



A GIRL HOLDING THE SUN |

火輪を抱いた少女

二つの太陽

VOL.

III

ILLUSTRATED BY
KAWASAWA MATARI
RUIKEICHI ANDROMEDA

七沢またり 著 / 流刑地アンドロメダ 画

The Girl Who Bore the Flame Ring

– Karin wo Idaita Shoujo –

- Volume 3 -

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THE CONTINENT OF RIBERIKA

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Chapter 34

Deathmatch of Star and Sun: A Red Ring Born

Three years had passed since the Coimbran-Baharan War which became popularly known as the Wardka War of Succession. Those three years had rocked the world.

Rebellion had broken out in Coimbra, and the province had split between North and South, with Wilm appointed as viceroy in the South, and Gaddis in the North. Gemb, Giv, and Karmbeeth, though having sided with the Grohl clique, had defied all expectations and were unable to be severely punished. In the heat of victory, Amil announced Operation Light of Dawn—a naval operation against Mundonovo—as soon as Befnam handed him the throne. Many great ships were built in Coimbra and Ribeldam. 100 000 men from each province set forth with their supplies for the southeasterly shores of Mundonovo. Amil made himself the supreme commander, and promoted Falid to be the general of the army. Incidentally, the war expenses were levied as heavy taxes from Coimbra, Gemb, and Giv, which only served to deepen the grudges created in the previous war. The eastern continent that the imperial army landed on was subjugated much more easily than Amil had ever imagined, aided by the fact that the locals in that area were dissatisfied with their leader, the bishop of a certain church of the star. Many local lords had seen an opportunity to grow their own power, siding with the larger force. Few had the will to face the hundred thousand invaders.

“This new land acquisition is but the first step of Operation Light of Dawn. At this rate, it cannot be stopped!”

Amil integrated the local lords who surrendered into the new province of Verdun, greatly expanding his sphere of influence. A powerful local lord named Riger was made viceroy. Ernarz had objected, but Amil had forcefully shut down his proposals. He was no longer on the Libelikan continent. Incidentally, the previous emperor Befnam had been able to spend his days immersed in research as he had hoped, and Amil threw vast amounts of funding towards a continuation of Operation Dawn. In exchange, he agreed to never interfere with Amil’s actions, and to never again become involved in politics. Absorbed in his desires, Befnam had not resurfaced once.

“People of the Empire of the Sun...”

With the taking of new lands in Mundonovo, and the formation of a new Provence, — a feat not achieved since the founding of the empire— Amil became known as the greatest ruler ever since. Nay, he began to be called the greater emperor, for great resources, manpower, treasures of gold and silver, and miracle products were all expected to flow back as a result. Truly, treasures and gold and precious gems were to be had... along with a wave of refugees from the continent. Unfortunately, the resources had been far scarcer than expected. Enough to enrich the entire continent, it was not. Fighting had yet to cease, so there was little surplus, and what little they could send home was eaten up by the costs of transportation.

The church of the star would not sit silently by as it began to lose its place in the world, dispatching at once a punitive force to repel the heathen invaders. Brutal fighting broke out between the allies of the church and the forces of the Horsheido empire, and though the first battle had devastating casualties on both sides, neither was completely knocked out of the war. As the allied forces lacked cohesion, and due to Falid’s stalwart defence, the fighting slowly ground to a stalemate. The war had begun to appear to be one that would not be won by a single decisive blow.

“To ensure that Operation Light of Dawn runs smoothly, we will unleash the super soldiers from our Operation Second Dawn. Let us strike down these false prophets and bring the light of the Sun to the people!”

Amil had increased military expenditure to fund Operation Second Dawn, and he temporarily sent ten thousand conscripts to Verdun. Even raising fifty thousand men from the northeast, and bringing twenty thousand to Mundonovo.

“They have odd technology, but they are not a match for us. Drive out the heathen!!”

Falid’s Black Sun Cavalry had been able to kill or capture several powerful lords, making pointless the great barriers they had erected defensively. The trouble lay in the church of the star that was so desperately protecting its influence; largely because the local lords only cared so long as their own lands were peaceful, and the will of the people was absolutely ignored. The continental north-eastern front, however, was a different matter.

“All units attack. Destroy their fields, and don’t let a single one survive. Not a single one.”

“Yes sir!!”

The local populace had taken the initiative and risen up in volunteer armies, joined by a cavalry corps from the church of the star that bore a white raven banner, and set out to drive back the enemy that had invaded their lands and taken their homes. The main reason for the defeat suffered there by Horsheido was the poor time of the attack. The situation was completely different from when they had the support of the local lords, and the north-eastern forces reached Verdun just according to their plans where they set about relieving the south-eastern corps.

“We must save our strength, but we cannot give up what we have. We shall conquer two continents, and spread the glory of the Empire of the Sun! Just as there is one sun, Horsheido should be one in rule!! Sacrifices must be made for the good of the empire!!”

Young, Amil was naturally impatient with the lack of progress in the expedition. It was his first real setback, and it felt as if all hope had been naught but mirage. He had once thought that he would already be bringing glory back to the Libelikan continent, but the emperor could not accept failure. Admitting to it would prove to become a weakness that would question his authority. One faction of retainers had already suggested that he either suspend the advance, or withdraw.

Eventually, his Second Light of Dawn had managed to desperately protect his holdings, but had been unable to expand his territory. Even the imperial assault had ceased for a time. It might not have been that bad, but it certainly looked that way. The church of the star had been steadily increasing its military power, and so there was a need to ferry more men over due to the limited number of locals they could conscript. Horsheido soldiers also feared the conscripts’ betrayal, so there was a need to levy many Libelikan troops for transport. Military expenditure increased, as a result, along with the taxes and labour demand.

In order to combat dissatisfaction, and no longer able to ignore the mainland, Amil decided to take reparations. They began to use forced labour from prisoners of war with the intention of using them as slaves to quell dissatisfaction. It did assuage some, but rather than being largely effective, it only served to add coals to the fire.

