

A GIRL HOLDING THE SUN

火輪を抱いた少女

悪

鬼

WRITTEN BY  
ILLUSTRATED BY

KAKASAWA MATARI  
RUKAICHI ANDROMEDA

七沢あたり 著

流刑地アンドロメダ 画

VOL.

III



# **The Girl Who Bore the Flame Ring**

– Karin wo Idaita Shoujo –

**- Volume 2 -**

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**[ PsychoBarcode Translations ]**

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謀略  
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赤髪の少女が圧倒する戦場に  
降り続く不吉な雨。

反乱



THE CONTINENT OF RIBERIKA

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# Chapter 18

## Quiet Days

Though the troubles of the world continued to proliferate, Noel spent her days as happily as always. She trained all the members of the White Ant Bloc until sunset, and when the night rolled in, she took to raising tumult with wine in hand. Of course, she hadn't forgotten to practice with her trumpet. She forced Riglette to join in, each of them moving crisply as they accustomed their ears to the sound. After two weeks, their movements had gotten to the point that Cynthia began keeping watch over them.

"Wonderful. I never would have guessed that these were those filthy... I mean, disorderly gentlemen. Yes, this is quite splendid."

"Sir Cynthia, we don't know how to respond after yer changin' yer words like that," Barbas responded, laughing dryly at Cynthia's hasty rewording.

In his hand was the bugle he had been practicing with. Both he and Riglette had been given bugles by Noel. Riglette was a Coimbran soldier, and Barbas was made mediator for the White Ant Bloc.

"Sorry. If you are offended, I apologise."

"Nah, nah, don' worry 'bout it. Yer pretty cute compared to that fool Riglette. That woman ain't yet bothered ta see us as fuckin' humans."

"You haven't reconciled with Sir Riglette, then?"

"Ha, there's no way I'd stoop low enough to wag my tail for that fucking bitch who calls me a monkey. And we've only acknowledged Captain Noel, anyway. It's 'cause of our deal with her that we're here."

Cynthia nodded vaguely at Barbas' open animosity towards Riglette. Cynthia's own status was greater than Riglette's, but she was still Major General Wilm's daughter. Their father-daughter relationship was apparently rather cold, but Cynthia still took pains to watch herself whenever they met. Above all, there was her personality to consider. Simply put, Cynthia didn't like it either. Every time she opened her mouth, it

unleashed a torrent of sarcasm and negativity. In all honesty, speaking with her carried the risk of accidentally starting a fist-fight, and so Cynthia made sure to avoid her. That high-handedness aside, it was impressive that Noel could even deal with her.

“By the way, where is your Captain Noel? I came thinking that she would be training with you again today, but...”

“Ah, the captain said that she’s off to borrow a book from the lil’ prince today. There’s somethin’ ‘bout a promise about showin’ her rare books. I’m in charge of the trainin’ today.”

It was true that something along those lines had been agreed upon. It was difficult to imagine Noel properly reading something, but people didn’t always match their appearances. Despite the slightly dubious nature of abandoning her training for it, so long as it was related to her promise with Elgar, it couldn’t really be helped; however, she still wanted to voice some complaints about how self-importantly Barbas had talked about bein’ in charge of the trainin’.

“I see, shall I show my face then? We can’t let her be rude to the young master after all.”

“Haha, you might already be too late. Well, I’ll get back to my trainin’ then.”

Barbas began to walk as he spoke, bugle in hand. He released a thunderous tone, and the soldiers who were clashing swords all rushed over. Having always been an armed faction, they had adjusted rather quickly. With Noel as their head, they were sure to flourish. Cynthia felt shivers as she found herself imagining their red haired commander laughing dangerously on a galloping horse, whilst brandishing a bident.

“I wonder how her destiny will play out. Hmm, no, I just can’t imagine it.”

After a strained laugh, Cynthia raised her gaze skyward. There hadn’t been much rain recently, and the good weather had continued that day too. Noel was likely in a good mood because of it.

As she entered the Coimbran archives, a cheerful voice rang out. It was there that all of the Coimbran histories, strategic manuals, and literary works were packed away by the nobles. It didn’t look particularly useful at the moment, but records remained highly important. A specialist librarian was in charge of the collection. The figure of Noel crossing her arms with a large brush in her mouth became visible between the

rows of bookshelves, and Cynthia called out to her. Surrounding her, Elgar, a maid, and the librarian all stood, looking in with great intent. Cynthia approached stealthily, wondering what they were up to, and she found that Noel was painting a picture on a white cloth.

“What is this? Weren’t you reading a rare book? Skipping out on training to do some painting is certainly a pretty interesting thing to do, isn’t it?”

“Ueh, Cynthia!”

Noel dropped the brush from her mouth in surprise at Cynthia’s suddenly calling to her from behind. Elgar smiled as he quickly offered explanation.

“Don’t be so panicked, Noel. And Cynthia, she’s already finished the arranged book.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes. Though she borrowed the writings of a Coimbran philosopher, Noel managed to run through it all in half a day. Not satisfied with even that, she read through many of our military manuals also.”

“Is that true, Noel? Don’t try to deceive the young master.”

Cynthia shot Noel a doubtful look after listening to Elgar’s explanation as Noel appeared to be on the verge of proudly declaring that she had thoroughly flipped through all it. It being Noel, she might have calmly flipped the pages even in the presence of the viceroy’s son.

“I read it properly, you know. I’m a pretty fast reader. I wasn’t able to find what I wanted, but it was interesting.”

“Hm.”

“The most interesting one was the Coimbran history book.”

“I doubt it was that interesting, though. It’s essentially a history of defeat.”

There were almost no remaining records from the pre-unification Coimbran dynasty. What was left consisted of nothing but their pathetic defeat; it was why Coimbra had a reputation for weak soldiery.

“From what I’ve concluded, there isn’t much about this country, eh? That’s how the world is. What’s important is what we do from here on out.”

Noel had begun her tale whilst grandly stroking her chin. As she was disrespecting the heir apparent, she would quickly receive some reeducation.

“Don’t talk like you understand, you moron!”

“Ow!”

Noel clutched her head with a miserable expression after being thrashed by Cynthia’s fist.

“Sir Cynthia, please remain quiet in the building. There are many precious works here, so we cannot take any risks.”

“M-my apologies.”

Chided by the wiry librarian, Cynthia hurriedly apologised, missing Noel’s secret, proud little smile as she did.

“Ah, it struck me when I looked at Cynthia getting angry! As expected of Cynthia!”

“Oi.”

“Just a minute...”

Twirling the brush once, she put it to the cloth which soaked up red, and, in the blink of an eye, the image began to take shape. The finished piece depicted crossed hammers, likely in an attempt at creating a crest. Not only was Noel surprisingly good at painting, but the end result was sufficient that it wouldn’t be embarrassing to display it publicly.

“What is it?”

“Knights publish their family crests on their banners, right? That was what one of the books I just read said. I don’t have a family crest, so I thought I’d ask the young master to help me think of one.”

“Unfortunately, I’m not good at those sorts of things. Only scales come to mind when I

think of crests. That's why we all put our heads together to come up with something. The thought was that if it was bad, it would bring shame to Noel."

"Sir Noel, what is the meaning behind the two hammers?" the maid directly asked.

In response, Noel proudly took up the white cloth and fluttered it about, proclaiming proudly that, "These crossed hammers represent my promise with the young lord. Basically, this crest is the proof of the deal. I'll work as long as this twin hammer banner exists."

The maid and librarian nodded in understanding, and Elgar was lost for words; red with embarrassment. Seeing the state that Elgar was in brought an image into Cynthia's mind: a fully grown Elgar and Noel, wrapped in splendid costume, waving to the plebeian masses. Elgar had succeeded his father, and ruled Coimbra, bringing great development to the territory with the support of Noel as his lovely wife by his side. Cynthia wondered where she would be at that time. Perhaps she would guard and help raise the children, with hectic days...

"Wait... that means I'd have to refer to Noel as a Lady?"

"What are you spacing out about?"

"Ah, n-no, it's nothing at all! Yup, nothing!" Cynthia panicked at Noel's enquiry into her disconnected expression, and shook the wild delusions from her thoughts.

In any case, their social statuses were far too different. It probably couldn't happen, but it wouldn't be strange if Elgar had strong feelings for her anyway. He gave off that impression rather strongly ever since she had saved him. Furthermore, she was a beautiful, highly skilled, young woman with a promising future in Coimbra. The thought of it wasn't particularly strange, but it was wrong in all sorts of ways, particularly in Noel's personality department.

In the mean time, to hammer home his point, Elgar spoke up with a darkened expression, "Okay then, I will take this crest to my father for approval. I'm sorry but, that'll be it for today."

"Yup, that's fine. You don't seem too well today, somehow, young master. It seemed like you were tired when you laughed and all."

"Ah, yes, the truth is that my mother's condition is not well. Even though we hired a

new court physician.”

Elgar shut both eyes and sighed. He was only 12 years old, but his voice sounded tired and mature. Sarah had received an arrow wound in the escape from Rockbell. It wasn't severe and shouldn't have been an issue, but if the arrow wound was at fault, Cynthia was liable.

“Young master, is this because of the arrow wound...”

“No, this is different. The wound healed fine, but the court physician says it's some cursed disease. All kinds of things have been happening in Coimbra, so mother is probably worn out. Lately, she hasn't been able to eat enough, and can only drink water. She keeps losing weight.”

“Is that how it is...”

“What of it, it's probably just temporary due to the heat. We've received some medicine and rare foods from Gemb, so she'll get better soon. Father would be lonely too if mother was gone.”

Elgar was forcing his smile. Without a clue as to what to say, Cynthia could do nothing but silently nod. The same could be said for the maid and the librarian, but Noel stood quietly, and gently patted Elgar on the shoulder.

“Yup, I'm sure it's fine. She'll be as bright and healthy as the sun. I'm sure that's how it'll go.”

“N-Noel! That is disrespectful to the young master!”

“It's fine. It is true that my mother wouldn't be happy if we had dark expressions. That's why I'm the only one who needs to keep it up. Noel, I thank you.”

After thanking Noel, and staying the exasperated Cynthia, Elgar spoke up again as though he had just thought of something, “That's right, I mentioned the food that just arrived from Gemb, right? Actually, a delegation arrived from them too. To welcome them we'll hold a dinner party tomorrow. If you would like, you all may attend.”

“Yup, sure- I mean, I understand!”

“Haha, I don't mind if you speak informally to me, but Cynthia would get angry, so

maybe it is for the better.”

“Young master, don’t be too easy on Noel. This idiot wouldn’t hold back at all, so you’ve got to be moderately harsh. Not moderately, actually, show her no mercy.”

“Cynthia’s too strict, eh? She’s always scolding, and it gets annoying.”

“And whose fault is that!?”

“Hm?”

“Haha, it never gets boring with you two around. I’d love to talk some more, but it can’t be done. I’ll leave the rest to you Cynthia. Noel, let’s see each other tomorrow.”

Elgar raised his hand, and, together with the maid, left the archives. Confirming that they had left, the librarian returned to his duties.

“..”

“..”

In the silence, Cynthia and Noel’s eyes locked. Noel placed the white cloth upon which she had painted her crest over her head, and pivoted. It looked like she was trying to hide. While she attempted to slither away, Cynthia took hold of her hair from behind, stopping her.

“Gah...”

“Ah, perfect. Considering the location, why don’t we review your etiquette and speech for today, right here?”

Tossing the cloth aside, she jabbed a finger at Noel.

“B-but there’s training today. See, I’m the captain, after all. Aaah, busy, busy, busy.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it. Barbas was doing just fine.”

“Yes, well I need to write a report about it. I’ve been told to do it, so it needs to be done quickly!”

“You hand all that off to Sir Riglette, so what are you trying to say!? And you really need to do something about that habit of handing things off to get by!”

“Yes, that is absolutely correct! Senior Commander of One Hundred Cynthia, I apologise from the depths of my heart!”

Noel saluted perfectly in the Coimbran style. She had unexpectedly switched to rather charming movements, but completely missed the point. On the contrary to what she had intended, Noel had poured oil into the fire.

“Those were splendid words and a lovely salute, but you haven’t acknowledged it in your mind at all. I’m not going to let you get away no matter what you tell me, so give up and take a seat.”

Noel reluctantly seated herself on a chair after Cynthia had issued her final warning. It wasn’t as if Cynthia had much free time either. There were documents that she needed to sort out too; however, knowing that this too was part of her job, she nodded deeply and began to explain to Noel just what it was to be lord and retainer. Some three hours later, she called out to Noel, who was sprawled across a desk.

“I’ve forgotten something essential. Do you have a ceremonial dress?”

She shook her head disinterestedly, “Of course I don’t. Mobility is shit in those fluttery things, so I thought I didn’t need one.”

“Then what exactly do you intend to wear to tomorrow’s diner banquet?”

“The uniform I just got. I want to show off the gilded splendour of my decorations. If we’re just going to eat, it’ll be fine. I mean, I’m on active duty, right?”

Certainly, men wouldn’t have a problem with simply wearing the military uniform. In the glorious days of old, however, the Coimbran traditional garment for women was the dress. In the first place, female knights were so fundamentally rare that there wasn’t a precedent.

“Unfortunately, that won’t do. It is customary in Coimbra for women to wear dresses to these kinds of events. You might not want to, but this is how things are, so deal with it. Isn’t that your favourite phrase?”

‘Such is the way of the world,’ and ‘It can’t be helped,’ were things that Noel liked to

say. Though she said them often, she didn't particularly like them, so it didn't help her much. In fact, instead of giving up more quickly, she became almost as obstinate as she was about her 'promises'. Her personality had been extremely warped such that her greatest vice was in regards to what she wouldn't protect; what she didn't want to protect. She would cover herself with simple agreement and a nod, glossing over the full meaning that she understood what was wanted, but wouldn't do anything about it. She would calmly equivocate and so it was important to be cautious when dealing with her.

"Yeah, but I don't have a dress. So, I'll go in uniform. It's fine, it's fine, nobody will fuss over me."

Cynthia was amazed at Noel's complete lack of self-awareness. Noel was certainly going to receive a significant amount of attention; all the more because she was a future leader who had appeared in Coimbra, as well as being an attractive woman. At any rate, Grohl had been spouting her praise in every which way for some time, painting a vivid image of her valour at the battle of Kanan highway. If Noel made a mistake, it would destroy Grohl's reputation. That was why Cynthia had been giving her strict officer training.

"I'll fuss over it, so you can't do that."

"No, I don't mind..."

Cynthia interrupted her words by striking her with the palm of her hand.

"All right, let's head off to a tailor next. It would be fine if I could lend you something, but there obviously isn't anything your size. It probably won't be luxurious, but I bet we can work something out in one day. It'll be fine if we tailor something that they already have in stock."

If they could go to a shop that she knew, and could foot the bill, things would work out somehow. They couldn't get an entirely custom made dress in such a short amount of time, but the tailoring could most likely be finished quickly enough.

"But, it would waste your time, and I'm tired today, and my stomach's empty, and in all honesty, it'll be a pain."

"It is the same for me. Look, if we don't go soon, the shops will close!"

“W-wait a minute. Don’t just pull...”

Ignoring her complaints, Cynthia forcefully dragged her by the arm. Every day had been busy since Noel had come to the castle. Rather than busy, it had become boisterous. That was to say, it hadn’t been all bad. It felt like she had a cheeky little sister. She wondered if her late brother had felt similarly about herself, though she still couldn’t understand fully.

*After first meeting her as an enemy, it is unbelievable that we ended up like family. Life is such a mysterious thing.*

Smiling slightly, Cynthia set her mind fully on finding a dress that suited Noel, who, on the other hand, had found her eyes spinning.

# Chapter 19

## An Enjoyable Supper

The dinner welcoming the delegation from Gemb was to be held on the following evening at Madress Castle. Coimbra attendants were to include Grohl, the viceroy; Elgar, his son; Wilm and Gaddis; as well as the various chief vassals like Perius. The daughters of several nobles were to dress up and entertain the guests as a pretext for allowing Noel and Cynthia's participation. Above all, Grohl wanted to boast about Noel, and had immediately approved of it. Incidentally, Noel had attempted to persuade Riglette to go as well, but had been curtly refused as she absolutely loathed the idea.

The ambassadors from Gemb attended too, and all of Kai's subordinates, for he was the captain of their guards, had lined up. Kai's task had not yet begun as to allow the ambassador to focus fully on his duties.

Grohl raised a glass in one hand as he commenced his greeting, "Gembite gentlemen, it has been a long journey to Coimbra. On behalf of the people of Coimbra, I welcome you."

They would occasionally receive ambassadors from Gemb, but the mood this time was unusually good. It was little wonder for they weren't feeling each other out this time, but were openly working towards deepening their friendship. That was why Grohl had greeted them so warmly, and as such, the atmosphere was cheery all around. Gemb and Coimbra had held friendly relations since before the unification, and things had not changed much since then. Grohl had wanted nothing more than their support, and so they had brought a promissory note concerning their alliance with Coimbra. They could not have been welcomed warmly enough, and again, there was the matter of Grohl's desire to show off Noel.

Carelessly ignoring the viceroy's greetings, Noel whispered, "Hey, isn't the waist too tight after all? My stomach's been hurting for a while now..."

The pale, baby blue dress that Cynthia had picked out for Noel fit her body well, so there was no way that it hurt. In the first place, it only had to be slightly tightened because of how slender she was, so she was likely merely unused to the sensation. It

was extremely important that all attendees wore such dress, so there was no way around it. Cynthia was wearing her favourite pale, red dress. She had put on some muscle since the last time she had worn it, so getting it on had proved slightly troublesome. Her own corset was tightened at least twice as tightly as Noel's was. She knew it was nothing but vanity to draw in her stomach as much as she could, but it didn't stop her. Looking at her surroundings, there were even some girls who were slightly sweating for the stiffness. The world of the aristocrats appeared glamorous at first glance, but there was much hidden work that they put into modesty.

*Still, she's disguised as a woman. She could become a splendid lady if we could only fix her speech and attitude... Well, that's probably impossible.*

That was correct, if only Noel could keep her mouth shut, she would appear to be a young lady from some important family or other. Her pale, baby blue dress suited her well, highlighting her characteristic red hair. Her azure eyes, lips —despite being only subtly reddened—, and her pale skin gave her the look of an exquisite doll. More than physical attractiveness, she exuded an almost inhuman aura; provided she was able to maintain a calm expression, and keep her mouth shut. Her natural, slightly messy hair hinted at some remaining childishness, but her impression had been too intense when they had used a wig. Her exposed collarbone was exquisitely erotic, and she seemed a totally different person from the usual Noel.

Such was her transformation that Barbas, accompanying her in a wig of his own, had gotten excited on his own, not noticing that she was Noel. When it was explained to him, his jaw hung so widely open, it looked as though it had been disconnected. Elgar too, had his eyes go round the moment he realised she was Noel. Face fully flushed, his gaze had flickered intermittently to her frequently before the diner party began. Cynthia wanted to believe in Noel's childish nervousness doing most of the work, but there could be no mistakes so she would likely have to drive home her points rather thoroughly. Riglette had knit her eyebrows at a single glance, tutted loudly, and went off on her own.

*Even as a woman myself, I can see how she is rather charming. That's for sure... that's for sure, but...*

No matter how beautiful she was externally, her true self got easily carried away, and would quickly start to mess around, so Cynthia needed to be sure to avoid being taken in by her doll-like appearance.

“Okay, this is a pain. I’m taking it off.”

“Y-you idiot! Is there anyone who would strip in a place like this!? It’s only for a short while, so bear with it.”

“You’re even more squeezed in than I am, so how are you fine? Could it be that your stomach’s squishy enough?”

“S-shut up. I don’t need your advice!”

Noel tactlessly struck where it hurt. There was no way that Cynthia was fat, it had simply been her vanity. Noel was mischievous enough that she was probably going to go on about how she totally understood, and the corners of her mouth were, indeed, already twisting. Whatever words she had planned, they were going to be one hundred times more infuriating than cute. Resisting the urge to pinch Noel’s cheeks, Cynthia put up a smile, for Grohl’s speech was still ongoing. The welcoming of guests was an important ceremony, and they could not afford to be in any way rude.

“Hey, when this lengthy speech is over, we get to eat, right? It’s painful, and it’ll get in the way, so why don’t we just open up the corset? Look, it’ll be fine if we do it now.”

She continued spouting unbelievable words: it was impossible to loosen the corset without first removing her dress. It seemed like Noel was starting to move her hands, and so Cynthia forcefully pinned them. All gazes were directed at Grohl, so Cynthia reprimanded her in a low voice, hoping not to be a disturbance.

“Stop doing stupid things. What is most important is that the viceroy is giving greetings.”

“No matter what?”

“No matter what. Please just be obedient. Listen, just for now, will you please shut your mouth like a doll?”

“Hey, can I drink the wine if I do? I feel like my throat is dry somehow.”

“Wait for the toast.”

“Ah, but this wine looks super good. The aroma is excellent. Well now, what vineyard is this from?”

Rattling off her words rapid fire, she seemed about to place the glass in her hands to her lips, so Cynthia rushed to stop her.

“It’s really only going to be just a little bit more that you’ll have to wait. Don’t do anything, and still your heart.”

“Yeah, I get it... but, the viceroy just keeps going. Look, even the young master is yawning. Is that okay?”

Slightly horrified, Cynthia turned her gaze to Elgar who was standing just behind Grohl. Of course, he was sitting tensely without yawning in the slightest. His appearance was rather splendid, but what was emphasised was his childishness.

*Thinking about it, there’s no way that the young master would yawn.*

Cynthia realised she had been completely fooled, but by the time her gaze returned to Noel, she had already raised her glass.

“Hehe, I drank it. Ah, but it seems like the toast’ll be soon, so I’d better refill this.”

“Noel... I’m going to remember this.”

Muttering with a sour expression, raising her head from Noel, her eyes accidentally met with those of a young officer in the opposite line. He was the previously introduced captain of the Gemb delegation’s guard. The fact that he had been entrusted with command at such a young age was likely indicative of his skill. In the first place, it was already unbelievable enough that he was able to succeed at all as an officer considering how much Gemb valued the military arts above all else. That very Kai looked like he had just seen something interesting; most likely Noel’s most recent disgraceful act. Cynthia could do nothing but nod and act as if she had seen nothing, though her mouth twitched slightly as she did so.

“I pray for ever more growth, and fame for both Coimbra and Gemb. Cheers!”

“Cheers!”

As they all exchanged the toast, the young Coimbran ladies brought more wine to the officers from Gemb. The meal was under the pretext of being a free and easy buffet, so it was acceptable to only eat what one wanted. Cynthia had painfully tightened her corset, and so wasn’t in the mood for food, but she had resolved herself to eat some

vegetable sticks, and fish pie. After that was a matter of welcome, and she felt the need to greet the people from Gemb appropriately, yet the chance never came as all of the Gembites had gathered together, eating and drinking. A great many dishes prepared from fresh Coimbran fish had been laid out upon the table. While some of them had to be spiced rather heavily to mask the scent, Gemb also bordered the sea, so the officers showed no real indication of discomfort. They were eating it as quickly as it could be described. Usually, that sort of behaviour would be improper decorum, but as they were there to side with Coimbra, no complaints were raised. They were laughing and drinking as normally as could be.

“...”

That being the case, Cynthia’s stomach turned sour at the sight of such ferocious appetites.

*Just what are their stomachs made of?*

As she appeared to meditate further upon it, she noticed someone beside her that seemed to be doing something rather familiar. Of course it was Noel. She had no idea at what point this had happened, but Noel had secured five bottles of Madress wine. With a gleeful look, she poured a glass, and downed it in a single stroke. Madress wine was not weak enough for that sort of consumption, and it just so happened to be so expensive that the plebeians had no hope of ever even touching a bottle.

“Ehehe, this’ good.”

With a loose face, she hummed in her satisfaction. Cynthia could not help but smack the alcoholic in the head for making such a fuss.

“Oi, this isn’t a bar. Though the event isn’t particularly formal, you still need act with discretion.”

“Somebody told me happiness is found in expensive wine. So, I’ll drink till I’m sick. Just look how much there is.”

“If you could find happiness just by drinking, nobody would have any troubles left.”

“But, I’m in a better mood... isn’t that evidence that I’m getting closer?”

“Who knows. I think that it’s completely different.”

“But it might work, so I’ll share it with you as promised. C’mon gimme your glass. It’s been empty for a while.”

“Okay, thanks.”

Cynthia politely thanked and accepted it since Noel was offering this once. As the red liquid was almost to her lips, she noticed a young man approach. It was Leue Grambull, Wilm’s son, and his social standing was the same as Cynthia’s.

“Sir Cynthia, it has been a while. I know that it’s extremely late, but I’d like to congratulate you on your promotion. My father Wilm is also very happy for you.”

“Hello there, Sir Leue. Thank you for your kind words. I hope I can count on your continued guidance in the future as well.”

“Please don’t be so formal. We’re both young, so let’s work together... It can be troubling to have a great man as a father, I too have my hardships.”

Her late father had been an old friend of Wilm’s, and Leue had known her since childhood because of their families. When her father was alive, they would sometimes be invited to the Grambull family manor. As Leue was of a similar age to her, there had been many opportunities for them to talk as they both practiced their swordsmanship. After her father’s death, their meetings had decreased in frequency. Incidentally, she had almost no memories of ever speaking with his younger sister Riglette as she would hide away in her room and refuse to come out even when called. There was also that Riglette’s relationship with Leue was poor.

“That dress suits you well. Sir Cynthia, I must say you’ve become truly beautiful.”

“Sir Leue, I see you’ve become skilled at flattery.”

“Haha, oh please. I’m not someone who can say that so easily to just anyone. I really think it to be true.”

“In that case, I thank you very much.”

Resigned to her acceptance of Leue’s complement, Cynthia forced a smile. She had no idea how serious he was, but he would say those kinds of things from time to time. His future was secured as he was Wilm’s heir, and furthermore, his face wasn’t bad, so he was extremely popular with the nobles’ daughters. It wasn’t that Cynthia herself

disliked him, but she had no time for things like romance. Her hands were full with training her troops, and herself; even moreso now that she had a certain mischievous girl to deal with.

“By the way, Sir Cynthia, is this the rumored Sir Noel?”

“Yes that is correct. Commander of One Hundred, Noel Bosheit... Noel, are you not going to greet him?”

“Eh, but, this is informal...”

“That’s just a facade. This is Senior Commander of One Hundred, Leue Grambull. He’s Major General Wilm’s son.”

“My name is Leue. I’ve been sent by my father because of your recent achievements. Also, please take care of my sister. She is still my sister.”

Accepting his words, Noel stood, and with a serious expression, saluted. At first glance, nothing was notable, but further inspection would reveal the slight flush in her cheeks and the very minute wobble she had developed. With as much as she had drunk, it wouldn’t be strange for a normal person to have fallen over. She was completely unbelievable.

“Ah, I’m Commander of One Hundred, Noel Bosheit! Please leave Riglette to me!”

“Ahaha, you don’t have to be so stiff. Tonight is informal, so go ahead and drink as much as you want.”

Leue took some himself, and smiled.

“Will do, thank you very much!”

Having answered in a loud voice, she began to put the glass once more to her lips, even spilling some on her only dress.

“You’re as lively as the rumors say. Well then, I’ll be off to greet the guests from Gemb, so please excuse me.”

Leue could not stand to deal with drunkards, and went on his way after nodding to Cynthia. It was likely thanks to the mood there that not much attention had been

drawn, despite all Noel's uproar. The Gembites were surrounded by the young ladies and had begun to regale their heroic tales. Sometimes erupting into cheers and applause, everyone was wrapt in the tales.

*It's probably an exaggeration, but Gemb is renowned for its valour. It's obviously heartening that they've become our allies.*

She didn't know what the reality of a war with Bahar would be like, but cooperation from Gemb was undoubtedly an advantage. As she thought, Cynthia fiddled with Noel's red hair while she was in a drunken daze. It was silky smooth, and felt good to the touch.

As the party neared its climax, Cynthia heard Grohl begin a grand tale opening on how Noel wouldn't lose to their tales; likely talking about her most recent exploits, though the people were drunk, and it was likely greatly exaggerated; the contents being about her slaying one hundred bandits with a single stroke of the spear, how a single cry could cause all foes in sight to cower, or some such overblown topic. Of course, to those who had witnessed her in combat, not all of it sounded outside of the realm of possibility.

*Where does the power come from in such a slender body? It's a wonder that she can wield her bident and warhammer with such ease.*

When Grohl's grand boasting was over, the regular chatter returned, but looking their way with a broad grin, holding a bottle of wine in one hand, the commander of the Gembi guards, Kai, approached.

"Excuse me, would it be acceptable for the Gemb delegation to raise a toast for the young heroine of Coimbra?"

"It's fine by me... uhh, who're you again?"

"Oi! Don't be rude!"

Assuaging Cynthia, who had started yelling, Kai filled Noel's glass to the brim. As far as she could tell, he wasn't angry.

"I am an officer of Gemb named Kai. As you can see, I am inexperienced, but I earned my command of one hundred men with my skill in arms."

“I see... no, is that so?”

Flushed and smiling, Noel had quickly tried to smooth things over, catching herself after her initial response.

“Whatever the case, in Lord Grohl’s story, Sir Noel is quite valourous. We Gembites value the strong, so feel free to visit with us. By all means acquaint yourself...”

“I’m Commander of One Hundred, Noel! I look forward to working with you!”

Noel merrily responded, still red, and reeking of wine. It seemed she had become completely drunk.

“Haha, since it seems we’re of a rank, we might as well be more relaxed. From what I’ve heard, you use a long spear, Sir Noel, but can you really use it with such thin arms? I’ve been wondering about that. I have no reason to doubt Lord Grohl, but was there not a bit much exaggeration?”

“S-sir Kai.”

“If that was rude, I apologise... but, we cannot raise our glasses to a fake.”

Kai watched her as he tested the waters. He most likely found the stories of Noel’s martial prowess to be unbelievable due to his own self confidence. If Cynthia hadn’t seen it with her own two eyes, she would feel the same.

“Can you not believe the viceroy’s story?”

“To say it honestly, that would be correct. To be more clear, it’s such a joke, it’s insulting. It sounds like a story made up for today.”

Kai had lowered his voice to a whisper. He seemed brusque, but unskilled in the ways of the world; hence his coming to test Noel instead of letting it slide.

“Not at all, but what can I do? There’s no way to have a match here. Ah, can you give me your arm?”

“That won’t be a problem, but what do you want?”

“It’ll be fine, it’ll be fine.”

“If you say so, do as you will.”

Kai presented his well trained right arm. Sitting, the instant Noel grasped him with her left hand...

“Gh...”

Kai’s face warped in anguish. He didn’t let out his voice, but he clearly experienced significant pain. His formerly arrogant expression had gone pale, and a cold sweat had begun to break out. Noel, on the other hand, looked about as oblivious as ever, except for her eyes, which looked as though mid battle.

“Hey, what’s important is if there’s enough strength to kill the enemy or not. However thin my arms are, or whatever I look like doesn’t matter at all right?”

“Gh... gnnn!”

“See, on the battlefield, nobody pays attention to those little things, eh? Just if they’re alive or dead. So, Commander of One Hundred, Kai, do you agree?”

“L-let go!”

Noel released her hand as, Kai seemed to be pulling his arm away, having confirmed her strength.

“Okay. If we made any more noise, Cynthia would get angry, after all.”

“W-what strength. You could have broken my arm.”

“Uh, was it the strength of a hundred men? I’m a commander of one hundred, so that much is obvious, though. And I really have the strength of a hundred men!”

“Yes, whatever it is that you’re saying, I don’t comprehend it at all... but it seems that Grohl’s story earlier was true. I must apologise for my rude statements. Please forgive me.”

Kai lowered his head, but Noel waved it off with, “It’s fine, it’s fine. Rather, drink up,” as she raised her glass to her lips with a smile.

Fortunately, she hadn’t caused an uproar without paying heed to her surroundings.

With a sigh, Cynthia smoothed down her dress, and resolved to properly lecture Noel afterwards. Of all things, Noel had been rude to an emissary from another province.

“Hey Kai, you’re still young, but you speak super stiffly, eh? Don’t you ever tire of talking like that all the time?”

“Well, I will accept what you’ve said, but are you not just a little too lax, yourself? I am, ostensibly, an emissary from Gemb, you know.”

“You said not to hold back ‘cause we’re the same rank, though.”

Kai leaned back arrogantly as he spoke, “I was merely being polite. It was strictly beaten into me every day by my superiors to not accept words at face value.”

Noel nodded along vigorously.

“Ah, they get angry at me every day too. And when I nod off during lectures, Cynthia gets all naggy.”

“Don’t say I’m naggy! Sir Kai, I will scold this fool later, so please be lenient for the moment.”

“Hahaha, I don’t mind it. In fact, I didn’t know that Sir Noel was undergoing training too. As a matter of fact, I too am no match for my staff officer, Lord Haksek. We young ones have our own troubles, eh?”

Laughing heartily, Kai put the bottle of wine to his lips and downed it in a single stroke. Afterwards, realising it had been rude of him to do so, he stroked his scar.

“Sir Kai, how to I put it, you seem quite lively.”

“Dear me, I often hear that, for I’m a simple man underneath. Haha, honestly speaking, this whole emissary thing where one must use one’s head, and the atmosphere, and all that, is rather difficult for me. I end up becoming rather stiff.”

“You’re really funny Kai. Even though your face is scary like that. You’re like a bear.”

“Noel!”

Kai simply smiled pleasantly, though Noel was being scolded.

“Hahaha, it’s a bit much to say that I’m scary, but I’ll take the bear part as a complement. You are rather amusing, yourself, Sir Noel. It is my first time meeting such a strange and peculiar person,” after a brief pause, he continued, “That’s right, this must be some kind of fate; a sign of Coimbra and Gemb’s friendship. Why don’t we have a toast to our camaraderie!”

Kai filled a new glass to the brim with wine, and Noel responded in kind. Cynthia was bewildered about just what was happening, and tentatively raised her glass.

“That’s great. In that case...”

Noel and Kai turned their gazes to her.

“S-shall I give the signal?”

“Quickly. Quickly.”

“W... w-well then. Uh, ahem... Cheers!”

Following Cynthia, the two also gave their cheers, and drank in high spirits. Immediately afterwards, as if nothing had happened at all, the two bumbled off and set about eating and drinking with no intentions of stopping.

“It’s delicious, eh?”

“Yes. These are all things that we cannot eat in Gemb.”

“Ahaha, you’ve got tons of food there, just like a real bear.”

Noel laughed heartily as she pointed. As if in response to her, Kai flourished the meat he held in both hands.

“...”

*Somehow... it seems like I’m the only one getting tired. For the moment, I’ll just have to be happy that it ended well. Yup.*

Sighing to herself, Cynthia accepted the leftover meat from Noel’s plate.

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## **Author's Note**

It's the story of the drunken woman and the Gembi bear.

The friendship between Coimbra and Gemb has deepened.

Grohl's mood improved.

# Chapter 20

## The Cogs Began to Turn

“At last, the time has come. We will assault Bahar.”

He faced the rows of military officers and civil officials, his face full of resolve. Grohl’s words were brief, but clear. After a brief silence, the room erupted in an uproar. Everyone had known it would come to a war sooner or later, but it was no surprise that the decision being made at that time caused unrest. Gathered in the meeting were all those ranking higher than commander of one hundred, and at Grohl’s command, the message would be carried down to every single Coimbran soldier. Incidentally, Cynthia and Noel were both present for the meeting at the end of the column.

The civil official Perius took a single step forwards, and enquired into the specific meaning of the order, “What are you saying?”

Joking in that scenario would be inexcusable. Aside from the head retainers, it would be nearly impossible to impose silence upon all present. Without a doubt, the information would leak.

“I said that we will assault Bahar.”

“Is that what your true intentions are?”

“The time for negotiations has already ended. All of our emissaries sent to crossexamine Amil have been ignored. They did not accept that Ristih was Amil’s retainer. Look at the disrespectful note that they sent in return!”

Grohl took a crumpled letter from his breast pocket, and threw it to Perius who confirmed its contents. It was an invitation to a “ceremony of the rising sun” on the first day of the seventh month, requesting Grohl’s attendance.

“It can’t be! Amil will become the crown prince when that happens...”

Perius could not hide his scowl. There was no way that Emperor Befnam didn’t understand the consequences. So that his own two sons would compete for the throne,

he had gone so far as to pour oil onto the fire himself. He would grant the throne to the survivor, but Amil was the favorite without question. If they didn't act soon, Amil would take his place as crown prince.

*This must be stopped. More than the pointless spilling of blood, at present, neither Grohl, nor the impoverished Coimbra can take on Bahar. If he can rein in his imperial ambition, Grohl can still live as a viceroy.*

The ceremony of the rising sun was a system that the Sun Emperor Bergis had created after the Libelikan unification. It was a ceremony to inform the entire empire who was most fit for the throne. One would take all of his soldiers to the imperial capital, and display all of his military might and assets. It was an old practice in which one would crush his opposition with overwhelming force. That being the case, the ceremony of the rising sun could not be invoked without the consent of the incumbent emperor. Naturally, this was because mobilizing a large army was difficult, but also it was to avoid stirring up opposition. Before that could happen, victory over one's rivals was a necessity; that and perhaps a purge. It was a ritual of what was called pre-established harmony. Grohl had twisted the corners of his lips so far that it looked as if he had gone insane; his face was pale, and his cheek was twitching.

"If we enter Bahar's territory while they move their troops, much blood will be spilled, regardless of friend or foe. Why don't we just throw away our men? This war does not seem like a good enough cause for that. We should send back His Majesty's messenger with proof of the truth behind the rebellion. If it goes well, the ceremony might be postponed!" Perius raised his voice in complaint.

Even if, for argument's sake, fortune was on their side and they took Bahar, the road ahead would still be thorny. Defeating Amil would not guarantee the throne. The probability that the other viceroys would name themselves candidates for the throne and set out to claim it under the pretense of righteously crushing insurgents was exceedingly high. Turbulent times would once again swoop down upon the continent.

"I don't have good cause? What nonsense! Just how many Coimbrans do you think have already died at the hands of that bastard Amil's plots!? We have a duty to avenge them!"

"Viceroy, we cannot act rashly. This must be a trap made by Bahar. Don't be taken in!"

"Silence, Perius! It has already been decided; I won't change my mind now! If it is a

trap, we just need to destroy it!”

“No! Please think calmly, Viceroy. Is this not an obvious trap? More importantly, the people are tired after the rebellion. Now is the time to help them!”

Grohl might not have had what it took to be emperor; however, he was by no means the despot that he was rumored to be. Perius knew that after his long years of service. He had turned his ears to the civil officials and put in great effort to alleviate the poor conditions. Mercifully, they had been able to put down the Red Circle Army and prevent the worst case scenario. There was no more reason to rush. If they didn't move, neither would Bahar. What was truly important was what happened from then on. They had already started slowly building an industry that didn't rely on the gold mines. They needed to maximise the profits from their fertile plains, and vast oceanic resources as they were things that the inland plains could never produce. If the capital Madress could flourish, trade would once again be stimulated. It wouldn't happen instantly, but the seeds had already been planted. It was not the time for a foolish war.

“Aah, I'm not going to listen to this! This is not the time to move slowly! I have no need for retainers who wag their tails for Amil!”

“Please listen to all of what I have to say. We are about to see the fruits of our labours. The day that your plans finally bloom is almost at hand. Until then...”

“Viceroy!”

Interrupting Perius as he was about to continue, Major Generals Wilm and Gaddis stepped forward and saluted.

“Oh, Wilm and Gaddis! What do you two think? It can't be that our Major Generals have lost their nerve like Perius?”

Wilm shook his head as Grohl looked at him to confirm.

“You have misjudged me. Those in the Coimbran army are here to become the province's sword in times of war. We will not forget that even if only a single common soldier remains. We will destroy all who stand in our way!”

Vaguely performatory, Gaddis raised his voice too, “It is obvious that Bahar was behind the rebellious uprising that spilled so much blood. Furthermore, what happened to Lady Sarah was all the fault of those rebels. All those in their right minds

will acknowledge that either reason is justified. Viceroy, please follow your heart. We will follow you to the ends of the earth!”

The more or less perceptive of them were likely able to notice his slight pallor, but Grohl had been overcome with emotions to the point of tears. His eyes were clouded with hatred, anger, and jealousy towards Amil, and his beloved Sarah was in critical condition, so he had completely lost hold of his composure. All that occupied his mind were thoughts of destroying Amil, and taking his place as the crown prince before Sarah passed away. He wanted to give his wife a taste of glory before she went to her death.

“As expected of my most trusted men. Your loyalty and resolution are known by all. Moreover, should we not assault Bahar, and make Amil’s sins known to the world? He does not have the honour of the rising sun, but we can feed him as much of the dishonour of the setting sun as he pleases!”

“Yes sir. We military officers all swear for your sake, Lord Grohl, and for the sake of Coimbra, to fight to the bitter end!”

“Wilm and Gaddis both, I’m greatly anticipating your efforts!”

“I am grateful for your words. I, Wilm, intend to absolutely live up to your expectations.”

“Betting my honour as a commander, I will absolutely bring victory to our viceroy!”

Glancing quickly at one another, Wilm and Gaddis returned to the column.

“With that our path is set in stone. The filthy shame that I have had to put up with until this point, and my previous anxieties must needs be cast aside. For this reason we have gained an alliance with Gemb, and the majority of the supplies from Giv have already arrived. And now, I have an even greater report for you gentlemen.”

Grohl, beckoning, summoned forward a single man from the column of civil officials. He was a blond and thin middle aged man, dressed fully in extravagant clothes, with a distinctively long goatee.

“This man is a special envoy from Ribeldam, Mr. Griel. Our secret negotiation has been completed, and at last, I can introduce him to you.”

The room filled buzzed at the mention of Ribeldam as one would expect. Ribeldam

had recently begun paying tribute to Bahar, but had been neglecting Coimbra. It had been primarily because of the exhaustion of the gold mines and suspension of foreign trade, but the final reason was that the maritime cities of Ribeldam had experienced remarkable growth. A new trade route between the southern islands, Ribeldam, Bahar, and the imperial capital had been opened, bringing floods of people, wealth, and happiness into the region. In contrast to the decline of Coimbra, it could easily be said that Bahar and Ribeldam had developed remarkably.

“I am honoured to introduce myself. I am Ribeldam’s secret envoy, Griel. What is most important now is that we have reached an agreement with the Coimbran administration.”

“Is this about maintaining neutrality? Viceroy, you surely can’t intend to believe Mr. Griel’s words!?” Perius questioned Grohl.

If it was as Perius was suggesting, it was highly unbelievable. Conversely, it would make the most sense that they were planning on siding with Bahar and attacking. That was how stormy their relationship with Coimbra was.

“I do not believe in their words, but in their history. They are merchants to the core. They look for opportunities. They have recognised the power we displayed when we crushed the rebels. As proof they have given us vast funds. In return, when I win, I will not inflict any harm on their province.”

Grohl tossed another paper to Perius on which was recorded the sums of gold that Ribeldam had supplied them with.

“That is what you say, Viceroy, but I find it extremely hard to believe. Please, think about it calmly. Ribeldam is the province with the closest ties to Bahar, so is it not as believable as heaven and earth switching places for them to ally with us? What they sent us is trivial when compared to their total assets; it guarantees nothing.”

“Viceroy, I fear I am of the same opinion. Please reconsider.”

“As Mr. Perius says, now is not the time to rush. One mistake now, and great calamity will befall us!”

Those civil officials who were close to Perius raised their voices in agreement. Everyone knew that the people of Ribeldam were merchants through and through. They valued money more than life, and would do anything for a profit, a temperament

all the more prevalent among their contemporary merchants. It would be nothing for them to put on a performance for the sake of a wealthy future customer like Amil. Trusting in the lies of Ribeldam and starting a war was insanity, but...

“Have you lost your nerve again, you coward!?”

“The viceroy has already decided. It is treason to go against his will!”

Members of Wilm and Gaddis’ cliques raised their voices at the civil officials, sparking a debate.

“We are not treasonous! It is obvious to want to avoid an unnecessary war. Are you not succumbing to petty pride!?”

“Silence!! Lord Wilm and Lord Gaddis both agree, and the viceroy has decide on war! Coimbra’s path is set in stone. Why don’t you cowardly bastards go hole yourselves up in a castle and count some money!”

“That’s right. The time for waiting has passed. Mr. Perius, if you know any shame at all, get yourself to work!”

Perius indomitably shouted, “You fools have gotten lost in your fervour and refuse to listen!”

The military officers briefly flinched at his force, but quickly returned to their naysaying. The ones with the power at the meeting were Gaddis and Wilm; apart from whom, the rest could be separated into three groups. Most of the independent military officers were also in favour of starting a war. The head of the anti-war faction was Perius, with his civil officials, and some military officers. It was only the people who could see the situation clearly, but their biggest concern was the spread of disaster to Coimbra.

“Viceroy, do not be taken in by their honeyed words. A war cannot be easily stopped once it has begun. It will not end until one party meets a bloody end. Seeing that we are the weaker province, Ribeldam will surely invade!”

Hearing Perius’ words, Griel burst out into a loud laugh.

“Hahaha, you’re saying some outrageous things, Mr. Perius. In this war you have the disadvantage? In other words, you’ll be defeated. Would not all of the other

surrounding provinces invade you as well?”

“What are you trying to say, Mr. Griel!?”

“Exactly as I’ve stated. Ribeldam will provide funds and remain neutral. What choice will we have but to side with Bahar if you refuse to believe us?”

“Do whatever you wish! I would like to end the discussion of starting a war! There is no need for a pointless war within the empire!”

“That was rude of me. I jumped to the conclusion that Lord Grohl had already made up his mind. You have my apologies.”

Griel bowed deeply to the indignant Perius. Seeing that, Grohl raised his angry voice, “You aren’t holding back, are you Perius!?!? Mr. Griel, my retainer has been rude. I have already made up my mind, just like you thought!”

“Hahaha, I don’t mind. We have repeatedly made clear that we intend to remain neutral, even if it results in poor reputation. And my goodness, is reputation hard to fix.”

Grohl knew what it was like to have an unfavourable reputation, and Griel made it a backhanded compliment by nodding to him as he finished; however, Grohl was too excited, and did not notice.

Twisting up the corners of his mouth, Griel continued, “Lord Grohl, the main point is that it is best for you to win. To summarize, let us make this a war in which you retake the crown. If you win, you will be justified. We shall be your vassals, for we are betting on your tenacity that shines like the sun. That persistence is what moves people’s hearts.”

“I won’t lose to Amil. I will absolutely claim victory, and I take the seat of the sun into my hands!”

“That’s the spirit. Lord Grohl, you don’t have to rush. Carefully seizing control of Bahar with well disciplined troops will be a necessity. Losing a single war is fatal. We must never forget that.”

“Thank you Mr. Griel for your advice. We will not err in our haste.”

Grohl nodded gravely at Griel's council. Confirming it, Griel sprouted a satisfied smile, and made his exit.

"Inform all of the troops. So that we can bring down the hammer on that treacherous bastard Amil as he aims for the throne, we will prepare all of our Coimbran soldiers. Make preparations to quickly depart for the front so we can take Fort Carness and flood into Baharan territory. Wilm and Gaddis will inform everyone of the specifics. Everyone, make sure to carefully prepare!!"

"Yes, sir!"

"Long live Coimbra! Long live Lord Grohl!"

Grohl stood, increasing their fervour, and the military officers saluted him. No longer able to stop the outbreak of war, the civil officials who had opposed it could do nothing but look to the heavens and sigh. Perius was forced out by the palace guard as he had tried to stop it anyway.

