supply depends entirely on shipments from their homeland. Let’s say the warfront stagnates—they will be pressed by a need to replenish these bullets alongside other supplies. I have also heard that the barrels of these new guns wear down much faster than the previous models. High Britannia left an army of ten thousand men in the port city of Ciennbourg... I couldn’t understand why at first, but after a little thought, it hit me—those are the units meant to guard their transport ships. If we prolong the war, then they will inevitably need to restock their bullets and cannon shells.”

Dukas spoke up. “W-Wait a darn second! Prolong the war!? How do ya plan on doing that!? They crushed us in an instant today!”

“If we were fighting defensively, then we would have intercepted them at a stronghold. And we would have targeted the enemy’s supply chain.”

“C-Can we do that?”

Maybe I should keep it concise, Regis thought. “High Britannia’s army is strong, but their weapons require more supplies than ours do. If we cut their supply chain, they will be forced to return home.”

Coignière glared at him, while Dukas openly voiced his skepticism. “They’ve got ten thousand soldiers at the port, eh? I don’t see how we can beat that.”

Regis smiled. “We can’t.”

“Huh!?” The large man immediately sprung up.

“...Which is why we should just give up fighting them on land, and attack from the sea instead. High Britannia won’t be able to receive supplies if they don’t have any transport ships.”

Dukas froze, wide-eyed. Coignière looked unsettled, while the senior officers were visibly distraught. Meanwhile, the other soldiers exchanged curious whispers.

“The sea?”

“Transport ships?”

“How are we gonna do that?”

Even the all-important Altina cocked her head. “I’ve never gone to sea before, but I do recall hearing that the Empire’s fleet was already bested. Can we really do something about High Britannia’s transport ships?”

“Yes, we’re fine on that front. I know so many stories on how to defeat an undefeated navy that I could span the very sea with them.”

A History of the Belgarian Empire

Pain Traditionnel

The staple food of the Belgarian Empire was *pain traditionnel*, otherwise known as plain bread. Belgaria's bread had a hard exterior compared to the bread made in surrounding regions, and it could be broken open with a satisfying crack to reveal a soft, chewy interior. This unique texture wasn't the result of one particular recipe being used across the country; it largely came down to Belgarians using a different main ingredient—namely the wheat. Around this time, other nations generally had access to hard wheat, while Belgaria cultivated a softer strain.

Hard wheat contains a higher gluten content than its softer counterpart. Gluten is a type of protein that is only found in wheat and other closely related grains, and is what gives dough its elasticity and stickiness. As softer wheats contain less gluten, the dough they produce severely lacks these qualities.

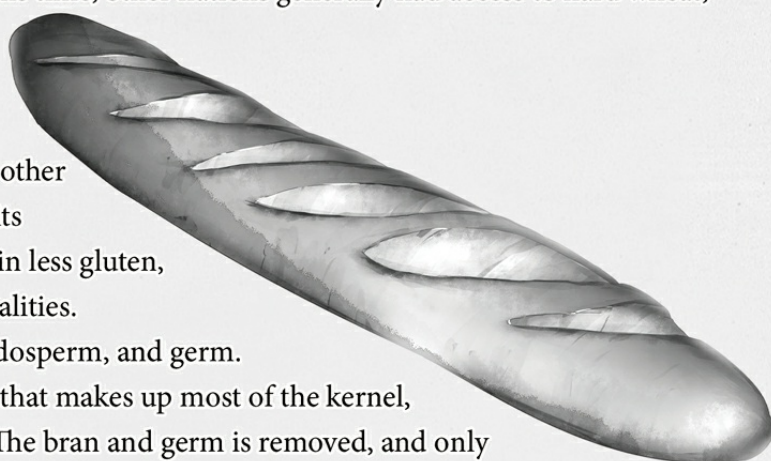
A kernel of wheat is composed of bran, endosperm, and germ. The endosperm is a mass of starch and protein that makes up most of the kernel, and this is the component used to make flour. The bran and germ is removed, and only the endosperm is ground down.

The softer wheats cultivated in Belgaria produced flour that had a slightly lower gluten content, which would be classified as medium-strength by modern standards. It is quite difficult to make soft bread using medium-strength flour, and while one could mix in sugar, eggs, or butter to soften up the mixture, these were considered luxury items; it was unthinkable for commoners to waste them on a staple food they had to eat every day. They needed to be able to make delicious *pain traditionnel* using only salt, water, yeast, and medium-strength flour... and so the *boulangers* devised a little trick.

As bread bakes, it stretches and grows due to the water vapor and gas produced by the yeast. This is what gives such a soft texture to dough that starts out like clay. When making bread using unsuited flour, ensuring that these gases could not escape—thereby making as much use of them as possible—was key. “But how might one seal them in?” you may ask.

Boulangers would fill their ovens with steam as the bread dough baked, as this extra moisture causes the surface of the bread to gelatinize. This gel then hardens and dries under the intense heat, forming a shell that seals in the gases and helps the bread to rise. To ensure this husk does not splay unevenly while it swells, the bread would be scored in advance. The resultant grooves are called *grigne*, and wide *grigne* are a sign that the bread is expanding healthily.

Freshly baked *pain traditionnel* is magically delicious. During mealtimes, the Empire's citizens would often form lines in front of the *boulangerie* so that they could buy it as fresh as possible.