There was one other thing they brought from the continent: a destroyer of the mind they called censugrass. Not only the nobility, but also the common soldier had somehow acquired some, and there were already those who had proved unable to

recover. Strict restrictions had been made, but that only drove up the price on the black market, and they knew no end to the demand. This too, Amil wracked his brain to try and resolve. His empire had more territory than ever before, but its foundations were beginning to show cracks.

The conscripts had yet to return from the continent, and as the labour force declined, so too did the harvest yields. Each province's viceroy had been worrying over the shortage. The people withdrew support, and dissatisfaction with the reigning emperor grew. To curb the dissidents, Amil recalled the most famous man in the empire: Falid. He was to head to Horn Provence to dissuade any rebellious actions from Giv or Gemb. As they were in the North, they could be invaded with the help of Longstorm Provence, and it became the wall that protected the central region from the North.

In that way, a shadow began to form over the imperial administration, but the situation had yet to explode, and though there was much grumbling and discontent, the local lords strongly believed that if they continued to invest, that the venture would pay off as Amil and the newly appointed prime minister Mills were well spoken of for their skillful management. However, there were two provinces in crisis that could not wait for that future —the two provinces that had still not recovered from the previous war:— Northern and Southern Coimbra.

“Wilm, that bastard, I knew it would come to this, but have you ruined me? Even pushing into this land that has already been laid waste, he hasn't lent any help. That two-faced, cold-hearted bastard!”

The one-legged Gaddis tore up his report as he complained in his castle Evear in Northern Coimbra. Gaddis had rebuilt it from the ground up, and was quite proud of its defences. Theoretically, it was funded by the money Amil had promised him for his assistance. Though he had increased farming yields and trade in small amounts off the back of Perius' policies, they had needed to halt the construction at the outer wall, and it was only a castle in name. The reason was simple: there was no money. Amil's promise had been naught but empty words.

I can hardly be called a viceroy without even a castle to my name!

When the north and south split, all of the prosperous cities were in the south, leaving only cities long past their primes, mines, and the destroyed territories of Rockbell and Bolbo. Gaddis too had briefly felt that it was only fair for Wilm to get the advantageous

position, but things had gone too far. Gaddis had no money, and no way to generate any. It was true that he had become a viceroy, but he had no methods of resolving the situation.

What should I do? As if there was a man alive who could deal with this situation.

He had approached Wilm to try and gain funds, but he was rejected under the premise that there was no surplus in the south either. Crisis struck with the requirement to fund the expedition. As a final effort, he had forced those who could not pay their taxes to work in the mines. If only they could strike gold, they would be able to escape from their woes. What resulted was a revival of the late Grohl's dream; the dream which even Gaddis had cynically rebelled against. Losing their breadwinners caused even more dissatisfaction in North Coimbra, and still no gold was found. Many men escaped the labour, unable to bear it, and on top of it all, collapses from overwork became common as more and more lives began to be lost.

Oh, so the ore just explodes when struck? Those inspectors are trying to fool me. Soldiers can't eat without their salaries, and they even went as far as to abandon their posts. What should I do now that both the emperor and my allies have betrayed me?

There had been no large insurrection, likely due to the memory of what happened to the red circle army, but resentment had built up even more than before. Gaddis could no longer do anything about it.

"If only... if only we could strike gold, everything would go well. If we could... I could set things straight! Why, why can't we find it!? Has god abandoned me!?!? Just like that Grohl!"

Driven into a corner, Gaddis' mind began to unravel. He left everything to his subordinates, and shut himself up in his room for days on end. All his retainers were north-men, many of whom —along with Cynthia and Elgar— had been loyal to Grohl. Being both a southerner and a traitor, Gaddis had been sleeping on a bed of nails, and there were recent rumors of assassins. Spooked, Gaddis would not let anyone near his person which only caused a further decline in public order.

South Coimbra was also a disaster. Wilm, with his high opinion of Amil, had raised many funds for the expedition, and cooperated with Ribeldam to become the launching point of the operation. Dreams of conquering the entire continent with only one hundred thousand men had swirled through his head. He had counted his

chickens before they had hatched, and had easily agreed to massive investments assuming that the profits in prisoners and booty would more than make up for it. Perius, hoping for Grohl's will to live on, had made countless reports, and constantly politicked to try and persuade Wilm against it, but to no avail. Formerly a military man, Wilm could not help himself when he thought of how the expedition would go down in Coimbran history. He lusted after the chance to immortalize his name and bring about great prosperity.

"Has the Emperor responded yet, Perius?"

"Unfortunately, not yet. We have likely been ignored this time. His Majesty most likely wishes to retain every scrap of gold right now. I don't think he has even forgiven us. In fact, he might actually intend to further squeeze us."

"It would be impossible to squeeze the province any more. No matter how much he pressures the people, only blood can come out now because there is nothing else left!"

"That is correct."

"Just what does His Majesty think of this!? Is he just telling us to die!?!?"

Perius looked upon the irate Wilm with cold eyes.

"Viceroy, I warned you many times before the expedition. We should only take on what we can handle, but you wanted the impossible in fear of being abandoned by His Majesty. This is the result. We retainers are equally to blame for this catastrophe for being unable to stop you."

"Have I... made a mistake? Was my loyalty to Lord Amil... His Majesty, a mistake?"

"Your foremost responsibility must be to Coimbra. That is the position you have been given. You cannot run away."

"Lord Amil was obviously the correct choice back then! Grohl unthinkingly went to war! He launched that attack for his own pride, not for the benefit of the people! Or am I wrong, Perius!?"

"True, it cannot be denied that Lord Grohl made a mistake. We should have stopped him, even at the cost of our own lives."

“Oh really!? I did what I had to do. What fool could say otherwise!?”

“Viceroy... the people are suffering and could easily complain. Lord Grohl is already dead, and you are now the viceroy of South Coimbra. Please do all that you can for their sake. If you cannot do that, then step down from your position at once. I do not believe you could afford a comfortable retirement, though.”

Only destruction awaited Wilm if he stepped down, be it the death sentence from Amil for misgovernment, or retribution from the sword of the people.

“...”