Incidentally, at the back, Noel had long since fallen asleep, completely resting against Cynthia's back.



Wilm returned to his office, and Leue called out to him in a stifled voice.

"Father, is this acceptable?"

"Is what acceptable?"

"In a war, Coimbra will suffer serious damage. We can no longer avoid losing territory and men. Should we not quickly restrain the viceroy, maybe even have him die. Is this not a situation that will gain great infamy?"

Leue was suggesting an active removal of Grohl. The reigns to the military might of Coimbra were held mostly by Wilm and Gaddis. If Wilm revolted against Grohl and restrained him, things could end without coming to a war.

"Don't act recklessly. We should not remove the viceroy right now, and furthermore, the war is likely what Lord Amil wants. He wishes to use the viceroy as a stepping stone to furthering his own reputation."

“Are you saying that it has to be Amil who captures the viceroy?”

“Amil has strong ambitions, so he likely wants to do this completely with his own hands. If he can raise his military fame now, he will be able to keep the continent together peacefully later. I too wanted to avoid a pointless war, but... hmph, if it hadn't been for that girl, this could all have been avoided!”

He had remembered Noel's face as he hatefully spat his words. Knitting his eyebrows together, he breathed deeply to calm down. He had truly wanted to prevent a pointless war. The only one he wanted eliminated was Grohl, and he hadn't wanted to waste Coimbran lives and throw the province into turmoil. There was no honest reason for him to support Grohl's foolish way of thinking.

“Did you spur him on because you knew that, father?”

“That's right. Otherwise there was no way that Gaddis and I would back such a thing. We are generals of Coimbra after all.”

Alongside Wilm's own manoeuvring, Gaddis' clique had likely also reached a deal with Amil. There was little doubt remaining about it. It was becoming a deal in which Gaddis and Wilm would rule Coimbra after the war.

“But, Lord Perius has seen through the situation.”

“His persistence was beyond expectations. He almost pushed through. It's regrettable that he became a civil official.”

Wilm's voice had won partly because of Grohl's deep trust in him, but moreso because he was saying what Grohl wanted to hear. Perius' opposition likely grated on Grohl's ears.

“It is truly ironic.”

“When the viceroy is enraged, opposition with sound arguments becomes impossible. I have served him for a long time, so I know his character better than anyone. I wonder how great it would be if he just learned how to hold himself in check.”

Wilm sighed a tired sigh. If Amil had been viceroy of Coimbra, then Wilm would have served him happily, but he just couldn't bring himself to do the same for Grohl. He could not bear to serve a young man who was obviously much more foolish than

himself until he died. That was why he had betrayed him. At present, only Perius and a few other civil officials cared for Grohl. Ignoring their advice, Grohl didn't have a good eye for people. If he had, Wilm would have likely already lost his position. Furthermore, aside from being unable to read a man's nature, he didn't have the self control to put down his emotions and make calm decisions. It was plain to see that Grohl did not have what it took to be a ruler.

"From here on out, how should we move?"

"I've received a secret message from Lord Amil stating that after the war begins, that restraint won't be necessary. If we don't do anything, we'll likely be crushed together with the viceroy."

Wilm gave Leue a grim look.

"B-but... I thought we were allies of Lord Amil. I don't think he'll see us as enemies."

"That's naive. They won't think that way at all. If we're seen as a hinderance, we'll certainly be annihilated. Listen well Leue, we'll have to precisely measure the flow of the war. If we mistake the current, we'll get caught up in the mud and fall to ruin."

"I, I understand."

Leue confirmed with a nod, and Wilm opened the window, raising his gaze to the sun. Intense sunlight struck his eyes, causing him to narrow them.

"Father, would it be alright for me to ask you one more thing?"

"What is it?"

"Lady Sarah's condition is worsening; could that have possibly been at your suggestion?"

Leue was suspicious that Lady Sarah's condition was Wilm's doing. He had certainly ordered Riglette to get Sarah a new doctor, but there was no indication that he was at fault.

"That's incorrect. All I requested was information gathering because Grohl always consults his wife on every major decision. He should be treating her as usual. There is no reason now to eliminate Lady Sarah."

“Is that so? I apologise for asking something so rude. I seem to have jumped to conclusions.”

“I don’t mind. Well, this is likely fate. It was miraculous that Lady Sarah and the viceroy had been saved by that infuriating girl, but it’s all the same in the end. Lady Sarah’s death to disease, and the viceroy’s fall to ruin show that their fates have not changed. That’s right, the viceroy’s lot has already died.”

“...”

“Listen well Leue, we must not be swallowed up in their fate. We will absolutely survive. Our mission is to reorganise Coimbra.”

It would likely come at the cost of many soldiers’ lives, and the suffering of the people. Even still, Wilm would continue. When Amil became the next emperor, Wilm would be rewarded for his merits with the reigns of Coimbra. It was disloyal to Grohl, but Coimbra’s history would have just as many loyal retainers, for he was treating the boils the province had developed.

“I understand.”

“Then that’s fine.”

“By the way, what will become of my sister? As aide to Sir Noel, who is rather skilled in combat, the probability is high that she’ll end up on the front lines. At this rate it seems she’ll be caught up in the current.”

Leue was concerned for Riglette. Their relationship was troubled, but it seemed that he still valued blood relations, but Wilm was not so. He had only refrained from eliminating her so that she could be used. When her mission was completed, he couldn’t care less what became of her.

“Whoever opposes the flow will be destroyed. It is up to Riglette if she wishes to survive. I have no intention of helping her.”

Wilm had spoken his cold words over his shoulder. Riglette’s final mission was the observation of Noel. That little girl that Wilm couldn’t read... that beast he could not understand was a fool who had saved Grohl when he should have died. She did appear to have some skill, but that was all. The outcome would remain unchanged, and there was nothing she could do to alter it; however, he would not overlook any more

unnecessary intervention. He also had to consider what Amil saw.

*If it wasn't for that, such a troublesome situation wouldn't have happened. Truly, truly she is an infuriating little girl, but she will soon receive her reward. All who stand in the way should die!*

When that time came, it was likely that Riglette would meet the same fate. Grohl, Noel, and Riglette: the endlessly troubling group would all be taken care of. That was it; he had to take drastic measures, after all. The corners of his mouth slightly raised, Wilm began to devise a plan of action.



Several days later a grand military parade was held at Madress Castle under Grohl's orders. Rumors that a war was afoot had begun to flow, such that not only the plebeians, but also the nobles had begun running about in an uproar. Against the famous military might of Bahar, there were obvious doubts as to their chances of winning. Nobody knew if it was a good thing, but the capital had regained some of its former bustle. The scores of soldiers from all over Coimbra numbered 50 000. Each unit's crack troops were assembled before the castle, listening to an address from Grohl as he stood upon his balcony. Seeing the magnificent appearance was encouraging enough to cheer anyone up; the actual state of affairs aside.

"Hey, we can't hear what the viceroy's saying at all, eh?"

"..."

"Could it be that you can hear him? Hey, if you can hear it, tell me what he's saying."

"..."

It seemed that Cynthia was irritated and wanted to pinch Noel's cheeks. It was rather amusing, so Noel proffered a question.

"He~y, little miss girl-turned-into-an-old-woman, Cynthia, can you hear my voice~? If you can hear me respond as vigorously as..."

As she closed in on Cynthia's ear with her voice raised, a clenched fist came flying up. It wasn't unexpected, but it couldn't be stopped anymore. That was simply because it

had been so much fun. Pain was certainly no good, but the trivial back and forth was fun. It might have even been appropriate to call it some small happiness.

“The viceroy’s speech will be posted up later. For now, just take in the atmosphere. If you get it, just do as you’re told!”

“Oh, so everyone’s just pretending to hear, eh? Ahhh, now that I’ve figured it out, I’m getting sleepy.”

“It seems like you want another punch, Commander of One Hundred, Noel.”

“I’ll hold back, Senior Captain of One Hundred, Cynthia, Sir!”

“It won’t help if you’re only posturing, you fool!”

A second punch was already on the way, but it didn’t hurt much. It seemed like she was holding back this time. Rubbing her head, Noel looked to the sky which was unfortunately cloudy. Mr. Sun was in hiding. There was something good about sunny days; there was something wrong with rainy days; and with rainy days, she couldn’t tell which way it would go. That was why she neither particularly liked, nor hated them.

“Haa, a war is coming, so there isn’t much time. Please take on some of the gravity of a captain. I will be embarrassed as your aide otherwise. It’s lethally irritating.”

Riglette sent a disgusted look at Noel’s back. After laughing as if it was funny, Noel broke into a dramatic stretch. Then she turned around.

“Ahaha, sorry.”

“If you get it, it’s not a problem.”

“Cool.”

“...”

After Noel’s frank apology, Riglette hesitated, seemingly troubled. She decided to ask her upfront.

“Hey, is there something you want to say? Are you thinking up some more abuse? I’ve

already heard that there's something wrong with my head, though."

"N-no. It is nothing. Don't mind me."

"I see. Then, is it fine if I ask you something else?"

"W-what is it?"

Riglette seemed somehow troubled. It was a rare expression that Noel didn't find funny.

"Who was it we're going to be fighting again?"

"What are you saying at this point? Isn't Bahar our enemy as always? Has your mind slipped even further in the summer heat?"

Massaging her temples, Riglette insulted her. The wondrous mood from earlier had been destroyed. Riglette was very lively when she was ridiculing people.

"Then, why was it that we have to fight Bahar, again?"

"Hmph, isn't that simple? It is obvious that the recent rebellion was Bahar's doing. Without making amends for that, they had the audacity to aim for the throne. That is why the viceroy has decided to start a war. That much should be obvious to all commanders of one hundred."

Riglette snorted.

"But Bahar's a province in the same empire. If we make it into a war, than we'll be traitors who needlessly threw the world into chaos. No matter how it's fluffed up, we're still the ones to move troops first."

"Try thinking with that what little brains you have. If we win, what we said will be correct. It'll be likely for Bahar to lose face, and the viceroy to take the seat of the emperor. That's the real aim of the war."

"I see. If it all goes as Riglette says, it'll be perfect. As expected of my aide. Amazing, amazing."

A vein bulged on Riglette's forehead as Noel attempted her jokes. When she tried to

poke fun at her via mimicry, it seemed to anger her. Incidentally, Noel knew that much without even needing to hear it, but she had to confirm as it was all knowledge that had been forced into her head back in that place; things such as military science, the art of war, training with various weapons, and the many ritual oaths of loyalty to the empire. There were other things that she understood, but those were largely things considered common sense in the world which was why Noel spoke so often to seek confirmation. Doing so would expand everyone's world, not only her own.

*It's really fun talking about whatever I want.*

Ever since she had left, she hadn't been hit for unnecessary chatter. She had to deal with Cynthia's fists, but there was no hatred in them. It was completely different from the trash. Noel had done lots of talking, and so she could tell. Noel had become free when she left, and had changed again when the rebellion was put down. She had been able to gain all manner of things.

"Noel, is there something you're curious about? You're making a rarely serious face. It's not like you."

"That's pretty mean. The truth is that I'm just thinking about something a little... hey, I know this is sudden, but do you like war, Cynthia? I want to ask Riglette, too."

"I was wondering what you were going to say. I doubt there's anyone who likes war."

"There is no need for me to answer such a foolish question. You're really annoying, so please stop speaking to me."

Cynthia was smiling bitterly, and Riglette had turned aside. There wasn't a human who liked war.

Thinking *I see, so it's like that, eh?* Noel made note of it.

Noel thought of another question, and decided to ask about it, "If that's what you think, Cynthia, why are you in an army that must go to war?"

"Because it is my, and all knight's, duty. Knights fight to protect the weak, and devote themselves to their lords. I believe there is a justice that must be protected."

"I see. You're amazing, after all, Cynthia, to go so far for anyone."

Noel thought it was truly incredible from the bottom of her heart. She would wager her own life for people that she didn't know, and couldn't see. It was something Noel couldn't do, and so Cynthia was amazing.

"Yup, Cynthia's amazing, and must surely be just."

Of course, the weak she included were likely limited to those of Coimbra. Even Cynthia was like that, but she probably didn't want to say it. Noel had learned that such was the way of the world. If there was one only true thing in the world, it was unmistakably that fact. There was likely also a second, a third, and a great number of other true things, that was, if everyone published their various truths, thinking them to be correct. At that time, the person with the loudest voice would be correct. To push one's truth, one accumulated assets, threatened others with violence, and silenced one's adversaries with a sharpened blade. Such a state had repeated countless times in the history that Noel had learned in that place. She had learned to become the sword of the emperor of the sun, and to kill his enemies; to sacrifice her body as his shield. That one phrase had been beaten into her countless, countless times. It still lingered with her in some small way. That place was likely a place to manufacture people for the sake of the one with the loudest voice, though it had ended as a massive failure.

*It serves you right. You're plan was a failure.*

Ironically, only Noel had survived, despite being seen as a failure. She had no intentions of becoming any sort of sword or shield for the emperor of the sun, and she was not the only one to think so, her companions did too. If she did ever see the emperor, she would point and laugh. She was curious as to what it would feel like to be laughed at by a failure.

"In that case, what about you? I'm sure that you have people and places you want to protect."

"I wonder how it is? Hmmm, I don't really know, do I? Ah, I might want to protect my companions."

"Why don't you speak as confidently as usual? Your eyes are icy."

In response to what Cynthia had pointed out, Noel tried swimming her eyes around. What came for her was not a clenched fist, but a sigh. She would protect her companions as much as she could, but she had no intention to throw her life away for

somebody who was merely an ally. If she would do that, no matter how many bodies she had, it probably wouldn't be enough. Cynthia was amazing for wanting to protect all the people of Coimbra.

"It's harsh to say that so suddenly. Ah, I don't want to die for the emperor. Yup, even if I died, I'd hate it."

She would by no means die for the Sun Emperor Befnam. Saying as much, she elicited a hushed rebuke from Cynthia.

"Hey, be careful with that blasphemy. You're a fine knight now, so at least carry one conviction. If you fight without thinking about anything, you'd be nothing more than a beast."

It was true that beasts probably didn't think about anything, but they would fight to survive. That was their instinct. After thinking a short while on how she was surely similar to them, Noel tilted her head.

"Hmmm, conviction, was it? My thoughts are a bit different from yours, eh Cynthia?"

"How so?"

"I don't really dislike fighting. I've fought until now without any convictions. All that I've thought until now was that I didn't want to die."

"..."

"But, it turned out I had to fight, and because of that I ended up with all sorts of things. I've become friends with you and the young master, and even became companions with Barbas and the rest. That silly Riglette even became my aide. I've piled up treasures in my room, so I wonder if I might actually like fighting."

Noel was smiling innocently, Cynthia drew in her eyebrows, and Riglette's eyes were wide with shock.

"You shouldn't ever say that you like to fight again. It wouldn't be strange if you got yourself treated as a lunatic."

"But it's true. Won't I get way more treasure if I keep fighting?"

“Silence. That’s an order! Either way, you are forbidden from saying that!”

“That’s not fair... then is it okay to say that I appreciate the profundity of combat?”

It was vocabulary that Cynthia had taught to her earlier.

“That’s basically the same thing, though. I can’t believe how you only remember such extraneous things!”

“Ehh, but weren’t you the one who taught me that, Cynthia? You even told me to remember it.”

“S-silence! This and that are two separate matters!”

Noel raised both her hands in disagreement, and words burst out from the person beside her who could no longer stand to remain silent. He was the bear like man from Gemb, Kai, who was most memorable for the great scar running across his cheek. If one had to say, he would probably be described as a similar man to Barbas.

“I’m sorry, this must be rude, but those words, I couldn’t help but wonder at them. The profundity of combat, that is. We Gembites have similar thoughts on the matter as Sir Noel.”

“Is that right?”

“Yes. We warriors of Gemb are brought up and trained from a young age to become stronger than anyone. In summary, the fight is our way of life.”

“The fight is your life? That’s... somehow super deep, isn’t it.”

“Haha, that may be. If you would like it, perhaps you should visit our province some time. We’ll welcome one as skilled as you at any time.”

As he spoke, Kai vigorously patted Noel’s back.

Feeling that she had again grasped all sorts of things, Noel responded gladly, “Then, it’s a promise, eh? I’ll absolutely come to visit one day, okay.”

“Good, come whenever you like! I will show you around.”

Kai gave a very deep nod, and Noel responded in kind, with good humour. As for Cynthia, she gave a very deep sigh, likely unable to find any words. That was an interesting phrase that she had learned from Cynthia earlier. There were words for when there were no words. It was truly a magnificent miracle.

“Ahem. Anyway, what we need to do now is focus on fighting. Once this next war is over, an era of peace will surely follow.”

“Yup, I get it. I’ll focus on the fight too. I’ll fight and fight, and until the very end, I’ll keep fighting. If I do, surely...”

Noel stopped her words there as it seemed that she had angered Cynthia yet again. Noel was who she was because she had fought to the end. That was why she had to continue fighting. No matter what, if she could keep fighting, she could find happiness. It seemed to be that doing so was the best way to achieve happiness.

Such were her thoughts.

# Chapter 21

## Fiend

Around the time that the heat of summer had reached its peak, Grohl, the Viceroy of Coimbra, sent out his manifesto to all of the peoples of the empire, at the same time declaring war on Bahar. The contents of his manifesto were as follows:

One point: in a cowardly plan, Amil has incited rebels. Amil's sins can in no way be forgiven.

One point: had Amil been a noble with any hint of shame, he would have already apologised, but on top of approving of his own sins, he had the audacity to end it all by proclaiming that he would undergo the ceremony of the rising sun. This is conclusively unforgivable.

One point: Amil is excessively increasing military might in times of peace, repeatedly taking provocative actions against Coimbra, justifying his inhumane ambitions with his military might, for he will not listen to the voice of justice in the face of his schemes.

One point: His Imperial Majesty has been concerned over Amil's actions for some time, and has recently raised his voice against his traitorous despotism.

One point: Amil's sinful ways are not something that can be overlooked as he is unworthy of being one of the great Sun Emperor Bergis' descendants.

One point: we the people of Coimbra have sent a declaration of war to the villain Amil with the intent of tearing out the root of evil in the empire. Those who wish to oppose the villains with us should take action immediately.

Grohl departed from the Coimbran capital city of Madress with the majority of his armed forces, proceeding east along the Kanan highway, leaving only five thousand men behind. A total of fifty thousand regular soldiers and temporary conscripts were mobilized; seemingly all of Coimbra's war potential. Their discipline and training was not of particularly high quality, but they remained formidable in terms of sheer numbers. Leue took command of the fleet, and had already departed to screen for Baharan warships, particularly caution towards the enemy fleet docked in Ribeldam.

Coimbran movements were primarily over land in an attempt to respect Ribeldam neutrality.

Grohl raised a hand as Elgar saw them off with a concerned expression from the castle walls. The garrison left behind consisted primarily of old soldiers, and the injured or sick. Perius was tentatively in charge of them, but they were unlikely to have to fight; a so-called decorative post. Grohl reluctantly turned his horse around, and began to speak with Wilm, who was beside him.

“Wilm, have the manifestos been sent to each province without issue?”

“Yes sir. We sent them on swift horses and so the viceroys should be receiving them around now. Your intentions have surely been circulated, Lord Grohl. The law of justice is on our side.”

“What are Ribeldam’s movements?”

“Nothing out of the ordinary. They are remaining neutral as per the agreement.”

“All right, we’ll set that aside for now. First and foremost, we must assault Carness, and push into Baharan territory. The first battle will likely be the most crucial.”

“Please entrust that task to us. While we’re defeating the lords of Bahar, you can advance on the capital city of Vesta. Already, some of us have completed our plans. If we can prove our might by taking Carness, the rest of the operation should proceed even more smoothly.”

“As expected of Wilm. Now that I think about it, you’ve been with me for a long time, and the burdens have only piled up, haven’t they? I’m sorry, but can you lend me your power this time too?”

“You flatter me. I, Wilm, consider myself lucky to serve you.”

“Right... then I’ll be depending on you.”

Wilm’s words had caused Grohl to be overcome with emotions. Then he pointed to Gaddis’ troops at the front.

“Haha, it looks promising. Even that Gaddis is going all out. He probably hopes to clear his shame at Rockbell in one strike.”

“Sir Gaddis also made his resolve after hearing your address. To fight desperately, that is.”

“That’s really good. The will of heaven had given up on me until now, but it seems that I’ve been blessed with good retainers.”

Grohl laughed in high spirits as he gazed at the vanguard. Gaddis’ troops were parading pompously at the head of the fifty thousand Coimbrans. The scales emblazoned on the banners flapped in the wind in a magnificent spectacle. Behind him the many supplies for the army were accompanied by the siege equipment that would get its first taste of the war by taking Carness. The majority of it had been supplied by the friendly provinces of Gemb and Giv. His grand army was unable to move particularly quickly, but Grohl had decided that it wasn’t much of a problem.

*When the declaration arrives, Amil will probably be shaken, but it’s already too late for him.*

For the ceremony of the rising sun, he would have to gather all of his soldiers to display for the empire. According to his spies, Amil was currently gathering nobles and merchants to prepare for the ceremony. Though it was highly irritating, it also happened to be a favourable situation this time. He was most likely going to turn around with his entire force when he heard about the crisis, but that too was futile. It would take two months to get from the imperial capital of Firuth to the Baharan capital of Vesta regardless of how much he hurried, even if all of the troops he took to the capital were elite. It wouldn’t be a stretch to say that their planning had bought them three months, and three months were probably enough. Defeating the Baharan nobles and taking the city of Vesta would be easy. All they had to do was remain calm once that had been accomplished. Rushing needed to be avoided; that, and being repelled by an inferior force. There were still many who believed in the myth of weak Coimbran soldiers.

Because they could not aim to defeat all of the Baharan lords defending the province in a single battle, it was important that they steadily strengthen their positions and advance carefully until they had completely destroyed Amil’s holdings. Such was their current strategy.

“The Sun God has finally come to my aid. Amil’s honour will collapse with his feet swept out from under him, and any talk of him as crown prince will vanish. Even if he recklessly attacks, he will be destroyed!”

Fighting troops exhausted from forced marching was as easy as taking candy from a baby. However Amil fell, he could not prevent Grohl's victory.

*If he had apologised a little, I might have forgiven him, but it's too late now. Resign yourself to your fate, Amil!*

Wiping his sweat, Grohl roared as he began galloping down the highway, his shocked guard following along.

"This is the war in which we bring the hammer of justice down on Amil! I'll grant any wishes of those who distinguish themselves, regardless of social standing!"

Having encouraged the troops, they raised excited cheers. Morale was high, and justice was on their side. After the image of Sarah's face in critical condition floated through his mind, Grohl published his sword and answered the soldiers' call. The Coimbran advance had begun.

Easily forcing their way through the border defences that had been erected, the Coimbran army set out for fort Carness. The fort dated back to before the unification, and its defensive capabilities had remained firm to the present day, though the current garrison numbered less than one thousand as the main Baharan force was in the imperial capital. Sending away the envoy from the fortress, Grohl ordered an assault.

"Carness is famed for its strength, but it will in no way stop us. Let them know Coimbra's might!"

Of the glorious vanguard, the first wave of the siege was led by Major General Gaddis in an attempt to redeem himself. It numbered ten thousand strong. For the moment, they would watch as they sent out their battering ram to attack the gate, but as many of the units had seen no real combat, when the time came for them to go forth, many became indecisive. Being shot at from the ramparts, they devolved into pandemonium. After several repeated attempts, Gaddis finally committed the main body of his force to the attack, besieging the tower.

The siege unit's second division had their soldiers lined up on standby, serving under Commander of One Thousand Dirk, who, in combination with the other commanders of one thousand, headed around eight thousand men in what could be considered a sort of rear guard. Grohl had wanted to put his beloved Noel in the vanguard, but had been denied as suddenly inserting a newcomer into Gaddis' force would have been an

insult to the Coimbran army. All of the officers had agreed with Wilm, so Grohl had nodded his ascent to leave it to Gaddis, but it had been three days since he first began the attack and no progress had been made. The first division's men had become fatigued and exhausted. Grohl too, was almost out of patience.

"Still, the enemy is rather persistent. I thought it would be decided today, too."

Noel responded to what Cynthia had muttered with a sour expression, "If their goal is to buy time, they'll stick it out to the end. They're probably a suicide corps."

"Suicide corps?"

"That's right. If they can buy a little time here, that's surely a good thing. See, isn't there some proverb from somewhere that goes: time is money?"

For some reason Noel had put her glasses on and was speaking as if she knew what she was talking about. Had Cynthia been unaware of her true character, she might have mistaken her for a knowledgeable female staff officer. Unfortunately, Cynthia did know her true character, and it was truly disappointing.

"Good, eh? Do you know what the enemy is planning?"

"Nope, I have no idea. I wonder why?"

Cynthia was taken aback for a moment by how indifferent Noel appeared, but quickly returned to her senses. It was the usual state of affairs, so if she paid it any mind, she would find the sun quickly setting. Above all, they were in the middle of a battle.

"I feel foolish for even asking."

"Ahaha, that's for sure."

"Don't you say it!"

Cynthia struck her once, apparently almost knocking Noel's glasses off, causing Noel company start laughing a bit. Cynthia coughed to reprove them for their lack of tension, and turned again to speak to Noel.

"By the way, why are you wearing your glasses?"

“Because it’ll probably be fine if I don’t have to fight yet. I thought I’d highlight my intelligence from time to time, you see.”

Hearing that, the soldiers could not help but burst fully into laughter. An intelligent person would never say something like that. Cynthia’s irrational fear that Noel wouldn’t be able to lead troops finally came to an end. It wouldn’t be strange to be looked down on as a female commander, but Noel had properly brought her unit together. It was mostly comprised of the rather wild White Ant Bloc, but they properly listened to orders. Cynthia had been through so much trouble at first that even this small victory was worthy of celebration, though she had been caught up in the mood and wouldn’t compliment it for the time being.

“You know what you wanted to now, so put on a helmet. Some arrows might even reach us here!”

“Mmmh, but it’s too hot, and it’ll get all stuffy, so I thought I might not need it. And, also, I can bathe in the light of the sun, so my mood is good. On that note, glasses don’t really get in the way.”

Noel rather irritatingly pushed up the glasses that were sliding off. It was true that the summer sun was strong and hot. There was no end to her sweat no matter how much she wiped and wiped. The experience of wearing a helmet in a prolonged battle at that time of year was torturous. Of course Cynthia wouldn’t hear it from any of the conscripts. Their helmets were low quality leather, their weapons were mass produced swords and spears, and the rest of their armour followed a ‘less is more’ philosophy.

“But, that’s still better than death. If you dislike helmets that much, at least put on this armoured headband. Hey, don’t move!”

“Ehh, but I don’t need it... hey, wait...”

Restraining Noel as she struggled, Cynthia wound an iron plated headband around her head. It wasn’t a very reliable piece of armour, but it could at least prevent a lethal blow between the eyes.

“There we go. Yup, I think it suits you.”

“Yeah, but I can’t seem to calm down, so I’ll only partially thank you. I’ll use this carefully. My treasures have increased again.”

“You don’t have to treasure it, consider your own life first.”

“Ahaha, this is a war, so don’t say anything impossible.”

Noel confirmed the position of the headband while smiling wryly. Equipped were: her glasses, the armoured headband, light armour in which she could freely move, the warhammer at her waist on which her hand was resting, and in her other hand was her jet black bident. All that was rather different from what the usual soldier wore, and her characteristic red hair worked together with it to make her highly likely to draw attention on the battlefield; a feat which would make her easy to target by the enemy.

Barbas muttered from behind Noel, his eye affixed to a spyglass, “Captain Noel, seems like this time ain’t no good either. They get close but keep shrinkin’ back.”

Cynthia received a spyglass of her own from her aide, and took a look for herself.

“Was that not enough? Why don’t they just climb the walls?”

“Isn’t it that they don’t want to die? That being said, of course the defence is strong near the gate. Well, the enemy lies in wait, so no matter where we attack from, we’ll take losses.”

The soldiers sent to take the gate were battering it with a ram, but it had fallen into a completely disastrous state. Boiling oil poured down from holes above it, and fire arrows rained down on top of that. Those who ran were mercilessly killed by arrows from the defenders atop the walls. As for the group that were scaling the walls, they too had made no progress. Naturally the vanguard was made up of low ranking soldiers, so there was a severe lack of troops with enough of a will to fight. The ladders that they had made were nailed down by arrows from above.

Major General Gaddis, in charge of the assault, likely couldn’t do much to help the situation, and, either way, his disposition backfired on him when he was faced with danger. All orders of total assault aside, they were supposed to avoid major casualties in the early battles, and the goal was to break the enemy morale along with the gates. There was even a chance that an ambush lay just outside the castle, as, from time to time, smoke signals rose up from the castle. Each time it happened, Gaddis recalled his troops with a horn, and arrayed in a defensive position. The books of Coimbran strategems advised against aggressive assaults on fortresses, and instead

recommended carefully surrounding them. Though that was a tried and true tactic, it would not guarantee when the castle would fall. That aside, Cynthia didn't have a good sense as a commander. Planning room theory, and actual fighting were two separate things.

"Hey, a total assault has been ordered, so why are we only sending small groups? We keep retreating too."

"He likely wants to minimize casualties. I think there's a lot of pressure on him to open the gate."

"If one man dies, send ten; if ten men die, send one hundred; if one hundred die, send one thousand; and continue the attack. Isn't that just the basics of a total assault?"

Noel tilted her head as if she was puzzled to the core.

"That's because nobody wants to die. It wouldn't be unreasonable to be hesitant. There's nobody dumb enough to go when you tell them to die."

"But, it seems like plenty are dying now."

"No... well, yeah, that's true."

"It's kind of like... they're unwilling, eh? I don't feel any will to attack. Could it be that they don't want it to fall!?"

"What lunacy. This is an important first battle, and it isn't unreasonable for Major General Gaddis to be cautious."

"Yup, that's true."

Noel had entered yes-man mode.

"Also, please don't say things that'll become trouble. Not only that, there are those who are jealous of your rapid success. Don't increase your enemies."

Noel didn't seem like she cared, but Cynthia could hear vile talk about her from all over. There were some who would even mock her as they walked by. All of them were of the Wilm clique as Noel had gained their attention. Cynthia could warn those of a lower status than herself, but couldn't do anything about those who were higher.

“There’re lots of people slandering me behind my back after all. Isn’t it great that Riglette says it to my face!”

Smiling at Riglette, an incredible tut could be heard.

“Sir Cynthia, should we not ignore foolish words?”

Muddling her words, Cynthia didn’t say much, but, “Y-yes.”

“Also, and this is from the previous conversation, but there is nobody experienced in siege warfare in our Coimbran army. It would not be strange for that to be why Major General Gaddis is hesitating. It is true that continuing the siege brings us closer to the day that they surrender. I’m sure that the major general has similar intentions. They are merely some sky-for-brains girl, and a white haired monkey, so we need to think for ourselves.”

Riglette’s lips arched downwards, and she shot a quick glance at Barbas.

“You bastard, are you talking about me and the captain!?”

“I wonder. If you had some knowledge of anything, it might surely not be the case. I’m sure that a monkey, or even Captain Noel, could understand.”

Riglette brushed it off as if it was someone else’s problem. Barbas loaded his glare with hatred, but rather than flinching, Riglette returned the stare. It was sufficiently dangerous that if Noel hadn’t been there, they would have likely tried to kill each other.

“Captain, should I do this bitch in? I know, let’s use her as a shield to advance, and have her sing instead of usin’ the bugles.”

“Try it if you can. Ahh, your thoughts are so savage and truly disgusting. Oh and please, do shut your mouth for me, thank you. I might faint.”

“Okay, that’s enough playing around for now.”

Noel planted her bident on the ground, overbearingly disrupting their dispute. The force of the interruption caused the two of them to become silent.

“Barbas, Riglette, it’s no good if we’re confused. I don’t want to die pointlessly, or have to drag our allies around, either, for that matter.”

“M-my apologies.”

“Ha, I don’t remember doing anything worth apologising over. First off, if it’s the great Captain Noel that Coimbra is so proud of, wouldn’t you go to the front lines without any confusion at all?”

Riglette attempted to provoke her with a backhanded compliment. She was always like that, but Cynthia had a hard time getting used to that way of speaking. Even in normal conversation, her sarcasm and disagreeableness combined with her particularly self depreciating style to cause Cynthia to leave with a negative impression of her. Noel was the bigger person for not paying any attention to it.

Crossing her arms, and in a deadpan manner —though the look she gave the fort gave off a murderous aura that was similar to the one that Cynthia had felt when she had first met her—, Noel gave her orders, “Riglette, when I give the signal, blow the attack signal on your bugle. After that, you may relieve the assault force with archers. Barbas, you take the White Ant Bloc with the ladders. I’ll go in first, so just follow me.”

“Y-you really want to take the vanguard? It’s not just your head that’s lacking, but your eyes too! You’ll die to an arrow in the front!”

“Captain, this fool girl’s right. It’s too dangerous. So, I’ll go first...”

“Ahaha, you’re so big, you’ll be a pincushion before you get to the top. I’m pretty fast, you know. I’ll be up there in one go, take their commander, and if I kick those pesky archers about, the castle’s as good as ours. That’s how it is, right?”

“W-wait, Noel! You are forbidden from stealing the march! Follow the pace, and attack when Commander of One Thousand Dirk commands! We can’t just push forward ourselves!”

Cynthia desperately tried to reign her in, but Noel wasn’t having any of it.

“If I match pace with everyone, the fort won’t fall. I don’t want to just watch our allies foolishly die. Don’t you agree, Cynthia?”

Cynthia puzzled over it. She understood what Noel was saying, but it was clearly a violation of orders. While that was certainly the case, at the battle of Kanan highway, they had saved the viceroy’s life by disobeying orders. Furthermore, Noel’s martial prowess was undeniable. Cynthia considered agreeing with Noel this time.

*The viceroy ordered a general assault to take the fortress, so it isn't really a violation of orders. In that case, it could somehow work out...? Hmm.*

Cynthia's thoughts cleared up as she pondered carefully. Noel's White Ant Bloc numbered five hundred, and they could meet up with remaining conscripts to add up to seven hundred, while Cynthia commanded one thousand regular troops. A total of 1 700 men could be enough for a breakthrough.

"All right, then I'm coming too. At this rate it won't fall within a week. If our entrance is delayed, taking Vesta will only be a dream."

"That's great. This time will surely be a success too. We haven't lost once when working with Cynthia."

Noel gave a heartfelt smile, and, at that time, the sound of a low trumpet blast reverberated across the battlefield. It signaled the retreat of the first assault wave, and the war drums of Commander of One Thousand Dirk's corps began to thunder. They had to move before Gaddis' men had left.

"Ahhh, we'd finally made up our minds, but it turned out to be pointless. Well, we wouldn't have been following the pace of the operation, so we'd have probably angered somebody anyway."

"I'm a little relieved. Starting an attack on one's own is a grave violation of orders!"

"Ahaha, you say that a lot."

Noel lifted her bident from the ground, flourished it overhead, and pointed it at the castle.

"Shall we go then? Noel corps, advance!!"

"Yes sir!!"

"We too, advance! Immediately assault Carness! Don't fall behind the members of Noel corps!"

Not wanting to lose, Cynthia raised her voice, and ordered the attack to begin.



In the Baharan military fortress Carness, the thousand men defending the castle were led by Commander of One Thousand Hoslo. Though he was 58 years old, he was in good health, and above all, his heroic loyalty had been even recognised by Amil himself. When he had heard of the mission to defend the fort unto death, his face had flushed with excitement and he had volunteered for the task. Willingness to go to one's death was of the utmost importance to such a heroic mission. The soldiers of the defence were all veteran, and their morale was high. After kicking aside Grohl's request for surrender, they had doggedly repelled the assailing army that was ten times their number. For three days the siege had already continued, and it would not be surprising if the fortress was to fall before another day had passed.

Fighting with a bow in his hand, Hoslo raised his gruff voice angrily, "Endure, endure, endure! If we can buy time here, Lord Amil's victory will slowly become unshakable! Let us gladly sacrifice ourselves for this goal!"

"Captain Hoslo, we're making the history of the glorious Empire of the Sun! You've killed so many traitors by yourself. It's only for a moment, but you've protected this place for a long time! Let's show those traitors how we proudly publish the three sabre banner!"

His aide inspired the men with the flag of Bahar: three crossed sabres, of three varied sizes. It signified how men and women of all ages would take up the sword in the event of a war. The ultimate example of which, lauded in their proud military history, was their brave soldiers' resistance of the empire of the sun until the very end.

"Die, traitors!!"

Hoslo released the bowstring that he had pulled taut, shooting a Coimbran soldier in the head as he reached the gate. The enemy seemed to be trying to replace their burnt husk of a battering ram with a new one, but their movements were dull.

"Concentrate your arrows near the gate!"

"Loose the arrows!!"

A chaotic storm of arrows rained down from above the bent backs of the Coimbran soldiers. The battering ram another wall between them and the gate. As far as Hoslo

could see, the enemy soldiers were not brave enough to risk their lives clearing a path. In a battle, training and supplies were important, but what was more fundamentally valuable was the maintenance of high morale. There were various methods of raising morale, but Hoslo subscribed to the line of thought that put his own life at risk with the rest of the men. Mere words could not move men's hearts. Actions would cause people to follow. That was what Hoslo believed.

*It's already been three days of siege. Our orders were to hold out for at least three days. Let's show the viceroy that we can exceed his expectations.*

The morale was so unusually high that they had beheaded the messenger entreating their surrender. For a commander, that was truly magnificent; however, there was no one who would criticize them for feeling that only doing as much as they had to.

*These are all old soldiers, but it would be good if they could be saved. Even if they don't know it, they are helping us walk towards a glorious future under Lord Amil.*

Just as Hoslo was about to inform his aide of his intentions, he heard an ear piercing scream to his right. Hoslo quickly turned his gaze to the sound, eyes meeting the sight of a soldier pinned to the inner wall. Trailing from the man who had been pierced by a black spear was a copious amount of blood along with his miserable viscera. An instant later, the body was wrapped in flames at the sound of something clicking into place. The soldiers' movements were slightly dulled by the scent of burning flesh. He wondered how it had caught fire without a fire arrow, unable to comprehend the mechanism.

"W-what just..."

"Lord Hoslo, the enemy's second wave is attacking! One group is rushing..."

Just as he heard the sound of a loud bugle from the grounds before the castle, the head of the soldier who had reported to him exploded. The one who had splattered the blood and brains of the man was an enemy soldier drenched in blood holding a warhammer the length of a longsword in her hands.

"Commander of One Hundred Noel of the Coimbran army was the first on the walls. I did it!"

The young woman introduced herself with a smile. She wore an armoured headband and her body had been dyed red as if she had recently bathed in blood, producing

something to the effect of an oddly seductive crimson radiance.

“Kill this one quickly! Don’t let them flood the walls!”

Some soldiers tried to push the ladder off the wall with their spears. The woman who named herself Noel smoothly slipped the spears, and, with perfect timing, struck them down with her warhammer, not giving them enough time to scream. His aide immediately drew his bow, and Noel threw her warhammer at him without hesitation. It was thrown with such force that it crushed his aide’s skull, and she continued in that way to cut a swath through his party.

“You’ve done a number on my subordinates, you bastard! I’ll never forgive you!”

“You’ve killed lots of my allies, so I’m just returning the favour. This is a war after all.”

She responded as if they were having a chat as she plucked the black bident from the wall. Holding it, she began to overwhelm all those who targeted her. With a resolute gaze, Hoslo tossed aside his bow, unsheathing his beloved sabre. He had to kill that woman quickly. If they took a single part of the wall, the men’s resolve would begin to waver. Even a small gap could become fatal. All the more so when the defending army was small. Raising morale that had already dropped was the most difficult art, so he had to nip the problem in the bud.

“You’re quite gallant for a Coimbran soldier, but it seems like it’ll even be difficult for a skilled soldier to take down a girl like you. It seems your fame was well earned!”

As he spoke, the monsters of operation dawn came to mind; she reminded him of the Rebecca of the black sun cavalry. Despite being a woman, she had monstrous battle prowess that awed the Baharan soldiers. Furthermore, calmly controlling those monsters, there was even more monstrous Falid, the memory of whom caused Hoslo’s back to stiffen. Hoslo was experiencing the same feeling at the moment. In the game of life and death, there was no distinction between men and women, and his prior words had only been self encouragement.

“We’re fighting, though, so gender has nothing to do with this. Of course, it’s not like age, appearance, or race do either. What’s important is the issue of killing or being killed.”

“That’s right, it’s just as you say!!”

Noel thrust her bident into a gap in an instant which Hoslo met in a heartbeat, advancing. The advantage of the spear was its long range, and aggressively pressing in could bring out the weakness of its length. Hoslo's target was Noel's torso. He pulled out the stops of his hesitation, aiming his attack above her armour. Noel forcibly knocked the blade aside from the place where the point of the sword would have reached her chest with her gauntlet.

"I'm not done!"

Unphased, he brought his sword around for another slash. This time, the attack aimed at her shoulder was intercepted by the two prongs of her bident. Noel showed her prowess by her ability to so fluidly wield the large polearm. She truly held fearsome physical strength. Hoslo loaded strength into both arms, pushing the spear, gritting his teeth as he prepared to take Noel's head.

"I'll kill you right here! You must die for Bahar!"

"Hey, don't you feel like surrendering? It'd end without taking much more time, though. I'd like to talk about all sorts of things, too."

"Nonsense! Who would surrender to you bastard traitors!?"

"But you know, I think that at this rate all of your precious companions will meet a horrible fate."

Noel seemed to be testing him.

"Silence, our victory will not be shaken! For that purpose, we will gladly become the cornerstones of Bahar!"

"How can you be so sure of victory even though Bahar is empty? What a wonder!"

"That's because destruction awaits traitors!"

"Ahaha, you can't fool me. The truth is, this was all engineered to lure the whole Coimbran army out, wasn't it? Right?"

Noel's white teeth were visible when she smiled.

As Hoslo was lost for words, Noel continued, "Making a show of going to the capital,

aren't the nobles turning around on the way? Was it some Bergis guy who came up with this showy thing? You're recreating the exploits of the empire of the sun, under the guise of becoming the crown prince, right?"

"I, I don't know! I don't know anything!"

"Well, no, if you're not going to surrender no matter what, taking any more time would be a waste. If we destroy all the roads and fields, the nobles in hiding will come out in a panic."

"W-what are you..."

"Bahar's flag symbolises how everyone will take up the sword, right? That means we'll have to kill any resistance, be it from men or women, and regardless of age. Yup, it's a war, so it can't be helped."

"Y-you monster, no... you fiend! As if a bastard like you could lay waste to Bahar!!"

As Hoslo was about to press his sword with all of his hatred, a sharp pain ran through his abdomen. Confirming that it seemed he was going to lose consciousness, Noel's left fist slammed into his solar plexus. The impact was ferocious, even through his armour. Nearly unbelievably, Hoslo endured, with one hand on his sword.

"Ghhhh, y-you fiend..."

Hoslo was bent double in pain. In the instant that he heard something ominously swirling overhead, his consciousness began to rapidly fade.

The final thing he heard was, "Haven't I been called that before? Either way, 'fiend' is actually kind of cool if you think about it. You know, I like playing tag. After all, you can play it as much as you want."

Before he could hear the last of it, Hoslo's head fell heavily to the floor.

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## **Translator's Note:**

Tag in Japanese is called something along the lines of “playing demon,” so Noel’s final statement isn’t as arbitrary as it might seem in English. I debated changing it so that she enjoys “playing devil’s advocate” so that it’d feel more natural, especially since Noel does do so from time to time—in fact probably more times than she actually plays tag in the story—, but as I don’t yet know how significant the whole tag thing may or may not become in later chapters, I’m going to leave it as is for now. It would also diminish her childish appeal slightly, and I think there’s another tag reference earlier that I don’t want to bother going back to check and see if I can change it for the sake of consistency.

The Baharan flag has three crossed sabres: large medium and small. I didn’t feel the need to say that as if they are of differing sizes, one is going to be the biggest, and one will be the smallest.

# Chapter 22

## The Sly Fox and the Mischievous Rabbit

The siege ladders rose into place just as Noel killed Hoslo, her allies flooding over the top. Barbas, at their head, cut a swath through the Baharan soldiers with his longsword. With the leader of the defence killed, the surrounding enemies lost much of their will to fight, and their numbers diminished as The White Ant Bloc swarmed over each man.

After cleaving the heads off some nearby Baharan soldiers, Noel took a short break to wipe off some of the blood on her bident and warhammer. Looking behind herself, she could see Riglette timidly mount one of the ladders. Having not participated in the charge herself, Riglette was now desperately sounding the assault on her bugle; not that anyone could hear it.

“You’re late, Riglette. I already got the enemy commander. Now all we have to do is raise our flag and give a victory cry to make the enemy collapse.”

“Hah, hah, th-then by all means! In the first place, nobody can even hear my bugle in this kind of melee!”

“Ahaha, your words are the same as always, but your face is as pale as a corpse. Hey, are you okay?”

“Silence! Like you’re helping!”

Riglette’s voice was shrill. Perhaps it was because she could see that she was standing near a pile of corpses. Even through all the flying blood, her face was a pale white. Thinking it would be pitiful if she had to wait too long, Noel took a deep breath, and released a thunderous roar that echoed across the entire battlefield.

“Commander of One Hundred Noel of the Coimbran army has killed the leader of the defence!! Strike down those who remain!!”

Catching the head that Noel tossed to him, Barbas climbed a nearby turret to display it from a height, “Did you hear that you bastards? Captain Noel’s taken the fine head

o' yer leader here! Here it is, give a cry of victory!"

At the sight of it, the Baharan soldiers' morale dropped in an instant, and they fell into a state of confusion. Originally, it had been Hoslo's leadership that had supported them, so as soon as that pillar was destroyed, they began to collapse. Their resolve to die was broken in an instant and their fatigue caught up with them all at once.

"Commander of One Hundred Noel has killed their leader! Don't delay, finish the assault at once!"

The Coimbran morale skyrocketed in inverse proportion to the Baharan morale. Dirk encouraged his men, and their indecisive attitude evaporated as soldiers rushed to the gates to put their enemies to the sword. Already, the battle for fort Carness had been decided. After most of the remnants in the fort had been killed, Noel sat upon the corpse littered ramparts to bathe in the midsummer sun with the feeling that she couldn't lose on a sunny day. She hadn't received a single wound all day, meaning that, as expected, sunny days were a good thing.

*But, I'm a bit worn out after the drawn out fight. It's not easy to watch the enemy's movements.*

Noel could fight with explosive power, but there was something she knew suited herself better: seizing the initiative and taking the enemy's head in a swift strike. Conversely, she was particularly weak in regards to wars of attrition. It was tiring to remain tense for long stretches of time, and her body would grow languid. When it came time to play, things were different, but she grew extremely tired when focusing on fighting.

"So it was a flop after all... but if I don't keep at it..."

As Noel's sigh was abating, Cynthia called out to her from behind, "What was a flop?"

Her sword was sheathed, though stained with blood.

"No, it's nothing. More importantly: thanks for backing me up. You drew the attention of the enemy archers while I was approaching, right? There was just the tiniest gap, after all."

"It's no big deal. In fact, I'd say your spear throwing was much more effective. You completely stopped the enemy's movement. Yes, it was a splendid strike."

“Hehe, wasn’t it? I mean, it’s the curious bident after all. No, from their perspective, it’d be the fiendish spear, wouldn’t it?”

“Fiendish spear? What are you on about?”

“The leader of the defence called me a fiend. Demons are pretty strong, so it’s kinda cool. I’ve seen them in a picture book once before.”