Armure

Spears have been used for hunting since before the foundation of nations. Even while countries of all sizes sprouted up over the continent and battle tactics quickly advanced, the spear remained the star of the battlefield. Armor was devised in order to protect soldiers from these spears, as well as from arrows and swords.

The first armor was *cotte de mailles*, also known as chainmail. It was made from bending short, narrow pieces of iron into rings, which were then linked to form a chain. That said, these rings were not linked in a single direction like the chains we know today. Rather, they were linked on all sides so that they could be spread out like a cloth. Most weapons at the time were made of bronze, which was unable to cut through iron chains, so this armor proved to be highly effective.

Scale mail and lamellar armor were other alternatives, though these didn't see much use in the Belgarian Empire. Scale mail was made by stitching small, hard metal shards over leather like the scales of a fish, while lamellar armor was made by tying small rectangular metal plates together with string.

As Belgaria's cavalry grew, enemy soldiers learned to aim for their legs. This was counteracted by replacing a portion of the riders' armor with pieces fashioned from a single sheet of metal, and eventually paved the way for *armure de plaque*—plate armor.

Plate armor was actually lighter and sturdier than chainmail, but as it had to be custom shaped to its wearer, it was very expensive. Only nobles could afford to wear it at first, and even if a noble did go onto the battlefield, they were rarely fighting on the front line. In its early days, plate armor was excessively ornamented, and many placed a heavier emphasis on aesthetics over practicality.

As metal-processing technology advanced, full-body plate armor that even covered the face became the mainstream. This type of armor was incredibly tough, and could even block the thrust of a spear.

Cheap, mass-produced armor did eventually come on the market. The size could be altered by adjusting the links between individual parts, and any unwanted contours were compensated for with padding. As a result, the common foot soldier could finally wear a partial plate.

Following this development, people began to swing around heavy hammers and maces, which were now more effective than spears. These blunt weapons were countered with shields, and the enemy's heavy weapons meant they could be overwhelmed to a certain degree by increased maneuverability. This led to a resurgence of chain mail... and thus, the cycle would repeat.

Then came the gun.

In the year 851 on the Belgarian imperial calendar, the Belgarian Army suffered heavy casualties against High Britannia's breech-loaded rifles. From here, firearms continued to advance remarkably, up to a point where no shields or armor could defend against them.

With the gun's rise to prominence, the sight of horsemen in full plate armor became nothing more than a memory.



Afterword

Thank you for reading Altina the Sword Princess V!

This is your author, Yukiya Murasaki.

The fifth volume has finally gotten us into large-scale warfare, and Oswald from the fourth volume clashes with Regis for the first time. I get the feeling that we're only just starting to look like a military fantasy.

Now, this might just be my personal preference, but I think it's absolutely the best when several seemingly unrelated threads become entwined. I can only hope that you'll enjoy it.

Exploring these separate threads in more detail is also quite interesting. This time, Eric got separated from the group, and he also has his own story going on. I'd love to be able to write about it someday...

Instead of dragging this out too long, I plan to resolve the war in the sixth volume.

Led by Oswald, the High Britannian Army closes in on the capital! With his days limited, will Regis be able to breach the unstoppable force that is the steam ship!? I hope you'll stick around for the next volume.

(Ah, come to think of it... I think this is my first time writing about the sea without any mention of swimsuits...)

My thanks—

To my illustrator, himesuz-sensei. I know I sound like I'm repeating myself, but thank you for all of your detailed illustrations.

To Yamazaki-sama and Nishino-sama at Afterglow. You came out with yet another wonderful design.

To my editor, Wada-sama. I'm sorry that I'm always asking for the impossible.

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

Altina the Sword Princess V



Looks like Altina's already on its fifth volume. I remember doing the illustrations for Volume I like it was only yesterday. Thank you so much for keeping with us this long!

Thank
You!

I'm personally really looking forward to what comes next, so I'm counting on you, Murasaki-san...!

If you're reading this, Wada-san, I'm sorry for making things so hectic again... I'll try my best not to burn a hole through your stomach.

Great work both of you, and I look forward to working with you next time. Thank you.

PhimeSuz



Altina stepped in once again and sliced at Franziska.
She tended to develop serious tunnel vision when in battle,
and was thus completely unaware of everything
going on around her.



Inside the tent,
Clarisse prepared enough teacups for everyone,
placing them on the table without a word.
Now that there was an unfamiliar person around,
she had reverted to being like a clockwork doll.
Without even the slightest trace of a smile on her face,
she retreated to the wall the moment she
had finished her business.

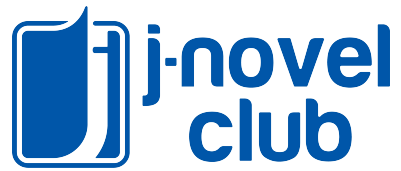
**“It’s a pleasure
to make your
acquaintance,
Lady Marie Quatre!
I’m Vanessa Smith,
Regis’s older sister.”**



**“I’m fine, Regis...
Please, do what you
think is best.”**

He had almost lost his composure,
but Jerome’s pragmatism and Altina’s trust
had given him a much-needed push.
Regis took a deep breath.
Even when the wind carried the stench of death,
they would need to keep breathing to stay alive,
and to make sure that everyone else survived as well.





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Altina the Sword Princess: Volume 5

by Yukiya Murasaki

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Illustrations by himesuz

HAKEN NO KOUKI ALTINA Vol. 5

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Ebook edition 1.0: August 2020