Wilm averted his eyes. With no rebuttal, he could only remain silent. He could insult Perius, but the civil officials wouldn't let that stand. Once Wilm had become viceroy, the first thing he noticed was the lack of capable staff. All those who had followed Wilm had been acting only in self interest, and there were essentially none left who would work desperately for the sake of the province. No longer able to trust them, Wilm was robbed of the majority of his political power, and he began placing direct family members in prominent positions. Though he knew full well that it was necessary if he wanted to carry out his plans, he was bitterly aware that his actions were worse than even Grohl's had been.

“We will not forgive any complaints at this point. We should do what we can, and deal with one problem at a time. First is the matter of curbing the spread of the plague. If we can feed the people better, it should lessen the spread of the disease. We should use the stores for the expedition, release the people from their labour, and lower the taxes. We can't buy much time, but it should serve as an emergency measure.”

“That... I cannot do.”

“If you fear going against His Majesty that much, we shall never recover!! You surely understand just how bad this situation is!”

Perius spoke truth, but Wilm could not do anything. Wilm's only backing was from those who also supported Amil. If he lost them, he lost his position as viceroy, and there were already countless potential successors.

“That's too bad. You can't do it after all.”

Perius let out an exhausted sigh. They couldn't do anything without money. He had

given his arguments and could do nothing more than wait. He had to open Wilm's eyes. If he could see reality, he would save the people even at the cost of his own destruction. It was nothing to pay to save countless thousands, or even tens of thousands of lives.

The Gembi say that it seldom rains but it pours, and that couldn't be more right.

An epidemic of unknown origins had broken out in South Coimbra and Ribeldam as a result of all the traffic from the continental fleet. It was a feared disease that rotted musculature and viscera that became known as "rot". Those in good health could survive, but the rest died, leading to serious damage in the highly malnourished South Coimbra.

"Viceroy, we have received an express messenger from North Coimbra!"

"If they want aid, send him away. I've had enough of his complaints!"

All of Gaddis' messengers had been requesting aide. Wilm knew that the north was suffering, but he could do nothing about it, and even if he had the surplus for it, he would focus on enriching his own province.

"It is not! A rebellion has arisen in North Coimbra's mountain region! Calling themselves the Red Circle Army, they are marching on Lord Gaddis' Castle Ewear! This is an urgent request for assistance!"

"Ha, the Red Circle Army? That Red Circle Army came back!?"

Wilm's eyes had gone wide. It was the former army that had been forcibly raised as a part of Amil's plans, and had been the first step to the destruction of Grohl. Mysteriously, it had come back to haunt Wilm who was in a similar situation, and the name was even the same.

"What's the scale of this rebellion!? Just who is leading it!?" Perius enquired in a loud voice.

"Yes sir! The Red Circle Army is headed by Grohl's son Elgar Ludwig! Furthermore, he has over ten thousand men, and the plebeians on his side! They have terrific strength and cannot be stopped. Even the North Coimbran soldiers join them and their numbers swell by the day!"

"Are you absolutely sure that the young master is leading the rebellion?"

The soldier nodded to Perius' question. The late Grohl's orphan, Elgar had lived quietly in his mansion in North Coimbra for three years. North Coimbran Commander of One Thousand Cynthia Edrich was in charge of looking after him. It was easy to imagine that he had developed some kind of a scheme, but Gaddis had overlooked it, likely due to his declining mental health. The tales of his seclusion had even reached the south.

"There is no mistake! Scales fly in the red circle of their flag. He has decreed that he will deliver them from the traitors, and save the soldiers from misrule!"

"What a situation. How of it, Viceroy? The rebellion cannot be quelled, but we cannot send reinforcements. If Madress is undermanned, the sympathizers may join the rebellion.

Perius began to feel a headache, but he somehow managed to conceal his true feelings. He would genuinely prefer to fight under Elgar. Though he served Wilm now, he hated the man; but overthrowing the government with force was not something that Perius was capable of. He believed that was a road that could not be morally overlooked, so he would do all he could to help the people of Madress as a Coimbran retainer.

Wilm mustered his willpower, and gave his orders, "Summon Leue urgently at once; we must fortify the defences at the Kanan highway. Too bad for Gaddis, we cannot look after North Coimbra, but we simply cannot leave this as it is. Request a punitive force from His Majesty at once!"

Wilm wanted to take his head in both of his hands, but that behavior was unacceptable for the supreme commander of the province.

"Yes sir. We'll send for him at once!"

Just as Perius acknowledged it, another messenger came into the room, shaking and horribly pale.

"It, it's terrible!! This is urgent!!"

"What is it this time? Calm down and do your job!"

"Gemb province has declared independence from the empire, and commenced an invasion of Longstorm! At the same time, Giv and Karmbeeth both also declared independence and invaded Horn! Battles have already started!!"

“W-what?”

Looking askance at the dumbfounded Perius, the messenger gave the last of his message, “The three northwestern provinces have rebelled against Horsheido!!!”

“ ... ”

Wilm, upon hearing it all, dropped the letter in his hand. Two calamities had occurred at once. Such a storm would undoubtedly drag South Coimbra into the fray. Wishing he could slump over and be propped up by a nearby soldier, Wilm thought back to the late lord.

Just what will become of the empire? What will become of Coimbra? And what will become of me? I... can no longer even guess.

In the Red Circle Army headquarters, Elgar’s army was a gathering of many people from various walks of life, staffed by former Coimbran soldiers, the White Ant Bloc, Mundonovan emigrants of the Ir sect, and was half comprised of North Coimbran soldiers. Rage fanned the flames of their morale high, but that said nothing about their training or equipment, and they could not move in unity. The only combat effective units were probably the troops led by Cynthia, the White Ant Bloc, and those of the Ir sect.

“Lord Elgar, the garrison of the fort we’ve targeted has opened their gates and added themselves to our number. Our strategy is proceeding well!”

“Is that so? Make sure you deal with them the same as the rest. While the fort has fallen, our objective is gaining soldiers. Feed them without reservation.”

“It will be done.”