Demons were strong and fearsome. They could not be defeated alone, so the rabbit in the picture book gathered everyone up, came up with a plan, and exterminated the demon. Having destroyed it, the rabbit lived happily ever after with the people that he had helped. He didn’t reflect at all about the defeated demon. At a glance, it looked like the demon had experienced a tragic fate, but he had surely been happy before his extermination, having been true to himself the whole time. Pondering such things, Noel smiled happily, and Cynthia shook her head with an astonished expression.

“Is it the time to smile? An opponent calling you a demon is the worst kind of dehumanizing abuse. Well, you were probably formidable enough to warrant that though...”

“So it had that kind of meaning? Hmmm, how deep.”

“It isn’t deep. Listen, you should just hurry up and forget what your enemies say.”

“It’s fine, though. It’s a war where we have to kill lots of people. We did at least call for their surrender. They got killed ‘cause they didn’t accept.”

“That’s justified in war. It’s kill or be killed. You don’t need to worry about anything other than your enemy’s willpower.”

“Yup, that’s true.”

“More importantly, we have completely taken this fort. Prepare yourself, we’re going to report to the viceroy.”

Noel nodded at Cynthia’s words and stood, confirming that her appearance had become rather dreadful. Her proud red hair was clotted disturbingly with blood, and her face and hands had been caked in it too. Though her armour had not been damaged, if she didn’t properly clean and maintain it, there was a chance it would become useless. Her warhammer was a similar case. The curious bident on the other

hand, could be rather conveniently cleansed whenever it burst into flame, which was nice.

“Hmmm, something’s bothering me. Hey, wouldn’t it be fine to bathe in the nearby river? I want to do some maintenance too.”

“It should be fine if you use the fort’s well instead of going all the way to the river.”

“No, that’s a bit much. I want an afternoon nap in the cool waters— I mean, I’ll engage in meditation. Consider the transient nature of human existence, oooor something...ahaha...”

It seemed as if she was on the verge of accidentally letting her real intentions slip. Noel had hastily attempted to smooth things over, but Cynthia had clearly heard exactly what she said, eyebrows tilted in displeasure. So it happened that the next thing to come was her fist. Taking the minimally pulled punch, Noel gave a few words of regret despite the fact that an afternoon nap in the cold waters on such a hot and sunny day would be an unparalleled joy. That was it: bobbing gently in the waters almost like a fish—or corpse— could make the world white, and bestow upon her a certain bliss. If she was to die, the waters would surely have felt good. Her body would bloat in the water and become rather grizzly, but if she was already dead, it wouldn’t matter.

Bodies, rubble and the like were being tidied up in a rush within the fort as a war council was held. The Coimbran scale was flying proud over the fort. The Baharan tri-sabre flags had all been torn down and incinerated with the bodies. Grohl sat upon his stool and nodded deeply with satisfaction.

“Gentlemen! I’d first like to congratulate you on your work. With this we can say that the start of the conquest of Bahar has been a success.”

Grohl had intended to push through the fort on day one with an all out assault, but had unexpectedly wasted three days. They had lost about 300 men, but killed around 1 000, which was a hard blow to their enemy. That aside, what was left of the defence was going to be a thin garrison around the nearby forts and roads. The fact that Coimbra had taken a famous stronghold was going to pressure the Baharan lords.

“Congratulations, Viceroy. Once our men have rested here, let us aim for Vesta as planned. The fall of Carness will show them what will come of resistance.”

Grohl gestured in agreement with Wilm’s council, and turned his gaze to Gaddis, “Hm,

by the way, Gaddis, are you of the same opinion?"

"Y-yes, I completely think the same thing too."

"I see. Even still, how you chose to fight this time was truly pitiful. Having seen your determination then, I don't want to believe it. Listen well: do not betray my expectations again!"

Gaddis screwed up his face, and prostrated himself before Grohl, saying, "Yes sir. I understand, sir!"

"Noel's movements are even more splendid in comparison. She scaled the walls alone, and, more than that, took the head of their leader. She truly is worthy of being called a hero. I want to entrust the vanguard of the next battle to her."

Grohl praised Noel in high spirits, causing the gazes of all the surrounding officers to converge on her location. Wilm's glare was filled with hatred, but Noel pretended not to notice. As far as she was concerned, she had no idea why he disliked her so. After a brief pause, Noel's superior officer, Commander of One Thousand, Dirk, stepped forth.

"Viceroy, I fear there is something I must say."

"Dirk? What is it you have to be so formal about?"

"Viceroy, it is true that Commander of One Hundred Noel's prowess in battle is terrific. There is no doubt that her exploits in this battle were first class; however, she defied orders, ignoring the flow of the battle. It seems to me that she went ahead, having already intended to steal a march on us when she mounted the ladder. I do not think we should set too much of a precedent of ignoring orders in search of merit. If there are too many who attempt to mimic her actions, military order will fall apart."

Dirk had wanted to avoid making the same mistakes as Gaddis, and had been aiming at a full assault on the fort, but Noel had gotten on the ladder no sooner than the attack had been signaled. It was good that she had succeeded, but on the off chance she failed, it could have affected the morale. Incidentally, Dirk was a man who had kept up with Barbas' White Ant Bloc's diversion as they fought. He was a noble who was also from the north, but he was very helpful, and also rather poor, so he was rather popular with his men. His weaknesses were his obstinance, and lack of ability with finance. He was pleased with Noel's actions this time, but he felt the need to issue a warning.

“What you say it quite right, but we have been able to splendidly take this fort. Is not anything that got us here more or less acceptable? Conversely, this is something I want to praise.”

“Viceroy, our protocols are the chains by which we regulate our soldiers. We must not allow anyone to violate them. If we are loose with them, the men will all compete for merit, and stop following orders. That would make us no different from bandits.”

“Hmmm, yes, there is truth to what you say, but...”

“Viceroy, what Commander of One Thousand Dirk is saying is correct.”

At Wilm’s agreement, Grohl knit his eyebrows.

“You think so too? It’s true that strict punishment and reward are written of as the foundation of the military, but... Commander of One Hundred Noel, would you come here?”

Rubbing his chin, Grohl beckoned to Noel. Glasses on, she stepped out with an air of composure, saluted, and knelt.

“My humble apologies. Please forgive my overextension.”

“I think that your actions this time have been worthy of praise. To the point that I would have liked to give you a medal of promotion; however, I do believe that what Dirk says is true. Is there anything you wish to say on this matter?”

“...”

“Noel, if you remain silent, we won’t know.”

“Yes, I believe that the issue of this battle was time. For this reason, I went ahead knowing full well it was against regulations.”

“That makes sense, I understand the circumstances, but what is this about time being so important? Will it not take three more months for the main Baharan force to return? I don’t think that a little delay here will be fatal,” Grohl asked, puzzled.

After a quick glance at Wilm, Noel began to explain her thoughts, “I fear that the Baharan administration might not yet be in the capital.”

“Well, now should be about the time that they receive the declaration.”

“Is that correct?”

“It is a report from my spies in the capital. Isn’t that right, Wilm?”

“Yes. Three days ago it was reported that the Baharan administration was in the process of setting up for the ceremony of the rising sun in the capital. They should have received the declaration of war already, but no matter how much they rush, it ought to take them three months to arrive. Even if they were to rush, their exhausted forces would be nothing to fear.”

“..”

Grohl was slightly irritated as Noel was pondering over how to make her point, and told her, “Noel, if you have something to say, it’s fine to just say it. Try saying what you think without any falsification.”

“Yes, then I will state my thoughts. I think that we should ignore the surrounding forts and roads, and head east with all our force along the highway with the capital Vesta as our target.”

Upon hearing Noel’s opinion, the surrounding officers burst into an uproar. A mere commander of one hundred had suggested changing the entire army’s plan.

“It is a truly daring idea, but why do you think so?”

“Viceroy, there is no need to hear more of that sort of thing! It would be unthinkable to change the plan now!”

“Calm down Wilm. Is it not fine to simply hear her out?”

“The plan is to advance on the capital whilst combatting the local lords.”

“That is exactly it.”

“But that way will take too much time. If we can assault Vesta now, the enemy will never be able to reinforce it. Knowing that, the capital is still under Baharan protection. They won’t abandon it, so they’ll have to rush back. That is where the most important battle will take place. If we can force the enemy to rush, we’ll be able to fight

in an advantageous position, and right now that's more important than being slow and methodical."

Noel had cut straight to the point, and Wilm, chastising her, began clearly frowning as the last thing that Amil wanted was for the war to bog down. Wilm was attempting to further that objective as to gain a glorious future. The main Baharan force would turn around en-route and the time it would take them to arrive was the greatest weakness of the plan.

"Hm."

Wilm strongly stated that, "I think that you don't need to listen to this at all, Viceroy," and after clapping his hands together, looking down on Noel, he fired, "Have you any proof that the enemy force is already on its way back, Noel? We have received identical reports from Gaddis' spies. If you have evidence about the accuracy of our information, do let us know!"

"I have none."

"Ha, that's what I thought! Listen well, Noel. The fundamentals of warfare are to minimise allied casualties whilst thinking of how to strike the enemy. First, like tightening a noose, we should work with the nobles surrounding Vesta, perhaps capturing them, so that we might be able to take the well fortified city without expending much effort. A great number of secret messages have already come through."

"..."

Grohl listened, and Noel's expression didn't waver.

Kneeling too, Wilm vehemently denounced Noel's plan, "With the strong measures you suggest, our men would have to be surrounded by the enemy without fighting. We would lose more men than at Carness. In summary, there is no need to rush to battle. If you understand that, hold in your opinions from here on!"

The other officers nodded strongly as if in agreement with his words. Grohl also agreed. Noel's rapid advance plan seemed to have high risks, and low rewards. If they could conclude their negotiations with the surrounding lords, they would fight on the Coimbran side. It was highly likely that they could surround and take Vesta with a large enough army. In any case, her plan would turn their potential allies into definite

enemies which would damage morale. Their foe's strength wasn't even in Bahar to begin with, and not only had Wilm's spies reported it, but so too had Gaddis'. If Noel was right, they still posed a threat, but that was highly unlikely. In war, one could not become afraid of a merely theoretical enemy.

"Noel, I think that Wilm is correct. Our spies have provided us undeniable evidence. Even if we follow your advice and ignore the enemy to march on Vesta, on the off chance of us happening to be delayed, it would spell our end. Vesta is heavily fortified, so no matter how much valour you have, it won't fall easily. Furthermore, our supply lines would stretch, and we can't afford to become surrounded."

"But Vesta is the key to Bahar, and now is our best chance. If we take it, something will surely happen. If the entire army is too much, please at least send my corps ahead."

"Hmmm..."

"Know your place! A commander of one hundred can not just move alone! In the first place, is it not obvious that the capital is the key!"

"Do you not know of the black and white game, Lord Wilm? I'm quite good at it. In the game, the corners are the key."

"W-what are you talking about all of a sudden?"

Wilm started at her abrupt change in topic, and the surrounding men were taken aback.

Completely ignoring the mood, Noel continued on disinterestedly with her point, "You won't necessarily win if you take the corners, but you'll never win if you ignore them. No matter how much you control, it will be overturned. So..."

Adjusting her glasses, Noel began to proceed, but was interrupted. An officer was laughing in scorn, or perhaps bemusement, at Noel's use of a children's game as an example. Thinking that it was fine now that Noel had said her piece, he left without saying anything in particular. Riglette attempted to do the same with a tut, but Cynthia stopped her, irritated. Noel learned something: this too was the time for a tut.

Initially, she had wanted to be more concise, but she had unfortunately lacked proof so she hadn't said anything in order to avoid having to explain things in a roundabout manner. Noel noted that she wanted to get better at that sort of thing.

“Hmph, we’ve heard something truly foolish. War is not a game. We take lives and spill our blood for victory! By no means do you have to listen to her words, Viceroy. She may have some skills, but she is still a lowborn at the end of the day!”

Gaddis followed up Wilm with his own abuse, “That’s right. Proposing that kind of plan brings shame to the Coimbran knights! No, even being a commander of one hundred is beyond your class!”

Looking at the two, Noel cast her eyes down a second time.

“You don’t need to go that far. It has only been a short while since Noel has become a knight. Noel, be sure to learn well from here on. You did nothing wrong to express your opinion on my order. Don’t worry about it.”

Trusting in Noel’s military proficiency, Grohl stood to her defence. Thinking him too soft on her, one officer piped up,

“Viceroy, we have taken fort Carness. At this time why don’t we reassign Noel? We don’t need her anymore.”

“No need. Don’t presume so much!”

The officer hurriedly responded to Grohl’s thunderous roar, “M-my apologies!”

“However, we cannot overlook the disobeying of orders this time. Noel, be sure to always follow Dirk’s orders. You can learn well from his devoted service.”

“Understood!”

Grohl made his point, and Noel stood to salute. Making no promises, she merely informed him that she had comprehended what he wanted. It was how she dealt with situations in which she felt compelled to make a promise that she couldn’t keep: by obfuscating her answers in ambiguity. It was one of her secrets of success.

Leaving after the council was finished, Noel was immediately stopped by Cynthia. Caught by the scruff of the neck, she was forcefully dragged to what appeared to be some servant’s quarters near the fort.

“You fool! Honestly, what even goes through your head!? You’ve finally distinguished yourself, yet you seem to be aiming to ruin it all! Even though I gave you training just

so this wouldn't happen!"

"He wanted my opinion, so all I did was tell him honestly. They really made fun of me, though. It's rare for that to come from everybody. Um, what was it? A bed of nails?"

A clenched fist came flying at her while she laughed and scratched her head. It wasn't going easy on her this time.

"It's because you brought up 'the black and white game' at a war council!"

"You suck at that game, after all."

"You idiot!"

This time her cheeks were pinched in stead of punched. Cynthia had truly gotten angry. Noel wouldn't be released until she repented from her very soul, and so she made a face that pitifully reflected upon her actions from the bottom of her heart, but it didn't work. Not even putting up both hands in surrender was enough.

"Ouch... even though I've reflected on it..."

"S-sorry, I just started thinking about what happened."

Noel didn't want her to just start thinking about things while still pulling on somebody's cheeks, but she stayed quiet. She had a feeling that it would upset Cynthia somehow.

"What happened?"

"Yes, on the off chance that what you think is even partially correct, we'll be in trouble."

"I couldn't come up with another example. I had no evidence, since it's just a guess after all. I'm used to being made fun of so it's fine, but I wonder what's making me so irritated?"

Cynthia sighed as she spoke, "That's the normal reaction. If it happened to me, I'd be greatly offended."

"Cynthia?"

“No, it’d be fine to be even angrier! To think they’d sneer at you like that after witnessing what you’re capable of! Aaah, it’s so frustrating, miserable, irritating! There’s your basic script!! They rejected your opinion without even considering it! Even though we’d be in one hell of a predicament if we were walking into an enemy trap!”

Cynthia smashed a nearby shelf with her armoured fist. Her anger seemed to be more violent than Noel’s. Her voice echoed rather loudly in the room, but it was not a happy voice. It seemed that Cynthia hadn’t realised that she was spouting some risky statements. If she believed Noel, that would mean that Wilm’s report had been a lie.

“Hey, why are you mad, Cynthia?”

“My friend has been insulted, so it’s obvious that I’d be mad! If they weren’t my superiors, I’d beat them half to death! They even failed in their assaults on Carness!”

Her face was red, and she was stamping her feet. Noel’s eyes went round at the scene. Her... friend. Noel had thought that way about Cynthia, but to think that Cynthia felt the same way about her was something that, once confirmed, caused Noel to feel elated; her prior irritation washed away.

“Really, thank you, Cynthia. You’re the first person to get mad on my account, so I feel a little better.”

“That’s not the issue here! What can I do about my anger!”

“Ahaha, first try taking a deep breath, and calming down. It’s fine, we don’t know what’ll happen anyway. Coimbra has you and the young master. Fight as hard as you can so that Coimbra will win. I’ll absolutely protect my promises.”

Noel gently placed a soothing hand on Cynthia’s shoulder as she seethed. She didn’t understand politics very well, but she did know it had been a poor move to invade Baharan territory. It was supposed to be a surprise attack, but they were probably going to be ambushed by their opponent despite her calling their intentions to attention. Things would be simple if Noel had overthought it, but that was an unfathomable possibility. If they continued to advance at their current rate, they would win, but she did not think that would happen.

“Don’t go acting like big game at strange times. I worry over whether or not you have brains, or if you’re just an idiot.”

“Ahaha, I’ll take that as a complement.”

“I’m not really praising you, though.”

Earlier, Noel had wanted to ask her if the spies’ reports were really correct, and what she thought the chances were of Major General Wilm fabricating them, though if she did ask, she would be dragging Cynthia, who was in charge of her training, into it all. That was why she had stopped herself. Noel could figure that much out by herself. She could run away fine, but Cynthia was another matter. She had already ruled out forcibly attacking the enemy above board, but if she took it easy, she would be playing right into their hands. Wilm in particular, not wanting Coimbra to win, had his eyes on her. She felt like letting her warhammer loose, but restrained herself. Making a living was truly difficult.

“Haa, it seems like the weather has gotten worse.”

“Looks like rain. It won’t affect the march but...”

“Isn’t that fine? It’s not that kind of thing.”

The sun which had been beating down just moments before disappeared behind a curtain of dark clouds, but no rain had yet fallen.

Noel made to return to the campground, and was met with two people that she recognised. The first was a slim, middle aged man with a harsh face: Dirk, the commander of one thousand whom she had disobeyed. Beside him was her subordinate Barbas. It would have been fine if she could have passed through them without incident, but she walked up to them thinking that she might greet them. Cynthia had strictly informed her that she was never to forget to greet her superior officers.

“Commander of One Thousand Dirk, you have my humble apologies for what happened earlier!”

“Ah, Captain of One Hundred Noel? Don’t worry, you don’t have to apologise. I hadn’t intended to disgrace you like that. Starting with Lord Wilm, it seems that Lord Gaddis also has become prejudiced against you. They’ve always been cold to us northerners, but that was unusually harsh.”

“Northerners?”

“Yes, they always look down on the poor from the north. All of the important offices are held by southerners. I hear you’re also from Zoim. That’s essentially how things work.”

“ ... ”

Noel finally thought she understood why they all seemed to look down on her. It might have even been the reason behind Riglette’s openly dissatisfied stance. Cynthia made a pained expression beside her. Noel didn’t remember if Cynthia had taught her that, but it didn’t seem to be a good enough reason for Wilm and Gaddis to hate her so much.

“I’m sorry it turned out that way, despite your distinguished service. I should have taken a stand. Barbas, you were just about to bring up some complaints about it, weren’t you?”

“That’s right. Captain Noel’s finally gotten some merit, and thanks to you, it’s all come to nothin’! It’s ridiculous that those trash then made fun of her. Damn southern bigshots, what’s their problem!?”

“Not everything can be forgiven on account of distinguished service, even for southerners. That’s how the army is. There are those who disagree, but I couldn’t overlook it.”

“What a square! That’s why yer only a commander of a thousand even though yer a noble!”

Barbas tutted as he scratched his head, and Dirk gave a wry smile. His words were extremely harsh, but there was no reason to be particularly bothered by them. If he did, they would likely be on similar terms as Cynthia and Noel.

“My family has fallen to ruin, after all, and I don’t want to get caught up in it all and change my lifestyle... oh yes, you know this man, right? He’s synonymous with the prosperous times for the mining belt. By the way, I was in charge of subjugating the White Ant Bloc until recently.”

“Yer crazy if you think that’ll help you. Well, I’ve got a harsh personality, so it wasn’t hard for me.”

“You would have been exterminated soon, so you’re rather lucky, I’d say.”

“The fuck did you say? Wasn’t it so tough they were about to switch you out!?”

“You fool! That was a ploy to trick you. There’s no way it would be a tough fight!”

Dirk slapped Barbas rather forcefully on the back.

“You two get along well, eh?”

“Really? He really fuckin’ hit me there. We’re just stuck with eachother. Well, we wouldn’t really kill eachother. This old man made sure to capture us alive whenever he could, so we made sure to take advantage of that.”

“I believe that there’s no reason to kill our fellow Coimbrans, but I never would have dreamed that this scoundrel would come to serve Coimbra. To think you convinced him of that. It’s truly impressive you managed to get this hooligan as a subordinate.”

“Thank you very much!”

“You’re welcome. By the way, it seems that you’re on good terms with Senior Commander of One Hundred Cynthia.”

“Yes sir!”

“A friend like that is truly a blessing, so be sure to treasure it.”

“Yes sir, I promise to treasure it greatly!”

Noel straightened up and gave a salute. Cynthia was Noel’s first friend since she had gone out into the world. Mirut and the villagers were precious companions, but not friends. Noel’s allies had greatly multiplied since she had come to Coimbra. She was surrounded by companions, but she hadn’t many friends, so she decided to protect those few she had.

“That’s a good, enthusiastic response. If you come up with any new plans or tactics, it would be best if you told them to me. I know you have great skill with the military arts, and there are those that doubt it, but miracles and luck won’t give you the enemy leader’s head. You’re young and have a future, so there’s no need to rush the attack.”

He gently patted Noel’s shoulder as he spoke. It wasn’t that Noel was rushing to attain success in life, but that she thought it would be their best chances of winning. He

hadn't recognised it, though. The viceroy and the others all shared Wilm's opinion. As that was the case, Noel wondered what she could do, but she couldn't figure it out. Noel corps consisted of five hundred men from the White Ant Bloc, and two hundred common soldiers, adding up to a total of seven hundred men. She could not take Vesta with so few, so Noel honestly aired her thoughts.

"Commander of One Thousand Dirk, would it be unacceptable for you to order me to pursue after the remaining enemies tomorrow?"

"Pursue the remnants? I'm sure that's not all you intend to do. Are you thinking of stealing a march on someone again?"

When Dirk knit his eyebrows, Noel pulled out a map from her breast pocket and pointed to a specific spot.

"Yes, I thought to attack the 'military outpost' that is on the Rhine district in this mountainous region. Will you permit it?"

Noel intended to stay quiet and target it anyway, but decided to try and gain Dirk's permission. If he was acquainted with Barbas, she thought that he could figure it out.

"We don't have any plans to take that area. We do have the viceroy's directive to capture the roads leading to Vesta, so is that the basis for your proposal?"

"Yes. If we attack here, it will by no means be pointless. It might seem strategically worthless, but the threat of us attacking their rear might be psychologically advantageous. If we destroy a troublesome outpost now, it will prove useful in the later stages of the invasion."

"Okay, I understand. I'll bring it up with the viceroy, but do try to avoid losing too many men. Show as much restraint as you can. It would be bad if rumors circulated that the hero of Carness had been routed. Once your work is done, return quickly."

"Yes sir, understood, sir!"

Beside her, Barbas and Cynthia looked like they hadn't comprehended it yet, but it was a major event for Noel. The Rhine district had a small city stretched out at the base of the Balkes mountain range. Incidentally, just east down the highway, converging with three other highways, was the key point of the highly vital Tolido highway. Being vital, Tolido had a defence set up, but that was not the case for the Rhine region. It was a

place where, if taken, seemed to be nothing special. Noels plan was to take the area to use it as a foothold to cross the Balkes mountain range and raid Vesta. As far as she could tell by looking at the terrain, there ought to have been a pass that only the locals knew. If there wasn't, she would simply force her way through. Noel had already proven it was feasible when she had run away from the church. People could do anything they set their minds to, and if she could do it, there was no reason that other people couldn't either.

After safely crossing the mountains, they could burn most of the fields surrounding Vesta before the harvest. That was how they would smoke out anyone in hiding. It would be good if there happened to be some nobles nearby that rushed to defend the area in a panic. They would leave a few alive and retreat back over the mountain. Then they could force a decisive battle as the enemy wanted to drag the conflict out. Both sides would likely take a lot of damage, but it at least it wouldn't be a lopsided defeat. It would be painful, but it was for the best. That was why the Rhine had to fall.

She had realised something when nobody had payed attention to her serious proposition: Wilm was disparaging her as much as possible. It seemed that he didn't want Coimbra to have an advantageous position. Noel really wanted to cleave his skull in two. For that reason, Noel had quieted down and decided to do things on her own. She had to do it to protect her promises with Cynthia and Elgar. Coimbra would need to be in good health if they were to search for happiness together because it was not in their nature to abandon everything and run away. Her biggest obstacle was the matter of how much she could do with a body of troops only seven hundred strong. It seemed like everything would hinge on the tenacity of Noel corps.

"What drive you have. Yes, you're very excited about the next attack. Barbas, your captain is very valiant."

"Of course she is. Whadya think the enemy calls her? Hehe, don't be too surprised... she's the fiend, the fiend. She's a real nightmare for the Baharans."

"The fiend of the battlefield, eh? How fearsome. No, it's rather reliable, isn't it? Demons notwithstanding, I should introduce you to my daughter who's around your age after the war."

"I don't need your help with that, old man."

"What are you saying? Aside from being a knight, raising a child and passing your

name on to the next generation is a very important thing. It is something you must not forget.”

“You done started with the fuckin’ lectures again, you matchmaking geezer!”

“You should fix how you listen! Have you not joined the army!?”

Whilst Barbas and Dirk were complaining, they started shoving each other around. It was only a vague sensation, but Noel felt like she had seen that scene before. She wouldn’t tire of watching it, but Noel had other things she needed to do, so she left. Twofold were her plans: eat some food, and quickly plan for the next day before sleeping, which was most important as the weather had not been particularly good that day.

# Chapter 23

## The Taking of the Rhine

The next morning, Noel began making preparations to advance with her troops. Dirk had gotten permission for her, so there was no particular reason to complain, and she hummed a jolly tune as she affixed rations to her horse. Aside from Noel, only Barbas and Riglette had horses. It couldn't be helped as they weren't a cavalry unit, so the rest of her men had fastened their supplies to their belts. The army probably didn't have enough supplies to convert the White Ant Bloc into a cavalry unit if it wanted to.

"Noel."

She returned the greeting with gusto, "Hello, Cynthia. Good morning! It's good that the weather's nice today."

There wasn't a cloud in sight, so Noel predicted that good things would come of it, but Cynthia's expression was somehow clouded.

"Yes, but more importantly, are you really going to go?"

"Of course. It's the first step in defeating Bahar."

"Why do you have to attack such a backwater outpost? If something happens, you can't be easily reinforced. Is there any need to take such a risk?"

"Yup, I've got my reasons. I need to take that region. It's related to what'll happen next."

Cynthia's eyes opened wide, and she called out in a loud voice, "Oi, wait a minute. You can't plan on capturing the Rhine, can you? Didn't you say you were going to attack the outpost and return!?"

Noel put her finger to her lips in a frantic attempt to quiet her down, for if those around her heard about it, things would likely become unbelievably difficult for her.

"Ahaha, aim high, you know. Of course, if it seems unreasonable, we'll hit them once and come right back."

“Sorry, but I don’t believe that for a second. If it’s you, I bet you’ll just attack no matter what!”

“I won’t do something that unreasonable. I won’t be able to do anything if I’m dead.”

Noel tried to trick her, but she wouldn’t be moved.

“Either way, it seems like it’d be best for me to tag along. I don’t know if I can get permission, but I won’t overlook any nonsense.”

“That’s no good. Such a large party will stand out, and take a lot of time. If we can’t take it in one push, it’s no good.”

Cynthia’s troops were one thousand strong, so Noel would absolutely want her cooperation once she had taken the Rhine, but there was no need for it at the moment. The enemy would dig in if faced with a large force, and she was relying on their underestimation of her.

“But...”

From behind Cynthia, a large man with a scar spoke up, “Hm, in that case, shall I accompany you?”

He was Kai, a commander of one hundred from Gemb. Lined up behind him were his men in their traditional straw hats. According to Kai, they were infantry from the most mobile branch of the army. Their defence was light, but with a quick wit, it seemed that they could be used effectively for surprise attacks.

“Sir Kai? No, it will be rather troublesome if you participate as Gemb hasn’t officially joined the war yet. It could easily escalate beyond an issue of diplomacy.”

“There is no need for worry. I won’t publish the Gembi flag, and I won’t leave any proof behind. I’ve more or less been given permission by the viceroy. More importantly, if I can follow Sir Noel’s movements closely, the risks should be minimal.”

In Grohl’s case, he wouldn’t find it unusual for the Gembi to join in on the fighting. The rule of Gemb, though, would probably be the man who wanted most to scream at him to stop. After Noel had tilted her head, she asked for one final confirmation. If it was still okay, then there wouldn’t be any problems as he would be taking self-responsibility for everything.

“Yeah, is it really okay? No matter what happens after this, you can’t complain, okay.”

“But of course. I wasn’t able to say this earlier, but you did a splendid job as the first on the walls of Carness. This is embarrassing, but your actions sent shivers down my spine. Your fighting style can only be described as demonic. I want to see the two hammer banner in battle again.”

Kai bowed as he spoke, and his light infantry followed suit in a highly bizarre spectacle.

“Like I said... hey, is it really okay?”

“I don’t see why not, but I don’t have the authority to say anything regarding Sir Kai. All the more so if he has permission from the viceroy.”

Cynthia shook her head as if she was troubled.

“Then we’ll go together, eh? Ah, you have your food ready right?”

“Thank you. Everyone, you have your rations, don’t you!”

The light infantry responded as if to show off the ration packs attached to their belts, “Yes sir!”

They all seemed to be hearty men like Kai.

“So, you don’t have to worry about a thing. We will follow Sir Noel, so lead the way. You are the commander.”

“Okay, I get it. Then, it’s about time for us to depart. Riglette, play the marching tune. Barbas, I leave the vanguard to you.”

“Understood. Everyone, follow me! Noel Corps is headin’ out!!”

“Wait... why am I on bugle duty again? Even though anybody else could do it...”

“Listen up you shitty baby, hurry up and blow the fucking bugle! It’s cause you ain’t capable o’ nothin’ else!”

“Shut up you white haired monkey! I’m starting now!”

Having been provoked, Riglette signaled the advance in an unusually dismal mood, though Barbas set forth on his horse in high spirits with the five hundred of the White Ant Bloc in tow. The two hundred Coimbran soldiers were in the centre, and the rear guard was brought up by the one hundred Gembi light infantry. The total number of troops under Noel's command was eight hundred.

Seeing them depart, Noel called out to Cynthia, "Well then, I'm heading out now too."

"Take care, Noel, I mean it. We are in enemy territory, it's completely different from Coimbra. Don't let your guard down."

"Yup, I'll be careful."

"The next time we meet, our side should have advanced fairly well, too. I'm looking forward to taking Vesta together. Let's meet safely again!"

"Of course!"

Noel gave a nod and a salute, which Cynthia returned. Having jumped onto her horse, Noel set forth from the Coimbran camp with great vigour, her short gallop taking her towards the mass of Coimbran scales and twin hammers.

"Sorry to keep you waiting!"

Riglette met her with with a cynical greeting, "It took you long enough. Were you that reluctant to leave?"

"Yup, she's an important friend after all."

"Yes, yes, I see."

Noel grinned at Riglette's tutting.

"You're an important companion too, Riglette, so I'm sure we'll become great friends."

"Hmph, well, thank you very much, but I'll have to decline. It would be rather bothersome after all. Save your intimacy for that barbaric, white haired monkey."

"I see, that's too bad. Ah, may I borrow your bugle?"

“It’s yours in the first place, so go ahead.”

Riglette wiped the mouthpiece and tossed it to Noel who immediately began to play a song with all of her might. There weren’t any enemies in the vicinity so it wasn’t particularly a problem, though she would have to be discreet after a while. The next time she would play it would be to sound the attack. Incidentally, her collection of bugle songs was her Noel Corps Assault Compilation. It was composed by Noel to be a light tune to which one’s feet would move almost of their own accord. Thinking about how one day she would like to add some singing, Noel directed her horse to the front. The troops marched happily along to the rhythm in a good mood all around. Incidentally, Riglette continued to pout beside her the entire time.

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### **Count Berotte’s mansion in the Rhine.**

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“The fiend of Coimbra, was it?”

“Yes, it is a rumor among the soldiers who fled from Carness. Even I only have hearsay on the matter, so we don’t know the details very well.”

“How foolish,” Earl of the Rhine, Count Berotte spat with a frown, “We have already accounted for the fall of Carness. It’s a shame what happened to Sir Hoslo, but he knew what his duty was. It is all so that Lord Amil can take hold of the glory of the sun. This fiend is probably some groundless Coimbran rumor!”

The Rhine, stretching along the Balkes mountain range, was a land that could be easily praised, but even still, Berotte worked desperately so that the people wouldn’t starve by ensuring that all of the arable land was farmed and so that trade was encouraged. He hadn’t made any brilliant moves like Amil’s aides Falid and Mills, but he proudly boasted that his loyalty to Bahar was in no way inferior. He had held no expectations of Amil when he first arrived, thinking he was simply a relative of the emperor; however, his expectations were betrayed in the best way. His reforms had, with fortitude and vigour, straightened out Bahar’s dubious financial affairs, and he had even seen to the founding of a new trade rout. Berotte now thought that Amil was well suited to his position as viceroy. Even his predecessor had deemed him worthy, so he had no worries. If Master Amil became emperor as planned, Bahar would likely

become even more wealthy as the home of the emperor. Falid or some other close associate of Amil's would likely become the new viceroy of Bahar, but that didn't matter. What mattered most was the well-being of the people of the Rhine and the people of Bahar. It was vital, and for that goal, Amil had to win the war. As the region he governed was fairly remote, Berotte didn't think that he would have to become involved in the war, but he would fight if ordered to.

"Baharan victory is at hand. Let us press onward without being distracted by groundless enemy rumors."

"But, this is oddly specific as far as rumors are concerned: a woman with a face as pale as a corpse and hair the colour of blood, flying a banner with two hammers. She has a bident releasing the flames of purgatory, and crushes men with a great war hammer... A rather frightening tale."

"You jest! If you have time to tell tall tales, go patrol the grounds! It's because of people like you that these foolish rumors get circulated!"

"M-my humblest apologies," flustered, backing down, the attendant sat back into his chair after one final glance.

There were fearful rumors spreading amongst the people of the Rhine. Thinking that hearing it once was enough, he heard a frantic knocking on the door.

"What is it!?"

"C-count Berotte, it's horrible! The enemy... the Coimbran army is here!"

"What, are you saying foolish things now too? I have my reports saying that they're still making preparations at Carness. Even if they were starting their invasion, it's too early for them to get here!"

More than anything, he didn't think they would send troops to some remote region like the Rhine that was at the end of the highway. He had even received a letter from Amil, having prepared the surrounding area, expecting Grohl to head straight east along the highway. The lords in the Carness region had been informed that if they could buy time, even surrender was acceptable.

"But, we've received a letter attached to a Coimbran arrow. Here!"

“It says, ‘open the gates at once, and surrender. If you resist, we will have to kill every single one of you. Do not decide rashly,’ does it? The traitors are mocking us!”

He threw the note to the floor and stomped on it repeatedly just as another messenger ran in.

“Count Berotte, two roadside outposts have been raided by Coimbran forces! The enemy commander calls herself Noel, and flies a banner with two hammers!”

“Basically, it wasn’t a false alarm, eh? Furthermore, a banner with two hammers? To think that the rumored fiend would come all the way out here!”

“But, their numbers are relatively few. The outposts were destroyed, but casualties were minimal. From the reports of those who escaped, the enemy numbers three hundred at most.”

“Only three hundred? Is that correct?”

“Yes sir, though it is an approximate estimation.”

“No, send scouts to find out. Thoroughly search the areas around the ruined outposts. If they seriously intend to capture the Rhine, they should send at least two thousand.”

“Understood, sir! We will send patrols at once!”

The outposts were only manned by no more than ten men each. As they were relatively remote, the only things they usually had to watch out for were bandits or wild animals at most. It was completely natural for them to have been destroyed by only three hundred of the enemy. The real problem was whether or not they were going to continue the invasion at that rate. The letter they had sent by arrow indicated that they intended to capture the area, but there was a chance that it was simply harassment.

*Well, it’s most likely a feint. If we hunt them down, the tables will probably turn.*

Three hours later, all of the patrols had returned. After the enemy had destroyed their outposts, it seemed that they were aiming to take the Rhine. As reported, they numbered three hundred. Their leader was a mounted female officer with red hair, and they were calmly marching under a banner with two hammers.

Berotte shook with anger at the dishonour, “Do they intend to take the Rhine with only three hundred men? I don’t care if she’s a fiend or not, she’s looking down on me!”

On the off chance that the Coimbran army attacked the Rhine, he had intended to buy as much time as possible before surrendering. He too, had been allowed as much by Amil, but an enemy force of only three hundred was a different matter altogether. While there were only three hundred regular soldiers in the Rhine, around one thousand conscripts could be levied. It would likely be enough men to form a counter attack. The Baharan people hated to lose, partly because of the local colour, and partly out of pride for past military exploits. A loss to the weak soldiers of Coimbra was impossible, even if they were lead by a fiend. What decided a battle was the number of troops and their morale. No individual could overturn the numbers, even if skilled.

“What shall we do, Count? Could it be that you intend to capitulate...”

“Wait.”

Berotte wanted to think things through. They could surrender, but it wouldn’t be reasonably acceptable to do so when faced by an enemy numbering only three hundred strong. Essentially, the war with Coimbra would end without too much trouble as a Baharan victory. At a glance, it looked like Coimbra was greatly increasing its territory, though, considering it was a trap laid out by Amil, that much was obvious. When the Coimbran army had prepared and launched its invasion of Vesta, Grohl would get a taste of hell. Amil’s plan, as it stood, had prepared just for that event. One of the key points for success was that several high ranking Coimbran officials had already betrayed Grohl. As far as Berotte could tell, he had the overwhelming numbers. If that was the case, it was just the kind of engagement that he wanted. Capturing the rumored fiend would earn him renown; potentially enough that Amil would notice him. His territory would likely increase as a reward.

“Count Berotte!”

“Please be quiet. If three hundred is all they brought, all the better. If we surrendered to them, we would become a laughing stock... All right, we’ll recruit the plebeians, leave behind a minimal guard, and head for the front. On one hand, we need to protect the region, but I also don’t want to get us caught up in the ravages of war. I want to keep the farms from being damaged.”

“Yes sir!”

“The western hill is probably the best place for an ambush. If we take the high ground it will give us an advantage. The enemy is few in number, but we must be careful. Hurry and assemble the men!”

The autumn harvest was in two months, so that hill was the best place to ambush the enemy in order to avoid collateral damage. If the Coimbran army was going to invade the Rhine, they would have to take the hill in order to proceed.

“Yes sir, I will prepare for the sortie at once!”

Standing, Berotte clenched his fists and released his angry voice, “We’ll let those Coimbran fools know our Baharan strength!”

Once Berotte had led his thousand men to the hill, he discovered some troops relaxing below. They were flying the Coimbran scales, and the rumored twin hammer banner.

“To think they would rest so brazenly in enemy territory. Just how little do they think of us!?”

“Count Berotte, let’s charge them at once! I don’t see any signs of an ambush. If we strike now, we can take them out in a single blow!”

“Yes, attacking only three hundred should let us slaughter them. Okay, let’s go!”

Berotte drew his sword atop his horse, and swung it down to initiate the charge. His one thousand men would rush down the slope, swooping down upon the Coimbran force. It seemed that the enemy had noticed, but they didn’t have the time to array themselves for battle. He wondered if they would turn and fight, or turn tail and run.

“A-an attack! A Baharan attack!”

“Don’t leave a single one alive! Have no mercy on the traitors who have invaded our land!!”

The archers in the rear rained arrows upon the enemy position. In the uproar, the Coimbran soldiers began a hasty retreat, throwing down their weapons, and even abandoning their Coimbran banners. Berotte sneered at the shameful showing.

“Hmph, this is the fiend’s corps? Isn’t this just a bunch of cowards!?”

Rushing to the front with high morale, Berotte saw a female officer panicked on her horse. It seemed like she was deserting her troops, and attempting to escape alone.

“E-everyone fall back! The enemy has twice our number! I’m going first, so please buy as much time as you can!”

“Wait! You’re the one the soldiers have been talking about, aren’t you!? If you’re a knight, you should fight like one, you bastard! Trying to leave first; have you no pride as a commander!?”

Tutting, Noel spat, “S-shut up! Who needs pride? When beaten to the chase, running is a victory! What are you doing, hurry up and defend me!!”

She had no control of the troops, and the soldiers showed no signs of stopping. In the first place, there wasn’t a man who would give his life for that kind of commander.

“Don’t try to explain! It’s a joke that a foolish woman like you is the fiend! I’ll take your head soon enough!!”

“Running is a victory!”

Noel began spurring her horse on to full speed. They were falling back to a small grove nearby with full force. An unbearable anger rose up in him as he thought about how they had recommended his surrender. Jeering, he ordered the pursuit, but the enemy was faster than he anticipated, and they managed to flee into the heart of the grove despite his best efforts. His subordinates were breathing hard too, as one would expect.

“Damn, just how fast can they run!? They’re like rats!”

“Haah, haah...”

“Everyone, halt the pursuit! Form up!”

Berotte stopped his horse, and brought his unit to a standstill in the grove. He had thought it would have been easy to capture them as they fled, but they had overturned his expectations and escaped. They hadn’t even inflicted any casualties aside from the initial volley of arrows as they had all fled in the same direction instead of scattering. It vexed him greatly, but there was a limit to how far he could chase them. His men needed to catch their breath, and reform.

“Haah, haah, C-count Berotte, what... is ever... the matter? T-the enemy is surely tired too, so we should drive them into a corner! This is Bahar!”

“That’s the spirit! We’ll pursue after a short rest! This is our back yard, no matter where they run, we can corner them! We’ve seen the true colours of their fiend. After we kill her, I’ll put up her gibbeted head on a spike!”

He wiped his sweat and drank from his water skin that he had brought on his horse. In the same way, his men were taking deep breaths in their attempts to regain some strength. Considering who he brought, they would be fit to continue in about five minutes. Just as he thought that, a horseman with the Baharan flag came galloping up, his face pale.

“Urgent news! A large Coimbran force is invading the Rhine! We desperately fought, but the city has fallen, its garrison wiped out!!”

“W-what?”

The horseman cried out in an unnecessarily loud voice, “The Rhine has fallen!!”

Hearing him, Berotte’s men burst into an uproar.

“What are you saying? We just cornered the enemy! There should be no way a large force got through! I wouldn’t even dream of it!”

“But, the enemy flag is already flying over the Rhine!! Please look!!”

He turned his gaze to where the messenger was pointing. A large amount of smoke was billowing up from the direction of the Rhine. It meant that the city had been razed or pillaged or had met some such fate. Confirming with his spyglass, Berotte saw that the flag over his mansion bore not the tri-sabre crest of Bahar, but the twin scales of Coimbra. It was hard to believe, but the Rhine had been captured in that short amount of time.

“J-just what happened to the city!?”

“That smoke... could it be that they’ve killed everyone we left behind...”

“Oi, hurry and go back! We have to get back and protect our families!”

The conscripts from the Rhine were shaking as they stood. Berotte tried to calm them down, but was interrupted by the messenger.

“The enemy force that took the Rhine is coming to capture you, Count Berotte! Please flee at once! I’ll let the nearby villages know!”

Having said his piece, the messenger turned and rode away. The wavering men began to move riotously.

“C-can you not remain calm!? There’s no way it has completely fallen!”

Berotte made a weak attempt to control the men’s morale, but there was no reason for any of them to be placated.

“It’s fallen no matter how you look at it! They struck when we sortied! It’s all your fault, Count!”

“That’s right, shouldn’t you just hurry up and surrender to Coimbra!? Oi, hurry and get back to the city!”

“You bastards, do you know to whom you speak!? Rather rude for mere plebeians!”

“Letting the city fall, you’re a fucking retard, count or no!!”

The soldier near Berotte was restrained, but he didn’t have any will to listen. Already, the soldiers in the rear were dispersing. At that rate, maintaining cohesion was going to be impossible. Berotte racked his brain to search for some kind of solution.

“A-an attack! Attack!!”

Following the bitter voice was a merciless rain of fire arrows. The arrows wreathed in flames penetrated the soldiers’ armour, and many fell amidst the screams. Then, with what sounded like some kind of explosion, the grove was engulfed in flames.

“W-what is this!? This unnatural ring of fire! Could it be that they set up their oil in advance!?”

“No, it wasn’t oil, but some kind of lump that exploded! E-either way, this is dangerous, so we should exit the grove!”

“O-okay. Everyone, hurry and fall back! If you don’t get moving, you’ll be swallowed by the flames!!”

In a rush, bearing the heat, Berotte abandoned his horse, and tried to escape, supporting one of his subordinates with his shoulder. Stepping over the men who had burned to death as they broke the wall of flames, he dove into the blaze himself. A bursting, bubbling sound could be heard along with the echoes of screams. If he stopped, he would be swallowed by the flames. The landscape had gone from peaceful silence to a roaring blaze in an instant.

“S-shit! What heat! My lungs, f-feel like they’re on fire!”

“Count Berotte, don’t open your mouth! Look, w-we’re almost out!”

“Aaaah! How did it come to this!?”

The end seemed far too distant, though he had no memory of ever going so deep into the furnace. He wondered how many subordinates had followed him, but he had no idea.

*J-just what is this? I don’t understand!*

Then, just as he was finally exiting from the mouth of the flames...

“Woah. You survived that hell fire. I thought I’d burn you all, though. I guess you only got lucky at the end, eh?”

“Y-you bastard!”

“Don’t disrespect the count!”

Berotte’s subordinate drew his sword to kill the one standing before him. The blade, however, did not reach its target, as the man was stopped, two sharp blades thrust through him, protruding from his back. He stopped moving after only a few convulsions, red blood spilling out into the earth.

“Y-you...”

Berotte was enraged, but some of the ash in the air had caught in his throat. Standing before him, with a bident in hand was Noel, after whom he had been chasing. Behind

her stood soldiers brandishing their spears, bearing the twin hammer flag.

“That was a fun game of tag. You got caught in a trap and lost. I’ll spare your life if you don’t resist.”

“M-my loss?”

“That’s right. I won, you lost. That’s how the old emperor Bergis did it. By luring his enemies to their deaths through his various schemes.”

“T-to their deaths?”

“This time, I looked like I lost on purpose. Cause, it’s human nature to try and chase something that’s running, you know. Even if you notice that something’s off, you’ll still end up chasing anyway. One time, I almost fell off a cliff while I was hunting.”

Noel had been speaking with an innocent smile. Berotte carefully looked over his shoulder. His thousand men had already dwindled to about ten. They had completely lost their will to fight, and were not preparing themselves for battle. He wondered if the others had fled the grove, or if they had all become charred in it. He couldn’t tell.

“M-my word.”

Noel had spoken of Emperor Bergis’ plans. It was true that Bergis had used himself as bait as he unified the continent, favouring plans that thoroughly crushed the enemy after leading them astray. The enemies that faced him still chased even when they knew it was a trap, losing focus on everything else to try and kill the people in front of them. It was what Bergis wanted, but they couldn’t resist for it was extremely difficult to pass up the temptation to destroy the enemy right away.

Amil had been copying the very same plans, himself, in order to gain the reputation of the sun emperor come again. Berotte had been partially caught up in that idea too, and he suddenly felt a wave of regret for having been so foolish all this time.

“I-it was all your plan? That shameful behavior was all to lure us to the killing ground!”

“Offering to only kill a few if the enemy surrenders is a good way to anger, and draw them out. And I thought that, obviously people would get mad seeing a girl like me in command, so I sent a flying column to take the Rhine. Once we had sown confusion by letting you discover that, we implemented our fire plan. Ah, that messenger was one

of my men. Obviously, there isn't a large army anywhere nearby. We didn't lay waste to the city either."

"I-it was all a trap!? This is the greatest failure of my life!"

"Yup, it was all a trap. The shit I learned at that fucking place turned out to be surprisingly useful, eh? I didn't think it would go this well," continuing on, Noel made sure to boast that it was, "Amazing, eh?" to the clearly displeased woman beside her.

Berotte unconsciously reached for his sword.

"I'll offer one last time. If you surrender, I'll let you live, and I keep my promises. There are all kinds of things I'd like to talk to you about, too. I won't have many chances to speak to a big wig from Bahar, after all," and, fiddling with her bident, she finally asked, "So what's it going to be?"

Surrender was unbelievable. His noble pride would not allow him to bend the knee to such a young girl. Above all, he had to kill the girl to avenge his men who had died in the fire.

"I should say the same to you, fiend of Coimbra!"

He brandished his blade. Noel beat his sword aside, and in the follow through, thrust at him with the bident, piercing his throat, sending a burning sensation up through his neck. Unable to scream, Berotte could only produce a harsh wheezing.

"Then it can't be helped. I'll only be taking your head."

Noel drew her bident out sideways as she spoke, bringing down a rain of fresh blood upon the forest. Noel took a break after casually stabbing the rolling head.

"Whew."

"Good work, Captain Noel. Please announce the victory! Everyone is waiting."

"Huzzah!"

All the men of the White Ant Bloc were cheering.

"Okay, I got it," Noel published the head on a spear, and called out in a loud voice, "I

have slain the enemy leader, Berotte!!”

“We won, it’s our victory!!”

“Another great deed for Captain Noel! It’s a glorious achievement! Oi, I’m going to raise a victory cry!!”

“Pops picked her well! All hail Captain Noel!”

“Hail Captain Noel! Glory to the invincible Noel Corps!”

Taken in by Noel’s prowess, the soldiers of the White Ant Bloc raised their swords as they gave their victory cries.

Blinking once or twice in surprise, Noel smiled from her heart after she regained her composure, “Thanks. As I thought, it’s somehow fun when everyone is together. It’s super dangerous, so I wonder why. How curious!”

After hoisting up her twin hammer banner, she cheered in response. The falling ash seemed like rain from the sun.

# Chapter 24

## Crossing Yonder Mountain

Entering the recently captured Rhine, Noel was taken to the local lord's mansion. Total control of the city had been taken by Barbas at the head of the flying column.

"Hey, didn't you burn down the mansion?"

"Ah, we thought of it, but they didn't seem like they'd come out. So we had to burn down a warehouse. They take their jobs seriously, or they're just stubborn."

"I see."

She scratched her head and looked at Barbas, along with the other nervous people who were lined up alongside the road. They were attendants, servants, maids and the like. Having never apparently intended on running, it seemed like they were rather devoted to their jobs, though they hadn't particularly resisted much. Baharans were famous for being brave to a man, and resisting invaders, but, as expected, not everyone was the same. It wouldn't be practical in reality to fixate on the local character. That was how Noel felt, having no idea what her homeland was like.

*Now that I think about it, where am I from? Was I born in that church after all?*

"Hmmm..."

Noel's humming and hawing had no particular meaning, but one of the servants timidly spoke up, "Um, would it be acceptable to ask a question?"

"What is it?"

"What has become of our Count Berotte?"

"Oh. I asked him to surrender, but he tried to kill me instead, so I killed him. We have his head, actually. Do you want to see it?"

Noel lifted up the bundle she held in her hand. The attendants stepped back, gasping

slightly under their breaths.

“I might want to give give him a funeral, but I can’t right now.”

“Is that so? That’s unfortunate.”

“Um, well, I don’t really want to kill you all, and I won’t attack the people of the city, so just do whatever you want.”

“E-even if you say that, we don’t know what to do now that Count Berotte is gone.”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. We’ll leave soon enough. I’ll ask Lord Grohl to properly send some people.”

“I, I see.”

Noel looked at the vaguely relieved servants.

“By the way, I would like to meet with the most well informed person around here. There are some things I would like to ask.”

“That isn’t a problem, but... the area around here is a tad unspecific. Where exactly are you thinking of?”

“The nearby mountains. Could you send me a hunter or woodsman or someone who frequents the Balkes mountain range? As quickly as possible, if you can.”

Noel patted the shoulder of the servant as she spoke, then she asked Barbas about where she could go and rest. He led her to Berotte’s office. Decorated with pots and paintings, it was a fairly pretty room. Noel’s eyes were particularly drawn to the Baharan silk rug.

“Woah, this is amazing. It’s super pretty, it’s like the design is glowing. How does that work?”

“It is exquisite. Buying one outside of Bahar would cost so much your eyes would hurt from looking at the price. We have similar ones in the mansions of Gemb.”

While Kai was speaking his thoughts, an old servant began explaining with a proud expression, “They are one of the city’s specialities. They are sewn from the cocoons of

a special bug, and are created over a long period of time.”

It seems that they may have taken more pride in their craftsmanship than their military.

“I see. As expected of Baharan silks. I am very impressed.”

“Thank you very much. Count Berotte had used the very best, and he particularly liked this one.”

It seemed to have been one of his treasures. Noel started to want it, though it would usually offend people to take another person’s treasure. She wondered if it was different in some way regarding the dead. It was probably still bad, but she had received glasses that belonged to Cynthia’s late brother. Noel decided to try asking.

“Hey, if —and only if— I said I wanted to sell this, would you get mad?”

After she asked, the old man slowly shook his head, “No, the Count is already gone, and his wife died an early death before bearing any children. Which is why it might be best for the rug to be used by you, even an enemy. In exchange for that, I have a request: please do not bring violence to the people of the Rhine.”

“Okay, it’s a promise. Barbas, we’ll only be here a short while, but don’t pillage anything. Harsh punishment to those who violate the order. To be specific, I’ll smash their heads in.”

“Yes sir! If that’s what the Captain says, we’ll be gentle with the trembling lot. That aside, what’dya want to do with this rug?”

“I’ll have somebody take it to Madress. I want to take care of it in my room. I bet it’d feel great to have an afternoon nap on it... let’s try that out...”

Noel rolled onto the carpet, looking rather comfortable as she stretched out spread-eagle on it, gushing about it’s splendour. The thought it would be a waste to walk over it with shoes on, but she saw some truth in how the elderly attendant explained that its value was in its use. If a tool wasn’t used, it would detract from its value.

“Excuse me... wait, what exactly are you doing? No way... Are you acting like the tramp now? How filthy.”

Having entered the room, Riglette looked down on Noel as a fool. She looked at Barbas to emphasise the word tramp, and again began to play out their usual performance.

“Who’s a tramp? It’s about time I teach that body of yours that there’s a limit to my patience.”

“How rude of me. I accidentally spoke the truth. Also, is not the rapidity at which you resort to violence mere proof of your going wild?”

“You fucking bitch!”

“Okay, okay, that’s enough.”

Noel, as she didn’t have much of a choice, stood to break up the fight. If they tried to kill each other, the lovely carpet would become dirty in a pitifully short period of time.

“Let’s collect our thoughts. Now, come here too, Riglette, let’s have a meeting.”

At Noel’s insistence, Barbas, Riglette, and Kai sat down around an oblong table after the old attendant had politely taken his leave.

“That old man’s a nice guy isn’t he.”

“He’s probably just afraid that if he bothers you, you’ll kill everyone.”

“Well, that’s true.”

Noel didn’t particularly object to Riglette’s statement.

“More importantly, you said you wanted to hold a meeting, but I don’t even understand why we took the Rhine. To gain renown?”

“I’m sure that Sir Noel has something in mind. Either way, I am deeply impressed that the Rhine was taken in less than a day after the initial attack.”

Kai’s soldiers had been assigned to Barbas’ flying column, and had assisted with the capture, and partial razing of the city. Most importantly, they served as light infantry for the particularly rough White Ant Bloc. That was why Noel had sent them along.

“You two did well, after all. The timing was perfect. Thanks.”

“I cannot accept your praise. We just happened to break through at the right moment.”

“Hehe, thank you very much. You did a good job o’ rilin’ them up, by runnin’ away, Captain.”

“Honestly, I just pretended to be Riglette. When I did, the enemy got super angry and really chased us. It had a brilliant effect!”

Having completely heard that, Riglette piped up with a cramped expression, “You just said something I can’t overlook. Who were you pretending to be?”

It seemed like she was going to ask again in a much louder voice when Barbas interrupted her, “I’m sure it’s all your imagination. More importantly, how was it?”

“Oh, it was great. Much better than having to burn down the entire city.”

Noel was tapping the desk with her finger. There was no deeper meaning other than trying to look cool. Being neurotic, Riglette was bothered by it already, and had even tutted twice knowing that she couldn’t do anything about it. With one great, final tut, her irritation boiled over into speech. It seemed she had gotten angry.

“In the first place, when did you get those things? I didn’t know about them at all. Acting like that gets in the way of my ability to do my job as aide.”

She was wondering about the combustion stones that had been used to burn Berotte’s soldiers in the grove. It was the red mineral that had been mined in stead of gold in the Balkes mountain range which was powdered, mixed with water, and when fully processed, became a clay-like substance. When soaked in oil it would produce intense flames before finally exploding. It was the secret weapon that the White Ant Bloc had made many sacrifices to develop as the only way to process them without causing an explosion was to do so underwater.

“Even if you knew, it wouldn’t help, you bastard. After all, I was the one who proposed their use. It had to be an absolute secret to surprise those idiots. Hehe...”

“You’re the idiot. Hmph, it is something that a lowborn would think of, isn’t it.”

“And, did it surprise you?”

“It was more unpleasant than surprising. If you don’t tell me everything concerning

the corps, I won't be able to help if something comes up. For example, if you were to suddenly die in battle, it would cause problems, as I would have to take over command."

Riglette was trying to provoke her, but Noel didn't mind much. It was true even if she didn't say anything.

"That's true. Sorry, Riglette."

"Ha, thinking about what happens if the captain dies, you really are a bitch. Hey, Captain, nobody'd complain if you killed her right now. Why don't we do her in right here, burn the body and throw it away?"

"Try it if you can, you white haired monkey!"

Barbas's hand was already on his sword. Flinching slightly, Riglette quickly regained her composure and glared at him while preparing to draw her own blade. If they actually fought, Barbas would probably win rather easily, but apologising was not in Riglette's nature.

"Hey, we're companions so there shouldn't be any reason to try and kill each other, right? Barbas is the head of the White Ant Bloc, and Riglette is my precious aide. I need you both. So, please get along."

At Noel's words, the two of them venomously took their hands from their hilts and looked aside. Kai looked on in amusement as he had no reason to take a side.

"So, Captain Noel, what do you intend to do from here? I believe I said so earlier, but I don't think there is any real strategic use to this remote location."

"Ahaha, what are you saying, Riglette? The real thing starts now. We'll send up a lovely burnt offering!"

"What? I have no idea what you are talking about. You're a commander, but I don't think you have the free time to joke around."

Noel changed her tone of voice and ordered Riglette, who had her eyes still cast aside, that if she didn't carefully follow through with her instructions, it would cause problems. Cynthia had taught her to be decisive when she had to be.

“Riglette, I’m sending you to the viceroy with Berotte’s head. When you are there, tell him this: Noel Corps has opened a secret path through the Balkes mountain range, and will raid the Baharan capital of Vesta. If we are successful in our arson attacks, provided we receive reinforcements, it should be possible to take the city. If possible, please send Cynthia’s unit to reinforce, as it would be troublesome for two commanders with no understanding of each other to work together.”

“How foolish. I doubt that something so ridiculous will be approved. Didn’t you get laughed at the last time you said something like this?”

“I have seven hundred men, and Kai has one hundred, totalling eight hundred. If combined with Cynthia’s thousand, we should be able to deal a devastating blow to Vesta. We’d use all of the combustion stones that Barbas brought. We’ll burn down all the farms surrounding the castle.”

“Another daring plan... but, if you do it like that, it’ll rile people up. Are you ready for that, Captain? You’ll probably get stuck with a worse nickname than fiend.”

Noel responded calmly, “The Baharans laid waste to Coimbran cities and villages, so they can’t complain when we take revenge. At the end of the day, the winner is right, after all. That’s how everyone thinks, and they’ll let it slide. Such is the way of the world, and so it can’t be helped. And so I will do it.”

Barbas was stunned for a moment, but after he was told about what happened to Rockbell, he didn’t harbour any more objections. Attacking the weak would make him want to vomit, but that was only limited to his fellow Coimbrans.

“Karma has long been taught in Gemb. It means that good things come of good deeds, but evil ends come of evil deeds; however, that rarely proves to be the case. The world is truly a complicated and mysterious place.”

Kai closed his eyes and repeatedly muttered to himself with his eyes closed. Noel could hardly understand what he had said. It was truly complicated and mysterious.

“Well, I’m a fiend prone to heinous acts, after all, so whatever sins I commit from here on out won’t matter much. Oh, should I paint the face of a demon on a flag to use this time? I’m sure everyone would be surprised!”

Riglette struck the table in opposition, “Please stop! As long as I’m here, do not raise such a flag! I don’t want to be seen as a fool!”

It seemed that she had taken the joke seriously.

“Hahaha! That’s a rather Gembu thing to do. Sir Noel, if you are ostracised in Coimbra, feel free to emigrate to Gembu. I would welcome you with open arms. I’m sure our viceroy, Siden wouldn’t mind either.”

Kai had invited her with a serious expression, and, slightly troubling over her reply, Noel responded with, “I’ll consider it,” but she did so while looking at the map spread out upon the table.

It was about time for their local guide to arrive. A hunter or a woodsman would know the Balkes mountain range like the back of his hand. They had to get useful military intelligence out of him.

“It would be good if he obediently answers my questions. If he doesn’t, will you draw out the answers, Riglette?”

“I’m very sorry, but there is no way that I will approve of a surprise attack on Vesta. Please tell me why you are so fixated on it.”

Riglette’s question had been posed with a tut, and a disapproving face.

“Sure, okay. I’m only telling you the truth because the Viceroy and the Major Generals aren’t here, though. If you ask me, I have no idea why everyone is fussing over taking so much Baharan territory.”

“Wouldn’t that be to seize Baharan assets after Amil has been made to take responsibility? Though unlikely, if we defeat Amil, Grohl will become the most powerful candidate for emperor. That’s just nonsense, though.”

Both Kai and Riglette agreed with Barbas’ words.

“That’s if we win, eh? There’s no point if we don’t win. In the first place, the goal of this operation is to prevent the inauguration of Amil as crown prince.”

“Well, that’s true, I suppose. I don’t think it is unusual to stop the enemy’s progress in an attempt to win, though, is it?”

“It is important, but I don’t think it is worth the time. I’m most worried about whether or not the local lords are really in the imperial capital. I want to strike Vesta to confirm

my suspicions. I also can't pretend to ignore the provincial capital if I want to protect my reputation."

"You keep saying those kinds of things... There shouldn't be any problems with the reports from my father and Lord Gaddis' spies..."

"I'm still curious about it; Major Generals Wilm and Gaddis, and Leue going as an envoy to Ribeldam. They all propose that the armies advance slowly and carefully despite the fact that the last thing the Baharan administration should want is for Coimbra to accept some sacrifices and advance rapidly. It'd be no laughing matter if the fortress at Vesta falls before they get back."

Kai nodded slightly, "Hmm, you have a point. If I was in charge of Bahar, I wouldn't be able to stand it if the capital I put so much effort into fell."

"I know, right? If it was me, I'd provoke Coimbra into making the first move, and prepare for a righteous counter attack. After that, I'd use hidden troops to cut off their escape, and trap the entire army. The hidden troops would be the lords pretending to go to the imperial capital. Oh, and should the Baharan navy cooperate with Ribeldam's? If they can buy enough time for the lords to return, victory is practically guaranteed. The most important thing would be to give the Coimbran commanders the sense that they could win right up until the very end."

Having managed to put her glasses on at some point, Noel adjusted them proudly. Her throat had gotten dry from so much talk, and so she drank a glass of water. It was warm from the heat, and not very refreshing.

"Captain, it might not be a good idea to talk about this in a loud voice. More importantly, it's dangerous to spout off about your speculations. We don't know who might be listening in after all. There's always a rat."

Barbas looked like he was going to continue, but he shut his mouth, though his gaze drifted over to Riglette. He was sure she was with Wilm, and she didn't even try to hide her discomfort. That much was obvious, as Noel had blatantly brought up her qualms with Wilm and Gaddis' plan, but that wasn't the only reason for her disquiet. She had already guessed that her father was fostering relations with Amil. She had seen the many messengers coming from and going to Bahar, and so there was no mistaking where he lay; however, there was nobody who would have believed her if she brought it up. At best, she would be locked up under house arrest under the pretense of

insanity which was why she had no choice but to obediently follow along with their schemes. She had no choice if she wanted to survive. Noel was going against the flow of events, and so she had been sent to her. Riglette had no idea what would be best for her to do. Her discomfort was unbearable.

“T-then I have something I want to ask. Aren’t all your thoughts based on speculation?”

Noel responded definitively, “Yup!”

She had no proof. She wanted to send out scouts, but if Noel was correct, there would be no need to. It would be good if they could confirm the force of the nearby enemy local lords, but it couldn’t be done.

“In that case, I think it is incredibly foolish to make a hasty plan based on unreliable rumors. On top of that, is there even any evidence that we can win?”

Again, Noel proclaimed assertively, “Ahaha, you’re talking just like your dad, but there’s no way to prove that we can win. You can’t know until you try.”

No matter how much thinking was done, the plan would have to be implemented to know if it was a success or a failure. If everything went exactly according to plan, they could even change who would become the next emperor.

“How incredibly foolish. It’ll bring shame to and become the laughing stock of the Coimbran army. If you call yourself a knight, you should at least have some common sense!”

“Who needs common sense? It doesn’t matter how much they laugh if I win. In the first place, there can never be any ‘definitive proof of victory.’ If there is any, it’s probably only a trap. War is about getting behind the enemy and deceiving them, isn’t it? That’s what they taught me, after all.”

Riglette ignored her own faults, and spoke ill of Noel, “T-that’s sophistry. It’s because you only run your mouth that your superiors want you watched!”

She, in fact, was the one who habitually said too much and irritated Wilm. She distanced herself from superiors, equals, and subordinates alike. Even though she knew it, she couldn’t stop. She was deeply afraid that someday soon she would call a superior officer a fiend and be beaten to a pulp because of it. Not being able to stop herself even then must have been some kind of disease.

“In any case, I can’t ignore any more orders. If the viceroy absolutely refuses to start the attack, I’ll call it off as it doesn’t comply with military regulations, or the orders of my superiors.”

She would only call off the assault, and continue with her razing of the countryside. If she couldn’t do that much, everything would have been a waste.

“W-why are you saying such obvious things so arrogantly?”

“I’m entrusting the message for the viceroy to you. Barbas, let me know when the woodsman or hunter arrives. You can do whatever you want to, Kai. We’ll let the troops rest a while.”

“Understood!”

“Well then, I’ll just laze about.”

Once Noel had seen everyone off, she began rolling around on the silk rug. She wondered how fortuna’s wheel would spin. Noel couldn’t predict what would happen at all, which was why she could only focus on the task at hand and do it as well as possible. Noel thought uncomplicated thoughts. She wanted Cynthia to come if she could. They wouldn’t lose if they fought together. The capture of Vesta would surely go well.



At a certain campsite in Bahar, Amil’s forces were having a short rest on the way back from the imperial capital. They numbered around thirty thousand. They were on their way towards the twenty thousand men under Major General Varzeck with the intention of coordinating a pincer attack from both the north and the south. There were approximately ten thousand guards remaining in Bahar. Naturally, the defence was rather thin in each city. The plan aside, it was unbearable to give up the cities to the enemy. Amil fought hard to stifle the horrible sensation in his stomach, but was still troubled by it.

“Lord Amil. A message from fort Carness. Commander of One Thousand Hoslo fought to the end, and died heroically in battle.”

“I see. Hoslo completed his mission? At the dawn of my time as emperor, I must make

sure to return his body to his family.”

Amil’s most wise advisor Mills gave his report, reading from the papers in one hand, “There is one more piece of bad news. The Rhine, in the Balkes mountain range, has fallen. Count Berotte died sallying forth from the city which now appears to be under enemy control.”

With tousled hair, he had a face that was gentle and kind. At first glance, he was merely a man of gentle manners, but all of the plans he proposed were diabolical. He was a man who could not be judged by his appearance. If Falid’s Black Sun Cavalry were in charge of the army, Mills was in charge of the plan. Harnessing the two’s maximum potential had brought Amil to the verge of taking the imperial throne. They were men who would not fail to bring about Amil’s military rule.

“Did you say that the Rhine has fallen? Things have gotten slightly troublesome.”

Amil looked at the map spread out across the table. If the Coimbran army was aiming for the Baharan capital city of Vesta, they would have to take the central highway, but if they accepted the risks and crossed the mountains, the Rhine would be the closest base of operations.

“I’m sorry, but isn’t it possible that they’ve simply attacked somewhere that was lightly defended without any particular plans? It wouldn’t be a surprising move for those Coimbran fools.”

The one officer had been optimistic, but Mills wouldn’t have any of it. Naturally, Amil thought the same.

“We cannot afford to underestimate our enemy. The greatest weakness of the military might of Bahar is how quickly it lowers its guard. In war the situation is always changing, and commanders must take such changes into account when making moves. The commander who took the Rhine is probably hoping to cross the mountains without issue. It wouldn’t be surprising if the locals knew one or two ways through.”

After ruffling his hair, Mills, placed a piece on the map with the Coimbran scales, and slid it towards the Balkes mountain range.

“However, I doubt this is my brother’s doing. Since the decline of Coimbra, he has become obsessive over his reputation to the point of despising risks. I can’t imagine him quickly devising this kind of plan.”

Doing so would pen Amil in, but betting everything on baseless rumors would cause his reputation to completely dissolve. The development of Bahar in contrast to Coimbra's decline had planted the idea in the minds of the plebeians that Amil had surpassed Grohl. It was underhanded, but that much was only natural when aiming for the imperial throne, and Grohl was retaliating in any way that he could, so he was in no position to criticize them.

"In that case, he must have unfortunately gained a wise ally."

"I haven't heard of such a thing."

"Which means that this commander may have done this of his own accord."

"That's the problem. He's gallivanting about on his horse, splashing water on our brotherly competition. Isn't that right, Mills?"

Amil turned his eyes to Mills who, smiling, took another piece of paper from his breast pocket.

"I fully agree. My spies reported that the one who took the Rhine is a certain Noel Bosheit, a commander of one hundred leading fewer than one thousand men. They seem to be resting there in preparation for something."

"Only a thousand won't be an issue, but the problem lies in any potential reinforcements. It probably isn't possible for the current garrison in and around Vesta to defend the city.

"Exactly. It is like a knife held at our throats. I would like us to retake it immediately, Lord Amil."

Another officer submitted his opinion, but Amil shook his head.

"We are moving secretly. If we send troops to take it back, it will reveal the true position of our main force, I'm afraid. If that happens, everything will come to nothing. It would be the pinnacle of folly for us to do that if we ever want to end things in a single decisive battle... honestly, that Noel has gone and done something annoying."

"About that, it seems that Noel has recently come to serve Coimbra. Furthermore, she is a woman, and has come to be feared as the fiend for her military prowess. In fact, she is the one who killed Sir Hoslo. Good gracious, to think that the famously weak

Coimbran soldiery could produce a fiend... it really happened.”

Mills was brought to his knees in his obvious dramatization. He was already beginning to formulate a plan to bring her down for Amil could not afford to become negligent. If all went well, his plans would bring Amil to the throne. That kind of man had to be used to attain it, such was the fate of those on top.

A smile floated freely across Amil’s face as he turned to talk to the silent Falid beside him, “Hehe, a woman is the fiend. Falid, it seems somebody has beaten you at your own game.”

Falid furrowed his eyebrows, and carefully stated his opinion, “Haha, this Noel woman could certainly become a threat to us. She was the one who not only captured Sir Ristih earlier, but also killed Geb and Ned. Both of whom were good soldiers. While there is no reason to buy into the rumors, we can’t afford to ignore her.”

He was sure of his own abilities, but would not look down on the enemy. Living with too much pride was the first step on the road to defeat. It had been thoroughly beaten into his head at that place.

“That’s quite amazing. In that case, we must do something about it, mustn’t we?”

“Then why don’t we take the best of the Black Sun Cavalry and send them to raid the Rhine? It won’t be too difficult to simply drive Noel out of the region. If our numbers are few, I don’t think that we’ll raise much suspicion.”

“Yes, that’s one option. Playing it by the book would have us quickly remove the hindrance as it might grow into something unpleasant if given too much time.”

Amil began to think as he stared off into the distance, and Mills began to laugh sickeningly.

“Fffupht haa haffph, what, what? There’s no need to worry. This is why we’ve spent time and money fostering cooperative Coimbrans. We’ve even sent them notes promising fame and rewards after the war. It’s sudden, but why don’t we set our Major General into action!”

“Do you intend to use Wilm? If he does too much, my brother will surely notice.”

“That is true, but we need to use whomever we can. We’ve sacrificed a great amount

to gain him for the future of Bahar. We can use this method in war as well as domestic affairs.”

Mills showed his teeth as he smiled, his mild expression transforming into one of a devilish schemer in an instant. It was the true nature of the two-faced man. His mastery of both hard and soft methods had been put to good use for Amil who intended to appoint him as prime minister at the dawn of his reign. He would make Falid the general of the army. Amil had no intentions of letting go of Bahar, wanting to leave behind a magistrate so that he could rule over it exactly as he wanted. Keeping the brave soldiers of Bahar at his side was something he wanted to do.

“That makes sense. It is certainly as you say. We had better use everyone that we can. It doesn’t matter if we have to discard them afterwards. We should sow disorder in my brother’s camp.”

“Huehe, thank you very much. Lord Amil, I, Mills, will take care of everything! Let’s remove this female demon of Coimbra with a single piece of paper. Fuahahaheehua haa!”

“Okay, I’ll entrust the matter of exterminating the demon to you. Instruct Wilm as you please. Everything is permissible. Falid, we’ll proceed with the troops as planned.”

“Your will is mine. Fuaaahaha, I, Mills, am extremely honoured to be the herald of Lord Amil’s reign!”

“I leave it to you!”

Falid and Mills nodded and bowed deeply. Seeing it, Amil too nodded in satisfaction.

# Chapter 25

## The Wise Man's Choice

It had already been three days since Noel had sent her messenger to Grohl, and Noel Corps was resting in the Rhine as usual. Pillaging had been strictly prohibited, so conflicts with the locals had not arisen. They didn't intend on staying long, and the people firmly believed that the Baharan army would come and liberate them. A mutual non-interference policy had developed between them. Unfortunately, Noel was unable to remain calm even in her free time. Nothing could stop her from wanting to ask all sorts of things, and so she had taken to calling out in a loud voice only to be met with irritated glances. In the first place, the only people she had asked so far had been children or the owners of mansions. Riglette tutted beside her as she did clerical work, hoping the singing wouldn't be so loud. It was a scene that had played out countless times before.

"Hum hum hummmm..."

Kai spoke up, "It seems that you're suddenly in a good mood. Do tell me if something good has happened."

Noel stopped her humming, clapping her hands together as she responded, "It's a mountaineering song that I learned from the children here. It's unusually happy, and we were all singing it together just a moment ago."

"Hmph, I can't tell which one is the child," Riglette tutted again as she spoke from behind Noel.

Nobody thought it was good for the children to be friendly with a commander of their hated enemy, one who had killed their count, no less, but it was impossible to keep them from their bubbling curiosity. They had secretly met up with Noel and quickly made friends with her. Her appearance was rather gallant and so the children saw her as a hero of sorts. When that was combined with her openhearted nature, she had become an overnight sensation.

"We'll probably ascend the mountain when the reinforcements from the main force arrive. I thought that we should all sing together when we do, so I've been practicing

so I don't forget it."

"Captain Noel, we aren't going just to play around. Please drive that point into that insufficient brain of yours. In the first place, we don't even have permission to cross the mountains yet. If you jump to conclusions, you'll play the fool again."

"You're cryin' and whinin' like usual, you fuckin' baby. That little mouth o' yers only chirps uselessly. It's annoyin' me so I think I'll stuff a rock in it."

"White haired monkeys have no right to complain. No mere brigand should be allowed to speak to me like that."

"It's because you entered my line of sight, you fuck. You're an eyesore so why don't you just cower forever in a corner somewhere."

The insults had begun flying between Barbas and Riglette as usual. Noel wouldn't particularly stop them. It was a pain, and even if she told them to get along, they wouldn't listen, though she thought it would all sort itself out if she properly ordered them to. As long as her fellow companions weren't trying to kill each other she wouldn't be bothered much.

"I bet the scenery at the top will be the best. I didn't have the time to properly admire it when I went up last time."

Kai responded to Noel's soliloquy, "You've crossed the Balkes before, Sir Noel?"

"I don't remember if it was here, but I have memories of crossing some mountains. I was desperate to escape back then."

"Hmm, might I enquire as to whom you were chased by?"

Noel responded with a laugh, "Who was it? I don't remember it very well, but they were shitty people who wanted to take my treasures from me."

Kai questioned her with probing eyes, "I see. Then they were most likely thieves right? By the way, I've been curious about this for a while now, but where did you learn the military arts? This is just something I heard, but you were a hunter in some village before serving in the Coimbran military, right? And on top of that, you're a capable commander. I cannot help but wonder at it."

Barbas and Riglette both paused their argument and directed their eyes to the two.

With no reason to hide it from them, Noel answered honestly, “When I was little, I spent some time at a shitty church. We were forced to memorize all of the military strategies left behind by the sun emperor Bergis, and were almost beaten to death to learn how to fight. We pledged to never betray the emperor and were forced to chant it over and over and over and over again. All of my comrades there died aside from me.”

“Are you making things up again? Churches are where people pray to the Sun God. It is just a place where priests and nuns develop self discipline for that purpose. There’s no way something that heretical would happen in a place like that.”

“Ahaha, you don’t have to believe me. No matter what anybody says at this point it won’t change a thing. What’s important now is,” Noel made eye contact with each and every one of them as she spoke, “that I can gain enough happiness for everyone. As the only survivor I have to live and become happy enough for everyone. I’ll live, and live, and live to the end. That’s why I joined the Coimbran military and why I fight with all that I have.”

Kai, Barbas, and Riglette all found themselves lost for words at Noel’s having suddenly gotten serious. Having said all that she wanted to, Noel opened the door to the terrace, walked out, and raised both arms and eyes to the sky. The weather was magnificently clear, but it wasn’t very good.

“Ah, this is no good.”

Kai responded, having regained himself, “What’s no good? Isn’t your beloved sun ascending brilliantly?”

“I smell rain. Yup, it’ll surely rain.”

“It doesn’t seem that way to me. Well, the weather in the mountains can change rapidly.”

“I can tell, you know. Aaah, if only the rain could just die.”

Noel tutted, and after returning to the room she flopped onto the rug with a thirst for blood. Not even the silky sensation was enough for her now. She closed her eyes, waiting for the calamity to pass, hoping to forget.



At the Coimbran army's main camp, Grohl had been proceeding carefully east according to plan after having taken Carness, cautiously capturing the territory surrounding the highway. Without using much military force, he had the local lords scrambling over each other to surrender after sending his messengers to them. It had only been two weeks since the start of the invasion, but he had already taken one third of their lands under the Coimbran scales. In a good mood, Grohl had instituted a lenient policy on the surrendered territories to relieve them. The one Grohl really wanted to hurt was Amil, and as long as he could do that and gain the throne, anything else was acceptable.

"We have received secret letters regarding the cooperation of the Lords of Laldo and Barnz!"

"All right, tell them that instead of relieving the area, they should join our army."

"Yes sir!"

"Wilm, have you gotten any new reports on what that Amil bastard is up to?"

"Yes, I have sent requests for more reports back to the capital. As he is rapidly deploying a large number of troops, there is great confusion. Furthermore, it seems as though they are having troubles with food supplies."

"How unsightly that he is having troubles with daily food supplies even though he wants to become emperor. Hahaha, it's laughable isn't it?"

"It is just as you say, Viceroy. Your capability is on a completely different level than the Baharan administration. We are all honoured to serve such a wonderful lord."

Grohl laughed loudly at Gaddis' flattery.

"Even if you praise me that much, it changes nothing. More importantly, Wilm, what do you think of their ability to return to Bahar?"

"Let's see... leading confused soldiers will probably waste a lot of time. I'd estimate it'll be about three months after all."

"Pfft, hahaha! We won't need more than two months to take Vesta, so a third gives us

a time extension! We might as well just take the whole province, eh?”

“The plan is going extremely well. Bahar is running out of lords. If they try for the decisive battle that they want, victory won’t even be a problem.”

“Haha, the Sun God has finally decided to become my ally. At this rate, the imperial throne is not far away.”

Just as Grohl was giving a toast, first to Wilm, then to his retainers, the messenger from Noel arrived.

“Hmm. It seems that Noel has magnificently taken the Rhine. It’s written here that she killed the local lord Berotte. She did well to take it with the troops she had. As expected of her military prowess.”

“Viceroy, this here is Berotte’s head. Will you confirm it?”

“No, it’s fine. It’d spoil the taste of our wine, but it’s rare for the lords to resist, isn’t it. When our messengers return, they’ve all obediently thrown down their swords and agreed to take up the Coimbran banner.”

Gaddis praised him yet again, “Is that not because of your great influence, Viceroy? Though some unnecessary blood was spilled, it’s good that the Rhine has fallen too. Congratulations.”

With a faint smile, Grohl continued reading the letter, “Also, it seems that Noel wishes to cross the Balkes and harass Vesta with the city of the Rhine as a base. She would like reinforcements if we can afford to send them. If possible, she wants us just to send Cynthia’s unit.”

With that, Grohl began to consider the situation. In all honesty, he had thought that what Noel had done this time was pointless. She not only wanted to take a remote location, but go and take Vesta all on her own too, but merely taking the Rhine with so few men was praiseworthy in and of itself. Furthermore, attacking Vesta across the mountains wasn’t a bad idea. If they could cause the local lords to waver even more, it would be a great boon to the campaign.

“All right, replenish Cynthia’s supplies and send her to Noel’s location. This will be perfect to disrupt the enemy.”

Her name called, after Cynthia had given her flustered response, she saluted with a stiff expression. Grohl forced a smile to try and comfort her before giving his orders, but there was somebody who opposed. It was his most trusted advisor, Major General Wilm.

“Viceroy, I’m sorry, but I have to ask you to please wait. If we are to send somebody without preparations, it must certainly not be Senior Commander of One Hundred Cynthia.”

“What? Why is that?” Grohl pressed Wilm with a dubious expression.

It was not a situation in which she would be likely to die.

“I’m sure this will trouble you, but I have been investigating the inner circle. Please take a look.”

Drawing closer, Wilm took a letter from his breast pocket. Its wax seal bore the Baharan crest. A single page letter was inside. The handwriting was something that Grohl knew well, it was the writing of his little brother Amil. Beginning to read, his good mood evaporated in an instant.

“What is this? Wilm, what is this joke of a letter!?”

The letter was from Amil to Noel. Its contents were as follows:

As previously ordered, take the Viceroy of Coimbra Grohl’s head. If that is impossible, whittle away at the Coimbran Army’s combat potential. Do so by any means necessary. A second betrayal is unacceptable. I have affixed money to cover the cost of the operation and any additional expenses.

In a rage, Grohl tore up the letter in his hand, and threw his wineglass to the ground.

“T-that shameless girl! To do that to me with so many eyes on her!!”

Confirming the contents of the torn letter, Cynthia rapidly spoke up, “P-please wait, Viceroy! That Noel could never double cross anyone like that!”

“I’m sorry, but I think so too. I don’t think that Commander of One Hundred Noel is a traitor.”

Cynthia and Dirk's defence only poured oil onto the fire of Grohl's rage.

"Then what is this letter!? Wilm, just where did you get this!?!?"

"Commander of One Hundred Riglette captured a suspicious man in the friendly camp, and seized it. I'm sure you already know this, but my daughter Riglette is Noel's aide. For this reason I believe this letter to be authentic. The letter also came with a large amount of money and information. Likely funds for the operation."

Wilm nodded as he stroked his beard. The news from his daughter, Noel's aide, was already beyond doubt. The officers, unable to trust anyone of common birth, or from the north, all began to speak ill of her one after the other. Cynthia struck the table with both hands, silencing everyone. Her face was red with rage, and veins were bulging at her temples.

Eyes open wide, Cynthia defended Noel's innocence, "Please wait! I believe that the letter that Riglette obtained is an enemy trap, and falling into it, we have labeled Noel a traitor without ever doubting its authenticity. Viceroy, this is a groundless rumour created by the enemy to eliminate Noel!"

Wilm objected at once.

"But this writing is undoubtedly from the Baharan administration, sealed with the trisabre crest. Furthermore, I have been looking into Noel's lineage in the interest of protecting the viceroy for some time. She said that she was from Zoim, but that isn't true. I asked the village head and he claimed that Noel came from the east. What else is to the east of Coimbra but Bahar!?" and with a pause, he swept his arm grandly eastward, and continued with great emphasis, "In the first place, Noel had the White Ant Bloc, which fought against us, easily surrender and become her retainers. Why would those lowborn follow Noel? There is but one answer. If Noel is Baharan, everything becomes clear. That is because they both held the goal of bringing ruin to Coimbra. In summary, they are hiding daggers and waiting for an opening!"

The officers accepted what Wilm had stated one after the other. The opposition consisted of Cynthia, Dirk, and all of the other officers from the north. Grohl too accepted Wilm's words. He had always been suspicious of the White Ant Bloc becoming Noel's subordinates. There was no reason that he could find for the people who had opposed him for so long to suddenly bend the knee. Furthermore, he had never thought about her birth. The whole thing was a frightful tale as an unknown

individual had suddenly come before him.

“That, that kind of foolish thing couldn’t happen! Remember, did not Noel save the young master, and Lady Sarah? Noel was also the one who helped the viceroy in his time of need at Kanan. If that suspicious letter is correct, I can see no reason for any of her achievements!”

“Hmph. There might be some truth in that.”

His initial rage wearing off, Grohl thought through Cynthia’s testimony as well, searching for the truth. He wavered. Either way, he couldn’t leave things as they were. He couldn’t let it affect morale, or cripple the army.

“We cannot overlook this suspicious letter. Are you mocking my daughter!?”

“Isn’t Noel the one being mocked!?”

Cynthia glared directly at Wilm, meeting his intimidating stance with unconcealed wrath. The bandwagoning officers shrunk back at the pressure.

Wilm glanced away with a loathsome expression. He did not want to implicate Cynthia was involved in a conspiracy. She was a reminder of his friend Cydonia, and he liked her honest nature to the point that he had thoughts of marrying her to Leue. The forceful opposition was outside of his expectations, and Wilm was desperately trying to think of a way to refute her with words.

“Listen, Cynthia. Noels actions have all been to gain our trust. This is something that someone trained to be an assassin from birth could easily accomplish. You are fond of people, and have been deceived by her.”

“I am not so naive! First, Noel captured Ristih, and killed Hoslo and Berotte, so how can you call that a performance!? Do those actions make sense for someone cooperating with the enemy!?”

“If Noel is an assassin, nothing is out of the question. Capturing Ristih may have been to gain our trust, or she may have started out serving Coimbra and switched sides. That must surely be what ‘a second betrayal’ is in reference to. And wouldn’t it be reasonable to kill Berotte to keep herself safe?”

“T-that...”

“You’re defending Noel quite a lot, could it be that you are working with Bahar? No, you are all that’s left of my friend Cydonia. I don’t think that would be the case in a million years, but...”

“I am not cooperating with Bahar!”

“Then why are you saying such dubious things!?”

Cynthia responded to Wilm’s provocation without thinking. In the first place, Cynthia was a slow speaker and unskilled in these kinds of settings. It was much more her style to wave her sword about what was right than to fight with words, but she wouldn’t lose a shouting match if it was to protect Noel.

“Viceroy, for the last six months, I have been training Noel at my own expense, and I have not seen a single thing that would indicate betrayal. As far as I have seen, she has been genuinely happy about working for the sake of the young master as she has promised. And Noel will absolutely never break her word! I guarantee it!”

“That isn’t evidence... Viceroy, we should form a subjugation force, and capture Noel at once. If she has been deceiving us in violently assaulting the Rhine, she can easily be captured, no matter how hard hearted.”

Cyntyia shook her head and opposed Wilm’s hardline policy, “That’s absolutely unacceptable! At least give Noel a chance to defend herself!”

“That’s weak! Traitors deserve death! Cynthia, if you have a scrap of a knight in you, figure it out!”

“If she really has betrayed us, I’ll kill her myself! Then I will take responsibility and kill myself!!”

Cynthia drew her sword, and thrust it deeply into the ground. It was a declaration of determination as per the Coimbran chivalric code. She had proclaimed her unconditional will to carry out her promise via an ancient tradition. If she failed to do so, she would forfeit her knightly status.

“I can’t say who is right, but I don’t think Cynthia is lying. In the first place, if Noel hadn’t stopped the Red Circle Army’s surprise attack, I would have died. I don’t think that was an act.”

“That’s right. Noel would not betray us!”

“However, the human heart is fickle. I know that more than anyone. She may have initially wished to serve me as Wilm suggested, but changed her mind.”

“It is not a problem. Please believe me.”

“Which is why I will take her from the front lines, and assign her to the defence of Carness. If she ignores that order, it will mean the death penalty. We’ll conduct a careful investigation after the war.”

Grohl delayed his decision as he had no idea if she was betraying him or not. Thinking calmly, he didn’t think that Noel would betray him, and as the one who had promoted her, he wanted to believe that it was all a misunderstanding, but thinking about where she had gained her terrific military prowess was itself terrifying. On top of his impending victory, there was a slim chance that he could tear out the roots of evil in his court. Most importantly, he couldn’t overlook the words of his most trusted advisor Wilm. Even if it was all groundless rumors, he couldn’t afford to be hasty, for if he ordered Noel killed despite her innocence, he would be the one playing the fool. Many a man had been expelled from his position over baseless rumors and slander in the past. Unable to decide, all Grohl could do was affirm vaguely that he would judge the situation at a later date.

“If that is your decision, Viceroy, than I, Wilm, must comply. Cynthia, do you accept it too?”

“Gh!”

Dissatisfied, Cynthia could not dispel her anger. Noel could never be a traitor. She wondered why they had to relieve her of her post even though she wasn’t present, but she couldn’t oppose Grohl’s point. Now that things seemed to have settled, continuing would only make things worse. It may even have been some small mercy that she had managed to avoid having Noel branded a traitor and executed. After grinding her teeth in vexation, she nodded deeply and saluted silently.

“I’m assigning the investigation of Noel to Dirk after the war has calmed down. Be thorough in your investigation.”

“Understood. As per regulations, I will conduct a fair investigation!”

“Now then, let us decide who will take her position in the Rhine. I think we should assign the thousand men we brought along for unexpected circumstances, along with some military police to keep them in line.”

“Yes, that should be good. Do not get too close to Noel until the investigation is completed. This is a crucial time, so I’d like to minimise concerns.”

“Yes sir!”

Sighing deeply, Grohl left as he didn’t have the confidence to judge the situation yet. The remaining officers all went their separate ways. Cynthia could do nothing but kneel on the spot and grip her sword in anger. She couldn’t understand why Wilm disliked Noel and wanted her removed. Wilm had been her late father Cydonia’s best friend and had loved him as much as he loved himself. He was a well respected and prominent knight, as well as a capable Major General. She could not comprehend why he saw Noel as nothing but a burden to be removed. She wondered if it was because of her mysterious background, or because of some other reason. Cynthia didn’t know what was right, but she did no one thing: Noel would protect her promises. She would not act to betray the young master or Cynthia. Therefore, it was unthinkable for her to be a traitor. Cynthia was deeply frustrated that she had not been able to explain that to everyone.

*No, I’m not done yet. I can speak with Lord Wilm, and explain it, or maybe...*

Cynthia hurried to Wilm’s tent to try and persuade him.

“Are you here to complain about the decision we came to?”

“Not at all; however, dismissing Noel will only benefit the enemy. Could you somehow withdraw your request to have her removed?”

“I cannot. I’m sorry, but I simply cannot trust her like you can. As a commander I have to look at the big picture, and try not to be swayed by my emotions in the moment. I’m sure you can understand that if you focus on what lies ahead.”

Wilm had explained it to her as if talking to an emotional daughter, and Cynthia realised that she couldn’t persuade him.

“Might I enquire as to why you want Noel removed from her position? I feel like you’ve been hostile towards her since she entered the service, Lord Wilm.”

“Does it look that way?”

“Yes.”

“It isn’t because I hate the northerners or because I’m jealous of her achievements. Just...”

“Just?”

“She’s a nuisance. She brought glory to the viceroy, but she has become a hindrance. That’s why I have had her temporarily reassigned... Dirk will give her a fair trial. Depending on his results, she should be able to make a comeback. I think that its a result that anybody should be able to accept, though.”

“Understood. Senior Commander of One Hundred Cynthia is returning to duty.”

“Right. The final battle is approaching. Don’t throw away your life, and work as hard as you can for Coimbra!”

“Yes sir!”

Cynthia left Wilm’s tent and looked to the sky. The dark clouds in the sky blotted out the sun, reflecting Cynthia’s inner thoughts.

“Noel... I was powerless. I’m truly sorry.”

# Chapter 26

## Noel's Companions

Reinforcements arrived in the Rhine. Noel had met them in high spirits at the city gates, but her countenance quickly clouded over as Cynthia wasn't with them. The thousand men she had requested had arrived along with one regiment of military police. In command of the reinforcements was a commander of one thousand under Wilm who was watching the scene with contempt from a short distance away.

*Aaah, Major General Wilm got me, eh? It looks like I won't get to brag about my rug.*

She had been lying in wait with the rug in hand so that she could show it off, but, unfortunately, she couldn't. She began to reflect on how she had been trapped by Wilm. The commander of the military police had a poor complexion wore a dark green uniform and a military cap. He clearly wasn't Cynthia. His aura was such that if Riglette had turned into a man, she might have looked like him.

"At present, you have been dismissed from your task of capturing Bahar. Again, your proposal to attack Vesta has been rejected. If you refuse to comply with these orders, you will be restrained. These are the written orders of the viceroy!"

Noel nodded without changing her expression when she heard the proclamation of the military police. The papers instructed her to return to Carness as a garrison, and that noncompliance would be viewed as an act of rebellion to be punished severely. The thousand men that had arrived would garrison the Rhine. Noel had, essentially, been sacked. Sighing at the fact that it couldn't be helped, Noel nodded yet again, expression still unchanged.

"Now then, that means you agree to be redeployed to Carness, does it not?"

"Yes, sir. I have also been ordered by Commander of One Thousand Dirk to comply. I will take my men at once and garrison Carness."

"Thank you for your cooperation. There are many stories about you, but we military police only believe what we uncover with our own eyes and ears. For this reason, compliance is greatly appreciated. I hope that things will continue to proceed as such."

“Yes sir, thank you, sir.”

The commander of the military police returned Noel’s salute.

“Be prepared to leave just after noon. The military police here will return with you to Carness.”

“Yes, sir. Understood.”

“Well then, you may commence preparations! We shall be on standby outside the gates!”

The commander of the military police shot to attention and briskly marched his men outside the city gates. It was amusing how synchronised their steps were. That aside, they didn’t seem particularly dangerous. The man’s face was intimidating, but his body was thin, and it did not appear that he had much training. In a direct fight, the White Ant Bloc probably wouldn’t have any trouble defeating them. Thinking that it would be rather amusing to see his face go red if she did try and fight them, Noel returned to the mansion.