Elgar gave his orders to Irvan, a man in a green robe with a strange crest. The man had taken the initiative and abandoned the Mundonovan continent. Those of the Ir sect had been continually oppressed, and they were eagerly awaiting a chance to strike back. It was for this chance that he had made the decision to take all his wealth and those of his sect to emigrate. The first adherents that made the journey had fallen into slavery, but he covered up the knowledge and bodies, and continued to desperately market himself in search of a partner.

That partner was Elgar. In exchange for assets and knowledge of the continental

affairs, he had promised the protection of the sect members, and freedom to propagate the religion. Irvan's daughter Illum's engagement to Elgar served as the proof of that contract. There were only around one thousand members of the Ir sect, but it had been thanks to their support that the rebel army had managed to get off the ground, and the food they imported such as their kyuros potato and the censugrass were enough to save the starving and desperate people of North Coimbra. Elgar knew that he was sowing the seeds of future troubles, but he allowed their propagation and cultivation of the censugrass. He did have some problems with it, but it had to be accepted if he was going to stock his kitchen.

"Young master," Cynthia spoke as she knelt with her helmet in hand.

"That's enough, stop it with that young master thing. I am the supreme commander of the Red Circle Army. If it seems like my subordinates make light of me, the total morale will suffer."

"M-my apologies."

Cynthia's face went red. That sincerity of hers had not changed, but her face had become gaunt with the harsh life they had lived.

"Now then, down to business."

"Yes sir, we have somehow managed to arm all of our soldiers. Also, we have restored order again, having executed the offenders as an example."

Countless mercenaries, hooligans, and the like were the ones who would join a rebellion. Though they were well used to battle, they were quick to pillage which meant the rules had to be strictly enforced to maintain discipline.

"That's fine. If we fell into the same rut as the previous Red Circle Army, the people would abandon us quickly. Show no mercy to those that plunder. Judge them as strictly as the enemy."

"Yes sir!"

"Also, send out the scouts in secret so that we don't lose sight of Evar castle even for a moment. If Gaddis gets desperate, he might sally forth. It seems like his mind hasn't been in good health recently, so he might do anything."

Elgar gave his orders disinterestedly, and stood without waiting for a response.

“What is your advice on taking the castle?”

Elgar responded without changing his expression, “You don’t need any. If you go for it, they’ll probably surrender. Of course, I won’t accept anything other than unconditional surrender. This is what they asked for. They will pay with their lives.”

After Grohl had died, Elgar had done nothing but temper himself, he chose to deny himself and hide his rage. On the off chance that Gaddis suspected a rebellion, he would have attacked. Buried deep inside was his true intent, as he waited for the right time. There were many shady opportunities, but Elgar had endured. They had not been enough to bring Gaddis down.

Truly, truly my days of disgrace have been long.

Before the failure of Amil’s expedition, the misgovernment of Wilm and Gaddis, the arrival of Irvan with the other members of the Ir sect, and the cooperation secured from Gemb, Elgar had lived in shame; he was now fifteen years of age. It had only been three years, but they had been long. Essentially, the Red Circle Army was being used by Gemb —aiming for the reconquest of Longstorm without a care for what became of Coimbra,— but their aid was easily sold in return for support and a few attacks from the south. So long as Coimbra was in turmoil, Gemb could pressure Longstorm. Furthermore, Elgar was a fifteen year old leader with no experience, which could only be seen as a good thing by Siden, in the prime of life; underestimating the ease of rule. Elgar was well aware that he was inferior in terms of ability, experience, and looks, yet he took action still. If they were going to move, he would take advantage of it as much as he could.

I will do anything it takes to resuscitate Coimbra. That is what I’ve decided.

Wanting to avoid seeming too much like being no more than a return of Grohl, Elgar’s most trusted confidants were Najj, a plebeian; and Barbas of the White Ant Bloc. The plebeians did not infight as much as the nobility, preferring to aide those who understood their grievances. As such, he had to be a mediator and cast aside his personal whims. In order to take the steady path, he had accepted his engagement to Irvan’s daughter. Everything was for the revival of Coimbra. It couldn’t be avoided if he was to gain the trust of the adherents of Ir, but his proactivity also brought in goods unexpectedly quickly.

“Father, Mother, it won’t be long. I will show you how I’ll take back Coimbra from the traitors... I won’t ask you to lend me your power, but please watch.”

After he thought of his mother, father, and Noel who had been exiled to Willa island, Elgar returned his attention to military affairs.

“Men of the Red Circle Army! Advance! Take back the cities from those traitors!! Eradicate those parasites that live off the blood of their fellows!!”

“Huzzah!!”

The Red Circle Army’s grand offensive had begun, sweeping across North Coimbra like a grand cloud of locusts, quickly taking the resistant local lords prisoner. It was not like the previous Red Circle Army, as they forgave all those who surrendered peaceably. Plundering fellow Coimbrans was prohibited, and all those who violated that rule were swiftly executed for the same crimes as Gaddis and Wilm. Somehow, order was maintained in the patchwork army, most likely due to the great efforts of the plebeian commanders Barbas and Najj, and the limited food supplies. Men without food simply acted as beasts without thought.

Gaddis did not counter attack, holing himself up in his castle. His requests for fighting men from the neighbouring provinces had all been denied, and he no longer had any way of fighting back, spending each passing day with his retainers at a distance; not even letting family close to avoid being betrayed. Gradually, the Red Circle Army drew near Evar castle. Elgar and his high command felt that it would be possible to take the provincial capital in a single strike as if it wasn’t defended.

“Lord Elgar, the time has finally come. There haven’t been any problems yet, and the people have given us their support. We have been accepted as a mouthpiece of the people and not just a self-serving rebellion.”

“Good, but what is important is what happens from here on out; how Wilm in the South, and how Amil in the capital respond.”

“Your will be done. Lord Elgar..”

“What is it?”

“Do not forget your promise when our dawn is come. This is our final resting place. We have nowhere to run, and no further assets. If we lose this here, everything will be

gone, and a death by the wayside awaits. Please save our sect.”