Opening the large door, Noel was greeted by a boisterous reception. The men of the White Ant Bloc had all drawn their swords and encircled Riglette, the servants were huddling together, faces pale, and all this had happened within 10 minutes of Noel’s conversation with the military police.

“I ain’t puttin’ up with this any more. I can put up with her insultin’ us ‘cause no matter how you put it, we were really bandits. But I ain’t ever gonna let yer lyin’ about the captain to slide. I hate that kind o’ shameless shit!!”

“I, I haven’t done anything! That’s not a lie, I legitimately don’t know! I-it’s all my father, he’s done everything on his own!”

“Ha? You don’t know nothing? Don’t lie to me! I know you’ve been watchin’ the captain on yer father’s orders! And how you’ve gotten the captain reassigned with yer half-truths.”

“W-wait. P-please hear me out. I didn’t make up anything!!”

“I ain’t gon’ listen to trash like you! I bet you want to imprison her, and then get her executed, but that ain’t going to happen you fucking bitch!”

Barbas lifted Riglette's chin with the point of his sword as she cried out, half crazed, that it wasn't true, that there was a misunderstanding, and that she didn't know. There wasn't a shadow of her usual haughty attitude. Her face was pale, and her body was trembling. It seemed that her mask had fallen as she stared death in the face.

"I-it's true that I was ordered to observe her. I'll acknowledge only that. B-b-but I haven't secretly colluded with anybody! I just submitted my report as usual this time! There wasn't even anything suspicious!"

"You're really an idiot, you know... no, you might know, but keep on pretending. Listen up, Wilm, that son of a bitch, had an easy time making shit up with the letters you wrote him. Almost like you gave him a blank sheet. The problem isn't what you reported, the mere fact that you were reporting is a betrayal!"

"T-thats... that's just sophistry! In the first place, how could I go against my father's, a major general's orders!?"

"The one talkin' shit about the captain is your father. Did you know that bastard Wilm sees the captain as a fuckin' enemy? And you're his bitch. Captain, I'll slit this traitor's throat and we can run from Combra. The White Ant Bloc can kick those wimpy MPs around with ease."

"Of course we'll follow Pops and the captain. We'll follow the two of you anywhere. The reasons we joined the Coimbran army in the first place are falling away."

Barbas pitched his ideas to Noel, "That's how it is. What with the captain's strength, we can take on this province or whatever. We can do better than this. None o' these retards in the Coimbran army understand the captain's skill. I know, we can go with Sir Kai to Gemb or wherever."

"C-captain Noel. I really haven't reported anything false. Please believe me, I, I really..."

Riglette's black hair was clinging to the tears and snot on her face, and she desperately reached out her hands for Noel's help, but she couldn't move any more than that in the face of Barbas' longsword.

"Okay, were those your final words? Then I guess it's about time to say farewell. I'm really glad that I won't have to hear yer piercing shrieks ever again."

Barbas raised his longsword and swung it down without hesitation as Riglette

screamed, clutching her head, but there wasn't a splash of blood. The blade had not touched her.

“..”

“That's my Barbas. That was one hell of a strike.”

Noel had forcibly obstructed his blow with her bident. The vibrations in the shaft rocked her whole body.

“I don't get it. Why are you sticking up for her? I don't get it at all.”

“It's because she's my precious aide. Also, if she hasn't betrayed us, then she's still a companion. Hey, Riglette, you haven't betrayed us, right?”

“N-not at all! I'm really, really, not a traitor! I-it is true that I was observing you, but... but!”

“Then that's fine. I don't mind being observed. If I've been ordered by your father, moreso since he's a great major general, it can't be helped. And I haven't even done anything particularly bad, right?”

Noel smiled gently as she stroked Riglette's head. Riglette clung to Noel's leg with her tear-soaked face. Though she was usually composed, it seemed that staring imminent death in the face had spooked her. It reminded Noel of her former self.

“So, what should we do now, o kind Captain Noel? Surely we won't just carelessly head back to Carness.”

“Yup, we'll return to Carness as decreed. I figure we can take it easy there for a while.”

“That's ridiculous! Sorry, but I won't do it. We'd just be heading back to be driven into a corner by Wilm's accusations, and get executed. I can't let my subordinates get dragged into that!”

Barbas spat and stuck his longsword in the ground.

“It's just like the first time, I'll get you guys out of there if it seems dangerous. That's also a promise. You, of all people, know that I keep my promises, right Barbas?”

“..”

“If something happens, I’ll cause a disturbance and you guys can run for it. Isn’t that fine? So let’s all go back together.”

“It’s not that easy! No matter how strong you are, Captain...”

“Ahaha, it’ll work out fine, ‘cause I’ll really give it my all, okay.”

Noel thrust a demanding hand out in front of herself. After being troubled, sighing, and lashing out in anger, Barbas scratched his white hair and finally offered his hand.

“Honestly, you’re one hell of an idiot. You’re stupidly soft on people. I can’t believe you’re protecting this bitch!”

“You think? I mean, she’s a precious companion.”

“Ah, I get it, I understand! I’ve come this far, so I might as well see it through to the end! I’m leaving her neck to you, Captain! Do whatever the fuck you want with it!”

After Barbas returned his longsword to its scabbard as if nothing had happened, he sat down on the spot with folded arms. Riglette was still clinging to Noel’s waist. It seemed like it would be a pain to Noel, but since kicking her off felt a bit harsh, she put up with it for a few minutes.

“That was a pretty intense exchange, eh? If it had happened to me I’d have probably just killed Sir Riglette and the military police on the spot, and commenced negotiations as a new lord. Being recalled without having done anything wrong is a significant blow to the the pride of a military man. I’d try to have it repealed even if I had to fight back.”

“Ahaha, that’s nice and Kai-like, isn’t it? But I’d get everyone involved if I did that. Also...”

“Also?”

“This kind of unacceptable thing is the way of the world, so it can’t be helped.”

Noel gave a weak smile, and Kai looked slightly irritated. After clearing his throat, he gave her a sharp look.

“I’ve thought this for a while now, but sometimes your resignation is difficult to stomach. Well, difficult to stomach, but no more than merely irritating. Why do you just give up without resisting? If everything ‘can’t be helped’ why even live!?”

“Why even live?”

“That’s right, if you’re just coasting along...”

Kai seemed like he was about to continue, but he suddenly stopped as the woman in front of him was giving him a glare to freeze over hell. He felt like she might stab him with her bident at any second.

“Hey, who’s not resisting? I might not be good with the ways of the world, but I’ll resist to the very end. I’ll struggle and struggle and struggle on.”

“S-sir Noel?”

“I don’t really get in anyone’s way, and I don’t really complain. I don’t care if there’s no meaning. I’ll just do what I feel like. That’s why they call me a fiend, but I don’t care at all. What’s most important is that I survive. If I can’t,” Noel was speaking with a force she had never exhibited before, and yet she stopped her words.

“If you can’t?”

“I couldn’t repay the dead.”

Noel spoke with a chill in her voice and tore Riglette off her leg. Once she was still crying Riglette had stood up, Noel turned to Barbas and gave the order to move out, dumping Riglette on him while she was at it. Giving in to the pressure, Barbas meekly accepted and saluted.

“Kai, we’ll be heading back to Carness. You can do whatever you like now. It’s probably fine for you to head back to Lord Grohl if you’ve concluded your business, though it won’t be much of an issue if you remain here. You’re with the Gembi military after all.”

“No, I’m still interested in you, so it can’t be helped. As it can’t be helped, I shall comply, too. Of course, only if you are okay with it.”

“I don’t care either way. Just, if something happens, you can’t complain. If you get caught up in things and die somehow, don’t blame it on me.”

“I don’t intend to die, but that’s fine!”

Kai’s idiotic voice rang out in the mansion, and Noel found herself letting out a little laugh. Giving the terrified servants a sidelong glance, Noel entered the room and began rolling up the rug that she liked. It was the only thing that she had to take back with her as it would bring about a supreme bliss if she could take an afternoon nap on it whilst bathing in the sun. She also wanted to show it to Cynthia.

Just after noon, Noel had left after being seen out in a grand manner by the children of the city. The adults had all looked relieved.

“You’re crazy popular, eh, Captain? It really felt like you’re a hero,” Barbas called out to Noel as usual as she set up her horse.

After she finished waving, Noel turned and fastened the rug to it.

“It’ll be nice if we can meet again.”

“They were scared of me the whole time. Is there some kind of trick to it?”

“It’s cause we’re similar that we get along right away. Basically, I’m a child at heart.”

“So, even you say that about yourself?”

Noel looked to the sky as she spoke again, “Isn’t it fine to stay childlike? It doesn’t seem like being an adult helps much. Actually, it seems like it only adds extra troubles.”

The previous day’s rain had stopped, but she still could not see the sun. The skies were clouded over. It still stank, so she assumed it would begin raining again soon. Having just gotten the rug, if it rained on it, it would be quite the ordeal for her, so she had to be sure to return to Carness with haste.

“Captain... I...”

“Riglette, sound the bugle. You know, that mountaineering song. We finally have the chance, so why don’t we go with some energy?”

Forced along once more, Riglette nervously approached. It was as if she had lost her former self, and had become incredibly frail. The hostility towards her from the White Ant Bloc was the same as ever. Riglette was so detestable that if Noel happened to die

in battle at that point, Riglette would certainly have been killed soon thereafter, though she probably wasn't much happy about it.

"I, I understand."

Riglette pulled out her bugle and a weak sound ushered forth. Barbas looked annoyed at the sound of the dreary tune, but Noel didn't mind, and began to hum along with the memory of wanting to capture the Rhine. The soldiers were depressed at first, and perhaps unable to put up with it any longer, one by one began to sing along and the pace of the march gradually increased. Their spirits began to rise. With the two hammer banners of Noel corps flying high, she proceeded with an expression of confidence in a triumphal return.

"I hope we can come back here someday. Right, Barbas? Right Riglette?"

"That'd be nice, yeah."

"..."

"It isn't a promise, so I guess it's a hope? All we can do is cling to a hope. It's fine for everyone to slowly build up more hope."

"If all those hopes are betrayed, won't that leave too big a scar?"

"If it happens, it happens. If it does, it'd be best if we don't fight again. We're companions after all!"

Launching into a great laugh, Noel began singing in a loud voice, and continued on for three hours until the commander of the military police got annoyed. Noel corps arrived in Carness after a week. On the way, they had passed by the main body of the Coimbran force, but they had told her that she didn't need to have an audience with the viceroy. Though that was expected, she couldn't even have a conversation with Cynthia.

"It's no good after all? That's too bad!"

"It can't be helped. What will you do?"

"I'll be obedient for now. You'd get mad at me otherwise."

“What did that mean, just now, Captain Noel!?”

“I’m an idiot, so I don’t really know!”

“Is there anyone who would say that with a laugh!? In the first place...”

The main Coimbran force could hear the shouts of the commander of the military police. They received a warning, and the commander gave an earnest apology. Noel tried to console him by letting him know that it’s best to ignore them, but he fainted and started frothing at the mouth a bit. It seemed she had crossed all kinds of boundaries. There were all kinds of people, all very interesting. Talking to them would expand Noel’s world. Noel nodded in satisfaction as she looked over her shoulder at the convulsing man.

According to a messenger, Grohl’s Coimbran army was expanding its sphere of influence well. It also seemed as if they had finally agreed to head east along the highway. Ahead of them stretched the Altvear plains and the Trais river that crossed the highway. Spanning it was the city of Toldo. If they could take the city, they would have a direct shot at the capital of Vesta, but the journey was long, so the Coimbran army was likely still some time away from Toldo. If something was going to happen, it would be somewhere near there. Noel prayed in her heart for the fortunes of war to smile upon Cynthia. As for what Noel herself was doing, she was sitting around obediently in Carness for the military police had informed her that opposition would be punished harshly as an act of rebellion. It wasn’t like she had anywhere she wanted to go, and the sun refused to come out, so she didn’t even want to go out on any walks, but she had suddenly had the idea to do what she could, and with the permission of the military police, she sent the signal to Barbas. They had been preparing as much lumber for constructing a palacade as they could from the nearby trees. She had told the military police that they would send it to the front for defence, but that wasn’t her intention in the slightest. The idea was to prepare the forested region to lure the enemy into at some point. Riglette had prepared a black rope, and they took it with various other goods to conceal it all in the woodlands between the two provinces. They were the provisions and an escape route if the decision was made to execute her in accordance with her promise to Barbas. Riglette’s one strong point was her ability to argue, and so she was in charge of negotiating with the military police.

“Honestly, what’s with your aide!? She even managed to get us military police to help her paint a rope!”

The commander of the military police had begun complaining vaguely about Noel's aide, refusing to use the name Riglette. Having finally returned to her usual state, it seemed that she was working hard, apparently leveraging her position as Major General Wilm's daughter to great effect. She had no talent for military arts and was shit at playing the bugle. Riglette was a terrible leader and every time she opened her mouth only sarcasm, cynicism, or abuse came out of it, but she was very good at efficiently carrying out orders. It could even be said that it was the only thing that she could do, though she was also good at spotting weaknesses and angering people. At that she was a natural genius. While Noel was thinking, the commander of the military police raised his finger in the air.

"This thing and that thing, and the next thing are all because of what you ordered your men to do!! It's all your fault!"

Noel whispered her response as she covered her ears in reaction to his loud voice, "If you don't like it, you can just say so..."

Seeming not to hear what she had said, the commander gave her a sharp glare.

"Do you think I can say something like that!? If you don't know, it's because Commander of One Hundred Riglette is Major General Wilm's daughter! Basically, she can personally take up any, even minor, things with Lord Wilm. With that in mind, even if she doesn't explain anything, we still have to play along with her!"

"Aaah, I see. I'd just refuse 'cause it's a pain, though. Even though you're an MP, you're still weaker than the daughter of a major general, eh? How pitiful."

Noel managed to enrage the commander with her Riglette impersonation which was as overwhelmingly effective as she had anticipated.

"S-silence! The military police cannot be crossed! Yes, that is how the world works!"

For some reason he had started speaking rather arrogantly, and it was unbecoming of him. It was important for the army to grant authority to its military police, but it wasn't something that should be said, as that wasn't his job.

"But I think it's perfect for killing time! That's right, do you want me to help too?"

"You can't! You must not leave this room! Those are the viceroy's orders!"

“Eeeeh, no matter what?”

“No matter what!”

“What a square.”

“I am simply diligent in regards to my orders! I haven’t breached orders like you have even once!”

The man puffed up his chest with pride. As he did so, his cap began to slip, and Noel caught a glimpse of his balding head. Going red, he quickly fixed his headwear and cleared his throat. At first she had thought he was just a disagreeable person, but the more she spoke with him, the more surprisingly interesting he seemed. Every single one of his reactions was exaggerated and Noel never tired of it, though if she told him that, he’d get angry at her, so she had to hold it in.

“Anyway, just stay here! I’ll do your part! The military police must be swift in its duties!”

“Okay, I understand,” Noel answered absentmindedly before turning to face her bed as she shut the door.

Starting to walk towards her bed, she thought about how the rooms in the fortress were very plain. It was enough to qualify as an officer’s quarters, but it was small and dark and full of dust; extremely different from Noel’s room in Madress. Her quarters there were overflowing with enough of her treasures to bathe her in a sense of satisfaction unlike any other place.

“Aaaaah, I’m bored... but he said I can’t go outside. That’s it, I just thought of the old picture book.”

Thoughts of the book that she had given to Cal wafted through her mind; the treasure she had received from the girl numbered 150. It wasn’t with her, but it was one of her precious treasures. Her favourite story was the one where a rabbit went to exterminate ogres and befriended an ogre who had changed his ways. In the end, they all got along well, and lived happily ever after.

“That was fun, but it wouldn’t happen in the real world.”

Noel sighed. The real world wouldn’t let everyone live happily ever after. If someone

became happy, others would appear to gobble it all up in a way that reminded her of the scales emblazoned on the banners of Coimbra. There were two categories of people: winners and losers. Homogeneity was impossible. Noel thought that everyone wanted happiness, and that it was for that very reason that conflict continued to arise. No matter what anyone did, he wouldn't gain anything unless he won a fight. The losers would become jealous of the winners and would strike up a conflict with all their might to try and take their positions for themselves. Noel felt that the world was just such a never ending cycle.

"Hmmm, but I haven't met a single person who's so happy it makes me jealous..."

Jealousy was envy, and she had heard somewhere that covetousness was a sin, though it was probably at that church. She got the feeling that they had used it to conclude that it was therefore good to innocently devote one's self to the emperor. She had no intentions of doing so, but the initial words might have held some truth to them. Those kinds of wicked thoughts had once been common for Noel, but she felt that recently they had been in decline. She had been called a fiend, but it might just have been on account of her lacking human weakness. Noel began to contemplate that her body might not have been normal after all, but nobody had ever told her as much so she couldn't say for certain. Cynthia would probably just respond with a fist if she asked.

"Aaah, I want to find happiness. The best in the world. That way I can share it with everyone," Noel murmured to no one in particular.

She was sure that it was directed at all her companions that surrounded her. After tossing and turning about on the hard bed, feeling slightly depressed, Noel jumped to her feet and flung open the window. Raising her eyes to the skies, she confirmed that the sun was still hidden. She wondered how many days had passed since she had seen the sun, forlorn in her heavy melancholy.

"It'll rain again. It's the same shitty smell from back then."

The rot of a corpse wafted faintly by, ferrying in a vivid image of her companion's dead expressions; horrible, collapsed, faces that were crawling with maggots. Their blank eyes focused on some distant point, unable to know that Noel was the only survivor. They simply stared into some unknown place. Noel pitied them from the depths of her heart, and then, the rain fell as if to cover the filth, washing away the mud, beating incessantly on their bodies; on her body. It was enough that she wanted to say that she'd never go outside again. That was why she hated the rain.

“ ”  
...

Noel employed the tut she had learned from Riglette, and slammed the window shut. The rain that fell was no longer simple rain, but had become rain of the worst kind; just like that day.

# Chapter 27

## Crumbling Scales

Rain was heavy in the upper regions near the Trais river, and visibility was particularly bad. Amil looked down at the area where the Coimbran army was likely to be from atop his horse on a small hill. If he could confirm even the slightest traces of a light, he could know that the enemy was there. They knew that the river was swelling.

*So it decided to rain here. Already my victory is unshakable.*

He looked to Falid who was also on horseback, and received a nod. The time had come.

“Lord Amil...”

“Yeah... Gentlemen, with this battle, we will win our glory,” after his brief words he surveyed them all, and stated his honest opinion, “Wardka blood runs through my veins; blood that destroyed your country; blood that you hate, but my soul is with Bahar, and I believe that I can live up to my legacy.”

“...”

“Bahar was defeated at the hands of the Sun Emperor Bergis, but in that defeat, Bahar grew to become the most prosperous on the continent. And then, I believe that when your viceroy becomes emperor it will clear away that dishonour!”

“That’s right, Lord Amil is one of us!”

“Lord Amil is the one who brought us into prosperity!”

Halting the soldiers’ responses, Amil put up his fist before him.

“I promise to reward your loyalty when the dawn of my reign arrives. I will bring you even more prosperity, my brethren. I will never lie to you, as I am sure you all know well. I always keep my word, after all. Is that not so!?”

“It is!”

“Then lend me your power. Entrust your lives to me. Do we not all wish to put down the rebel Coimbrans and walk the glorious road together!?!? Shall we not win!?!?”

Amil stood in the saddle and flourished his sword, and all of the men responded in kind. A large number of the Baharan tri-sabre banners were flying in rows in the driving rain.

“Victory for Lord Amil!”

“Glory to Bahar!”

“Lord Amil is fit for the throne!”

Falid’s Black Sun Cavalry were arrayed before him, prepared for the attack. Their flags bore the flying dragon. Men and horses alike were fully equipt in black. The survivors of Operation Dawn formed Bahar’s strongest unit.

“Lord Amil, your orders!”

“All units, commence the assault! Kill all the traitorous Coimbrans!! Charge!!”

“We now let the world know of the strength of our Black Sun Cavalry! Bring glory to Lord Amil!”

At Amil’s order, Falid took the vanguard and commenced the attack. The Black Sun Cavalry had trained intensely for this very hour. Everything was to bring glory to Amil. Rebecca licked her lips as she rode beside him, tightly gripping her longsword, but she was not alone, all of the Black Sun Cavalry were lusting for blood.

The Baharan army thundered down the slope to the sound of beating hooves. The main body of the force consisted of cavalry. They had lost some men on the way who collapsed out of the saddle, but not a single man had wanted to rest, and so it had to be if they were to overrun the enemy position. Each man had strong convictions.

Falid led the charge, seeking out his objectives in the rain. Amidst flying mud and the neighing of the horses, they charged the Coimbran army. Most of the Coimbran soldiers were huddling in crude tents to avoid the rain. Having let their guards down, almost none of them were even armed. Only one Coimbran sentry noticed something was amiss, and turned to face them, raising his light.

“H-hey, you guys...”

A spear ran through his face, and he roared a scream. First blood went to Falid Alain. At the same time the trumpets, gongs, and war drums all sounded to intimidate the enemy.

Battle was joined along the Trais river, no, it was too one sided to be called a battle. Falid’s Black Sun Cavalry had already chewed their way through to the Coimbran centre and had split the vanguard from the rear guard. At the same time, Mills’ war wagons spread out to the Kanan highway, cutting off the Coimbran retreat. The Baharan wagons were twin horse carriages with iron armour. The soldiers could shoot their arrows, hidden within, and lining them up formed a fortification on the battlefield. Their weaknesses were in their high cost to produce, and their wide turning radius.

20 000 men led by Major General Barzek arrayed themselves downstream, south of the battle. Coimbran forces collapsed into chaos with their retreat cut off, as well as a pincer from both north and south. The officers simply ran about with no clear idea of what was happening, leaving the soldiers to decide how to fight or if to run. Naturally, they chose the latter.



“W-wait! Get back in line right now, and ready your spears! The enemy shouldn’t have many men, so calm down!”

“You’re saying that’s only a few! All I can see are Baharan flags!”

“It doesn’t matter, so get back in line! You’re violating orders!”

“Shut up! You’re in the way!”

“Hey, don’t push me! You’ll go into the river!”

“Just move already! I’ll kill you if you get in my way!”

They were surrounded by enemy soldiers and faced with the rising rapids of the Trais river. None of them knew which was the best direction to flee in, but one after the other decided to jump into the river to avoid being surrounded. Grohl finally noticed

that something was happening. He could hear the sounds of weapons and screams from all around, but had no idea of what was occurring. Though, he could tell, if nothing else, that it was a crisis as no matter how bad visibility was, he could still confirm the Baharan flags.

“What? What is this!? If it’s a surprise attack, hurry and repel them! If you pointlessly harm our reputation, the Baharan lords will waver!”

“I, I don’t know for sure, but the men on the front are fleeing! I fear it has already become a battle.”

“Stop messing around! Are you going to run from battle!? Send a messenger to get a detailed report on the situation!!”

“Y-yes sir!”

“And also, order all those fleeing cowards to return to their units! If they don’t comply, try them accordingly! We have fifty thousand men, so intercepting them should be easy!”

“Yes sir!”

His retainers rushed out, and in their place entered Cynthia and Dirk. They had been stationed near the headquarters and had been caught up in the confusion.

“Viceroy, the enemy spearheaded the attack with cavalry, and is laying waste to our camp!”

“Th-the enemy is both up and downstream, and is launching a pincer attack from north and south. If we do not deal with it quickly, this will become a rout!”

“Just how many of them are there!? How could so few cavalry get so far!?!?”

Cynthia raised her voice as she wiped the rain from her face, “It isn’t a small number no matter how we look at it. What I saw of the northern portion was no fewer than ten thousand men!”

“Ten thousand? Somebody should have spotted them coming, if there are that many of them! Just what are Wilm and Gaddis doing upstream!?!?”

“I-I don’t know, but...”

Dirk’s expression was clouded. To say it clearly, nobody knew what was going on. Even if they sent messengers, nobody would know where anybody was. The driving rain and roaring wind robbed them of both sight and sound, obfuscating their orders. Further chaos was created by the fact that they had been in a column formation for the march. Having been split up by the enemy while they were en route, each commander had to assess the situation individually, and the number of Coimbran officers used to such situations could be counted on one hand. To make matters worse, deserters had half driven the army into a stampede. Grohl hadn’t been told yet, but his headquarters were already unsafe. It may have been best to immediately escape, but there was no solid proof to back that reasoning up; only that the enemy voices were drawing ever nearer.

“Those fools! And they call themselves soldiers of Coimbra!?!? Send out the order to drive the enemy off at once! Dirk, Cynthia, gather the men around here and strike back!”

Grohl kicked the ground, sending mud flying just as a messenger crashed into the tent, out of breath.

“I-it’s terrible! M-major Generals Wilm and Gaddis have already withdrawn their men from the front! Only by raising Baharan flags and joining the enemy!!”

At those words, time stopped. The retainers froze, dumbfounded.

Even Grohl could only manage to stammer wordlessly, but the colour slowly drained from his face, and he managed to spout out in a rage, “Don’t say such things!”

“But, they’re clearly...”

“You’re still talking!! Commanders wouldn’t be so cowardly as to change sides, not even as a joke!”

“B-but... every unit under Lord Wilm has announced its surrender! At this rate, a large number of our forces will augment theirs!”

The messenger handed over a mud spattered letter, and Grohl took it and read. Its contents were as follows:

This war has no moral cause, and is merely a matter of Grohl Wardka's personal grudge. For this reason he has betrayed His Majesty the Emperor, and is considered a rebel. His transgressions cannot be forgiven, and as such, his entire family should be punished. All sensible Coimbran soldiers should take up arms at once for our cause, so that together we can kill the true traitors as is their just due.

"W-what is this..."

Dirk explained his opinion as Grohl began to mutter, "I fear, Viceroy, that this can mean nothing but betrayal. If it wasn't so, the enemy would have never been able to penetrate as far as here. Rather than protect the headquarters, Wilm and Gaddis' corps have withdrawn."

The letter was clearly sealed by Major General Wilm, and signed by Gaddis. Now that he thought about it, the officers closest to Wilm were nowhere to be seen. They alone commanded over five thousand men, and if they counted the conscripts, they would easily number over ten thousand. If they fought for Bahar, they would drive Grohl into a corner with no escape.

"No way, this can't have happened. T-that a major general would b-betray..."

"Viceroy, collect yourself! If we don't deal with it at once..."

Dirk desperately shook him, but he did not return to himself. In that time, reports of death after death came flooding in.

"Excuse me! Commanders of One Thousand Kils, Damashew, and Rostam have died in battle! They have been overrun by cavalry with a dragon banner, and each unit has routed!"

"The Baharan Lords that joined us have detached! They are now attacking under the Baharan flag!"

"Gail, Lapp, and Dolls corps have all ignored orders and retreated from the front! The front upstream has completely dissolved!"

"N-no way... this... can't have..."

Northern commanders were killed in action and southern commanders were fleeing. Those whom Grohl had treated poorly were dying for him, and those he had favoured

were betraying him. The power relationship between the cliques, and the politicking to maintain a harmonious government, couldn't be prevented, but this was the result.

"I... I..."

"Viceroy, you need to decide what to do right now! You are the supreme commander!"

"T-the enemy has built a wagon fort along the highway! The retreating men are being shot to pieces! They've cut off our retreat!"

Grohl fell to his knees on the spot in despair.

Clutching the mud, he let out a scream filled with all his various emotions, "Aaaaah, uaaaaa..."

Dirk stood when he saw it, and spoke in a stern tone, "Viceroy, we're going to retreat as far back as possible, so you must calm down and stand. You need to survive to the end. Do you understand!?"

"D-Dirk..."

"I can't say for sure, but I'm fairly certain that the enemy is numerous. My corps is still strong, so my men will do our best to buy you time! Please escape while we do!"

"T-then I shall join you! I still have almost one thousand men! I am prepared to fight to the death!"

"I-I too shall remain!"

"Lord Dirk, I will follow you!"

Cynthia and the remaining retainers volunteered to go, but Dirk shook his head.

"You officers are needed to accompany the viceroy and clear a path of retreat. I have three thousand regulars, and two thousand conscripts, for a total of five thousand men. Though it isn't many, I doubt we'd be able to escape the cavalry, so we have no choice but to hold out as long as possible."

"I-it's still not enough!"

Cynthia objected, but was strongly refuted, “I’m sorry, but we don’t have time to discuss this. Hurry and somehow rally the men up the highway. If the rain stops, we’ll be able to see the enemy force clearly. That’s when we can decide on another plan!”

“U-understood. Senior Commander of One Hundred Cynthia shall escort the viceroy on his retreat!”

“Good, and send my apologies to Commander of One Hundred Noel. It seems she was right after all. I should have noticed the enemies lurking in our midst.”

Grohl raised his head, and gasped at Dirk’s words. Noel had been particular about rushing from the start to take Vesta, even going so far as to want to take it in a single strike. The one who had so vehemently opposed it, and even scorned it, had been Wilm.

Naturally, Grohl had gone with the opinion of his most trusted advisor, but Wilm had now been exposed as a traitor, which meant that, “This is all Wilm’s trap! Or is it Amil’s doing!?”

“I’m sorry, but...”

“It was his idea to stop by the river. The ones who complied were Gaddis and Wilm’s cliques... was even the doubt they casted on Noel a part of their plan?”

Grohl had doubted that she had taken the Rhine with so few men and had foolishly recalled her. He was the biggest fool in Coimbra. He had served himself up on a platter, vitals exposed to the enemy, and he was now being driven to his death as a result just like the battle of Kanan. The only difference being that Noel wasn’t there to help him this time, for he had foolishly redeployed her to Carness.

“What a thing it is. I, I walked myself straight into this?”

“Viceroy, let us quit this place! My men will lead the charge! Imperial guard, protect the viceroy!!”

“Yes sir!”

“Lord Dirk, I pray you the best.”

“You too, Senior Commander of One Hundred Cynthia.”

With a nod, Dirk drew his sword and left the tent. Cynthia forced Grohl up as he limply hung his head, and dragged him to the imperial guard, and began to head towards her men to take command. They had to open a path out of the killing ground.

Remaining by the headquarters, Dirk's men desperately saw to holding their ground amidst the ferocious chaos. Most of his men were from the north and had high morale as they wanted to make the Baharans pay for the rebellion.

"Show them the strength of the north! We fight to the end! The bandits who burned your homes were with them!"

"L-lord Dirk! The enemy's already here! Let us remaining men buy your escape!"

"Hahaha, I appreciate the sentiment, but it's too late. Their main force is cavalry. So I'll fight with my brothers to buy time!"

"B-but!"

"Say no more! In the first place, I'd never leave you behind!"

Dirk would show them his miraculous tenacity. They managed to repulse one of the enemy cavalry charges, but in the confused situation, no matter how much they fought, they didn't have enough men, and the situation began to deteriorate. It had already been an hour since Cynthia and Grohl had left. The Baharan tri-sabre flags fully encircled the headquarters, and were laying siege, and had already cut Dirk's men down to only a thousand. They had done well against an enemy numbering forty thousand.

"Haa, haa, f-fix the lines! Form a wall!"

"Black Sun Cavalry, take to the front! We will win this battle with our own hands!"

With that, he saw the enemy cavalry charge. The Baharan troops opened a path for a strange looking cavalry unit flying a dragon banner. They were clad in all black. Coimbran heads flew in all directions as they charged straight for the location of Grohl's banner.

"What strength. They might truly be the best troops in the empire, but I still need to buy time. Everyone, target the horses!! Lower your spears and kill their mounts!!"

Dirk readied his blade and strengthened his stance as he spoke. To destroy the cavalry, first one needed to kill the horses, and kill the men when they fell. Unfortunately, it didn't go so well. The soldiers positioning their spears to kill the horses were stabbed by the cavalry first. There were even those who had their heads taken by longswords. Closing in on Dirk was a black demon in black armour on a black horse: the commander of the cavalry with a long spear and fiery red hair. He expected an immediate attack, but the man suddenly stopped his horse and called out in a loud voice.

“I assume you are the enemy commander! I am the commanding officer of the Black Sun Cavalry, Falid!! I shall take your head!”

“You fight well; a worthy opponent! I am Commander of One Thousand Dirk of the Coimbran Army. Have at ye!”

“Die!!”

Dirk raised his left arm and feinted, intending to rush in with his shield deflecting the spear. He would use the sword in his right hand on the horse. Confirming Falid's movement, Dirk immediately swung his sword, but it didn't reach. His blade was stopped before the horse's throat. The spear had found its way into his right shoulder, and it seemed like he was about to drop his sword.

“Gh... B-but I'm not done yet!!”

Dirk quickly pulled back and took up his sword with his left hand.

“Coimbra, Coimbra will not be defeated!!”

Dirk mustered his last strength and prepared cut his enemy down, but that didn't happen either. Falid used all his strength to knock aside Dirk's weapon and thrust his spear at his defenceless neck. His body collapsed on the spot without power, and his head fell away with a grimace.



*There are guys like this even in the famously pathetic Coimbran army. I really can't let my guard down if I can't completely destroy them.*

After Falid silently admired the fight, he stuck his spear through the head. The corpse would also be put up on a pike, but it was necessary for raising morale.

“I have slain the enemy commander Dirk!! The Black Sun Cavalry has taken the Coimbran command tent! Burn the traitor’s flag and give a cry of victory!!”

Falid raised his spear and the cavalry gave a ferocious war cry as their morale soared. The Black Sun Cavalry wasn’t satisfied with simply capturing the tent, and having resolved himself, decided to commence the pursuit of Grohl. If the Coimbran forces wanted to avoid the wagon fort that Mills had set up along the highway, they would have had to have taken a rugged side road. The Coimbran army had sacrificed many men by not advancing any faster than anticipated. Those who had been faithful to their mission were already dead. Morale had plummeted so rapidly that enough men had fled or surrendered that it could already be said that they were no longer an army.

The fifty thousand they had sent from Coimbra had been cut down to only five thousand, and though the majority of them hadn’t even fought, the number of dead exceeded twenty thousand. As expected, the majority of the dead were northern Coimbraans who were ready for a rematch. The seeds of a deep resentment had been sown, and the northerners were probably never going to forget the betrayal of Wilm and Gaddis.

The crushing defeat that Coimbra suffered at the battle of the Trais river, would receive the moniker of “the battle of crumbling scales,” as the honour of the Coimbra scales was lost. The scales had tipped in favour of Bahar, and they let the world know that it would most likely never return. Having recreated the strategies of the Sun Emperor, Amil became successor to the throne in both name and substance. For his magnificent service, Falid and his Black Sun Cavalry became famous as the best troops of Bahar. Grohl was recorded in history as a great fool; a terrible man whose own misgovernment sparked an uprising which he blamed on Bahar, and unsatisfied, had aimed to obstruct Amil’s ascendance to the throne, ending it all by attacking another province in the same empire over a personal grudge.

Justice went to the party with the loudest voice, and the winner was always the loudest, though if roles of victor and defeated were reversed, the situation would probably be rather different. Unexpectedly, the world was proceeding just as Noel had predicted, though she wasn’t likely very happy about it herself.

# Chapter 28

## Good Luck to the Beast that Goes to its Death

A messenger from Wilm arrived at fort Carness. It was a notification of Emperor Befnam's edict chastising Grohl and labeling him a traitor after Coimbra's crushing defeat at the battle of the Trais river. Wilm had temporarily been appointed as viceroy, and he had promoted Riglette to the position of major general.

"It's hard to believe, but this is certainly an Imperial Edict from His Majesty Befnam. It clearly bears the seal of Horsheido... but it's rather abrupt that Major General Wilm has been made acting viceroy."

"Are you displeased with His Majesty Befnam's edicts?"

"N-no, not at all, but, it's just that I can't quite fully grasp the situation."

The commander of the military police was pacing this way and that in his confusion, but it wasn't only him, both Barbas and Kai were unable to express themselves in words. Nobody could believe that the grand army that Coimbra had arrayed could summarily crushed in a single day. Though they had essentially predicted that it would be decided in a single battle, it was hard to accept such a one sided defeat.

"Lord Wilm has great expectations for Lord Riglette. The traitorous Grohl is presently retreating west along the side roads. You have orders to immediately lead the troops in Carness and pursue him. Also, pass judgement on Noel Bosheit at once."

The messenger's words had only been superficially polite.

Spittle flew from Barbas' mouth as he spoke, "Oi, you bitch. Yer fuckin' daddy's jumped into bed with the Baharans real quick. Oh, but I guess that fucker Gaddis did it too. It's one hell of a thing for both major generals to just quietly betray us! Isn't that just great for everyone who believed in them!"

"Watch how you open your mouth. We are justified by imperial command."

"Ha! If yer justified, I'm god!"

Brushing off what Barbas was saying, the messenger turned to Kai, “Incidentally, Sir Kai, Gemb has complied with Baharan requests and has commenced an invasion of Coimbra. Not only Gemb, but Ribeldam, Giv, Longstorm, Horn, and Karmbith have prepared their men. You are free to gain as many merits as you please in cooperation with Lord Riglette.”

Kai furrowed his brow in response to the messenger’s words. He nodded along, but still couldn’t grasp the situation. He made a face that showed he wanted to point out the total lack of indication as to their status as traitors.

“Would you like some time to think the situation over? We have prepared a special room for you, so feel free to wait there.”

“What a leisurely order! Grohl is running for Coimbra right now! You should prepare the men at once!”

“You’re all annoying, aren’t you?”

“What was that!?”

“I said you’re annoying. Even though you want me to deal with the situation. What a laughable sentiment. In the first place, I get to judge Captain Noel, right? If you act like that, I might just have you killed, you trash!”

The messenger faltered at her force, “S-sir Riglette?”

“Barbas, this fool is getting in the way of the conversation, would you drag him away for me?”

“What are you saying, Sir Riglette!? Any injury to me is a betrayal of the empire!”

“Hurry and take him away! He’s an eyesore!”

“Don’t try and order me around! Well, we both think he’s an eyesore. Oi, somebody get over here and drag this fool down to the dungeon!”

“Y-you son of a bitch! If you act like this...”

As he started to resist in a rage, two of the White Ant Bloc subdued him, and dragged him away, one on each side. Once he was out of sight, Riglette started the meeting.

“Hmph, I hate my father from the depths of my soul. The evidence he ‘got’ from me was probably a fabrication so that he could get rid of her without dirtying his hands. He wanted you and the captain to kill me, which almost happened. It’s unbelievable.”

Riglette tutted. The one who had saved her had been none other than that foolish little girl Noel, so Riglette owed her a huge debt.

“That aside, you’ve become a major general, right? Isn’t that great? The Captain and I are retiring, so do whatever you want together with the other traitors. Be happy you weren’t killed.”

“Wait.”

Riglette threw the letter from Wilm at Barbas’ retreating back.

“Your friend Dirk died in battle. Do you still want to retire?”

“What?”

“It’s true. It’s written right here. It appears that he was killed by the enemy commander Falid while protecting the viceroy. His famous Black Sun Cavalry have been ordered to descend upon Coimbra, you know.”

“No way, old man Dirk...”

Barbas darkened his brow, as did the other members of the White Ant Bloc.

“I don’t intend to do what that man wants. He only sees me as a disposable tool. As if I’d be used again.”

Riglette picked up Wilm’s letter, and violently tore it asunder. Knowing she was hated, she had put in great effort in hopes of being appreciated, but she was done with him. If he hadn’t seen her as disposable, he would have kept her at his side, or sent her to the navy like he had done for Leue. In summary, she had been completely abandoned. He sent her a letter now to raise her mood. He would use whatever he could, and get rid of her when the time was right.

*I don’t care about betraying the empire or whatnot. What I can’t forgive is trying to just throw someone away after using her. I’ll definitely kill that man!*

“What should we do as military police? If we defend the viceroy, we’ll go against the emperor and become traitors, but turning our blades against our viceroy would go against everything it means to be a retainer. Aaah, I just don’t know what’s right!”

The commander of the military police was kneeling with both hands on his cap. He had most likely done nothing more than blindly follow Coimbra up until this point. Unfortunately, Coimbraans were also the people of the Horsheido empire and it was absolutely unacceptable to defy the orders of the most powerful man in the empire.

“Figure it out yourself. I’ve already decided.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’ll judge the captain, that much I can abide by.”

“What’s that? You haven’t figured it out at all! You’re all just fucking talk!”

“I’ll go along with whatever she decides to pay back a debt I owe her. Why don’t you stop making a fuss and just decide already? If you want to escape, there isn’t much time. The army of justice is approaching to destroy the rebels after all.”

Riglette turned and began to walk to Noel’s room after she spoke.

Opening the door, she found that the room was pitch black. The rain had finally stopped, but the rough curtain was completely covering the sky as if she hadn’t wanted to see a single sliver of the scenery outside. It was ferociously hot too, and just stepping inside had already caused Riglette to sweat.

“Captain... we need to speak quickly.”

Riglette took a step into the room. A nebulous sense of suffocation befel her, and she wondered if the room was really as large as it seemed. Noel was sitting on the bed with her notebook open, but her back looked like the back of a recluse about to give up the ghost.

Riglette took another step in. Something was definitely wrong with the room. She could feel something lurking in the back, only she couldn’t see signs of anything in there at all. Little by little, she began to hear the patter of feet running about, and as she peered further in, the sound of mocking laughter. Riglette wasn’t sure if she was hallucinating or not. There were maybe one, or two... no there were several dozen in

there.

A thought struck her. It was the sound of children at play. The instant she understood it, an innocent laugh echoed through her mind.

“Eek...”

Something seemed wrong with Noel’s eyes, and she called out in a rasping voice, “What is it, Riglette? Has the rain stopped?”

Was it even Noel? She wasn’t sure, but she fumbled out a response.

“I-it stopped. If you open the window, you should be able to tell.”

“Cool. Then let’s open that up. The rain was noisy and annoying so I shut it out. Ahaha, once I did that, I felt way better.”

Noel stood abruptly, and flung open the nearest curtain. Brilliant light cut through the darkness, instantly flooding the room, erasing the presence as it did. The childish laugh was gone.

“There are still clouds, but the weather’s kinda good, eh? I guess the bad news is done for the moment, then?”

“Y-yes, well, I have some bad news from earlier. The main Coimbran force has been defeated.”

“I’ve already heard that bad news from somewhere. Like rainwater seeping through the ceiling.”

Noel gave a weak laugh and asked for the details. After hearing it all, Noel was neither disheartened nor angry.

She simply responded with a muted, “Ah.”

“You don’t have any thoughts on Wilm’s betrayal?”

“Getting angry won’t help after all. Well, I’d still kill him if he was right here, though it’s a bit late now.”

“In that case, why did you not punish me? My father was the one responsible for your reassignment, and sold out his companions for his own personal glory, on top of it all. I am that man’s daughter. I won’t complain if you want me executed.”

Noel responded with a blank expression, “Well, you’re my precious aide. I won’t take anything out on my companions. I’d have killed you if you had said that you’d betrayed us, though.”

Saying that they might as well meet up with everyone else, she left the room.

Like the lord of the castle, Noel gathered up all the men and spoke, “We’re going to save them,” and looking over the uproarious lot, she continued, “Rebel or not, the Coimbran army is my ally. Also, I have to save my friend Cynthia.”

“Are you serious about this? Kai’s men aside, there are only about seven hundred of us in the castle. In comparison, the Baharan army is easily over fifty thousand, not to mention all the traitors who are joining them. Won’t we be killed if we face them?”

“The enemy is going after the viceroy as much as they can, right? They have to be tired. We, on the other hand, are all rested up and full of energy. Also, their advanced pursuit units are probably really lightly manned so that they can be as fast as possible.”

Despite Noel’s optimism, Barbas and the others held dark expressions.

“But I heard the enemy is fielding elite cavalry.”

“Yup, that’s why if you don’t want to, you don’t have to come. I’m leaving behind anyone who doesn’t want to. Do whatever you want. It’s fine to take minimal provisions.”

With that, Noel took up her bident and began making preparations.

“Thanks for everything, Kai. Are you heading back go Gemb now? Let’s cancel our play-date, okay?”

“Why would I do that?”

“Gemb is an enemy of Coimbra now, so the next time we meet, we’ll be enemies. I won’t go easy on an enemy, so...”

“Hahaha, that’s a truly fascinating proposition, but when did I ever say I was going to leave? You’ll trouble me if you jump to any hasty conclusions.”

Kai’s response had been slightly irritated.

“So you aren’t going back?”

“Nope. My lord Siden made it clear that it was important for me to think for myself when something important happened. Unfortunately, I’m not good with my head, so I’m acting on my convictions. It may have only been for a short while, but I’ll never abandon a comrade in arms.”

Kai’s men agreed with his statement.

“Ahaha, you guys really love war, eh? Even going so far as to lose on purpose.”

“I wouldn’t go that far. Also, it’s a little harsh to say that we love war. It’s about the depth and complexity of the matter, is it not?”

“Ah, yup, now that you mention it, I guess it is.”

“That aside, I have no intentions of dissolving our arrangement.”

“Then I’ll be sure to come and play!”

Noel strongly grasped Kai’s outstretched hand, her own enveloped by his massive paw.

“I ain’t runnin’ either. I’m one o’ the captain’s companions, and I need to get revenge for old man Dirk. If we fall back to the mines we might be able to fight on for a number of years... we might be bandits, but we’re still men! We need to show those Baharans some pain!”

“If pops is goin’ so’re we! We promised to die at the captain’s side! She could beat a demon straight outa hell!”

“I-I’m coming too!”

“Me too! I might be an MP, but I’m still a man of the Coimbran military. I’ll protect the viceroy to the end!”

It wasn't only the White Ant Bloc that spoke up, but also the commander of the military police, who had been overcome by emotion and agreed to follow Noel. After smiling happily from the depths of her heart, Noel affixed the twin hammer banner to her bident.

"Then it's fine for you all to die by my side. I'll find happiness and share it with you. Let this banner be a landmark by which you can return."

"Captain... if we're dead, shit and happiness will be indistinguishable."

"We'll be by your side as long as we live, right pops!"

"All y'all need to shut it!"

As Barbas and the others quarreled, a serious expression wafted across Noel's face.

"But it's not a lie. I won't say anything impossible, but should be fine if I remember you."

"Hehe, thank's for that. Well then, let's make sure to possess the captain if we die. If it works out in the end, it won't have been a lie!"

"It's bad luck to say that, pops..."

As the White Ant Bloc began to proclaim its agreement man by man, Barbas apologised with a laugh. Noel joined him too, and before long so did everyone else. Some of them were awkward, some had their faces go stiff, and some went pale, but none of them had any more thoughts of running. They were afraid of death, but their will to fight was overflowing. It became the foundation in their hearts from which they all had built their convictions.

"Shall we go then? We'll be defeated at once if we stay in Bahar, but I won't lose again. It's a matter of giving what we get. I'll never ever give in, so let's fight hard to the bitter end!"

"Yeah!!"

Noel gave her rallying speech, and the body of around eight hundred men raised their fists along with their spirits. At some point, Riglette too raised a fist.

Noel left Carness, and concealed her men on the side roads to wait for the remainder of the Coimbran forces.



All of the Coimbran soldiers were wounded, and already holding their weapons were suffering greatly as a result of the merciless slashes from the enemy cavalry. Their flag was now a deep crimson having soaked up the blood of countless Coimbrans. That evil blade was approaching even Cynthia. Once one thousand strong, her numbers had dwindled to three hundred already. The fact that very few had deserted attested to Cynthia's incredible command, but there was a limit to how much willpower could compensate for waning strength. They ran and ran, but the enemy was never far behind them. Furthermore, as the signs of defeat piled up, it was inevitable for morale to decrease.

Shoulders rising and falling with each breath, Cynthia's aide asked her uneasily, "Sir Cynthia, where should we run?"

"We should be able to work something out if we can only make it back into Coimbran territory. I'm sure we'll receive reinforcements."

"But our messengers report that each province has already invaded Coimbran territory. Even our allies in Gemb. There are even rumors that the local lords have betrayed us too."

"It... is a baseless rumor from the enemy. Don't let the soldiers know too much. If morale gets any lower, we're going to collapse."

They were dismissing it as a rumor, but it was most likely the truth. Once they got back to Coimbran territory, they would probably have no way of knowing who was friend or foe. Now that Wilm and Gaddis had betrayed them, Cynthia didn't know who to trust. The only allies she could reliably trust to remain so were Noel, who had been recalled; the soldiers who were retreating with her; and the men who had died at the Trais river.

"The enemy are... spreading out as they please. It may already be too late."

"Is that so?" Cynthia cut off the conversation with her curt response.

She had already exhausted her mental capacity. The idea that it might have been better to have remained behind and died with Dirk if the retreat was going to be so horrible briefly floated through her mind.

*The enemy has tremendous numbers and momentum. On top of that, we are under an onslaught of some ferocious cavalry. Is this the true strength of Bahar?*

With each charge of the cavalry in black which published the Dragon Banner, the Black Sun Cavalry, her subordinates decreased painfully in number. They did launch counter attacks of their own, but the movements were completely different. The enemy would readily ward away the lowered spears as if they could see everything. As far as Cynthia could tell, they had yet to kill a single cavalryman. The situation was abnormal.

“We are exhausted, but this difference in skill is unbelievable. Just what are they?”

“S-sir Cynthia, the Black Sun Cavalry are back in view! With more enemies in tow for the attack!!”

“Ready the spears to halt their charge!! Do not let them get to the viceroy! We are his shield!”

Cynthia’s voice was angry, as she scolded the undecided soldiers. Summoning the last dregs of their strength, the men of Cynthia’s corps formed up, each with his spear. To stop a charge of around twenty cavalry, they widened the line to match the enemy width, and grasped their weapons. At a terrific speed, the cavalry put their spears through the men who had opposed them, sending screams and blood flying through the air. A small amount of viscera stuck to Cynthia’s face. Despite having been thrown, the spears aptly penetrated the armour of the men they struck. Cynthia thought she saw one of them sneer as he drew the sword at his hip and spurred on his horse. Likely hoping to kill the enemy commander himself, Cynthia responded by drawing her sword, but she didn’t have enough strength left, and her grip was weak. Her vision clouded.

“Enemy commander spotted, I’ll take her head!”

“As if I’d let you!”

“Out of the way, small fry!!”

Decapitating the man who had moved to defend her, the cavalryman drew near in an

instant.

“Die!!”

“Ack...”

(Is this the end?)

In the instant he put all of his might into a blow to strike Cynthia down, his body unnaturally lifted into the air. His riderless horse neighed on its way to an inevitable death.

“Gh, Gggh...”

“Cynthia is my precious friend, so she can’t be killed.”

A highly distinct bident had cleaved the man in two. Having been thoroughly mown down, the man collided with a large tree, spraying something red.

“Noel! Is it really you!?”

“Hehe, I’m here! I’ve brought everyone to come and save you. Isn’t it great that we were able to meet safely again?”

Noel was in a magnificent mood, but the other Black Sun Cavalrymen were still in good health.

“D-don’t let your guard down! Those ones are really dangerous! They’ve really shaken us!”

“Looks like it, yup. But I could see all their movements fine, so it seems like I’m a little bit more dangerous.”

With a wide grin, Noel calmly approached the enemy with her bident at the ready.

“What’ve you done to our dawn brother!?”

“Ride down the woman and the small fries! Don’t let a single one escape!”

The angry cavalrymen charged in as if to run them down. Noel dove under one of the

horses and speared one of them through its abdomen. With his screaming as a signal, a large number of soldiers sprang out from their surroundings publishing the Coimbran scales, and the twin hammer banner. Further surprising the Baharans was the fact that along with Noel's ambushing troops were some Gembu infantry, despite the fact that they were supposedly allies.

"T-that's a Gembu uniform!? They should already be fighting with Bahar. W-why ally with us?"

"These are only the men who agreed with Sir Noel's refusal to abandon her companions."

At some point a large, rustic man with a scar on his face had managed to come up beside her, he was an officer from Gembu: Kai.

"Officer Kai? I am very grateful for your reinforcements! However, doing this kind of thing..."

Kai was blatantly defying orders, and if he did a poor job of it all, he would certainly be charged with treason, a crime worthy of capital punishment without a trial.

"I'm not turning my sword against my own lord, so it should be fine. On the off chance I am to be punished, I will accept it gracefully. Maybe I'll say I was possessed by a fiend of war!"

After laughing heartily, Kai turned to face Cynthia.

"The one you and your government should thank Sir Noel, not me. She might not be too smart, but there might be something to her that can really draw people in. Ah, that's not to say she is a bumbling fool, it's just a problem of her lifestyle."

"So she came to save us even though she had been reassigned on false charges? I... don't even know how to face her."

"I don't think that Sir Noel pays it any mind. Well, whatever happens to this little rebellion after it all doesn't matter. Our priority now is simply getting out of here. We have made preparations for the Coimbran force to return to Carness. Our light infantry can definitely protect you all the way back!"

"I'm sorry, Sir Kai! This is all I could do to fend off their pursuit! Please look after the

viceroys well!”

Cynthia had managed to narrowly escape death because of Noel's corps. Her men, too, had propped themselves up with their spears to fight to the end on the spot. Once they had whittled down the elite cavalry to ten, an extremely resentful voice called out for retreat, and even their infantry dispersed at the order.

“S-sir Cynthia, the Baharan forces are pulling back!”

“Haa, haa, i-is that true?”

Cynthia looked to the retreating Baharan soldiers with ragged breath, and they certainly seemed to be genuinely retreating, likely without the resources to continue the pursuit. Cynthia immediately ordered the tending of the wounded, and that they would, for the moment, return to Carness.

“W-we somehow managed to get away. Are you hurt, Noel?”

“...”

After Cynthia wiped off her bloody, muddy sweat, she called out to Noel who was squatting down with her bident. As expected, even Noel was tired, and her fair complexion was tinged slightly red as if she was slightly feverish. On the other hand, her troops were fresh and ready to pursue the enemy themselves, and were already beginning to pound cavalry disrupting stakes into the ground, as well as string up black ropes between the trees. Having arranged for everything that needed to be done, she was operating even better than Cynthia, who was uncomposed for the moment.

“Noel.”

“This person... was able to live until now, even though his organs have spread all over the place. It looks like the flame from my curious spear has cauterized the wound, so he's still not dead.”

He was the cavalryman that Noel had chopped up and abandoned first. It seemed that he had ironically been given the same fate as what he had doled out to Cynthia's subordinate earlier, but he had astonishingly managed to stay alive, though it would be more accurate to say, as Noel had, that he had been unable to die.

“Gah... aaah!”

“You can relax. We might be enemies, but I don’t intend to pointlessly harrass you.”

“We had a talk just now. This man is a product of Operation Dawn, apparently. Even though he doesn’t have any real military accomplishments, even though he went through all that horrid training and experimentation, he’s going to die like a dog here. He’s crying like a child.”

“Operation... Dawn? Unfortunately, I’ve never heard of it. Just what was it?”

“I wonder. I don’t quite know myself,” Noel prevaricated.

She thought that there was no point in saying anything if she didn’t know either, but Cynthia held herself back. It wasn’t the time for that kind of argument, and, more importantly, Noel didn’t look like she wanted to know.

“But still, no ordinary man could avoid giving up the ghost like this.”

Cynthia once again affirmed how formidable the Black Sun Cavalry was as an poignant given that it was composed of men like him. Then she looked at the dying man’s face. Tears really were pouring out from around his bloodshot eyes, but she could only hear a faint wheezing from his lips, and could not tell if he was saying anything. He was theoretically a detested enemy, but she didn’t think she should try and gain any more information from him.

“Noel, isn’t this enough? If you don’t want to, I will.”

Noel shook her head in response.

“I’d told him to relax so I could kill him at first, but he said he didn’t want that. So I though I’d let him live it out. Uuuh, I think he wants to die of his own volition at the end, so I didn’t finish him off.”

“But...”

“...”

“I... I’m sorry, but I can’t watch this any longer. I’m putting an end to it.”

After troubling over it some more, Cynthia finally drew her sword and went to stab him, without particular opposition from Noel. If asked why, it would be because his

eyes had shut and his ragged breath run out.

“He died then? There wasn’t a need to suffer that much.”

“Well, that’s true, I suppose, but I think he was happy.”

“What makes you say that?”

“It would be lonely to die all by himself, but I listened to everything he had to say. You and I were both with him in the end, so I’m sure he was happy.”

After murmuring her response, Noel stood up using her bident as a staff, and walked down towards her men who were loitering about.

# Chapter 29

## Vermilion Stronghold

Having successfully evading the enemy pursuit corps, Noel and the others turned back to Carness. Grohl was safe, but his spirits had been thoroughly crushed, and he could not stand tall as he once had.

His two most trusted major generals had betrayed him, and Amil had thoroughly crushed him, so Cynthia thought that it was inevitable. She couldn't allow the current state of affairs to continue to keep him down, though.

On the other hand, Noel was irritatingly lively. She had been completely exhausted, but after heading back for only an hour, she had returned to her usual state of affairs.

"You've... already recovered? Even though you looked so tired just earlier."

"Yup. Meeting up really wore me out, but if I rest a bit, it's all good!"

"But, while a short rest is fine, this situation is the worst. We don't have a single good report. We have no idea how many allies we even have left."

"Shouldn't you take a bit of a break, too, Cynthia? You're making a face like your happiness is running away."

"It feels more like it's already run off."

"My my."

*If she understood the situation, even Noel would be in a bad mood, I bet.*

The only good news is that Madress has barely managed to remain under Coimbran control. Perius had been worried about another uprising and so had succeeded in holding out. A situation like this had barely even been put on the table, and so bad news had piled up like a mountain. In the first place, those lords supported by Wilm and Gaddis all simultaneously rebelled, shameless enough to simply drop their Coimbran scales, and raise the Baharan tri-sabre. Next, Gemb and all the other

provinces had joined the war on the side of Bahar. Gemb and Giv had arrayed their soldiers in preparation to capture the northern regions of Coimbra. The Reibeldam navy was approaching from the southern sea, apparently with Leue in tow. They had all arranged to attack as one so that no matter how proud a fortress Madress turned out to be, it would fall.

“Noel... can you hear me out for a bit?”

“Sure, what is it?”

“I’d like to tell you everything that I know so far.”

Cynthia explained it all without holding back. After which she wanted to discuss what they would do from there on out. The soldiers at rest didn’t expect much from the crisis either, and all of their faces looked frightened. That aside, with the news they gathered, they marked down the strong positions of the rebels, and the positions of the other provinces on the map, and their faces became downcast, with one exception.

Noel’s positive tones resounded with force, “I get it. I’ve pretty much figured it out!”

Taken aback, Cynthia proffered up the main question, “So then what should we...”

“Mnn, we’ll stab them in the chest! Also, I want a lot, so is there any water left?”

Noel’s request for a refill came after she downed all of her water in one go. Beside her, Riglette tutted as if she wasn’t involved, and went to go draw the water.

*Originally, Sir Riglette should be punished, but...*

Cynthia was, for the moment, tolerating the decision. There was a voice inside her head telling her that Riglette should be punished, but Cynthia had other priorities for the moment, so she had made sure to calm herself. Most importantly, Noel had no intentions of doing anything like that, which made it even more difficult. It also wasn’t a situation in which Grohl could pass judgment, either. Cynthia thought it would probably be better if she examined things after their current problems had been resolved.

I’ll bring it up if we survive this.

“With things how they are, it makes me really want to drink(alcohol), but since Cynthia

would get mad at me as always, I'll hold back."

Noel turned her eyes to the flask at Barbas' waist. It did appear that some wine was in it, and she began to meaningfully giggle at him. Cynthia had no confidence that she was really the brave warrior who had been spreading death on the battlefield not long ago. It might have been a dream, but Cynthia was still alive somehow.

"Noel, did you properly listen to what I was saying? Do you really understand just what kind of situation we've found ourselves in?"

"Yup, I made sure to listen, so I know. Isn't it fine to ignore the rebelling lords? The ones who'll turn traitor are the ones that will easily flip right back as soon as the situation changes. The main Baharan force is much more of a danger than those wishy washy guys."

After a yawn, Noel ran her gaze over the map. While she was doing so, Riglette offered her a flask, and Noel began drinking it, though this time, she clearly wanted it to last. It looked like she was just messing around, but she did seem to properly think things through.

"The... situation will probably continue to worsen. As the days go by, we'll protect the viceroy while we head back to Madress. The highways and side roads near Carness are blockaded to fence in the rebels, but they probably can't do that forever. We'll have to slip into the darkness, and make an opening through which we can get to Madress."

"It'd be bad if we lost Madress. We'll have to fight our hardest to keep it, but if we want to win from here on out, we can't completely avoid combat."

Noel pointed to the Rhine highway that led to Madress. She pointed to a narrow pass through the mountains.

"I... don't think it's possible, but, do you really think you can win again?"

"I doubt anyone would fight to lose. If they give up they just hurry up and run away, well, people who want to die are a different matter."

"No, she's right. No matter how much of a fiend you are, captain, that's a bit difficult. The enemy is over fifty thousand strong, and the most we could defeat would be about ten thousand. I don't know if we should even fight with how beaten up we are."

Barbas had butted in, but Noel wasn't having any of it.

"The Baharan military can't maintain its massive army forever, so it doesn't matter how many military bases they've taken. It's fine if we can take them back, after all. Even in the worst case scenario of Madress falling, as long as we live, we can keep fighting. The expanses of the Coimbran province are now our fortress and our battleground."

"As expected of the captain. You're always looking ahead."

"It can't be helped if you want to mope, so I'll always continue to fight. What has been taken can always be retaken. It's as simple as that."

Noel spread out the map with both hands, knocking over the little flags that marked the military outposts.

"Hmph, it won't be that simple. Our opponent isn't an idiot. They are surely researching us thoroughly."

Noel nodded to Riglette's mocking comment without objection.

"That's why we have to search for a way to win. Now, let's all think!"

"And even if you say that, I'm a bit bad with my head. That's Haksek's specialty, though. Well, I can tell that attacking from the front is a terrible plan."

"It's not a problem if you pump out lots of plans that'll get us kicked around like attackin' the massive army from the front. That's why we hid some stuff in the mines."

They all wracked their brains. Even the openly sarcastic Riglette started troubling over it. Cynthia didn't know what had happened, but her relationship with Noel had probably gotten better.

*Wait... it's not the time to be thinking about that.*

Deciding that it also wasn't the time to argue with herself, Cynthia decided to forcefully take Noel back.

"I'm sorry... but let's put polishing up a plan for recovering from this hopeless situation on hold for a moment. Accompanying the viceroy back to Madress is our uppermost

priority. That place is our lifeline, we have to return at once.”

“Yup, okay. Then we’re parting here... I hope we can meet safely again.”

Noel’s grumblings had seemed slightly lonely, and Cynthia expressed her doubt with a scowl as it sounded like Noel wasn’t going to come.

“What are you saying? This isn’t a matter for other people, you’re coming too. If you’re stranded in a place like this, the only thing you’ll do for sure is die. There’s no reason to stay.”

“Didn’t you say it earlier, Cynthia? The blockade can’t last forever. That’s why we shouldn’t threaten the enemy. If they underestimate us too much, they’ll get burned. If that happens even once, they’ll surely start being cautious.”

A ferocious smile floated across Noel’s face, wiping away her previous childishly carefree expression.

“Wait. In that case, my men will by time by our lord’s side. How many times have I been rescued by you? Well, it’s my turn for that now. I am prepared to face my death!”

“I’m sorry, but that’s no good.”

Noel rejected her proposal, and it felt like she wouldn’t accept any objections, but Cynthia wasn’t going to give in either. She couldn’t accept herself as a knight if she wasn’t able to serve her lord like Dirk or Noel.

“You rescued us. That’s enough. Leave the rest to me this time. The great Dirk has died, and if you die too, I won’t be able to continue on as a knight!”

Cynthia menacingly struck the desk with great force, but Noel didn’t budge, her ferocious expression once again returning to normal.

“Listen, Cynthia, isn’t your job to protect the viceroy? And your exhausted men won’t be able to buy much time at all, so leaving it to the ones who have the energy is the best option. The truth is, I have been ‘thinking’ a bit.”

“B-but!”

Cynthia vehemently objected. It was true that her men wouldn’t be useful for a little

while, so it was doubtful that they could even stand up to another onslaught of the Black Sun Cavalry. They were men who had already known despair.

“A-are you saying that you’re going to abandon me again?”

“That’s overstating things. Aren’t we just parting ways for a bit? It’ll be fine, we’ll meet again soon.”

“...”

“But having protected the viceroy and escorted him out, shouldn’t you be happy to have been saved, this time? Honestly, I’d like to get saved for once~ ehe,” and, patting Cynthia on the shoulder, with a, “Don’t worry, it’s just a joke,” Noel turned to prepare for battle.

Having attained victory at the battle of the Trais river, the Baharan army marched along the highway to Carness, removing all obstacles in their path, digging up the pallasades, cutting the black chords, and occasionally filling in pit traps. Each one specifically targeted cavalry, and so the Black Sun Cavalry was extremely irritated, and had to be escorted by an engineering corps. They had been advancing at full speed in hopes of ending the conflict in a single decisive battle, but it had unfortunately been impossible. The main reason for this was the companions from operation dawn. Twenty of them, close enough that they had felt like siblings, had already died. Several of the corpses had already been found, and it was easy to tell what had happened to them. The men were expert swordsmen, possessing strength far beyond the normal realm, and the problem was that they had too much confidence in their own strength; a problem that didn’t plague Rebecca.

“Ahh!! This is infuriating!! While you’re mucking about, that bastard Grohl is getting away! Gaah, just hurry it up you dullards!”

Rebecca, second in command of the Black Sun Cavalry, kicked around the nearby engineers. She was going easy on them, of course, but to the engineers, it was not to be taken lightly. Screaming, they fled to another location.

“You shits, fucking wait! Are you going to abandon your duty!?”

Just as she was about to chase after them, another of the Black Sun Cavalry returned with news of the search for their companions.

“Rebecca, sir, we’ve found our missing brothers.”

“Really!? Are they okay!?”

“No, unfortunately, they’ve all died. According to the report, they were killed by a unit bearing a twin hammer banner!”

“Shit, it’s that fiend Noel again!? Damn!”

“I’m very sorry!”

“I’ll get revenge for this!”

Tears were shed by the men of the Black Sun Cavalry. Rebecca felt tears of her own welling up surprisingly quickly, but she fought them down. It wasn’t the time for crying. She had to defeat her enemy to rid herself of regrets. Just how much pain could such sticks and strings, and makeshift rubbish cause? Rebecca smashed the palisade with her longsword countless times; countless times.

“I’ll never forgive her! I don’t know about fiends or whatever she is, but I’ll tear her limb from limb!”

“Rebecca, sir, Noel’s twin hammer banner is currently flying over Carness. Let’s kill her with our own hands and give rest to the souls of our fallen brethren!”

“Of course! We’ll make her regret looking down on the Black Sun Cavalry!”

They were indignant as Falid returned from scouting ahead. His spear was stained with blood. He had been mopping up the stragglers of the retreating Coimbrans.

“There’s something off about Carness. The flags are there, but there wasn’t a single enemy soldier in sight. They might be planning something.”

“If it’s a trap then we’ll smash it, right brother! We are cavalry, but we’re the best even as infantry. The horses are just how we get around!”

Falid looked surprised by Rebecca’s shout.

“Oi, think about it for a bit. About why we haven’t seen anyone.”

“If we have time to think about it, shouldn’t we just take the place and find out!?”

Just then, they heard the sounds of an enemy attack. It only went as far as a hail of arrows, but it forced them to stop clearing a path. Enemy soldiers concealed in the forest would sporadically harass them, but they were never spotted no matter how much they were chased. They most likely shot their arrows from the treetops and immediately left. Minimal in damage though it was, it was maximally infuriating. If they sent men out to exterminate them, it would slow progress even more.

“Ah, what a pain! They’ve been launching nothing but fucking cowardly attacks for a while now! I’ll fucking slaughter them!”

Rebecca stomped on a fallen arrow countless times in anger; countless times. Watching it, Falid grabbed her by the chest. It was true that the Black Sun Cavalry were strong, but they got angry too quickly, almost like animals. Training them required the installation of a suitable amount of fear.

“Cool your head, Rebecca! I’ll ask you one more time, so try and think about why the enemy would act like that. You are second in command, and that means more than just having control of your body, you need to use your head!”

Falid glared harshly at her, and Rebecca paled, starting to cry a little.

“I, I don’t know! I’m an idiot, so I don’t know! That Noel has pegged us as fools!”

“Yeah, that’s right, but why is she provoking us like that? Think. I for one, completely expect it to be a trap. A trap that lures you in out of anger.”

“It’s a trap?”

“That’s how it is. Make sure you learn from this.”

Falid let go of her, and gently patted Rebecca’s hair as she hung her head. Both the carrot and the stick were required to most effectively train an animal. It was how he had once been trained in church, so there was no doubt about it. Falid was only doing the same to them.

“My my, it was a splendid lesson, as expected of the one Lord Amil is interested in. Fuehehe, that’s just how I like it.”

Happily clapping his hands, Mills made his appearance, leaning out the window of a war wagon as it slowed.

“If it isn’t Lord Mills? I’ve shown you something unsightly.”

“Not at all, not at all. I appreciate you giving the warning instead of making me. So you think it’s dangerous to carelessly attack Carness, do you? It might muddy even your Black Sun Cavalry’s sterling reputation, but it could give my war wagons a chance to shine.”

“So it’s a trap, after all.”

“We don’t have definitive proof, though. I came to see what had been so persistently enticing you, and well there’s no doubt about it, is there? You said it was Noel, right? That fiend seems to be inviting you to what she no doubt plans to be a horrible fate. We may be following in the footsteps of our great Sun Emperor Bergis, but we can’t be too careful. We can’t get caught in a trap laid by that monkey, can we?”

Mills exited his war wagon and drummed his swagger stick on the ground.

“What do you suggest we do, Lord Mills? I don’t think that we can simply ignore Carness.”

“Of course, it is just as you say, Sir Falid! We can’t leave Carness alone to be a thorn in our side. It even flies the flag of the fiend. Facing guerilla tactics like this before even arriving at a stronghold of a grand opponent is surely draining on morale.”

Mill’s twirled his stick, laughing loudly, snapping a piece off the broken palacade.

“But... and this is a but, if we attack without thinking, it will be the pinnacle of foolishness to become a repeat of what happened to Count Berotte. So what do you say we should do? Fuehehe, I consulted with Lord Amil and we’re going to use a disposable horse.”

“A disposable horse?”

“Yes, we’ll send a bunch who can all die without issue. People who can only help Bahar by no longer eating any food. They keep eating up the rations, so it’s best to get rid of them anyway. Fuehehe, if they heard this, they’d probably try to stab us, eh? Fuehehe!”

Falid made sure to conceal his emotions as he observed Mills laugh loudly away. The mild mannered man was highly intelligent and would be useful. He had the level headedness that was required of a staff officer. Something he couldn't chose about the man was how he took the initiative, and there was a possibility that he would one day become a hinderance to Amil. Poisonous plants could be made into powerful medicine, but its nature would always remain the same.

"As expected of you, staff officer Mills, I'm impressed by your splendid plan."

"Fuehehe, you flatter me. I know, I think I shall prepare some high quality wine for our victory celebration. I would be honoured if you could join me."

Thinking that he'd need to make sure to be cleaning up at the front when that happened, Falid gave a full faced smile as he provided the polite response, "I thank you."

They had fully cleared the obstacles by the next day, and the Baharan army closed in on Carness.

"Forward, forward! We're taking the rebel Carness in one go!"

Gaddis' men were the assault force after having surrendered to Bahar. Bearing Coimbran flags as they advanced on the fortress, Gaddis gave the order to attack. At present he was acting as second in command to the provisional viceroy Wilm. He couldn't accept a position below Wilm given they had the same rank, but also couldn't go against Amil's decision directly. All he could do was silently nod.

*But if I can lead the attack successfully, I can catch up to Wilm. Even overtaking him won't be impossible. The fight starts now.*

Every day had been hectic before the betrayal, but he had to be complacent before things truly began. In fact, he was greatly relieved that he had been able to change to the winning side. The troops felt so too, and each man's spirit was raised along with the others'. He could see that the morale had soared higher than ever before.

"This is a battle to conquer the rebels! We have made the correct choice. Feel no shame, for we are justified! We must remove the enemies of His Majesty!"

After encouraging his troops, he drew near to the sturdy gate. Having not been counterattacked, he had drawn the conclusion that the enemy had fled. That said,

there were probably still a few inside. If not, they would have attempted to fight back with arrows. Going by the flags, the commander was that upstart Noel, but it seemed that she had already put them up and ran.

*Putting up her own banners and running away, as expected of a lowborn. Not a scrap of knightly pride. As I thought, Grohl has no eye for people.*

Noel had gone from tramp to commander of one hundred with a little bit of luck. Unlike Wilm, who already hated her, Gaddis didn't care much, but the story was different if she was going to get in his way. He would have to crush her after showing her the difference that experience made. Unfortunately, now was not the time for that.

"We know best that there is no fiend of Coimbra. Fear not! Attack!"

"Yaaaa!"

They successfully battered down the gate without resistance. There was no need to use the siege ladders or catapults. There wasn't a trace of a Coimbra soldier inside the fortress either.

*No battle is this easy. I ought to thank that Noel.*

As one would expect, killing former allies would garner some resistance, but given the current situation, Gaddis was able to heave a sigh of relief. If it did have to happen, his men would probably turn their swords on their former fellows, though, as would he. As long as they weren't close friends or relatives, the only thing in common was a shared province of birth. As a gathering of strangers, comradeship in the military existed because it had to.

"Lord Gaddis, as expected, there isn't an enemy in sight, but a good amount of provisions remain!"

"If they didn't have time to gather up all their supplies, they must have been in quite the rush."

"Okay, send everyone to gather up the supplies, if we present it to Lord Amil, he might remember us one day. Also, continue the search of the fortress, particularly focus on finding any hidden soldiers as we don't know where they might be hiding! They might have information, so capture as many alive as you can!"

“Understood!”

“Hmph, so much for the fiend of Coimbra. Grohl was quick to praise her, but she’s just a girl after all. It’s tomfoolery for her to even be a commander!”

Gaddis sat down near the entrance as he muttered his abuse. He was worried that the troops that didn’t enter might be ambushed, but he turned his thoughts to the rulership of Coimbra once the war was won. Naturally his thoughts were of his own safety. The only reason he had gone into the castle was so that he could avoid being seen as a coward.

“Woah, oi look at this. It’s real gold.”

“There’s loads of food, too, and wine.”

“There’s something else here too, some kind of ore? What is this?”

“Don’t worry about it. More importantly, you should be searching for something valuable. Lord Gaddis will overlook it if a little goes missing. He’s been in a good mood recently since he’ll become the next viceroy.”

“Seriously!? Then we’d better hurry!”

Gold and supplies were scattered here and there inside the fortress. Assuming that it had been spread about in the chaos of a hasty retreat, the soldiers weren’t particularly suspicious about it. In actuality, there were mysterious bags evenly distributed in between the scattered gold and supplies. Ensuring that all of Gaddis’ men had entered the fortress, a hidden member of the White Ant Bloc gave his signal. As he did, the concealed men simultaneously released fire arrows into the fortress, and repelled down the walls to escape as quickly as possible without checking to see if the arrows had an effect.

“Oi... doesn’t it kinda stink?”

“Isn’t that just smoke?”

“I-it’s not my imagination, somethin’s on fire! Put it out already!”

Within a few minutes, the entirety of the fortress was enveloped. The blaze roared through the interior. The violent flames spread themselves across the supplies,

strengthened by oil that was hidden throughout. When the combustion stones that had been evenly distributed throughout the fortress exploded, they mercilessly poured flames upon their victims.

Pandemonium erupted inside the fortress, and the only escape was the front gate, and the soldiers desperately shoved each other out of the way to flee, but the panicked men could not act calmly. Men were trampled, men were attacked by their fellows in the confusion, men buried themselves in the soil to escape, and men died of asphyxiation in the flames. The halls were filled with the stench of burnt human flesh. In that time, Carness was fully engulfed in the fire. The fiendish twin hammer banner flew over a fortress of red flames, amidst the screams of burning men. An image of purgatory burned itself strongly into the minds of the Baharan soldiers watching.

When the flames finally fizzled out, only five hundred men remained of Gaddis' men, the unit having taken over four thousand casualties. It was a tragedy that could be labeled as annihilation. The first to escape, Gaddis had somehow survived, but his right leg had been severely wounded by the falling rubble.

“Uwaa, it really burned, didn't it. The plan was a great success!”

“Hehe, it seems to have gone well. If it's like that they might not have rescued even a single man from inside.”

“Well, that's true. Hmmm, still, what a view, eh? A bright red sun and a bright red castle. It truly was a mysterious scene. Won't you watch it too, Riglette?” asked Noel as she happily watched from atop a tall tree.

Barbas was next to her, and Riglette was sulking at the base as she couldn't climb trees.

“Hmph, I'm fine, thank you. Didn't you know? Fools and monkeys like high places, you know. It's a place that suits you well.”

“Again with that fuckin' shit!”

“Then shouldn't you be up here too, Riglette~? Well, you'd have to climb it, though!”

Riglette's face went bright red in irritation, further fueled by the fact that she really couldn't climb it, which robbed her of any retort.

“Haha, woah! Still, the captain said it pretty well.”

“Ahaha, she matches now. Well then, it’s about time for everyone to get back, so let’s make preparations to escape!”

“Yes sir!”

Noel jumped down from her tree and began making preparations to escape. Then, once the men of the White Ant Bloc charged with starting the fire had returned, they set out. Noel had devoted the majority of her trump card, the combustion stones, to the fire plan at Carness, but after seeing the effect, she decided she wouldn’t need to use the lines she had rehearsed to convince the reluctant Barbas of the plan. It was a plot to use those who carelessly entered to lower both the enemy morale and their speed of advance.

Noel’s plan had been a success. From then on out, the Baharan army would have to take great care even when clearing out an unresisting outpost as they didn’t know where the hands of the fiend reached. They wouldn’t want to wake another scene of purgatory again. The fiend baked with military outposts, and so even the traitorous feudal lords made sure to be dubious and thorough in their searches. The Baharan advantage didn’t disappear, but as Noel had slowed down their advance just as much as she’d hoped.

The ghost of the fiend would haunt all the soldiers present, Baharan and traitorous Coimbran alike, for a long time to come. Groundless rumors such as, “Noel the fiend will appear when least expected, and strike her foes to purgatory,” and, “Traitors will surely die one day under the curse,” began to spread like wildfire. It wasn’t a direct result of Noel’s schemes, but a consequence of Riglette’s manipulation of prisoners of war. Wilm, and the other Baharan commanders tried to calm the situation to no avail. The credibility required to combat such a rumor had increased. Furthermore, there were many eyewitnesses to corroborate the stories. One of the consequences of this was Noel’s name gaining even more recognition.

The real Noel didn’t care about being known as a fiend or anything like that. She had no intentions of doing anything bad. That aside, she didn’t have any intentions of stopping, either. Laughing about how it couldn’t be helped, Noel made herself a demon mask, and wearing the angular white mask that was so eery it would cause people to scream if they saw it at night, she went to tease Riglette. It too was preeminently successful.

# Chapter 30

## Hope for Sun

After burning Carness, Noel corps succeeded in safely returning to Coimbran territory as they had been able to move without direct pursuit having suitably slowed the Baharan march. That aside, the situation within Coimbran territory had dramatically changed in the past month. A majority of the local lords had defected, and their numbers were increasing by the day. Most of the villages had started to understand the situation and had begun independently removing their own Coimbran flags. As for Noel and the others, anything resembling a safety zone had already vanished. On top of that, the Baharan army fifty thousand strong that Amil was leading had completely retaken all Baharan territory, and had invaded Coimbran lands with a plan for taking the capital city of Madress; all while bearing the venerable banner of the sun which had been bestowed upon him by Befnam himself. All who opposed the venerable banner were rebels. Amil had pompously commenced his march west as if to proclaim that he was the successor to the Empire of the Sun.

“Riglette will sound the attack on her bugle as always. Of course an actual attack is no good, though.”

“It’s... meaningless even if we do this, you know. It’s a great place for some futile efforts, though.”

“You’re at it again with that fuckin’ shit. You’re a real genius at lowerin’ morale, ya know.”

Riglette’s tone started to rise, “Silence! With such a large army against us, all we can do is rely on these little tricks day in and day out. I just want to know if there’s any point to it all!”

At first Riglette had approved of hit, hoping it would be successful, but actually putting it into practice had been wearing her out. And so she complained. With how things were going, her opinion of Noel’s ability to command was going right back down to where it started. Riglette was the type who wasn’t able to implement the plans that she had liked in theory. Naturally, Noel wouldn’t bring up that point directly as it would hurt her feelings. What was important was putting the right person in the right place.

Implementation was her own speciality, which was why she dragged the ever complaining Riglette along by force. Sometimes she had something interesting to say after being dragged out, and that was just how it was supposed to work between a commander and her aide.

“We have to do what we can. Also, war is all about making the enemy upset. Even if they were laughing at first, we’re going to make them squirm.”

“Hmph, it’d be good if it worked. We’re the ones squirming right now.”

Barbas glowered at Riglette as she tutted, and Kai was trying not to get involved. Everything was proceeding as usual.

Noel stationed soldiers in the particularly hilly and wooded areas along the highway that the Baharan army was advancing down. They would blow the attack order on their bugles or beat it out on their drums regardless of whether or not it was day or night. The troops who had witnessed the incident at Carness would hurriedly take up positions in preparation for an ambush. They had developed an anxiety and fear of what the fiend was doing, and so always went on high alert. The other day, the truth about the loss of the twenty cavalymen had spread to the troops and was disseminating down through the ranks, but they never saw the enemy. The attacks would be sounded, and the twin hammer banners would fly, but not once had an attack actually come. Even the troops that had been wary at first slowly became accustomed to it over time, despite their best efforts. Gradually, they lowered their guard, and began to ignore the sound of the bugle. They began to show composure as the thought that the fiend was a rumor after all, spread among them.

Having waited for that exact moment, Noel led the White Ant Bloc in an attack targeting the slow moving baggage train, thoroughly burning it down, and disappearing before the enemy arrived on the scene. Basing those kinds of guerrilla tactics out of a mine was the speciality of the White Ant Bloc, and they ranged freely across the land with the highly lethal Noel as their leader. In lieu of said guerrilla tactics, the Baharan army decided to place a guard on their baggage train, instructing the men to never let their guards down, and threatening them with beheadings if they ever did. As the Baharan soldiers were forced to maintain caution, and Noel had struck two major blows, their willpower had been drastically cut.

“They’ve assembled quite the defence, but the enemy seems rather tired, don’t they? It had plenty of meaning, didn’t it, Riglette?”

“Hmph... I wonder about that.”

Barbas scoffed as he looked through his telescope, “You really don’t shut up. It’s workin’ no matter how ya look at it. They’re all fuckin’ dead tired. They don’t look like a just and glorious army like that banner o’ theirs suggests.”

He could see that their footfalls fell heavy, and their faces fell pale, likely due to the large pressure of impending attack. Noel tapped her fingers in pleasure that things had worked out according to plan.

“If I was in the enemy’s position, I don’t think I’d be able to help much. An unseen foe is difficult to prepare for. If they prepare every day, they will exhaust themselves, and if they let their guard down, they will be swooped down upon by the fiend. If they come after us, we should evade them at full speed... you wouldn’t happen to be a genuine fiend would you?”

Kai had asked with an earnest expression, and Noel laughed pleasantly as she responded, “And what if I am?”

“Let’s see. I believe I’d want to know the secret behind how you became that way. I too wish to protect my country by becoming a fiend.”

“Ahaha, if you stick horns on your head, anybody can become one! I’ll teach you how to make them later. Riglette even leaked some...”

“Is now really the time to go on about such foolishness!? While it is true that the enemy is tiring, they are still advancing into Coimbran territory. We have to consider how we can deliver a crushing blow!”

While Riglette was speaking the truth, if there was a plan to deliver any substantial blow, it would have already be in progress. Which was why they were laying bait. They only needed maybe one more good opportunity. If they let it slip, their chances of winning would also escape.

“Even if you say that, there’s nothing else we can do. We number under one thousand, and the enemy numbers over fifty thousand, right? Our advantage is our mobility, so I think it’s fine for now.”

“I’m sorry for interruptin’ but now might be a good time, Captain.”

“It seems so...”

Noel raised her hand in signal to one of the White Ant Bloc as she spoke. It was a signal to light the Baharan army aflame. They had placed dry grass and would light it with simple oil soaked fire arrows. The enemy was afraid of arson attacks, and so they needed to make sure to live up to their reputation from time to time, though the scale was small, so it wouldn't do much damage. As far as lowering their morale was concerned, though, there wouldn't be any problems. The archers of the White Ant Bloc, and Noel with bow in hand, began to ignite their arrows, though they would also be trying to hit as many of the Baharan cavalry in the vanguard as they could. Suddenly in an uproar, the Baharan troops turned to face them, but due to their position in the trees, it wouldn't be easy to direct a charge towards them. Their opponent still had to move, though, in response to the ambush.

“That's enough for today, let's get ready for the next time. The enemy can rot a bit more.”

“Yes sir!”

At Noel's signal, they began to disappear into the brush.

Able to move freely, Noel was able to actually implement everything she could think of. She had previously always had to get permission, or at least tentatively ask or inform her superior officer about her intentions, but released from her constraints, Noel was as free as she felt need to be. Noel's plan to rob them of the road was simple. They would publish captured banners, and make a show of visiting a small town that had deserted. Their equipment was Coimbra, but if they claimed to be Wilm's men, the gates would be opened without any doubts. There was almost no one siding with Coimbra, so it was only natural. Wilm had quite the debt they needed to collect.

“What's the situation like for the townsfolk?”

“They were frightened at first, but now they're playing along. We're all Coimbrans so they feel relieved,” Barbas responded.

Having easily entered the city, Noel had restrained the local lord who had come to meet her, on the spot. They had seized the weapons from the trembling guards and quickly taken control of the city. Continuing to impersonate Baharan soldiers, Noel had taken other rebel cities at the same time. Supplies could be acquired and places

of rest could be set up in the cities, and there wasn't a single man who wouldn't think to take advantage of that. They weren't allies anymore, so they could do whatever they wanted to them. Incidentally, five cities had fallen to them. It might seem ridiculous at first glance, but lies were effective tools. In times when it was impossible to tell friend from foe, the only indications were the banners that they published which gave birth to negligence that thought it would probably be fine and that everything would work out in the end. There wasn't a shred of tension in the garrisons of the lords who did not depart for the front. For them, when faced with the option of fighting the Baharan army, the choice was obvious.

"I see. That's good. It'd be a pain if they resisted."

As far as she could tell, the people had simply shut themselves in their houses, refusing to go out. It had never been particularly prosperous there, but now the place looked as abandoned as a ruin.

"They don't have much courage. They should be praying desperately to the sun god that things don't go horribly wrong right about now."

"If praying was enough to be saved by god, the world would surely be a happier place."

The surrounding men of the White Ant Bloc nodded in agreement with Noel's mutter.

"By the way, the lord's tied up now, so what should we do with him?"

"Mn? We have to kill the traitors. If he gets away, it'll only add to our enemy's number by one. We'll take his head and put it on a pike like usual."

"He's crying as he begs for his life, though, is that fine? He says he'll do anything."

"Of course. I'm tired of hearing the cries of these lords, so there's no reason to talk to him now. There's no reason to forgive an enemy. I can't think of anything he could do that'd be useful, anyway, so just get it over with."

Noel drew her thumb across her neck. Dirk had said it too, that military regulations had to be respected. Treason was a capital punishment, so killing them was the correct thing to do. It seemed that Dirk himself had died, but she figured that she could protect his words at the very least. Well, as much as she could.

Riglette seemed to have thought of something, "Okay, well if you're going to execute

him, could you leave it to me? I've got an idea."

"That's fine. What're you going to do?"

"It's about the stories of the fiend that have finally spread. I thought that we could do something practical with them. There's merit in trying."

"Okay, I suppose. I'm a little concerned about it, but go ahead. Sorry Barbas."

"No, it's not a problem. In that case, I'll release the garrison after giving them a good scare."

"Good. Make sure they won't even think about taking up the sword again, okay? It might be fine to break some limbs."

"That's the plan... to think they were allies just a month ago... it's a harsh world, eh? I'll be thorough."

"Such is the way of the world. If you really think about it, it might be better to just die and get things over with."

Noel accepted the flask Barbas handed to her, and put it to her lips. The content was wine. She wouldn't drink a lot, but a little couldn't hurt.

"I'd like to replenish our stocks somewhere. Tryin' to drag it out like this makes me not want to drink."

"Ahaha, when the war's over, let's drink enough to bathe in. I'll invite Cynthia."

"If you invite her, she'll get angry at you again. She was displeased with how useless you became when you drank too much earlier."

"Yup, she'll get mad for sure... she's kind of annoying, but if she isn't around I get lonely. Ahhh, continuing to fight is really draining, isn't it?"

"That's how wars are. You might not fully understand this Captain, but war is generally painful and tragic. I spent a long time up in the Bolk mines, so I've seen it all."

Noel responded appropriately, "Yup, it's an experience thing, right? I learned something new."

In regards to the people of the town, Noel took up a forbearing stance. She wasn't going to go as far as killing them all. The guards were to be released after some punishment, and the town was not to be pillaged. Noel was not an ally to them, but she did not see herself as an enemy either.

"Ahh, I want more wine."

Noel poured one last glass of wine from the lord's stock. Downing it in a single swig, the astringent flavour spread through her mouth. Having thought it would be sweeter, Noel was slightly disappointed. It looked expensive, but the contents were not so good, so Noel washed it down with some water.

"Captain, let's not burn this town down either."

"I know that even if you don't say it so many times. I promised I wouldn't, so I never will. I always keep my word."

Noel's expression soured. She didn't like being pestered about the same things over and over again. It made her feel like she wasn't trusted, though it might not have been something she could ever do anything about. Barbas had been enraged when Noel had executed all of the town guard and burned both the city and its surrounding fields. He had gotten angry enough that he still might kill her. She wondered just what she would do if her companions were ever beheaded. Not wanting to be killed herself, she'd probably go on the attack as expected, and then be sad afterwards, or so she thought.

"I'm very sorry. I just want to drive home the point."

"You're a good man Barbas. I'm sure you'll be a great dad."

Barbas spat some of his wine when he heard her, "Don't tease me like that, it's bad for my heart."

"Even though your hair's white, your face went red, how fun!"

"Captain! That's enough of that!"

"Ahaha, sorry I went a bit too far."

"Sheesh, I got a bit too worked up myself. Sorry about that."

“Hehe, pops, yer gettin’ worked up there.”

“Shut it!”

At first Noel had thought that if the lord had betrayed them, the city had too, and it’s always better to have even one enemy removed. Naturally all the guards had to die. It would also have been a waste to leave the supplies there for the enemy. She figured that it was best to make an example of what happens to traitors, maybe leave a single survivor to spread the tale of the fiend, but since her companion Barbas had been so utterly opposed to it, she’d properly stopped.

“The betrayal of the lord has nothin’ to do with the people. Burning their houses won’t change a thing. Actually it’ll just make more enemies,” he had said, and that, “You said that Coimbra was your castle, Captain, so it’d be a problem if the people living there were suffering.”

Having seen his point, or at least thinking that she had, Noel had promised to stop burning the captured towns.

“Then once we’ve taken only what we need, you can distribute it to the people. We can’t carry it all away, and they’re the ones that made it after all.”

“I say this every time, but is it really okay to give it away? Once its been given, we can’t take it back.”

“I say this every time, but it’s fine. The Baharan army is going to pass through here soon enough, and they have nothing to give them.”

Noel was distributing what the lord had levied as tax in place of burning the town because they couldn’t carry it all away, and anything they left would be reappropriated by Bahar. That being the case, giving it away seemed like a good idea. If Bahar still reappropriated it, they would surely sow the seeds of resentment. Those seeds would grow into something useful, and, more importantly, Noel had nothing to lose by it. Not only the present, but also the future was taken into account. That was one of the teachings of the sun emperor. She didn’t have any intentions of bringing honour to the empire of the sun, but she had finally remembered it, so she was going to try it out.

“It’s about time, isn’t it?”

At Barbas’ question, Noel took out her treasured glasses from her breast pocket and

started acting as if she was good with her head, “Yup, just about. If it’s going to be an ambush, we’re going to have to take that position. There are lots of places to hide, and the road’s really thin so they’ll have to stretch out their troops. Their troublesome cavalry won’t be able to move clearly. It’s clearly the best location.”

When she put the glasses on, she felt as if her thoughts really did become clear. She also felt like she had listened to Cynthia’s lectures, and that part was fun too, but it would be a problem if they broke, so she usually kept them safe. What Noel was aiming for was Amil’s head, no, it was more accurate to say that if she couldn’t kill him, she would never be able to overcome the difference in numbers. She planned on fighting to the end either way, but it wouldn’t be foolish to think that with that, she could turn the tables on them. Noel had thought of all sorts of things. The battleground would be halfway down the Kanan highway, and was located in the mountains. Lying in wait there, if they could lure in and defeat the vanguard, sowing unrest, Noel’s main force could slam into wherever Amil himself was located. It was for that time that Noel had continued to employ her disruption tactics. Their guard would be up, but maintaining it would have tired them out. What she wanted was for their morale to be affected by the exhaustion because low morale caused them to ignore their orders and bred negligence. She’d confirmed it with the military police, so there was no mistaking it. A fear of fire had been fostered in the enemy after all the arson attacks. If the troops that were there to lure them out used what looked like another fire plan, they wouldn’t mount up. The whole thing was a fairly small scale operation, but in the confined area, it could inflict a fatal blow. Even if they didn’t want to, the enemy would be disrupted, and forced to pursue while Amil stopped in the middle of the procession. There her target lay.

“It’s going to take some skill. If it goes well, this’ll be the feat of feats. You’ll get a massive promotion, captain Noel, and become a hero of Coimbra in one go!”

“Hey pops, w-wouldn’t that make us the companions of a hero?”

“That’s right it will. If we butcher Amil, everything will work out. I don’t know what’ll happen to that Grohl guy, but Bahar’ll fall into chaos for sure, and it’ll take them a while to sort everything out.”

It seemed a little optimistic, but Noel thought it was the best way. For the moment, it would force the Baharans to fall back. Grohl was absolutely going to have to answer for things, but Noel didn’t care either way as long as Cynthia and Elgar were fine.

“Hmmm, but I wonder what’ll happen.”

“What?”

“Will it really go that well? Our enemies are no fools.”

“Why so timid? We’ve done all we can. All that’s left is to do it. Make that bitch blow her bugle more than usual and there won’t be anything to worry about.”

It was just as Barbas said: Noel had done everything that she could; everything she intended to do. She had put all of her efforts towards the five minutes it would take to claim Amil’s head. Nothing could clear Grohl’s infamy, but if Amil was unable to be enthroned, the war would lose all meaning. Amil’s death was necessary for Noel’s victory, but the weather wasn’t very good. Usually, poor visibility would be helpful, but Noel was a special case. Troubles reared their heads on rainy days. At present the weather was cloudy and she couldn’t tell where the rain would fall. Noel hoped that it cleared.