Irvan looked slightly agitated. From what he had heard, Irvan seemed to also be a man who had fled from terrible oppression and had experienced hell. Only forty years of age, his hair had all fallen out, and his face was as withered as an old man’s in a testament to the hard times he had survived. The words he spat up like blood were by no means a lie. If Elgar violated the deal, all of the members of the Ir sect would meet their deaths at the end of a blade. Even Elgar could tell how deep the roots of their faith ran.

“Of course, I understand. I will uphold my word as I have said before. My friend Noel Bosheit taught me that. I will never betray you.”

“I... am greatly comforted by your words. Please pardon my rude remark. I am a weak man, and so I cling to God’s salvation to survive, nay, not I alone, but all of my sect are also. We are not yet accustomed to trusting men.”

“It is not a problem. If you have any doubts, come and ask about them. I’ll tell you no lies, for I know that suspicion among allies can bear no good fruits. Feel free to let me know of any of the slightest troubles for the people of your sect.”

After responding, Elgar left his pavilion. The time of rest had passed, and the time of the assault on Evear had come. Gaddis had not surrendered, and he would reap the consequences.

“Lord Elgar!! Urgent news! Something is wrong with Evear Castle!!”

The man in charge of managing the soldiers, Nejj, came running up with spear in hand. At first he had just been a man who stood out, but Barbas and Cynthia had been able to whip him into shape. He was a man trusted by the plebeians who was bright in times of trouble, and undaunted by any opponent. As the mouthpiece of the people, he usually spoke his mind without holding back. Elgar noticed that he was more suited to be a civil official than a military officer. A man who could feel the will of the people was hard to find.

“Calm down Nejj. What is wrong?”

“Captain Cynthia’s force is already coming back, but the castle’s banner isn’t North Coimbran! Something has to be up!”

“What?”

Gaddis' North Coimbran flag should have absolutely been flying above his Evear castle, the crest of which was naturally Gaddis' own. Something had to have happened if that wasn't the case. Elgar began to feel exhilarated, but desperately restraining himself, he slowly walked forward as Cynthia rushed in at an incredible speed to hurriedly give her report.

“I, I have a report! The capital of North Coimbra, Evear Castle, has already fallen!! It now flies the twin hammer banner of Noel Bosheit!!!”

“Noel, you say?” Elgar sought confirmation, “Is there no mistake!?”

“No mistake, sir! That Noel is back and she has magnificently taken the castle! Please take a look! That happy-go-lucky girl is happily playing her trumpet!”

Cynthia was beaming from ear to ear and Elgar ran to a place where he could see the castle and quickly confirmed with his telescope. The twin hammer banner flew, and the men on the walls gave victory cheers in South Coimbran equipment, but the Coimbran scales were nowhere to be seen. What could be seen were the twin hammer banners beside twin harpoon banners. Elgar did not recognise the crest.

“It appears as if they have total control of the castle. The guards are waving a flag of surrender, but we should give a warning just in case.”

Irvan's advice was calm, but Elgar wasn't hearing anything anymore.

“Noel, that girl, has kept her promise and come back, eh?”

“That is correct. She has likely returned with soldiers from Willa island. She is strangely popular, after all. To think she took the castle with her own force.”

They may have gained entry to the castle under the pretense of being South Coimbran reinforcements. That much would be simple, considering Noel.

“Cynthia... I feel like I have gained the strength of a hundred men. I also think I'm rather happy. Yes, if my father was here today, he would surely have been deeply moved.”

Elgar thought of his late father's face, how he had hung his head with a face full of

regret. There was a burning in his eyes, but he did not cry. The tears of a commander were ill omened.

“You should tell that to her yourself. Well then, let us head to Eveal ourselves!”

At Cynthia’s urging, Elgar wiped his eyes, and nodded strongly.

“Yes, let’s. Make haste... All men, we’re entering the castle!! North Coimbra is free!”

“Huzzah!”

A cry of victory arose from the men, and there was no reason to stop them. Elgar began to walk to the castle amid the shouts of joy from the soldiers, gazing up at the unfinished, and fallen castle. Bathing in the sunlight, Noel and her displeased aide played a song of victory.

Chapter 35

Feed the Hate

Gaddis knelt, face battered, tied in the meeting hall of Ewear Castle, capital of North Coimbra. Noel held the rope. Forcing down the urge to speak to Noel, Elgar glared at Gaddis. He was an enemy who had betrayed his father, despite being a commander; a man for whom, along with Wilm, he held unlimited hate.

“That state befits a traitor, Gaddis.”

“E-elgar, you bastard, do you really think it will end with this? Do you know what you’ve done!?”

“Of course. I have taken Coimbra back from those who would misgovern it. What else could I have done?”

“S-such foolishness. You are a fool just like Grohl!”

“Don’t say my father’s name, you worm! Do you know how much disgrace I suffered while obediently following your orders, you bastard? I wanted to slit my own throat on the spot so many times. So besmirched were those days that killing myself quickly seemed preferable. I have done everything for this day.”

“A, a punitive force will soon come from the surrounding provinces! This is your end! You’ll die a traitor like your father! B-but, if you stop now I’ll have mercy on you. If you understand that, hurry up and surrender!”

Gaddis bluffed in desperation, but his body was trembling. There was not a shadow of the dignity he had once held during his days as a commander. All that remained was an emaciated old man who had lost his confidence. He was probably thinking about how he could be saved. Elgar gave a scornful laugh.

“Nobody is coming for you, Gaddis you bastard. Or should I say they won’t come?”

“W-what are you talking about?”

“Do you know what is happening on the continent? I’ll tell you everything, so try thinking with that head of yours.”

Elgar pushed down his seething wrath and told Gaddis the current situation: how the three provinces of Gemb, Giv, and Karmbeeth had all declared independence and were fighting the Empire. The reinforcements he had requested from Bahar, and the Black Sun Cavalry stationed in Horn could not move. Naturally, there were no reinforcements from the capital, and South Coimbra couldn’t afford to move either. Elgar dashed his hopes by coldly telling him how he had been abandoned.

“T-that kind of thing can’t have... I can’t believe that anyone would raise a banner against the Empire!”