“But it can’t be helped now that we’ve done all we can. No being helped at all. Nothing to do but go for it.”

Noel stood, removing her glasses, and informed Barbas that they would attack tomorrow. This was their final rest before the decisive battle. Enthusiastic, Barbas led his men out of the room, Riglette was in charge of the execution, and Kai was checking their supplies. Noel was alone in her room.

“It seems like I’m free, but I need to save my strength.”

Hitting herself to clear her thoughts, Noel clapped her hands together and gave a shout to psyche herself up. Things had to go well. She had to give it her all. She would attack the enemy’s supreme commander, Amil; for everyone; for herself.

# Chapter 31

## Battle at Daybreak

“Are you really going to come fight with me?”

“Yes sir! We are volunteering our services! To attack those who are enemies of Commander of One Thousand Dirk, and to protect Coimbra, we ask that you place us on the front lines!”

“Then I look forward to working with you!”

The day before the battle, they received two hundred reinforcements from Madress, bringing Noel corps' total manpower up to one thousand. Having not expected it at all, Noel's eyes were round with surprise. She now had enough men to strike at least one good blow. Grohl had been safely returned to Madress, and so Noel was fighting alone, hoping to repay the traitorous lords that had been attacking one after the other. That all aside, the infantry reinforcements they had managed to somehow scrape together were the two hundred odd survivors of Dirk corps. Only those two hundred men and the supplies they required could be spared from Madress without compromising the defence. The Ribeldam navy had blockaded Madress harbour, temporarily causing the circulation of supplies to come to an end, and because the land routes had already been cut off, they had to make do with what stockpiles they had. Even the navy had beached its ships to man the city, so there wasn't a single redundant soldier.

While that had been going on, peace talks had opened, but they were still incredibly stormy. At the same time that Perius heard the punishment for defeat, he received instructions from Grohl forbidding him from responding. Such was the decision of Grohl, his will having broken. Perius sent his own messenger to engage in secret negotiations. Fully confident of victory, Bahar had no intention of receiving anything less than unconditional surrender, and responded repeatedly that they wanted Coimbra to simply put down their swords. Perius himself could fully understand their position, but as he was in charge of negotiations, he had to secure safety for Grohl and his family as well as pardon for the sins of the Coimbran officers and men. The retainers had thrown away both their shame and their honour as they hardened their resolve to fight to the end. He felt that he could get some kind of deal, so Perius sent

appeal after appeal to Amil, unwavering in the face of threats, and enduring in the face of scornful gazes. Then one day, the man appointed as provisional viceroy, Wilm, came to his tent to deliver to him who could not hide his emotions, an ultimatum.



“Now then, since we haven’t met for a while, let’s eat up! Cheers!”

“Cheers!”

And so Noel began her meagre dinner party to welcome her new companions. Originally, she had intended to boost morale by giving them a feast before the sortie so it wasn’t a problem. In fact, it had put some life into them, which she thought was nice. She herself was making merry rather happily despite the minimal amounts of wine. The reason for her mood lay in the two rewards she had received from Grohl. The first was the highest honour in all of Coimbra: a golden ring bearing the Coimbran scales. Its delicate ornamentation and brilliant golden lustre made it a thing of beauty. If it wasn’t for the current situation with the enemy, it wasn’t something he should have bestowed upon anyone, but Grohl had decided that he might not have another chance to reward her. The second was a promotion to Commander of One Thousand. Skipping the rank of Senior Commander of One Hundred, he had given her a so-called double promotion. Noel had received a letter from him which contained a sincere apology for the matter of his reassigning her as well as his doubting her. It contained much self deprecation on his part, including a statement that he couldn’t bear to face her directly. Almost his final will, the concluding statements included a request that she continue to look after Elgar.

Noel had no particular loyalty to Grohl, but as they were fighting together, she knew they were allies. He was also the man who paid her salary and had appointed her to her position in the military—which was why she had stepped beyond her bounds in advising him on how to attain victory—.

Barbas had wanted to know, “What the fuck does he think he’s sayin’ after all this!?” but Noel managed to assuage him.

He had apologised and even given her gifts, so Noel thought it was probably fine. He properly apologised for his wrongs, so the way to accept it was with a smile. Number 150 had taught her that doing so was one of the foundations of friendship.

“It looks like you’ve been promoted too, Cynthia. Now we’re the same rank, eh?”

“Congratulations, captain. It’s late, but there’s no changin’ the fact that it’s good. So, here’s a toast!”

“Thanks, Barbas.”

He made her cup overflow, and Noel decided it would be her last refill. She couldn’t let a single thing go wrong with the battle on the following day. Surely Barbas and the others knew that much as well, for despite their usual clamouring, the wine did not flow as freely as normal.

“That’s... strange. Why am I the only one left out? I think I did quite enough.”

“Ha?” Barbas seemed shocked, “What’s this shit you’re tryin’ to pull? Try rememberin’ with that pretty little head o’ yours just who your father is. If it wasn’t for the captain, you’d have been executed first.”

Riglette herself hadn’t seemed to serious about it either, likely just wanting to add a few words to the conversation. Being unable to honestly give her congratulations was simply Riglette being Riglette.

“Hmph, I’ve already cut ties with that man. He put me through that, of all things, so I’ll make sure to get my revenge.”

“I see, I see. Well, the most important part is from here on out, so watch your words. Don’t give us that damned tut again.”

“Tsk, you’re as insufferable as always. It’s because you’re like this that you became a bandit.”

“Aaaah, that’s exactly what I was talkin’ about. I really should have just killed you back then.”

“Hmph, well that’s too bad, isn’t it.”

As Noel watched their amusing little quarrel, she thought about how Riglette’s tutting could likely never be cured. Once a habit was deeply ingrained, it was hard to remove. No matter how many times Cynthia hit her, Noel did not fix her speech. It was essentially the same thing. Now that her rank was the same as Cynthia’s, Noel thought

that the frequency of being struck would go down, but that the intensity would go up. As that was fun in its own way, Noel didn't particularly mind.

"Tadaaah, this is the insignia of a Commander of One Thousand. Isn't it cool! This medal is nice too, but it's pointlessly large!"

Having quickly sewn her new insignia to her uniform, Noel walked through the ranks of men with a smile as if she was showing off. Being fundamentally carefree, and having always been amiable, Noel was fairly popular with the troops. On top of that was her strength and the fact that she wouldn't abandon her men. The soldiers met her with applause and celebration. She couldn't see where she was going, but she lived her life to the fullest, and would enjoy what she could, when she could.

"You've become a Commander of One Thousand!"

"I'll follow you all my life!"

"Ahaha, thanks!"

Noel met them all with a smile as they came one after the other to give her their congratulations. She thanked each man and patted him on the shoulder with words of encouragement.

"Still, the captain's really pretty, and has a good figure to boot."

"It's a shame she's not interested in men! Aaah, a real shame!"

One of the young soldiers held his head and sighed. There wasn't anything wrong with her physically, and she cut a good figure so there were probably many men who had fallen for her at first sight, but once they got to know what she was really like, her desirability in that way essentially disappeared; primarily due to her childish nature. She quickly expressed her emotions, and usually in a manner very unlike the standard military way. Even still, she had a mysterious charm to her. She was happy on sunny days, and distressed enough to die on rainy ones. There was also her demonic strength and tendency for plans that would set the enemy on fire. Not a single other officer in the Coimbran army was as curiously endearing as her, but the young men all felt that she wasn't a very balanced person, unfortunately.

"I want my daughter to be that lively. I bet every day would be fun."

“Hmmm, really? If she got going with a hammer, there’d be no stoppin’ her. And she specializes in arsony...”

“Nonono, isn’t it fine to be flamboyant? That’s how kids should be.”

“Mmmh, you think?”

“Well, live or die, every moment would be fun; right to the end. Even though it’s an awful war, I feel like she’s made things a little better.”

“With the captain, it’s not that war becomes fun, but really profound; it’s the depth, you know.”

“Mnh, really?”

“Well, uh, the words might not be so deep?”

The older man narrowed his gaze. From the north, he had experienced both Coimbra’s greatest prosperity and its decline. He didn’t have any particular hopes for the future, but he was optimistic about how things would turn out; the type of man who was a good fit for Noel, and found her vivid life attractive.

After their enjoyable meal, Noel led all the men out of the captured town and to the difficult Yavits pass on the Kanan highway. They had prepared the area because it was a highway. Surrounded by steep slopes, and faced with elevated trees and a thick brush. In reality, the pass was frequented by bandits, bears, wolves, and the like, so that it was feared by travelers even to the present. Spatters of rain began to fall over the high ridges at Yavits, and so Noel could look down over the highway. Bahar had already begun its advance, and the vanguard had already passed by her with banners of the glorious sun proudly flying. Just to the west of Noel’s location lay Barbas in command of three hundred men. When she gave the signal, he would release the fire upon the enemy and throw their vanguard into the crucible so that in the confusion, Noel could raid Amil’s location in the main force.

“Captain. There’s no time, the main force is here. That is unmistakably Amil’s banner.”

Three suns were crossed by sabres. According to Riglette, that was his banner. It was proof that he had been aiming for the throne from the time he had been first appointed viceroy. Riglette made sure to indifferently point out that he was well on his way to fulfilling his ambitions.

“Does he want to become the emperor that badly?”

“That’s probably it. He’d rule the continent after all. From the start this had been a war of succession. All this talk of rebels has been nothing more than excuses.”

“Hhhhm. It doesn’t really resonate with me.”

“That’s probably just you. Either way, could you please have some tension in you now that you’ve become a commander of one thousand? Though you might not want to hear it from a humble commander of one hundred like myself.”

“I’m properly listening, I really am.”

Noel brushed aside Riglette’s bristling as she gazed through her telescope at Amil’s main body of troops. After what appeared to be an imperial guard consisting of cavalry and infantry had passed by, a line of war wagons stretched out led by two men.”

“Is he in there, I wonder?”

“They’re probably worried about archers. It would be laughable if he was cut down by a hail of arrows just as the throne was in sight. Looks like we can’t hit them directly.”

“I’d thought of picking him off with arrows, though. If we want to confirm his death we’ll have to attack and take his head after all, eh?”

Noel could use a bow too, but it wasn’t her speciality. She wasn’t so sure that she could bring him down in a single blow, and her finger would slip a bit in the rain. Most people wouldn’t be bothered by that, but Noel couldn’t help but mind.

*It isn’t much, but rain is rain. I’m getting a bad feeling about this.*

The rain was not heavy enough to muddy the ground, only enough that occasional raindrops could be felt on the skin. Even still, bad was bad.

“It’s probably that big wagon there in the front. See, it’s got quite the flag.”

“It’s really obvious, isn’t it. They even went as far as to use gold leaf. It’s like he’s proclaiming to the world that he’s the commander.”

“Probably to raise morale, to show his allies that he doesn’t fear the enemy one bit.”

The wagon decorated in gold that announced the presence of the supreme commander drew nearer. Soon enough it would be time to signal Barbas and the seven hundred men that Noel had in waiting would charge down the hill to take Amil's head. The enemy may have numbered over fifty thousand, but Noel's troops held local superiority.

"No matter how you look at it, their defences are thin. Just a small amount of fog is out. This is a chance we might never get again. Mountainous terrain is the Gembu speciality. If we strike now we can get him for sure."

Kai nodded quietly.

"Uuum, what should we do? Hey, I've gotten a really bad feeling about this."

"What are you saying after all this time? We'll never get another chance like this for attack."

"That's true, but..."

"All that bait you sprinkled everywhere, was it not for today? If you won't make the decision, and give the signal... I will. Everyone, get ready!"

Riglette made as if to blow her bugle, and Noel reflexively stopped her and was met with a critical gaze from Riglette, but Noel's hand did not lift.

"What should we do?"

"Sir Noel, you are the commander. Whatever you decide, we shall abide with."

"Let's attack already! If you spend too much time worrying, the opportunity will pass. As if that white haired monkey wouldn't move if you didn't give the signal!"

Riglette spoke harshly, but Noel calmly evaluated the situation. She did technically agree. A second opportunity like this would probably never come again, and it was their last great chance to attack. The next battle would be on the open field and Amil would be guarded as well as usual, but, Noel thought, things were going way too well. Her enemy had fallen into each one of her traps, and had become more worn out every time. She wondered if they really hadn't noticed what she was up to. She wondered if the enemy really didn't know they were marching through the valley of the shadow of death. She wondered if Amil knew, having used a similar plan to trap Grohl.

Her head spun. She wondered what Cynthia would say; probably something along the lines of what Riglette had pointed out. They couldn't turn things around if this didn't work out. They had to. Cynthia would have already been attacking herself, as a chivalrous knight, but Cynthia she was not. Therefore, she had to come to a conclusion herself. No commander was fit for purpose if he only mimicked another. For ten seconds, Noel considered in silence before coming to a decision.

"Stop. We're withdrawing. Do not blow that bugle Riglette. If you start, you'll stop if it means knocking you out."

"W-what are you..."

"There's no time for questioning. We're withdrawing now. Send a messenger to Barbas at once."

They had to tell Barbas to cancel the attack. If she didn't give the signal, he wouldn't attack, but there was a chance that he would strike on his own if he saw a good opportunity. Barbas' decisiveness was both a strength and a weakness. She summoned her soldiers to send a messenger.

"W-wait! I want to know why. Even as a commander of one thousand, I can't let you advantage the enemy. Give me the reason for the cancellation of the assault!"

"I've got a bad feeling about it. Also, it's raining a bit, so I'm in a terrible mood."

"T-that's it? It's raining a bit, so you'll call off the assault?"

"It's good enough for me. If you're fine with lies, I could give you some better reasons, though. Time is of the essence now, so I'd rather not. If you get it, hurry up and send the messenger."

Riglette went beet red at Noel's response. Thinking that it wasn't working out, and just as Noel was about to plug her ears, she heard screams and angry voices from Barbas' location.

"W-what!?"

"Looks like we're the ones being ambushed after all."

"It is unfortunate, but Sir Noel's observations appear to be correct."

“It can’t be an ambush, not here, how!?”

“The enemy thought of how to move through here too, I bet. I’ve pulled them into lots of traps, but didn’t think they’d turn the tables on me this quickly. If they’ve come from the other side, it’d make this an easy twist, and that’s what it looks like.”

“A, a trap. Then we’ve been lured out!?”

“Looks like it... Riglette, and everyone else, I’m sorry that it didn’t work out.”

After bowing in apology to them all, Noel took her hand from the bugle and placed it on the bident beside her.

“Wait, you can’t be thinking of saving them? Reinforcing them with these numbers is unreasonable! I’m sorry, but it’s too late for that white haired monkey, so we should focus on getting ourselves out of here first. Isn’t that the correct judgement!?”

“The failure of the mission is my responsibility. I’ll never throw away my companions. Never. Barbas and the others are my precious companions, and besides, I’d be sad to be abandoned myself.”

“So because of that?”

“It’s more than enough reason to fight.”

Riglette shuddered at Noel’s words and Kai had nothing to add, so Noel gave her orders.

On the receiving end of the ambush, Barbas’ men had fallen into a state of chaos. It was only natural as they had thought to be the ones attacking from their lair. While the men of the White Ant Bloc immediately returned fire, the Coimbran soldiers were unfortunately slow. Noel corps had high morale but couldn’t keep up with the quick witted enemy’s movements, and were being beheaded by black clad enemy soldiers in the blink of an eye.

“Shit, they’re the Black Sun Cavalry! Those bastards should just be riding around on their horses! What a pain!”

A woman with a sharp longsword charged at Barbas screaming, “You’re the commander, you fuck? Then die! Kill all those who get in my way!”

Turning in a rush, Barbas readied his own longsword to meet her. Her armour was the same as all the others', but without a helmet on, her long brown hair stood out along with the fact that she was clearly very muscular, even in her armour. She could clearly wield her longsword with ease and speed.

"Recently all the ridiculously strong women have been after me. The captain, and now you! The fuck's wrong with the world!?!?"

"Your captain's Noel, right, you bastard? She's fuckin' killed a lot of my brothers, so I'll make sure to get her ass too!!"

"That won't do you bitch!"

"HA!? You're the bitch!"

Barbas repeatedly fended off the quivering angry blows from the woman, his hands shaking with the impacts, and found himself faltering at her unwavering smile.

*She's fuckin' strong! In terms of brute force she's about as strong as the captain, or maybe more!?*

"Ahaha, you won't win by only defending yourself! If you're one of the fiend's men, why not bite back!?"

Laughing, she struck and struck and struck, chipping away at the swords as her force steadily increased. At that rate, in only a few more blows, she could take Barbas' head, but even in pursuit, the other Black Sun Cavalry had their hands full, no, they themselves were being pushed back; as if their opponent was playing with them; as if they could be killed at any moment, but were being toyed with.

"I can get the location of the fiend from any number of people. Only, I'm going to kill you. Cause you talk so much shit."

"Heh, well too bad for them, bitch!"

"You shit!! I'm going to dye that white hair red!!"

She put all of her strength into a blow that came rushing down. Just as Barbas was sure that he had died, somebody kicked him flying from behind, and rushed at the woman. Knocked to the ground, she struck at it angrily as her nose bled from the

impact.

“Kh...”

“I was a little late, eh? But I won’t let you kill any more.”

Noel had murderously headbutted her with her iron headband.

“Heh, so you’re the fucking fiend, are you!? I, I am the second in command of the Black Sun Cavalry, Rebecca, and I will take revenge for my brethren!!”

“You’ve got a nosebleed, you know.”

“S-shut up!!”

Pointing to the tip of her own nose, Noel provoked Rebecca into a rage. The blood gushed from her nose ever stronger as her face went red and her concentration was broken by her rage.

“Wait. You’re too worked up and might die. I’ll handle this.”

“Falid! I’ll kill her for sure! I will!”

Falid thrust a finger at her as she objected.

“Silence, my orders are absolute. Go cut off their escape. We’ve managed to lure out the fiend, so all we have left is to clean up.”

“B-but!”

“What’s your answer?”

“U-understood... aaaah damn!”

The man wore a black helmet through which red hair could be seen. Red of a colour almost identical to Noel’s.

“Barbas, go help the others.”

“B-but if that muscle woman cut off the retreat, we’ll have nowhere to go, Captain!”

“Just go!”

Kicking Barbas away again, she sent him off, and turned to face the man.

“I’ve heard rumors of your valour. My name is Falid, and I am a Commander of One Thousand in the Baharan army, the commander of the Black Sun Cavalry. You are?”

“Coimbran Commander of One Thousand Noel. I’ve only just recently been promoted, though.”

“Congratulations.”

“Thank you very much!”

Noel smiled lightly and finally met eyes with the redheaded Falid as he had only been paying attention to her movements and bident up until that point. Though they seemed to be having a regular conversation, there wasn’t a wasted moment. Naturally the same could be said for Noel. Either one would go for the jugular as soon as an opening appeared.

“Oh, so you’re a fellow redhead?”

“Ahaha, that makes us match.”

“It is rather unexpected... well then, I should like to witness the fiend for myself. Let us carry out our duties!”

Falid raised his spear slowly as he spoke. Noel hurriedly knocked it aside and in that moment, Falid closed the distance to deliver a strong kick to Noel’s torso.

“Khh...”

“It seems like you see well, but your body isn’t responding... no, it is a strange sensation.”

Falid suddenly stopped his movements. Noel quickly regained her posture, and thrust her bident. Twisting himself out of the way as if he had known it was coming in advance, he brought down the but of his spear on her head. Avoiding a direct hit, it grazed her hair, but the blade of the weapon was coming back around for another attack which she also managed to evade somehow by throwing herself clumsily to the ground, but she didn’t see an opportunity for a counter attack. All she could see herself

doing in an attack was creating an opening through which she would be pierced.

“You avoided that? The fiend is truly fearsome.”

“Haa, ha!”

“You can follow my movements clearly, but unfortunately, your body can’t keep up. You seem tired, too... both of which remind me of something.”

As he had said, Noel was watching him closely. It was through careful observation that she had been able to survive so long. She concentrated as much as she could to observe her opponent’s movements. When she did, it felt like she could watch it in slow motion, and she was usually able to end a fight in one strike by attacking as it happened. It wore her out, but it was her best technique for dispatching her foes. She, however, could not see Falid’s movements so clearly despite her best efforts. In fact, it was almost as if he could see through her movements as he attacked. The man was incredibly dangerous.

“Aaaaah!!”

Noel shot out a faint and an attack without stopping as to prevent a counter attack. She hid her true blade amidst a flurry of lies in her final method of attack. If she couldn’t read her opponent, this was all she had left. Three, four, five blows flew out before her final attack. Wrenching her whole body around, she brought down a blow with all her might that aimed for Falid’s head. If any part of her bident could graze his helmet, it would knock him out, and there was nothing more that Noel could do.

“I can see my opponents well, too, so you’ll never beat me.”

It didn’t connect. Falid tossed aside his spear and easily drew his sword to deflect the blow, despite the staggering effect it should have had on a direct confrontation. He kicked her forcefully in the side, knocking her off balance and made to run her through before she recovered, but the blow never landed. Grinning like an animal, Noel had caught the blade which bit deep into her palm, and ran red with blood, the red droplets dripping onto her face. In that moment, a certain someone’s expression floated through Falid’s mind.

“You... you’re...”

“I lose when my death has been decided. If I can live even a second longer than you do,

I'll win, so don't run."

Noel put some strength into her other hand, and a blaze roared up in the nearby brush. The flames quickly swallowed up the nearby trees, and smoke rushed in between the soldiers. Clearly a man made fire, it wasn't going to be extinguished by the slight drizzle that day. Memories of the purgatory at Carness came roaring back.

"Fire? You can't plan to get your allies caught up in this too, can you!?! At this rate, you'll burn to death too!"

The flames made ovens of their armour, and they began to hear crackling sounds grow ever louder. They began to choke. Falid looked down at Noel's face as he remembered Carness. Her eyes were prepared for death. Some pain was nothing to a dead man. He thought to force the sword aside and grab the spear that lay beside her, but that would have been difficult. She'd probably jump on him, and take them both into the flames the second he tried for it. It was a situation in which he couldn't stop her, even if he knew what she would do.

"It'd be lonely to die by myself, but I'm fine if its with everyone else, so I'll have you lead the way."

She had begun to laugh like a madman. Even the Black Sun Cavalry groaned under the heat of the flames. Death was not something that they feared, but meeting their ends there in the flames wasn't something to be joked about. All their eyes turned to Falid, Rebecca's too.

"Don't run. You'll die here too."

"I'm sorry, but I can't die here! Black Sun Cavalry, retreat at once!"

"You fuckers, fight dirty just cause you can't fuckng win! Fucking burn!"

Dropping his sword and moving quickly, Falid and the other Black Sun Cavalry made haste down the hill. Only the fallen Coimbrans remained in the blaze that was thick with smoke, and it was difficult to tell if they were alive or dead.

"C-captain. I appreciate yer comin' to save us, but I'd rather not burn to death."

"Ahaha, me neither. I don't like things this hot."

“Weren’t we all going down together?”

“Ah, that was a bluff. Nobody wants to burn to death after all.”

Just as Noel thought things were about to get really really bad, she heard a familiar tut over her own ragged breathing. Riglette and the others had come with thick cloths over their faces, and soaked in water.

“There’s something wrong with your head! Burning to death with the enemy is insane!”

“But you came for me didn’t you?”

“Be, be quiet! There’s no time to think!!”

Riglette’s eyes went wide and she started muttering. Rushing into the flames, seemed to have taken a toll on her.

“S-she’s going to complain l-like a baby until she dies, this one will.”

“Shut it! Hurry and get the living out of here! I’m taking this idiot! Kai’s trying to hold back the flames, but that won’t last!”

As Noel was being roughly carried by Riglette, she called out to Barbas, “The Black Sun Cavalry is really strong, so I couldn’t think of anything else. We didn’t have enough soldiers, either. Sorry.”

“N-no, it couldn’t be h-helped.”

Noel indicated to Riglette who’s idea it was to use the combustion stones. It was the place where Barbas had been lurking. Naturally it was going to engulf their side as well, but they didn’t think they were going to get away from the Black Sun Cavalry anyway. Noel had done her best, but her failure, she probably doomed a great many companions. That was why she had tried to rescue as many as she could by herself. She had wanted to at least burn a path out, and had hoped for them to be saved. It wasn’t an order, but a wish, and yet Riglette had come. For that, Noel was very grateful.

“It was a bluff, but it wasn’t a lie that I’m not lonely when I’m with you all.”

“It’s an honour.”

“Shut it, you fools! Just keep those mouths closed!! Do you think I’ll let you die now that I’ve come all this way!”

Riglette retreated desperately. Noel watched the faces she knew amidst the thick smoke in the forest. She saw the corpse of the commander of the military police, bloody and with an expression of pain. He had been a haughty man, but was surprisingly entertaining. She had wanted to speak with him more, but was never going to get another chance again. Soon enough, the bodies would be incinerated. They didn’t have the time to take them away.

*Sorry I couldn’t die with you. I’ll remember the promise, everyone.*

Noel mourned for the commander of the military police and all the other men who had died. Imperceptible tears began to well up in her eyes, and she quickly wiped them away and hurried her feet along. Consciousness fading, she ran and ran so as not to be left behind by Riglette or her companions. If she couldn’t, she would be alone again.

And so the battle of Yavits pass came to a close. A minor skirmish overall, it was not particularly of note. Amil had prepared human shadows from the start, and all the men under his banner were impostors. It would have been pure foolishness to behave so conceitedly in such an infamous territory. The imperial guard would be able to rush out from the wagons and exterminate the enemy on the off chance that Noel decided to attack. Displeased with having to have fled from the enemy, Falid was readily congratulated for driving off the rumored fiend, and applauded for his bravery. When told of her use of fire, Amil had remarked that the fiend was truly to be feared. Having passed the most perilous stretch, the Baharan army resumed its westward march toward Madress. The yet to be repaired Rockbell district lay before them, after which lay the capital. It was plain to see that the war was coming to an end.

# Chapter 32

## The Clown's Tears of Broken Dreams

Having withdrawn from Yavits pass, Noel corps made its way back to Madress via the highway through Rockbell. Having thought it would be troublesome for Noel to return triumphantly to the city, Amil ordered the obstruction of their march. The Black Sun Cavalry moved to disrupt them, but they were faced with traps and ambush, so the harassment was accomplished with an ethos of never chasing too far. Though it seemed passive, Amil had strongly warned them that Noel was likely to use herself as bait as they traveled. Unlikely as it was, if he was to lose his right hand man, Falid, it would mar even an otherwise flawless victory, and the common consensus was that they had no real need to fervently pursue. Wilm was sent ahead with orders to siege the city of Madress where Grohl had confined himself. He would work with the Ribeldam navy to pressure Grohl into accepting an ultimatum. Of course, they would assault if it was refused, but he wanted to take the city bloodlessly. Madress had the continent's westernmost harbour. Together with Ribeldam, it would be the platform from which his Mundonovo expeditions were to be launched. If they could, they would use the men, supplies, and facilities just as they were.

Noel, on the other hand, was forced to change her route to Madress when faced with enemy harassment. The men were wounded, and had decreased in number to eight hundred. Even their commander Noel had injured her hand. They were unable to simply force their way back. Prevented from making her triumphal return to Madress, Noel changed their destination to Bolbo, the city just north of Coimbra that had managed to remain under their control. That aside, the local lord had already betrayed Coimbra and fled with any useful supplies as it wasn't a particularly strategically important location, and the region was slowly declining as the money from the Bolk mines dried up. Bahar had no reason to take it, and even the Gembites to the north had stopped their advance at the border outposts, coincidentally turning the region into a demilitarized zone.

Noel corps faced countless skirmishes at the hands of the traitorous local lords as Amil had placed a great bounty on her. Blinded by the dazzling rewards, one had gathered up about one hundred men in a rush and led the small force out triumphantly.

“They have so few men, but they always attack head on. Do we really look that weak to them?”

Noel crossed her arms. A direct attack was insane unless the numbers were almost even. There was even a possibility of a crushing defeat even with an ambush if it was laid poorly so she simply could not fathom why they would rush towards defeat by a numerically superior foe repeatedly.

“Yeah, he just doesn’t know how to fight. He’s underestimat’ us because he thinks we’re on the run.”

“In Gemb, we call it hunting. Our peasantry takes their weapons, heads, and everything else.”

It was a practice of killing fleeing foes and reappropriating their belongings. If a man was able to kill the commander and present his head, he would be rewarded.

“I get it, but it can’t be helped if the tables are turned.”

“The local lords are only needed to make money and welcome guests. Why would they be good at fightin’?”

“You idiot. That’s just prejudice. There are plenty of capable local lords.”

“Too bad I’ve never met one. Local lords are nobles aren’t they? Well, nobles are all shit. Like you, for example.”

Barbas snorted as he spoke, and Riglette gave her rebuttal as her lips twitched, “Sir Cynthia’s a noble, too. Just thought I’d let you know.”

“She’s a good knight despite her nobility. Hehe, she’s an exception.”

“I can’t let that slide.”

“I think that’s about enough for now. Riglette, sound the retreat. We’re falling back at once!”

With those words, Noel had them feigning retreat. They led the enemy to a location they had prepared in advance to catch the whole force with an ambush from both flanks. Without much of a detailed plan, they intended on giving the small scale enemy

force a good dusting. Nobles commanding for the first time with no combat experience weren't a match for Noel corps. Once pincered, they immediately fell into disarray, and began to flee. Noel used her bow to take the life of a horse on which rode a pompous man. This action was repeated many times.

"W-wait. I'm from a family dating back to the founding of the nation of Coimbra..."

"It's better if you don't say anything unnecessary. I've heard lots about the founding fathers. Soooo, you were saying?"

"Right, well let's not waste time, and just do it. Look, this way, please."

"What are you doing!?! S-stop! Please stop!!"

At Riglette's order, the soldiers crucified him, and lit the base of the stake on fire as he screamed. Its flames spread slowly toward the body of the noble before touching the straw they had piled up and roaring to life, wreathing him in fire. The shrieks and screams of the prisoners and the noble echoed all around as a wretched smell wafted in the breeze. After a while, the noble's voice disappeared. Once the prisoners had been petrified, Noel entrusted their release to Barbas. Most likely, they wouldn't fight again for another few months.

"If he didn't want to die he could have just stayed obediently in his land. Why did he even come out?"

"Chasing someone strong probably made him feel strong. Well, this is how that turned out."

"Hmph, the captain's infamy should be spreading about now. And how striking at her will lead to a fiery introduction to hell. The fools should stop showing up now."

Riglette looked proud of her work, and asked what they thought of it.

"Yeah, I don't know if it was the best method. The attacks don't seem to be decreasing. It's like only the infamy is spreading."

Noel tilted her head as she thought. Bothered by the incessant harassment, Noel had asked Riglette for ideas, unable to think up anything special herself. The first thing that came to mind was to raze the cities of any lords who dared attack her, but it would have made Barbas furious, so Noel didn't bring it up. That was when Riglette had

thought up a brilliant idea: burn the captured lords to show what happened to those who underestimated them. Apparently, she had already done that to the previous lord on her own. Noel thought she'd try it out, but the skirmishes continued on as always.

“No, the attacks are abating without doubt. Once they've seen this, their morale will plummet, so everything is going well.”

“Really? It seems like it's just extra trouble. It's a pain to gather the firewood every time.”

“Everything is going fine.”

Riglette lacked persuasive power when she said that from the position of the person who didn't have to gather the materials. Barbas wanted Riglette burned at the stake, but Noel had rejected his proposal. A skirmish broke out with a nearby outpost on the following day, seemingly having turned traitor. They were turned aside with ease. The day after that, the roasted lord's younger brother came seeking revenge, and met his death: stabbed. Riglette was disappointed, and tutted many times.

Making examples did appear to be effective, but unlike Carness, there weren't many eye witnesses. Now there were only the people of the city and the soldiers in it, and it would take some time for the rumors to spread beyond there. Deep down, Noel thought that any results would be subtle. Meeting Noel's gaze, Riglette told her that it was a long term strategy, and reminded her that even a journey of a thousand miles began with a single step, impressing her with such forward thinking, eliciting praise. The praise was met with a satisfied tut.

After ten days of this and that, Noel finally set course for Bolbo. As the local lord had fled, they were able to make use of his empty mansion. The first order of the day, as far as Noel was concerned, was to shore up the poor defences of the town. Hiring local labour, they cut trees for a palisade, and dug a moat to buy some time. Without any sort of defences, the enemy cavalry would have been able to easily stampede through the streets. Though they had no intentions of mounting a desperate defence, it did serve to deter skirmishes launched by the Black Sun Cavalry.

“Hey, why aren't the townsfolk taking shelter?”

“The ones who've remained here are all the ones who've given up. They live day to day without thinking of the future. They have no intentions of leaving now, so isn't it fine

to let them do as they please?”

The city of Bolbo had once been a gold rush town. These people were the ones who had lived in poverty through the glory years. Those who hoped for revival had already moved away. Once she knew, Noel let them do as they pleased, and then, she gave Barbas an order aside from strengthening the defences.

“Make more combustion stones? Well, yeah, but it’ll take time.”

“That’s not a problem, just, could you try and make as many as you can?”

“What are you going to burn with them all? You... you can’t be planning on burning the land around Madress while its under siege?”

Scorched earth tactics would harm the Baharans, but would likely result in even more Coimbran deaths. She had no intention of such a thing.

“No! If I did that, it’d probably kill Cynthia and the young master, too. Can you have a look at this for a bit?”

After angrily denying it, Noel took out a small jar from her pouch. A rope extended from the lid of the jar, and it was also strung together with several others. After lighting the chord on fire with her bident, she twirled the bundle and threw it far. Several seconds later, the sound of an explosion rang out, and the jars burst open, raining flaming stones upon the surrounding land. Fortunately, nobody was near it, but had somebody been, he would have likely been scalded.

“T-that’s impressive. I bet the enemy’d have to pick their jaws off the floor, they’d be so surprised.”

“I want to know why you didn’t think to throw them yourselves, considering you used them in the mines.”

“You know, if we threw them around in that highly forested place, it’d have made one hell of a bush fire. We banned their use outside, and we never really wanted to kill the Coimbran soldiers. The chances of accidents were high, too. We made sure to be as careful as possible with them outside.”

“I get it. I guess you really had no choice.”

Noel nodded at his prudent measures. If they used them too often, the enemy would also probably get suspicious and begin to investigate. They had worked to disguise it with oil and hay, but it wouldn't be strange if the enemy noticed sometime soon. Before that happened, it was best for them to deliver a crushing blow.

“So, we're going to mass produce these?”

“Yup. It doesn't have the power to kill -yet-, but it'll surely surprise them. I figured we might use the shock to clear a path through the encirclement and enter the city. We can also use them as provocation. Tossing them in while they're asleep would definitely be a bother to them.”

Noel tossed another one of the jars to Barbas, who caught it in a bit of a panic. It was empty, though, so it wasn't a problem.

Noel had been thinking of a way to break the encirclement of Madress ever since she had first heard of its completion. Above all, she wanted to go to Cynthia, and knew she had to fight to protect Elgar. She had to keep her word. The spark came when she had forcefully dragged Riglette into a discussion of the matter. It had to be the combustion stones used to take advantage of the enemy's fear of fire. On top of that, the Bolk mines were right before their eyes. She dubbed the devices: Noel type throwing shells. Barbas took the White Ant Bloc to begin mining the combustion stones at once. They had about a month to mass produce as much as they could.

Incidentally, while that was underway, a Baharan messenger had come to them, high-handedly requesting their surrender; an offer Noel refused with both her word and foot. The site of which caused Noel corps to give a great cheer, and for some reason, the mood spread even to the townsfolk. Noel nodded in satisfaction as the men had not shrunk back in the face of their situation, but Riglette merely tutted and sighed deeply.



The meeting room in Madress Castle had a completely different mood about it. Wilm stood before Grohl's sickly pallor and sunken cheeks as an envoy of Bahar. His uniform bore the glorious Horsheido Sun instead of the Coimbran Scales, as if declaring he was no longer a servant of Coimbra.

“It has truly been a while, Lord Grohl. I don't believe that we have met since the Trais.

It is good to see you safe.”

Grohl chewed his lips in anger as Wilm mocked him.

“Wilm, you bastard, you dare to show yourself before me? If you have any sense of shame, kill yourself right now, you traitor!”

“You worked against us even as our highest commander! Sir Wilm has none of the honour of a knight!”

“Know you no shame, traitor!?”

The retainers too, threw both words and glares at him. Among them, Cynthia’s blood was boiling.

“Suicide is a bit much. My loyalty and my pride are in this emblem of the sun. Therein lies the proof of my correct judgement. The house of Grambull has been given the highest honours. I have nothing to be ashamed about.”

“How shameless. Was this not all your doing, Wilm!? You led me to defeat, and wag your tail for Amil! Just when did you betray me, you bastard!?”

“Hahaha, ‘led’. You were the one to fight. You were the one who implemented my plans. The responsibility therefore falls at your feet, as the supreme commander. You have no grounds from which to accuse me. Oh, and why don’t we leave when I betrayed you to your imagination.”

Wilm gave a snort. Unable to bear it any longer, Cynthia’s hand reached for her sword.

“I’ll fix this right now, you traitor! I’ll judge you right now!”

“Hmph, so you are going to kill me, a good friend of your father? He would not approve. The only reason you rose so high as a woman was because of me.”

“Silence! If my father was here, he would do the same as I! I’ll take your head, and send your soul to him as an offering!”

“I understand your sentiment, Sir Cynthia, but calm down! While it is true that Sir Wilm should be hated as a traitor, but he is an envoy of Bahar right now! We must hear him out to advance the peace talks!”

“B-but!”

“Temperance!!”

Perius’ word very nearly brought Cynthia to a stop by itself, but she had to grind her teeth through the rage to stay her trembling hand.

“Hehe, I am presently acting as the temporary viceroy of Coimbra. To put it simply: you are the traitors, and not I. That is simply the truth.”

“Sir Wilm, please further the talks. We should not waste any more time than we already have.”

Cynthia was not alone in her anger, and Perius’ response was a testament to that, but they had to advance the talks. They were to hear out the conditions, and Grohl would make his decision. That decision was to leave things to Perius.

“Lord Amil of Bahar requests three things for peace: First, open the gates to Madress and allow entry to our forces as well as the Ribeldam navy without resistance.”

“Then?”

Wilm looked displeased as he read out the next term, “Second: disarm all Coimbran soldiers at once, and desist from mounting another attack. This has been adapted to account for Noel Corps’ position in Bolbo. Amil does not believe that peace can be maintained if Noel does not surrender.”

Wilm himself had wanted her head, but Amil had rejected his proposition as it would have forced her to descend upon the surrounding fields.

“The final one?”

“Third: Grol Wardka will take responsibility for all his sins, and accept full judgement for the war. If you comply, the lives of your wife, children, and officers will be spared. You may confirm this if you wish.”

Wilm took a letter from his breast pocket and handed it to Grohl.

Looking it over with a drained expression, Grohl sought confirmation with a rough voice, “Will the lives of all my officers and men, as well as Sarah and Elgar be spared?”

There's no mistake here, Wilm?"

"Of course not. Hehe, everyone who isn't you will be spared. Only, you will die as the man who began a pointless war and brought death to many homes. You will be the only one labeled a foolish traitor by the Horsheido Empire. Even one as incompetent as you can do that as your final duty."

"..."

Wilm scoffed as he continued, "The lives of your son and wife will be spared, I, Wilm, guarantee it. I keep my word, so you can rest assured."

In place of Grohl's silence, Cynthia spoke up, "That's unbelievable! We cannot accept those conditions! It is true that Coimbra began the war, but the original cause came at the hands of Bahar! The whole matter should be impartially investigated!"

"It's fine, Cynthia."

"You cannot accept sole responsibility, Viceroy! The dead will not be avenged!"

"It's... fine. There is no need to sacrifice any more life. I'll go to the dead and ask for forgiveness."

"Viceroy!!"

Cynthia tried to change his mind, but his face made it clear that he had only hardened his resolve.

"If my death alone can spare the lives of my men, then it is for the best. Above all, Sarah and Elgar would normally be considered implicated in the crime, but they can be spared. I'll... surrender to Amil and will submit myself to my punishment. It will be my final act as viceroy."

He nodded weakly. He had already accepted death, already forfeit his pride, already lost sight of his ambitions; he had already shattered his self confidence.

"Noel, however, is still fighting. She will not give up. She is moving on behalf of the young master, and has promised to search for happiness with him. Will she not oppose this to the very end!?"

“I... am very sorry for Noel. Her greatest misfortune was the lord she served. Everything is my fault. I truly could not bear to face her.”

“The fight is not over yet. The twin consecutive walls of Madress are strong, and cooperating with Noel in Bolbo, we can continue the fight another year. If we prove that we are prepared to fight to the end, we can probably sue for better terms!”

Noel would never break her word. Knowing that, Cynthia once more appealed to Grohl. They still had ten thousand men in Madress, and if they dug in, they would be able to buy a year, even faced with a large assaulting force. They would use that time to sue for better terms.

“You are still young, Cynthia. You are very gallant just like your late father, but even if you hold out here, Lord Amil will not back down. Try to think about how many lives would be lost in futile resistance. Madress is a formidable castle, and even incompetent command could hold out here for six months, but the plebeians would suffer en masse. Are you prepared to accept responsibility for that?”

“What are you saying, you traitor!? Just how many Coimbrans have died because of your cowardice!?!?”

Wilm spoke out to persuade her, “Everything I have done was for the development of Coimbra, and the lives of its people. The death toll is regrettable, but I wanted to end the war as quickly as possible for their sakes. I, of course, intend to suitably compensate the families of the dead.”

He was fond of her and had no intentions of letting her die in the war. He wouldn't harm the child of his late friend no matter how much she berated him.

“How shameless! I'll never accept it!”

“Think it out calmly. It's true that you can gain time by working with Noel's force in Bolbo, but this is obviously an unwinnable war for you now. You should know this having fought on the front. I know you want to fight to the end, but is that really the correct thing for a knight to do here? Don't get caught up in your emotions, and think it through!”

“Khh...”

Grohl looked up at Cynthia as she chewed her lips, “It's fine, Cynthia, it's fine. You, and

all those who have proved their loyalty by staying with me to the end, have my heartfelt gratitude for your services... Wilm, tell Amil that I accept all of his conditions. We'll open the castle gates tomorrow, and disarm the troops. I'll leave the persuasion of Noel to you, Cynthia."

"B-but, I don't think that Noel will comply!"

"If she won't be persuaded, we will pay with the lives of my wife and child. Please beg for the lives of the men in the castle. It can't be helped if she refuses to follow my orders. I'm in no position to judge her. Don't blame her for it," he muttered with a face as pale as death.

Exhausted were his plans, ambitions, and spirits. He had completely given up.

"Hehe, it is a redemptive decision, Lord Grohl. It may well be the best decision you've made as viceroy of Coimbra. You have my sincerest admiration."

Wilm smirked and clapped his hands, but Grohl only glared at him.

"Wilm, I may be insufficient, but one day your payment will come. Never forget it."

"Then I shall tell you a different story. You were the one who first betrayed my expectations, no, I should say that you continued to betray them. You are the only one to reap what you've sown. I said this before, but I have done nothing worthy of condemnation."

"..."

"Your misfortune was that you were given a load which you were not fit to bear, but do not worry, that burden will soon be relieved. Please leave that matter to us Coimbrans. We will revive, and show you once more our former glory. Make sure to watch us closely from down there. Oh, and your wife and child will be given enough to live out their lives in exile."

With a laugh, Wilm glanced at the silent Perius and the rest of his audience before exiting the grand hall. Grohl too rose unsteadily to his feet, and was helped out of the room by his retainers. The faces of the remaining retainers told of how they were resigned to their fates. Unable to accept it, Cynthia stood stock still for some time before finally relenting and setting out to fulfill her duty. Had only she beheaded Wilm when she could have, her mood would have been as clear as day, but she had to

consider the ten thousand lives at stake. The fight had not ended. She knew that Noel had probably already started something, and had perhaps even been beheaded already. Her simplicity made her clearly understandable.

Cynthia truly wanted to fight together with Noel, but Grohl had already made up his mind. It was painfully clear that he now only wanted to avoid wasting any more lives, and to spare Sarah and Elgar from death.

*It can't be helped, I suppose. This world is truly unbearable, isn't it Noel?*

With a deep breath, Cynthia hardened a single resolve.

One hour after the negotiations, Cynthia departed from the castle with one hundred of her men. In order to allow the message to be passed on, the encirclement was temporarily loosened to allow her through. Her destination was the symbol of the glory and decline of Coimbra, the city which held Noel, the city of Bolbo.

# Chapter 33

## Grace to the Winner, Death to the Loser

Cynthia corps arrived in Bolbo. Even on the approach, it was obvious just how much they had fortified the city. It was surrounded by a watery moat, sandbags were piled up in place of walls; the heights and depths combined to considerably obstruct any assault made without appropriate preparations. Watchtowers had been erected to observe each city district. In just a short amount of time, they had transformed the fallen city into a battle-ready fortress with fluttering twin hammer banners to demoralize any attacking force.

*She's prepared to fight to the end after all.*

Cynthia corps carefully advanced as to not be mistaken for an enemy by the bowmen of the city. Sure enough, a warning bell began to sound as soon as they had been spotted by one of the towers, and Noel's men lined up along the sandbags at once with bows trained on the approaching force.

Cynthia went at the head of her troop, flying the Coimbran scales, and shouted, "I am Commander of One Thousand, Cynthia of the Coimbran Army! I am not your enemy, gentlemen, please open the gate!"

After a short while, the men lowered their bows in relief and opened the gate. Cynthia ordered her men to stand by, and stepped forth alone. Five thousand Baharan men were waiting behind Cynthia's, ready to encircle the position if she proved unable to persuade Noel as it seemed that Amil had considered the possibility of Noel suicidally continuing the fight. Their orders were to hold their ground no matter what.

As Cynthia entered the city, she spotted Noel who almost leapt upon her with a joyous expression.

"Long time no see! I'm happy we managed to meet again! I was worried that it might not've really been you at first, so I aimed my bow at you, sorry, Cynthia," Noel rattled off her greetings.

Cynthia quietly assured Noel that, "It's only natural given the circumstances, so you

were justified in that... I'm glad we got to meet, too."

"You're as stiff as always! It's not even a problem since I'm the highest ranking person in the town. Hey, look, look! You got promoted just like I did. See, you're a commander of one thousand! Now we're the same again!"

Noel happily showed both her insignia and her teeth as she grinned away.

"That's true. I didn't think we'd even out so quickly. As expected of someone feared as a fiend... though this isn't the time to be congratulating each other."

Cynthia had spoken in a heavy tone, and she could not laugh again. Considering what she had to say, she couldn't even smile, and it seemed that Noel had picked up on it as her own laughter was replaced with a sad gaze in an instant. Kai, Barbas, and Riglette were dubious too from beside her.

"Hey, I'd heard that Madress had been encircled. Was that just a rumor?"

"..."

"Did you force your way here? That makes me happy, you know. I haven't been rescued often, myself."

Noel offered a dry laugh. Planting her bident in the ground, she looked to Barbas with a signal to shut the gate, most likely to prevent a weakness from being exploited. Once more she raised her hand and the soldiers atop the sandbags lined themselves up.

"I thought you'd notice. You've got a good eye after all."

"Soldiers that aren't yours are hiding somewhere out there, right? I'd prefer it if they were reinforcements. It'd make breaking back into Madress a breeze if you brought enough men; if we can get to Madress, that is."

Cynthia decided that it was best not to lie. If she did anything else, it could easily be perceived as a breakdown of negotiations by the Baharan forces.

"I'm going to say it clearly, Noel. I haven't come here to rescue you. I'm here to insist upon your surrender."

Her words rippled through the surrounding men. Given their high morale, many of

them appeared dissatisfied, and it wasn't long before boos and jeers began. Obviously, none of them were the type to surrender. No man interested in surrender would have holed himself up in that fortress. There had been plenty of opportunity to run during its construction. Noel held up a hand to quiet her irate subordinates, and trod a single step firmly forward with her favourite warhammer at her waist, and her bident in the ground. Cynthia prepared for the impossible. She didn't believe it would happen, but she had no intention of dying just yet. That would only doom them all.

"Ahaha, you joke sometimes, too, eh Cynthia? That's the first one I've heard you make since we met."

"I hate to say it... but this isn't a joke. The viceroy had decided to surrender, and I was chosen as the messenger to persuade you to stop fighting."

Noel stamped on the ground indignantly at Cynthia's admonishing tone.

"Surrender? I'll never surrender."

"Noel..."

"I hate surrender. I'd hate to die without a fight. I've decided that I'll fight to the end with everyone here."

"That's right! We're Noel Corps! Even unto death!"

"If Pops and the captain stick it out, those Baharans ain't nothin'!"

"The White Ant Bloc can fight in these mines for years!"

"We aren't just the White Ant Bloc, we'll show them the power of the Coimbran army too!"

The men were in an uproar after hearing Noel's words.

"See? They're all raring to go, so it's fine. You should fight with us, Cynthia. First we have to break the encirclement, and then we have to rescue the viceroy and the young master. Then we'll wait in the mines for a good opportunity. If we keep fighting until they make a sound, we'll eventually win."

Noel was discussing tactics, but it was dubious as to whether or not she even believed

she could do it. Her face clearly lacked confidence, but she wasn't going to accept defeat. Even if she couldn't break the encirclement, she could take to the fields and cause great pain to Bahar with a guerilla campaign. Aiming for the weak outposts, they would be a raiding party of fiends. The proof that they could do it lay in the countless towns they had already conquered.

"The gates of Madress have already opened, and the Coimbran Army has laid down its arms. Coimbra is already under Baharan control. The viceroy has decided to bear all the shame himself, and accept his death to save the people, his soldiers, and most of all, his wife and child."

"Why doesn't he fight to the end? He could buy more than a year in Madress! And we're still fighting!"

"He wants to minimise casualties! Do you understand? If you resist any further, the viceroy's decision will become moot. Your promises will be scrapped, and his wife and child will both forfeit their lives!"

Noel spoke bitterly now, "Why? Why would that be my fault!? I don't want to. I won't surrender, I won't die without resistance!"

It was childish, but it was very much her style. She hadn't lost. She hadn't lost, but she had to surrender. She worked it over in her soul.

"One of the terms of the agreement spares all the lives of Coimbran soldiers. You won't be killed."

Noel muttered pleadingly, "I don't trust them. More importantly, come on, let's fight together. We'll win for sure. I've got an amazing weapon. If we use it right, we can fry all the Baharan soldiers. Then we'll save the young master, and work hard, and we'll become the next major generals."

At the sight of her frail state, Cynthia's heart wavered for a moment. She hadn't accepted the agreement herself yet, but it couldn't be helped. Nobody would become happy if they fought any longer. They had to respect the last wishes of the viceroy and allow his wife and child to survive.

"I'm sorry, but I can't do that. I will respect the viceroy's decision. Madress has already opened its gates so there is no other way. You too should comply with your orders. Throw down your weapons, and open the gates!"

“No. It’s no joke. No matter what you say, Cynthia, I won’t follow that kind of order, ever.”

“I see... then it cannot be helped. I will behead you here!”

Cynthia unsheathed her blade as did the surrounding soldiers in a rush. Noel still hadn’t readied herself, eyes wide without understanding.

“You’re still my friend right, Cynthia? We’re friends right? Right?”

“You are my companion, and my best friend. At the very least, I think you are irreplaceable.”

She spoke the truth with no equivocation. They hadn’t known each other long, but there wasn’t another person she was as close to in the world. Noel messed around, and Cynthia reprimanded her. At some point she had begun to enjoy the time they spent together, and she really didn’t want to turn her blade on her.

“But I am a knight of Coimbra. If you will not comply no matter what, I must kill you. I will become a demon to protect the people.”

“F-friends don’t kill each other. I mean, we’re friends, so... so, turning your blade on me, is just... not right!”

Noel raised her warhammer with trembling hands.

“W-why don’t we calm down and talk, Cynthia? There ain’t no need to fight the captain! That’s just stupid!”

Cynthia scowled at Barbas as he ran between them.

“I’m sorry, but we don’t have the time for that. The Baharan army is watching the negotiations from just outside the city. If I do not return soon, they will launch an all out assault.”

“If... if I really did say that it wasn’t going to happen, would you really kill me Cynthia? Then how could you call me your best friend!? That’s not fair!!”

“Once I kill you... I’m going to follow. I can’t let my friend pass alone. If you kill me, on the other hand, it couldn’t be helped. We’d have both merely been acting out our

convictions without ill will.”

“T-that’s...”

Noel’s face twisted in despair, eyes dimming, and the warhammer in her hand began to violently tremble.

“Noel, this is the end. Throw down your swords and surrender!”

Cynthia’s scowl turned to Noel who was stepping down from a kill for the first time. Her quaking figure was full of openings and the usual intimidating aura was nowhere to be seen, and Cynthia knew she had an opportunity to kill her. She would have been able to land a fatal blow before the surrounding soldiers could intervene.

“Aaahh...”

Noel’s gaze wandered, a pained sigh escaped from her lips, and powerlessly, she collapsed.

“You’re really unfair, Cynthia.”

“I know... It was the only thing I could do to stop you.”

“If I had killed you, and then the young master was executed, I would have violated two promises at the same time. I couldn’t do that, how could I!? That’s... that’s not fair!!”

“I’m... sorry.”

“Uhhhh, uwwwaaaaaa!”

Limp as she lay, Noel began to cry like a child, her full body shuddering. Something wasn’t right; something was wrong, but Noel didn’t know what. She had given it her all; done everything within her power to do; despite how they laughed at her, despite how they were angry with her, despite how they looked down on her, she had put all of her blood sweat and tears into somehow attaining victory. After all she had done, what remained was this: the sense in her soul that the world was unfair. It was unfair, but the pain remained pain, and the regret remained regret, and as she thought, the tears became unstoppable.

“Again... it rains?”

Cynthia felt cold water on her cheek as she accepted the sword. The pitter-patter of the raindrops echoed all around, growing to a roar in the blink of an eye. Barbas, Kai, and the other soldiers looked to the heavens amidst the downpour, and Riglette averted her eyes in frustration as Noel continued her hoarse cries as if to beg for forgiveness as she lay. Cynthia placed her Coimbran cloak over Noel, and could do no more than to gently pat her sopping red hair.

She personally took the news of the fiend’s surrender to the Baharan force. Cynthia told them that she needed two hours for preparation, and the Baharan commander reluctantly agreed. Noel corps sent over a twin hammer banner as a sign of surrender. As it was highly prized by both the commander and her men, it was the ultimate disgrace to hand it over to the enemy. Knowing that, the Baharan commander was able to put his misgivings aside for two hours.

Noel summoned Barbas and Kai after calming down a bit to them she intended to have them escape after the rain let up. As a Gembite, Kai did not want to get captured, and Barbas had been an insurgent from the start. The two of them risked death in capture. The two of them lined up, prepared to go with her to the end.

“Do you remember your promise with me?”

“Yup. I’ll head over to Gemb to play. I’ll do my best to make sure it happens.”

“It’s fine if you remember. I pray for your safety.”

Kai led his men out the North gate, and Barbas decided to take his men to conceal themselves in the Bolk mountain range. Noel gave Barbas her favourite bident just before he left.

“Hey, will you keep this?”

“Why are you giving it to me? I’ll have to politely refuse if it’s just a memento, since you’re going to come back alive.”

“It’s a reminder that we’ll meet again. I can still fight even without it, so...”

“Even if you say that, I can’t do it. If somebody else held it, he’d probably get burned, Captain.”

“It’s fine, it’s fine! It’ll probably be okay this time!”

Noel forced it into his hands. He braced for the heat, but didn’t feel any, managing to touch it even though it was a cursed weapon that burned anyone who wasn’t Noel. It was, however, so unusually heavy that he didn’t think he’d ever be able to use it.

“It’s heavy. I don’t think I’ll be able to use it after all.”

“Ahaha, it might be difficult, but do your best. Also, if I die...”

“Captain!!”

“This is just if. If I die, throw it into the sea. It’ll be a problem if you don’t. I’m sure we’ll meet again.”

She aggressively patted Barbas on the shoulder.

Taken to Madress almost like a criminal with her feet shackled, and her hands bound with a sturdy rope, Noel met with Amil as he sat in what once was Grohl’s throne. Amil, Mills and the other Baharan commanders were lined up, followed by the traitorous Coimbrans Wilm, Leue, Gaddis —now with an artificial leg— and the rest.

“We have captured Noel Bosheit!”

“Well done.”

The guards pressed her forcefully onward with their spears. Her fearsome reputation had spread well among the Baharan soldiers, and the tales of the purgatory of Carness were enough to cause the lower ranking men to quiver in fear, hence they were arrayed more than necessary in case they had to defend themselves.

“So you are the one feared as the fiend? You have caused me quite a lot of trouble, but as far as I can tell by looking, you are just a girl. Falid, are you sure there’s no mistake?”

“No mistakes, sir. She has tremendous ability, enough to easily contend with the Black Sun Cavalry. She survived my spear.”

“Hmmm, then did she really kill all those Baharan soldiers and Coimbran lords? If she did, the crime is worthy of death.”

Amil gazed down at her with great interest. She stood, bound, with an expressionless face that betrayed no emotion. No signs of fear or indications that she would beg for her life were visible for she simply knelt silently with her eyes downcast. Her fiery red hair showed her true thoughts.

“But could not your sins be forgiven if you work for me? I will grant you the position of commander of one thousand, and some land in Coimbra.”

His words shocked Wilm and Gaddis because she really had committed crimes worthy of capital punishment.

“Please wait! We cannot trust her. She is a monster that we cannot predict. I believe she must be dealt with now to uproot the seeds of evil.”

“I... agree with Wilm. We cannot make use of a fiendish person. That much would be obvious had you seen Carness! The fiend should be dealt with harshly to appease the souls of the dead!”

The Baharan commanders found themselves smiling wryly at the statements from Wilm and Gaddis. At the end of the day, traitors were traitors. They had much more sympathy for Noel’s fight to the end than they did for those two dishonourable men. She had killed many of their coworkers, but such was the way of war. Though they knew to fear her, they felt sympathy when they saw her pitiful state.

“What do you find strange? Have I said something wrong?”

“Hahaha... My apologies. I could not help myself since I cannot trust you traitors. I just couldn’t hold it in.”

“Hehe, it does make one want to laugh. Just how much will they flap their tongues?”

Wilm and Gaddis’ faces went red with the strong abuse from the Baharan officers.

“S-silence! We were justified! My duty is to the Emperor above all, including the viceroy! I will not accept any insolence!”

“Hahaha, we Baharans will not cower to such threats.”

“Oh, how loyal of you two Coimbrans! You should learn a thing or two from our gallant Sir Noel here! If you wish to commit suicide, I’ll be sure to lend a hand!”

“Do not mock the Coimbran army you bastards!”

A torrent of insults spewed forth in response. Some of the Baharans even laid hands on their sabres as relations had always been poor between the two provinces. They were allies for now, though, and that could not be quickly changed. Amil raised a hand to stop the situation from going critical.

“How unsightly. Can none of you remain calm? We all serve the Horsheido Empire so we should not argue more than needed to settle a dispute. Is that not so?”

“Yes Sir. You have my apologies!”

“I, I humbly apologise.”

The tumult returned to silence. If they defied him now, they would forfeit the glory they had so recently attained. The generals of both sides shut their mouths and held their grudges. Amil gave Falid a signal with a glance, and he began to take steady steps.

Falid took a knee facing Noel and gave a polite invitation, “Sir Noel, Lord Amil has taken the glory this time. Because he has, he can now lead a great many people to happiness. Will you not lend us your military prowess to assist? As far as I have seen, he is a man who will reward anyone for good services rendered.”

Though she had lost to him in a fight, she had ability that surpassed Rebecca. In strength alone they were most likely equals, but she clearly had the superior leadership ability. She was the kind of capable staff that Amil desired. More importantly, that memorable red hair of hers had lit a spark in Falid’s heart, or so he thought. The expression she had made was unmistakably one of the girl who should have died in Operation Daybreak: Number 13.

“I am sorry, but I must decline. I have already promised my services to Lord Elgar, and I cannot violate my word.”

Amil nodded at her quiet yet clear response. Falid saw no reason for her to die pointlessly there, and he grabbed her shoulder to try and persuade her once more.

“Please consider it carefully. Nothing will come of remaining obstinate.”

“I must decline.”

Amil interrupted Falid before he could attempt any further arguments, “Promises are something to be protected as you say, even to the point of attempting the unreasonable, but we cannot simply ignore your crimes.”

“The capital punishment should suffice! She should be executed right here! We cannot let the roots of future calamity be!”

“Sir Wilm,” Falid rebutted with a hostile glare, “Lord Amil has promised to protect the lives of all Lord Grohl’s soldiers. Would you go against his decision?”

Wilm was overpowered; for a moment.

“H-however, she is undoubtedly the fiend! Releasing her will only be a liability! This much I’m sure you understand!”

As the future ruler of Coimbra, Wilm was vehement about keeping future enemies from being created. Noel likely held a grudge against him as he had targeted her from the start. With that in mind, he had to kill her.

Assuming as much, Mills made a proposal of his own as it seemed like Noel would prove interesting in the coming days: “I understand your position, Lord Wilm, but Amil will one day rise to the highest of seats. I do not think it prudent to treat promises as scraps of paper before he does.”

“Sir Mills, before the future, the present must be...”

Amil stopped Wilm’s objection with a gesture. There were no more people to be feared in Coimbra. The only source of future problems, Grohl, had been crushed, and Amil was on his way to ascending the throne. There was no reason to eliminate useful pawns. He was young and had plenty of time so there was no reason to rush.

“Mills’ opinion is justified. I see no merit in needlessly staining my own name; conversely, I should demonstrate my forgiveness.”

“We still cannot make light of her crimes. Fueheh, how does banishment sound? Send the fiend to an island until she reforms. So that she can be looked after.”

“Banishment, is it? That would prevent her from doing anything unreasonable.”

“Yes, and if you keep your word, even for the dreaded fiend, it will only serve to further

spread the knowledge of your magnanimity.”

Once Amil had thought over Mills’ proposal and fully digested it, he could see that the Baharan officers also thought it to be a valid solution. He personally felt no real threat from Noel, but did not want to further anger the traitorous Wilm and Gaddis.

And so, Noel’s life was spared. Amil decided to let her live as a part of his intention to make use of capable men. It was how he had gathered so many talented men, and how he would continue to gather more. It was important to show the people his tolerance.

“Yes, that seems to be for the best. Noel, there is a small island to the south-west of Coimbra known as Willa. You are to go there and pray in repentance to the Sun God. Once we believe you to have atoned for your sins, I will ask you again. Remember that I want your strength. I promise you fair treatment.”

Noel accepted it without objection, but a simple, “I understand.”

Faced with Noel being taken once more to prison, Rebecca made an irritated expression. Others of the Black Sun Cavalry were with her. They had forced aside the palace guards and landed a sharp punch to Noel’s abdomen, and continued to forcefully kick her while she was down. Surrounding her, they continued to kick as they rained down insults upon her. The guards made no moves to stop them. She was the second in command of Bahar’s pride and joy, the Black Sun Cavalry, so they knew there was nothing they could do to stop her. Rebecca grabbed Noel by the hair and lifted her up menacingly.

“Oi, you bitch. Are you fucking wagging your tail since Lord Amil saved your fucking life? Even though you’ve fucking killed so many of my brothers! Show me your convictions by dying here! Die, just die!!”

“ ... ”

“This fucking bitch has no words? Can’t fucking speak? So should we keep kicking until you want to speak? Haaa!?”

They struck her hard on the temple, and she only angered them more by remaining responseless. Rebecca could not hide her anger as she lifted Noel’s face once more to pummel with her fist. When she collapsed back to the ground they kicked her head with all their strength over and over and over and over again.

“Rebecca, sir, she’s going to die if we keep this up, but that isn’t a problem is it?”

The Black Sun Cavalry sought final confirmation, and the corners of Rebecca’s mouth twisted.

“What- if we just say she was running away, nobody will complain. Let’s fucking kill her right now. Hehe, we’ll feed your fucking corpse to the dogs! They’ll even eat the bones!”

Rebecca took up her sword, and just as she did, a voice called out behind her for restraint. It was calm, yet plainly angry.

“What exactly are you doing? I thought I ordered you to patrol the castle’s perimeter? Is there some emergency?”

“L-lord Falid!?”

“T-this, this is...”

Rebecca cut off the confused responses of the Black Sun Cavalry as she stepped forth, “That’s not it, brother! I thought I’d erase the regret of our fallen brothers! As if we could just let her be without taking revenge! In the first place, why don’t you just let the small fry deal with such a trivial job!?”

“Madress has only just recently fallen and the sparks of rebellion have not yet died out. That is why I ordered the elite Black Sun Cavalry to patrol. Are you saying that the protection of our Lord Amil is trivial?”

“W-we’ll finish her off and get right back to it!! Is that fine!?”

“Lord Amil has guaranteed the lives of every Coimbran soldier. Are you saying that you wish to violate this?”

Unable to keep his emotions in check, Falid got confirmation twice. Rebecca did still fear him, but the anger and desire to take revenge had outstripped it in their extremity.

“So are you just going to forgive her!?”

“For the sin of disobeying my orders... and for the crime of going against Lord Amil’s decree, the death penalty must be issued. I’m truly sorry.”

“B-brother?”

Falid took out a dagger from his cloak and tossed it down at Rebecca’s feet.

“There, go ahead and die. Hurry up and kill yourself. I’ve said this before, but we have no need for people who can’t follow orders. You all are wasted on the Black Sun Cavalry.”

“T-that’s...”

“No need to speak. Just kill yourself.”

“I, I’m sorry! I don’t want to die over something like this!!”

“So?”

“Ughhhh, I, I was wrong! I won’t do it again, so please forgive me! I really am, it’s really true!”

“It’s fine as long as you understand, but the next time this happens, I’ll kill you. It has been decided that Sir Noel will be exiled to Willa island. There is no need to raise a hand against her! If you’ve figured it out, get back to your duties at once!”

The Black Sun Cavalry trembled like frightened dogs at Falid’s harsh rebuke.

“Y-yes sir!”

“I, I get it! I, I’m not going to kill myself! I never will!!”

With those final words, Rebecca and the Black Sun Cavalrymen turned and ran. Retrieving his dagger, Falid apologised to Noel and helped her up. The blows had been quite harsh, but Noel didn’t appear to have put up with much, only sporting bruises on her face, and some blood running from her lip which Falid wiped with his handkerchief. There was a chance that some bones had been broken.

“Are you alright? If you need medical attention, we can arrange for it immediately.”

“I’m fine.”

“I’m truly sorry. Rebecca isn’t a bad girl, but she gets angry too easily. Well, it can’t be

helped that it turned out this way.”

Noel raised her face at Falid’s sentimental words.

“Is that so?”

“May I ask just one thing? Have you ever heard of Operation Daybreak?”

“Operation... daybreak...”

“It was an operation that ended in tragedy in a church of the Sun in the imperial capital. I thought that you might know of it.”

Noel thought over his genuine question for a short while, and simply answered that she didn’t.

“I... see. Sorry for asking you strange things, only there is a chance that you’ve simply forgotten. If you remember, I would like you to let me know.”

Falid smiled, and Noel tilted her head in mystery.

“...”

“Back to what we were talking about earlier, I know that Lord Amil will surely lead us all to happiness. That’s what I believe. Once you’ve calmed down on Willa Island, why don’t you think it over some more? I’m sure that you’ll realise how taking up the sword for Lord Amil is the right thing to do.”

“Yup, I got it. Someday I’ll take up my sword for Lord Amil. I promise.”

“Do you? Yes, I’m looking forward to it. I cannot wait for the day that we can fight together. Let’s make sure to talk more when that time comes.”

“Yup, I’ll see you then.”

Noel smiled as she spoke, and began to slowly walk as she was taken away by the guards. After seeing them off, Falid’s thoughts turned to the girl for whom he once harboured special feelings. She was Number 13 after all, and he was very glad that she had survived because he had thought that everyone else had died.

*But you said you didn't know. Have you forgotten, or are you feigning ignorance? Either way, you're still here, and nothing can change that. Yeah, I really look forward to fighting side by side.*

For a moment, Falid dropped the mask of the Black Sun Cavalry and smiled as innocently as a child.

On the following day, the former Viceroy of Coimbra, son of Emperor Befnam, Grohl Wardka was sentenced to death. Made to confess his crimes, the scene played out with Grohl begging for mercy as he knelt before Amil. The execution was to take place later that day, and they had already prepared a guillotine in Madress' main square. A single jeer ignited a large chorus of cries for his death.

"So this is what I pay for my incompetence? Elgar, Sarah, please forgive me, and Noel... I'm truly..."

After Grohl had finished muttering, the gleaming blade came down with a dull thud, and his head jumped into the awaiting bucket. The executioner held up the head as it dripped blood, thrusting it to the heavens as a sign that Amil had won the war of succession. The crowd erupted in a roaring applause as he did, going further than insulting the Lords who were closest to Grohl by slinging stones at those who had not been able to stop the decline of the province. It was a pathetic end to the man who had once been the closest to the throne. His wife Sarah, though spared, lay comatose as her husband died, and passed away herself without ever finding out. Perhaps that was a small mercy for her, but Elgar was left behind, placed under house arrest in a small northern town, and stripped of his Wardka name, forced to take on his mother's maiden name: Ludwig.

"I know now that I want to live my life to atone for the grave sins of my father, and I swear once more to be a loyal servant of Your Majesty the Emperor."

After the young Elgar watched his father's death, he knelt politely before Amil. Even the traitorous Wilm and Gaddis had apologised for the crimes of his father, and had admirably claimed that they would labour and toil for Coimbra's sake. He hid the blade of hatred and revenge deep within his heart which boiled with the fires of hell. He knew that one day he would surely have to repay them for what they had done; they who had laughed at his father's death; they who had egged his father on.

Those who would see Noel off were waiting at Madress harbour on the day that she

was to depart for her exile. Cynthia was drained, Elgar was melancholy, and Noel Corps was standing by in civilian clothes.

“We can’t talk much now, Noel. To be honest, I can hardly face you... one day, when you return, I’ll accept full responsibility. Until then, I will live in shame, so be sure to come back.”

Cynthia had turned down Wilm’s offers, and decided to serve Elgar. Rough days lay in wait, but it was the only thing Cynthia thought she could do.

“You don’t have to be so down. I’m not really mad anymore, see, you’re in front of the young master, so you’ve got to cheer up!”

Cynthia remained unmoved by Noel’s jokes. Deciding it was hopeless, Noel turned her attention to Elgar.

“Hey, sorry I couldn’t help with your dad. Even though I did my best.”

“Not at all, Noel. You did very well... my father was apologising before his execution. He wanted to believe in you at the end, at least. I’d never seen him so sad before. The last thing he told me before he died was to make sure that I could see people’s true intentions.”

Noel pretended to hug him in consolation, and whispered into his ear in such a way as to make it look like a dear parting. She didn’t want the nearby Baharan soldiers to hear her.

“It’s fine to give what we got. Isn’t that right? I mean, we’re still alive to do it.”

“N-Noel, just... what are you...”

She smiled at the now beet-red Elgar.

“I’m definitely going to return. Until then, make sure to keep that promise. It’ll be fine, it isn’t a loss as long as we’re alive.”

“Okay. I’ll train hard while I wait, so make sure you really do come back.”

Noel sadly, but brightly waved goodbye, “Yup. Well, it’s about time I head out then. Take care of the young master, Cynthia. Stay well until I come back!”

With a slight frown, Cynthia simply muttered that she would as Noel boarded the Baharan ship. Her ankles were shackled, but her hands were free. Waving heartily at everyone who was seeing her off, she watched Noel Corps begin to gather together in formation.

“Noel Corps! Salute!! We will wait until your return!!”

“Don’t worry, Captain! We’ll wait for you!!”

“Noel Corps, forward march! Band, commence!!”

As the ship departed, they unveiled their small, concealed bugles and drums to begin a musical performance that was as loud and lively as if Noel was departing for the front. When they were discovered by the nearby Baharan soldiers, they began to be jostled as they were ordered to stop. Noel watched her amusing, and very fun, companions until they were out of sight.

Once they were completely out of sight, Noel found herself alone on deck. All of the Baharan soldiers knew that Noel was known as the fiend and didn’t want to get any closer to her than they had to. Naturally, she had no conversation partners. All she could hear were the songs of the sea birds. She could smell the sea air, but her mood wasn’t very good.

“Haaah, alone again, eh? It’s a little boring. I get lonely after all.”

Even if she was with people, having nobody to talk to or play with was boring. Noel gave a dejected sigh.

“That’s too bad. It looks like it’ll get in the way.”

Looming over where Noel lay was a displeased face that she knew. Tutting with a nasty expression, Riglette’s long black hair fluttered in the breeze. She was wearing the uniform of the Coimbran military police.

“Oh, so you were here, Riglette? I figured nobody would talk to me since I’m hated here.”

“So you greet me with that. It’s fine, you really are hated, after all.”

“You’re dressed as an MP.”

“I was told to. My job is to observe you.”

Riglette gave a snort. Getting up, Noel looked at her in amazement.

“I’m accompanying you on your glorious island exile. That man was able to... get rid of a nuisance. Unfortunately, if I didn’t follow along, I would have been killed. He distrusts me with good reason.”

“So that’s how it is.”

“Yes.”

Riglette was curt. Noel was lonely at their parting, but Riglette had probably wanted to come along too.

Feeling a little better, Noel turned to Riglette, “Oh, by the way, what is this Willa island like?”

“My research suggests that aside from manor on the island, it’s just a simple fishing village. There is a historic church, so that is where you will be reflecting on things. In summary, it is a shitty, pointless place for me to be.”

“That’s too bad.”

“Too bad indeed. Well, I have to make sure you are as good as dead. It would be a bother if you just died on your own, so try to hold back.”

“All right!”

Noel responded energetically and began to look for her nearby large bag of luggage. Weapons or dangerous items had been forbidden, but she had received permission to bring everything else. Along for the ride were all the treasures she had bought in Madress, a gameboard, some toys, her trumpet, and the warhammer that she had secretly smuggled in among the various crates on the ship with the help of Noel Corps. Noel retrieved the board for the black and white game out of her bag, and set it down in front of Riglette.

“What’s this? You are a criminal, so please be quiet.”

“Let’s play since we’re free. We’ve got lots of time ahead. We’ll be on this ship for at

least five more days you know.”

“I must decline. Even with five more days, if I was your partner, I’d die of overwork.”

“Oh, I guess it can’t be helped that you’re scared of losing.”

“Hmph, I’m not worried at all. Listen up, I’ll play you just once.”

Noel set up the pieces two at a time, ready to play the now provoked Riglette. Her win rate had been about 80% up until that point. She would lose her concentration when she got bored, and lose like that. It was true that she had lost the fight for Coimbra, but, taking the big picture into account, she hadn’t yet suffered a total defeat. As to why: neither she nor Cynthia nor Elgar nor Barbas, nor even Riglette had yet died. Kai too had returned to Gemb, so things had only just begun.

“If you don’t play we can’t start.”

“I was just thinking for a bit.”

“Thinking so much about the first move... could it be you’re an idiot?”

“If you lose, Riglette, that’ll mean you’re even more of an idiot.”

Riglette tutted as Noel jauntily placed her white piece with great force. The real match began then. She would rest for a time and strengthen herself so that she would not lose to that redheaded man.

“I just thought of this, but...”

Raising her own piece, Riglette responded in irritation, “What?”

“Well, I hate rainy days, right?”

“I know. You’re really childish after all. Try to fix that while we’re on the island.”

“The worst, yuckiest stuff happens, but if I really think it through, I survive the day even if it rains. I thought I’d die for sure this time, but I just barely made it out. Isn’t that surprising?”

“What?”

“I’m lucky to survive. It might be that rainy days aren’t only full of bad things.”

“It wouldn’t be funny if our fates were determined by the weather. How ridiculous.”

Noel acknowledged that much and continued the game. In the end, it was a crushing victory for Noel as she wound up owning all the pieces on the board. Riglette rattled off tut after tut as Noel grinned before challenging her to a rematch. It was fun to go after opponents who weren’t thinking straight. She wasn’t going to lose any time soon.

“But sunny days have the best mood.”

“Right now my mood is supremely terrible.”

“I hope it’s sunny when we go back.”

A smile floated across Noel’s face as she gazed at the distant Madress castle, and she knew that the fight wasn’t over.

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## Author's Note:

Our fight has only just begun!! This is not the end. It will continue just a little longer. I won't update daily, so please don't be too impatient while you wait. There are plenty of things I still want to write!

Q: Noel promised to take up her sword for Amil, so does that mean she'll become his retainer?

A: Noel will protect her promises, but she's a sophist. Reference for this behavior can be found in her exchange with the enemy in chapter 17. I did that kind of thing as a child.

"I'll give this to you. (I lift this up to you)" → "Really!?" → \*Raises thing over head. "See."

– The Demon's Voice

It's fine to end it here. Everything's been tied up, and doesn't this kind of thing happen all the time? On to the next story, the next!

– The Angel's Voice

It ain't over yet. The foreshadowing ain't paid off, and there're all sorts of things you can't just leave.

– The Reaper's Voice

Eat first, then think it out.

## Interlude 2

# The Tale of a Certain Island-Exiled Mischievous Fiend

At the end of their five day journey by boat, Noel and Riglette arrived at Willa island where small fishing vessels were moored in the ocean harbour. The cries of the sea birds were lively and the sea breeze felt refreshing. The weather too, was particularly splendid.

“All right, I’m the first on Willa Island!”

Noel thrust both hands happily into the air and rushed off the boat. Riglette walked languidly down, massaging her temples. The salty spray had caked onto her glasses, and sand had gotten into her shoes, so her mood dropped rapidly as they disembarked.

“Sir Riglette and... Sir Noel th-the, the fiend! The people of Willa island wholeheartedly welcome you!!”

“Salute Sir Noel the Fiend!”

The aged island chief saluted warily, and the soldiers behind him rattled in their armour.

“Um... That fiend part isn’t really in my name, though.”

“My apologies if I have offended you! Please do not be angry! At least spare the people of the island!!”

“You know, I’m not really even angry...”

“I’m very sorry!!”

“Uh... anyway, let’s walk.”

Tiring a little, Noel told them to pay it no mind, and decided to just proceed onward. The soldiers at attention continued their salutes. They led her to an aged mansion on the island and the chief told her that it was going to be her place of residence. Essentially, she was to be watched all the time. Guards were posted outside the mansion, and Noel, her observer Riglette, and a female servant would live inside.

“So I can’t leave this house?”

“No, as long as you inform the watchmen... I mean your guards, you can go anywhere, but the people of the island may be rude. If they make offence, please immediately come to me about it. Oh please do not act hastily... I beseech you!”

The frightened chief was pale as he spoke. Noel furrowed her brow. It seemed as if they feared her as a real fiend; the kind who ate people when angry. She wondered just what kinds of rumors had spread.

“Hey, am I really that famous here?”

“You... you’ve killed ten thousand Baharans, taken one hundred heads, burned all the traitorous Coimbrans, and even ate their bones. Lord Amil sent you here as punishment because he was afraid killing you would curse him. Those are the rumors as to why you’ve been exiled to this remote island.”

“How foolish. Just where did those rumors...”

“Right. Yup, I know!”

Noel’s curt response seemed to lay the blame on Riglette, though Riglette herself appeared flabbergasted by the rumors. Noel briefly troubled over what to do, but since they were pretty hilarious rumors, she decided not to correct them. She even began planning to run around with her white mask proclaiming the curse. If the rumors continued to be embellished, it would be pretty amusing if she turned into something completely different from a regular fiend. While she was at it, she would go after Riglette too.

“Why are you grinning at me like that? It’s depressing.”

“Oh it’s nothing.”

Noel played dumb; her fun would have to wait.

“Ah, I think this is rude to say to our esteemed fiend, but you cannot leave the island alone. We are a solitary island quite distant from the continent. It wouldn’t end well if an amateur attempted escape alone.”

“Yup, okay. So should I test the waters with a swim?”

“Sir Noel Bosheit, you are a criminal. It would behoove you to repent at the church before you play. If you aren’t serious on even the first day, it’ll cause me some trouble, you know.”

Noel nodded frankly to Riglette’s backhanded jab, “That’s true, and I’m a little tired, too.”

“You need to pray for reform, not sleep. Church is not a place to sleep.”

“Ahaha, that’s right. Then let’s pray!”

Noel stood, stifling a yawn, ready to sleep. Closing her eyes for prayer made her sleepy. As she was probably going to be spending quite some time on the island, she needed to get used to it quickly before she became sick of it. The island chief on the other hand, breathed a sigh of relief.

Even after one full week, Noel hadn’t managed to talk to any of the islanders. Whenever she called out to them in boredom, they would scream and run. The most interesting one was her maid.

“Ah, umm, Miss Fiend. I have finished the preparations for lunch.”

“Yup, thanks. So, what’s on the menu today?”

“S-s-steamed wilapra fish, corn soup, and bread.”

“Looks good. Hey, why don’t we eat together? See, you look hungry too. Come on, come on, don’t worry, it’ll be fine.”

As Noel approached with a grin, the maid became ever more pale. The frightened maid even began to tremble as Noel drew near. Noel briefly considered that it might not be good to tease her like that, but it was funny, so she closed the distance.

“P-p-please forgive me!! Please, I beg of you, at least don’t eat me-!!”

The maid flew from the mansion with a scream. She was a dutiful girl who came back to clean after an hour had passed. Incidentally, even Noel had been rendered speechless the first time she had blatantly run away. It had been a long time since Noel was the one being surprised.

“Are you at it again? Just how many times are you going to tease her? Enough already, just behave.”

“I don’t want to hear it from the person who was clutching her stomach she was laughing so hard, the first time.”

“Ha, it’d be impossible not to laugh at that.”

Riglette snorted. The maid had fled, crying and screaming; Noel had been completely taken aback; and Riglette had laughed so hard that she had trouble breathing. She clutched her stomach painfully as if she had been struck by an arrow.

“Speaking of which, are you getting along with the the islanders, Riglette?”

“No. I have no reason to speak with them. Basically, I don’t think there is any merit to befriending them.”

“Then when you’re finished your food, why don’t we play some more?”

“Well... if I’m free, I might be able to find some time for you.”

Riglette took her seat and began to eat in a sour mood, but that was only a front. In reality, she was enjoying herself. They had spent enough time together for Noel to be able to tell. When she really was displeased, she’d tut, and because she didn’t this time, there was only one conclusion to be drawn.

Once two weeks had passed, the people’s curiosity naturally began to outweigh their fear. A fishing couple peeked through the windows to see what was happening; the children would turn and bolt if called out to; an old woman looked like she was considering bringing something over, but thought better of it; and the island chief began to slouch a little more.

*The weather’s great, and I just want to play once I get outside. It’d be more fun if Riglette joined in, though.*

The win loss count for their board games was 235 to 30 for Noel. She had kept record of it, but Riglette refused to look, even though she looked so proud when she won, and tutted so furiously when she lost. Well, Noel could tell at once that it was almost lethally painful for her. It was fun to watch her face change with the situation from superior to inferior. Noel hadn't tired of it yet, so she could probably get through a thousand matches at the rate they were going. All that aside, it looked like it was about time she could talk to the islanders. She wanted to swim; she wanted to fish; she wanted to go boating. She wanted to bathe even more in the sun —as if she hadn't done enough of that already—. Keeping their doors shut was torture in its own way.

“All right, let's head to the sea today. I'm going for sure.”

“I'll have to refrain as I need to finish writing my report. I'm quite fed up with having to falsify so much.”

“I see. It's hard for new MPs, eh?”

“Even though you're the criminal, it doesn't seem so hard for you.”

“Pretty much!”

Noel changed into light clothes, put on a straw hat, and set out for the beach. When she headed out, the watchmen did observe her, but their faces went pale and they didn't say anything in particular. Running at full speed, she arrived at the vast sandy beach. There were some indications of a local presence, but nobody was in her general vicinity.

“Well, that's fine. Mr. Sun is out quite nicely today, so I'll just take it easy. Maybe I should pick up a shell to give to Riglette when I get back.”

Noel bathed her full body in the sun as she thought while idling on the sandy beach. When she lay down and had a short nap she noticed some shadows approach. Vaguely checking what it was, she saw that they were some dark, sunburnt children. She hadn't yet spoken with them once, and, hopping quickly to her feet, a smile played across her face.

“T-the fiend woke up!”

“A-are we going to get devoured?”

“What’ll we do!?”

As she did, she heard their frightened voices, some among them on the verge of tears.

Noel called out to them in her best non-threatening voice, “Hey, if you would like to, why don’t you play with me? I’d like to try talking with everyone.”

Deeply shocked, after some deliberation, some of the children tentatively nodded. Though clumsy and awkward at first, they opened up to her after about an hour, rather riotously on the beach. Noel’s mental age was close to that of a child’s, so she was unimpeded by that thing known as shame. She talked about all kinds of things, and swam around catching loads of fish by hand, quickly becoming a hero of the children. They even began going to the mansion to play, and Noel always heard them out. There wasn’t much to do on the small island and her stories enthralled them.

“What exactly are you doing? Becoming the leader of the children and conquering the island?”

“That’s a great idea! Ah, Riglette, want to play?”

“No. I hate children. Don’t jest.”

Riglette tutted. Noel had completely become one of the children, but didn’t care at all.

“We’re going fishing tomorrow. I bet even you could do it, Riglette.”

“While you do put it... wonderfully, this is hardly the situation for that kind of thing. Something big is happening on the mainland. Just as the Baharan government succeeded their imperial positions, they announced an invasion of the continent of Mundonovo. The world is moving again.”

“Hm...”

Noel didn’t want to go to that western continent, and she didn’t feel the need to celebrate Amil’s inauguration. She had to gather information for her eventual return, but it was still premature.

“You are also a commander of one thousand in the Coimbran army, so you should be paying a little attention to this. Your important friend Cynthia is going to get caught up in this, is she not? Well, she’s been placed specifically in northern Coimbra, so it’ll

probably be fine.”

Cynthia had been appointed to the desolated northern reaches of Coimbra with Elgar. According to Riglette, Gaddis’ appointment as viceroy had raised hell, and furthermore, he was doing something with the goldmines that Grohl had given up on.

“If it seems really bad, I’ll just go there and help her.”

“Just how do you intend on doing that?”

“By boat, of course. I figured we could steal one since it seems easy enough.”

“You have to let me know before you do anything. If you just did something on your own...”

“Ahaha, I wouldn’t leave you behind!”

Noel began to prepare the fishing rod she had borrowed from the children after her brief response. Stealing a boat was a last resort, and it wouldn’t be pretty. If she could, she would want to head back at once. That way would surely be entertaining.

One month passed. Once the children had opened their hearts to her, the adults were dragged along and began to speak with Noel. The parents thought that she was threatening them by playing with the children, but it seemed that they were finally able to recognize that Noel was more than just a rampaging fiend. Though they mostly had strained expressions, they began interacting with her as if poking at a boil.

“Uuum...”

“You’re making a show of being worried about something. It’s really a nuisance, but...”

“Is something troubling you? Even though we get along now, I’m still just the fiend. The kids and the adults call me that.”

She smiled when called a fiend, but there were some things she was unsatisfied with. Actually, it was her sole dissatisfaction.

“You don’t like it?”

“I mean, Noel’s such a great name...”

“Then I have an idea, but...”

“Oh?”

She was sure that it wouldn't be good enough, but Noel decided to hear Riglette out anyway. It would probably have the desired effect, but serve to lower her reputation, most likely intentionally.

“Just tell them that you'll kill them all if they don't start referring to you by your name. For example, you could start by killing them one at a time when they make mistakes.”

“Ahaha, that's my Riglette. Wily and evil! You wouldn't lose to a fiend.”

“I don't want to hear that from a real one,” Riglette responded bitterly.

She had been tutting more frequently since they had come to the island. As to why: she had to spend most every day with Noel. That aside, her stress hadn't increased much, her complexion was healthy, and her constant frown had begun to fade, but her fairness of skin remained the same as she never went outside. Noel even got to wondering if it was actually Riglette who had been placed under house arrest. Of course, if Noel actually told her that, she would probably go completely red, so she had to hold back.

“So what are you going to do dressed like that?”

Noel had a bandana on her head and was wearing traditional island fishing clothes. She had a harpoon in her hand and was brimming with excitement to go.

“The fishermen all head out today, but what I'm aiming for is the Willa tuna. It's delicious right to the bone, and it is super expensive on the mainland!”

“Okay, okay, go and have your fun. It'd be nice if you could be the bate for the fish.”

Riglette casually looked over her official documents. She was rather busy and had no time to bother over Noel, who found her reaction rather boring and decided to plan something.

“Oh, you aren't stopping?”

“I don't care what you do. I don't want to be like a certain white haired monkey.”

“I see. Then I’ll get on a fishing boat and just head right back to Coimbra!”

“D-don’t say such stupid things! Do you understand what position you’re in!?”

She stood with eyes wide at Noel’s statement, and then tutted when she realised she’d been had, though too late.

“Ahaha, it was a lie of course. But wait, didn’t you not care?”

“Y-you shitty fiend! Get out!”

“Ahaha, I’ll be back!”

They had a large haul unlike anything that had been seen in recent years, and Noel got to eat delicious fish to her heart’s content.

After half a year, Noel had gotten the people of the island to open up to her. Even the once fearful island chief would come over with wine and snacks to play. She could keep company with his grandchildren and he now returned her words. The watchmen were no longer posted at her mansion, and the maid was frying up some food on the grill, now able to lightly brush aside any teasing. Occasionally, soldiers would arrive from the mainland to see how Noel was doing. It seemed like Wilm had yet to lower his guard, and he was likely driving home the point for Riglette. That was the only time Noel would go to the church to pray with a serious expression, and behaved as though sincerely reflecting upon her actions to the point that the islanders had to desperately hold back their laughter. Riglette endured all the gushing with a grimace, claiming that it would be most dangerous if the military police simply nodded in satisfaction. Nobody had ever stopped calling her the fiend, but she had already gotten used to it. Noel was able to laugh, play, and live with the people around her; accepted as one of them. Riglette, however, spent all her time cooped up in the dark mansion. Even still, she would sometimes participate in the banquets, and had become self conscious of her weight all on her own.

Dark clouds began to form over the Libelikan continent after they had been on the island for a year. Rumors came to the island about rebellions here and there, a mysterious plague, people selling themselves and their children under a heavy tax burden, and widespread death by overwork in the mines. There was no way to tell how true they were, but the faces of the men who went to sell fish were clearly depressed. It wasn’t long before the peace at sea began to suffer as well when pirates

began to indiscriminately attack merchant vessels and fishing boats alike. The black waves even reached the tranquil Willa Island. One day a ship landed and pirates disembarked to occupy the island. The guards and the island chief who had been easily defeated, and the pirates had stolen food and money. When at last they appeared about to take away the islands women, children, and even Riglette, Noel stepped in. Her lateness was due to a nap on the sandy beach.

“If you drop everything you stole, I’ll let you go. If not, I’ll kill you all.”

The pirates attacked her in a rage and she easily crushed them with her warhammer. A mere thirty pirates were no match for Noel, and once she had captured their ship, she raised a homemade twin hammer banner and claimed it as her own. Such was the day that Noel won the total trust of the islanders. From then onwards, the islanders trained under her for the purposes of self defence; even the Coimbran guards participated. The young men, women, children, and even the elderly took up weapons and learned their use. Not a single islander thought to be protected by someone else, having learned that it was necessary from the pirate attack; especially considering that they were so far separated from the mainland. That mainland had its own problems, and was unable to protect the distant island.

“I think a small fish would be the best emblem for Willa island. It’d be pretty cute.”

Painting said small fish on a cloth, Noel’s opinion wavered. The fish had x symbols for eyes, and it’s body seemed too bony somehow.

“If it’s going to intimidate the pirates, how would making it cute help? Please try to think with that empty head of yours.”

“All that’s important is that they remember it. If they lose to someone flying a small fish, they’ll be embarrassed, and it’s half bone,” Noel smiled.

“It’s important they don’t look down on you. A small fish cannot raise morale.”

“I see, that makes sense. Then we’ve got to go with this.”

Noel showed her a cloth that she had concealed that was emblazoned with crossed harpoons that looked similar to her twin hammer banner. They would proudly fly the banners and place them around the island to ward off pirate attacks. Their vigilante corps was only about one hundred strong, but their morale was extraordinarily high. Although they did tentatively have a commander, they essentially just followed Noel’s

instructions. Fending off the pirate's revenge multiple times, they managed to take some of their attackers' supplies instead, and the island once more returned to peace, the pirates likely knowing that they would take great losses if they attacked. There was also that more rumors about the banished fiend were beginning to resurface. The pirates they had taken prisoner were now toiling away in the fishery. Noel's fearsome reputation did have its advantages.

"If there were more people, this island would be rich. It'd be convenient if some more pirates came by. It'd be great if we could have more workers and soldiers."

"Please don't spout that lunacy anywhere else. You'll be seen as a fool by more than just me otherwise."

"Ahhhh, is this okay?"

Noel was casually playing with a coconut that the children had given her.

"What is it?"

"It looks like you're already lumped in with me. I heard this from the kids, but you're the fiend's right hand! You've done it, Riglette!"

"N-no way..."

"It's true."

"T-that can't be..."

Riglette collapsed to the bed, massaging her temples.

"Aaaah, I want to meet with Cynthia, the young master, and Barbas. Do you think they're doing well?"

She had occasionally contacted Kai. Siden of Gemb was interested in her, and so they had proactively contacted her. A messenger would sometimes stop by with small gifts and information on a small Gemb ship. The island was on a carefree high alert, but even if it was easy to meet, the two never did.

"I... don't know about that white haired monkey, but Lord Elgar and Sir Cynthia are in northern Coimbra as always. They have some hardships, unlike you."

“Is that so. Ah, if I write them a letter, would it arrive? And I can send some pickled fish.”

“That is impossible. You would trouble them by doing that, and above all, it would cause me a load of trouble, so please hold back.”

“I see... Too bad!”

“Well... if you say you’ve decided to serve the emperor, it’ll resolve this house-arrest at once. Don’t you also have an offer from the commander of the Black Sun Cavalry?”

“Ahaha, but that’d be too much. The emperor is my enemy after all.”

With a cold laugh, Noel rejected the proposal. She was happy with Falid’s offer, but they were aiming at different targets despite their shared goal of finding happiness. It was written in the letters: the happiness he sought was the implementation of Amil’s dream. Noel begged to differ.

“Did you not promise to take up your sword for His Majesty?”

“I remember my promises. One day I’ll have to give him a grievous injury!”

Noel smashed the coconut with her warhammer as she spoke, spraying the milk even as far as Riglette in an incredible mess that took an hour for the two of them to clean up. The battered coconut was eaten as punishment, truly giving Noel her just desserts.

Unlike the continent, the island of Willa retained its peaceful days.



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