“Accept that it is the truth. The empire cannot afford to send men to a desolated land.”

Gaddis’ shoulders fell with shock at Elgar’s declaration. Nejj ran into the hall with loud footfalls, having secured the entire castle with Cynthia and Barbas. One pocket of resistance had refused to surrender, likely in memory of the atrocities of the previous Red Circle Army. That was why Nejj and the others had been ordered to prioritize persuasion. There was no need to pointlessly spill blood for they knew that none in North Coimbra were loyal to Gaddis. Elgar was sure that an explanation could clear up their misunderstandings.

“Lord Elgar, the soldiers who once resisted us have sworn allegiance to our cause! It seems to have been hard for them too, and the conversation flowed quickly! People really can understand each other when we have a conversation!”

“Well done, Nejj. All that’s left is to deal with him.”

“I have a request, Lord Elgar. Let me execute him. Thanks to him, my pop, and brother...”

Nejj put his hand on the hilt of his sword, and Gaddis’ face went blue.

Noel looked like she had something to say, so Elgar spoke up, “Just wait a little, Nejj. Noel, what is your opinion? What do you think we should do with this traitor?”

It had been long since they had last spoken; three years had passed since their parting at Madress harbour. Both he and Noel had grown, though Noel’s face had still retained that mysterious, girlish flavour that appeared to always be plotting something in jest.

“Hmm? Weren’t we going to execute him?”

“That’s the plan, but if you have something to say, I’d like to hear it. I want to make the best decision for the Red Circle Army. Didn’t you capture him alive for a reason?”

He didn’t think she had kept him alive out of mercy, so he was sure there was some value to the man.

“If his actions are unforgivable, I think it’s fine to kill him, but if we keep him alive, I think he might be useful.”

“O-oi!” Nejj was indignant, “You aren’t going to let him go are you!? There’s no reason to keep that kind of man alive! You can’t be thinking of adding him to our number!?”

He even unsheathed his blade.

“Not that,” Noel fiddled with her hammer as she replied, “Wouldn’t you have to be a bit too enlightened to think that if he’s so hated to death by the young master? All Coimbrans know of Gaddis and Wilm’s betrayal. If you forgave them, others would feel too safe, so there’s only one tentative way to use him alive, but it’s really up to the young master.”

Their next target was South Coimbra. If the local lords worried over where would be struck next, they wouldn’t be able to persuade the soldiers to defect if they thought they would surely be forgiven either way. The problem lay in how Elgar wasn’t going to be able to forgive him. He wanted to behead Gaddis on the spot, and offer the head up at the site of his parents’ grave. That was why he had endured so much humiliation for so long.

He was sure that his fellow North Coimbrans felt the same, but, “Gaddis, will your entire clan be destroyed, or will you die as my pawn? The choice is yours, you bastard.”

“A-are you saying that you’ll forgive me? I, who betrayed your father? Oh, ooooooh thank God!”

“Of course you’ll probably spend the remainder of your days in shame, but I won’t execute you or your family. There may come a day when your dishonour fades. The choice is yours, decide between life and death.”

“I, I will, f-from now on, act for the young master, no, for Lord Elgar. I swear an oath on

my life! So please, please at least spare my life!"

"I see... I understand, but you'll have to be under house arrest for a while. Naturally, you will forfeit your position and will wait for my orders. The instant you make any unnecessary moves, not just you, but your entire family will be killed."

"Y-yes, yes! Thank you very much!"

Gaddis prostrated himself even as he remained bound, shaking and crying tears of relief.

"I ain't gon' accept this! Everyone'd be angry if they knew you'd let this shitty bastard live! Do you know how many men died due to his betrayal in the last war!?!? I think every man here wants him dead!!"

"Explaining it is your job. I'm entrusting it to you, Nejj."

"Lord Elgar! I ain't gonna be able to persuade them of somethin' I can't accept!! Please don't ask the impossible!"

Elgar found himself nodding and smiled a bitter smile. His own feelings were in line with the others', which was why he could not think of anything that could persuade him.

"Listen, Nejj. We don't have luxury of being able to fight unnecessary battles, and we don't have the strength. Can you not understand this?"

"I, I understand, but... but that fucker is unforgivable!"

"Hold back your anger, and consider how it is best to minimise total deaths. This way, that man's entire family will step down and concede their territory. We will redistribute all of their assets to the people, or at least enough that they won't be able to plot a second comeback. Is that not enough to persuade them?"

He had no intentions of allowing them peaceful lives. As long as they were alive, he would let them know hell. Gaddis would have to pay for what he had done to the people. Elgar was much closer to killing him than letting him live, but he wouldn't let Nejj know that as he wasn't the kind of man who could keep a secret. Above all, Elgar was the one who most wanted him torn to shreds, but he could easily stay the blade of his revenge for a short while if it meant increasing his chances of victory.

“In... that case, it can’t be helped, but I still cannot accept it. Aaah, if I’d been the first one here, I’d have lopped off his head without a doubt! It’s all that redhead’s fault!” Nejj pointed at Noel, “She should have killed him before we got here!!”

Facing him, Noel was spaced out as if she had no idea what was going on.

“Uuuh, who?”

“You’re the only redhead here!! You fuckin’ took the castle all of a sudden! Well... that’s good and all, but I just can’t accept it!”

With no reason to be angry, Nejj scratched his head. His upfront personality often led to conflict, but he was a good man at heart, and was a big enough man to apologise after reflecting for a while. The plebeians knew this well, and there was not a trace of ill will against him. He was easy to read.

“Nejj, be quiet for a while. I don’t want to needlessly frighten the castle’s troops. Don’t cause unnecessary conflicts.”

“U-understood! Aaaah, I’ll go outside to cool off and be right back!”

As the boisterous Nejj briefly headed out, Elgar turned to face Noel, and for a moment, he was captivated by her red hair which was unchanged in its beauty.

“It really has been a while, Noel. It has only been three years, but I feel very nostalgic.”

“Yup, it’s been a while, young master. I’m glad you look well! It hasn’t been long, but you’ve gotten good with words, eh?”

She wasn’t holding back at all, and had called him young master just like Cynthia, but for some reason, he couldn’t bring himself to stop her. Conversely, he somehow felt it would be unnatural if she called him Lord Elgar, and he was also aware that nobody had updated her about the situation yet.

“Why are you here?”

“Why? I’ve come to fulfill my promises.”

“I know that, but how did you take this castle?”

“First, I took all the Willa islanders to Gemb, then, after secretly coming here, I was able to take the castle in one go by dressing as southern reinforcements. Their ramparts did nothing to help them, and it fell much more easily than I had expected.”

Elgar found himself smiling wryly at Noel’s signature laugh, and held out his hand.

“Thanks for coming back, but the real fight starts now. I would be honoured if you lent me your power from here on out.”

“Of course I will. Let’s do our best and take back the land!”

She strongly grasped his extended hand, and it was around that time that he was greatly shaken. He already had a fiancée. There was nothing he could do to change it now, but Noel looked as happy as always. If she was near him, he thought it would be enough. Hiding his feelings, he once more turned his thoughts to the coming war, to the next critical moment.

“Ah, you’ve still got that warhammer.”

“It’s one of my treasures, after all. I’ll use it with care, though I can’t use it as well as you can.”

Elgar usually carried a longsword and his warhammer. It was heavy and cumbersome, but for some reason he felt like it gave him power.

“I see. Well, it looks like we’re all gathered together now. I’ve used mine a bit too much, so it’s a little broken.”

Noel gave a misleading smile, and Elgar was caught up in it, smiling too. He had changed a lot, but Noel had not. She was taller now, but inside, she remained the same, which made him happy.

In the conference room in Eveal Castle, Elgar, Cynthia, and Irvan were in charge; Barbas, Noel, and the other commanders were participating too. The civil officials who had recently been added to their numbers ran about settling affairs. Mostly northerners, they seemed to have decided that they wanted to take out all of Gaddis’ relatives in a single sweep. There was the temptation to abandon their positions, but their opinions were understandable considering Gaddis’ actions. Naturally, Barbas and Cynthia had to talk with Noel, but their objective needed to be decided, and after a short prelude in which he told them that he would fully explain things later, Elgar

got to his talk.

“Things look favourable now that we’ve taken our first objective. All of this is thanks to everyone’s hard work. I am very grateful, you have my heartfelt thanks.”

Elgar nodded after surveying the crowd.

“Congratulations!”

“There has been minimal damage to the Red Circle Army, and the people have given us warm welcome.”

Irvan followed up Nejj and Cynthia’s congratulations with his own, “Congratulations, Lord Elgar. We of the Ir sect all also feel blessed.”

“Irvan, I will not forget your support. One day I will reward that labour. Tell that to the adherents.”

“I will gratefully accept, Lord Elgar. Iron is forged in flames. I believe that your plans will show the people of North Coimbra this truth.”

Elgar agreed with the advice. The people were surely holding their breath as they waited to see what their new leader would do. If he couldn’t live up to their expectations, his reputation would turn in an instant; such was the will of the people.

Thinking he should take the initiative, he suggested the easiest things to implement, “First we must free those forced to labour in the mines, then I thought we would lower the taxes, but does anybody have an opinion on that?”

While they bought time, he wanted to impose policy that improved conditions. It would take time and he knew it would be more difficult than anything. Had things been simple enough to deal with in a short period of time, Gaddis wouldn’t have had any trouble. He had to gather Irvan and the civil officials before the end of the day for a conference on what to do with their limited supplies and money. The support of the plebeians was Elgar and the Red Circle Army’s lifeline. Elgar knew that he did not have the charisma to easily draw people to him, so it was crucial for him to advance steadily down the most reasonable path and never diminish his reputation for reliability.

“That won’t be a problem at all. I assume that it is safe to say that there is no more gold to be found in the mines. Too much effort on that front will end up being less efficient

than simply working the land. We should send men to the region at once to liberate the miners.”

“Leave it to the White Ant Bloc as usual. That area is our specialty.”

“Then I shall entrust that task to you, Barbas. Also, there is talk of the sick being forced to work. Distribute some censugrass to those with symptoms, but... do not give them too much.”

“Yes sir!”

Censugrass could not cure the disease, but it was an effective painkiller. Elgar wanted them to die better deaths than perishing in naught but pain. The Red Circle Army was also distributing it to merchants who sold at a highly inflated price in the enemy provinces of Ribeldam, Bahar, and Horn under the guise of a miracle drug that could cure the plague. Able to be cultivated in the mountains, the plant became a valuable source of income. The reason they were selling it to their enemies was because it was also a poison that rotted the mind. High enough doses over a long enough period of time would turn any man into an invalid. Even if a man wanted to stop, his body would continue to crave it until one day, he died. By the time it could be detected, it was already too late, and there were probably already many who were beginning to show symptoms in the other provinces. Overdose could turn any medicine into poison. With that in mind, Elgar had allowed mass cultivation, often confronted by Irvan, who would ask if he was prepared to go to hell over it. The plant was taboo on his continent, and the members of the sect of Ir would not touch it.

I don't care what becomes of my soul when I'm dead. What matters is right now.

What mattered were the people living in Coimbra. If he could save them, the rest was insignificant. The ones who had stolen it were the imperials.

“Now, this next point is particularly important. It is the matter of when we should invade South Coimbra with our Red Circle Army. We will not have achieved victory until Coimbra is united.”

The room fell into a hushed silence as everyone began to think. There was a common sentiment that wanted to attack with force, but the soldiers were clearly already tired. More importantly, the Red Circle Army still stood on shaky foundations. The emancipation of North Coimbra had been a success, so they had no need to rush.

Military and civil officials thought alike, as did Elgar, though there was one person who looked amazed at all the concern.

“As Lord Elgar has stated, we cannot go down a road that leads us away from unity with South Coimbra, but we should be able to gain control over them in no more than three months. We have come this far on military might alone. Consequently, we have not been defeated once. We should rest for a short while to train the soldiers.”

The military officers all nodded at Cynthia’s words, and Irvan stood up to represent the civil officials, “Though I mostly agree with Sir Cynthia’s opinion, I believe that we shall need half a year. In such turbulent times, the people have become exhausted. We are blessed with spring, and if we remain in control, we shall reap the harvests in autumn. I propose that we use those harvests to supplement our invasion of South Coimbra. We must not rush.”

As Cynthia did not raise any objections to Irvan’s prudence, everyone nodded satisfactorily.

“It looks as though you have a different opinion, Noel. No need to be reserved with me, just tell me what you think.”

Noel nodded with a smirk as Elgar directed his words to her.

“While it is true that preparations are important, if we wait that long, the enemy can strengthen his defence, so I think now is the best time to move. If we strike now, I think we could penetrate through even Madress.”

The room went began to stir when Noel finished her sentence.

“Pardon me, but what is the basis for this judgement? I understand that you took Ewear castle in a surprise attack, but it will not be so easy with the South. Our allies are valorous, but I do not think that we can win a war on that alone. Now is the time for us to fortify our position.”

Others tried to continue from where Irvan left off, but Elgar interrupted them harshly, “I see. I support Noel’s opinion. How many men will we need?”

“I think five thousand will be enough. The southern lords will quickly surrender when threatened. The only ones who would ever fight are essentially all in Madress. Well, if they don’t comply we can just smash them all.”

“Okay, then I’ll leave the subjugation of South Coimbra to you. Do as you please. I will accept full responsibility.”

“Yup, oka... I mean, I understand!”

Noel gave an energetic salute. As Elgar began to wrap up the meeting, Irvan approached him in a rush.

“Please wait, Lord Elgar! What are you thinking!? Did not Cynthia and I explain how we mustn’t rush!? That is the decision of your allies, who, I might add, are the only reason the Red Circle Army is even here!!”

“I am fully aware of that, but my father met a tragic end because he ignored Noel’s words. Therefore, I shall believe her. That is what I decided on that day.”

“While I can understand that, this situation is completely different! Surely there must be a limit to how correct even Sir Noel can be. This will only cause our allies to stumble!”

“It isn’t as if I don’t trust you all, but...”

“But?”

“No... it’s nothing, only, it cannot be said that Noel’s suggestion is necessarily incorrect. The thin nature of our enemy’s current defence should make this our greatest opportunity.”

“But it is too much of a risk. There is no reason to gamble. I simply cannot approve. In the first place, capturing it with only five thousand men is unthinkable.”

“Irvan, there is a reason why Noel is still feared in Bahar. I’m sure you too will quickly realize this, so please trust me.”

“Your... will be done.”

Irvan withdrew with nothing more to say, merely scowling at Noel.

Having removed her red armour, Noel stretched out her arms and relaxed in the Eveal castle barracks. As she did, Riglette was, for some reason, taking care of the paperwork. That was when Barbas appeared with her bident as did Cynthia with a

scowl. Upon noticing them, Noel welcomed the two with both arms.

“Oh, if it isn’t Cynthia and Barbas? It’s been a while! It’s really great to see you again!”

“I wanted to see you again, Captain!! The whole White Ant Bloc’s rejoicin’!”

“It’s been three years, eh? You’re as energetic as always.”

“I know right? Are you surprised?”

Cynthia smiled a bitter smile at Noel’s high spirits.

“Of course you did. You really just appear without warning like the wind. I could even call you a phantom.”

“Well, I am the infamous fiend after all. More importantly, Cynthia, you look worn out. Have you gotten thinner?”

“A whole lot has happened. You could easily have called the situation in North Coimbra hellish just a short while ago.”

“Well I’m glad you’re safe. I was always worried about you on Willa island. Of course, you too, Barbas.”

After hearing that, Barbas approached her, wiping his eyes, and courteously handed back her bident.

“Welcome home, Captain. I knew you’d come back. I believe this is what you should be wieldin’.”

“Yup, thank you very much. This bident really does calm me down. There isn’t another like it.”

Noel squeezed it countless times as if to confirm it was real, and the feeling was incredibly familiar. She wondered if the bident was also happy at their long awaited meeting, as it felt just a little bit warmer than usual.

“Lots happened here while you were away, Captain. It’d take a while to tell it all, though.”

Noel firmly placed a hand on Barbas' shoulder as he scratched his white hair.

"Hey, you've got a kid now right? That's what I heard!"

"H-how'd you hear that much!?"

"Ahaha, I asked Kai. Hey, can we meet? I wonder what your kid's like? I'd like to play together some time soon!"

Noel gave a wink that made Barbas blush.

"Ah, yeah, do come and see."

"So, what's the name?"

"I'll have you look forward to hearin' it for yourself when you meet."

Barbas rubbed his nose in embarrassment. Though Noel wanted to know right away, she thought waiting made it even more fun.

"That's not fair... well, it might be fun in its own way."

"The truth is, I was hopin' you'd be the godmother. Well, I've made your name a lucky one."

There Barbas cut off his words and turned his gaze beyond Noel, highly displeased.

"This fucking four-eyes is still alive? Dammit, the joy of our reunion is halved! Read the mood, and stay out of sight!"

"Your face and tone are as vulgar as ever, even after three years. I'm honestly shocked. I could have sworn you died in a cave-in."

"You fuckin' bitch! I hope you die of some disease! Oh, I get it, you're so rotten that you couldn't possibly get any worse!"

"Your brain is rotten, so you certainly wouldn't notice any symptoms."

"Haaa!?"

Cynthia found herself bursting out in laughter at the nostalgic scene. Noel completely understood how she felt, and was happily watching away. There was something calming about it all, though the people in question probably didn't think so.

"Well then, Noel."

"Yes?"

Cynthia enquired with a serious expression, "Why did you propose a sudden attack on the South? I'm sorry to say this, but the young master seems to blindly believe in you. Please do tell me if you have any thoughts. There's no limit to how much they might criticize a newcomer like yourself."

Noel felt that the troubles just piled up as usual, so she went straight into explaining it all. She hadn't come back just to trouble Cynthia.

"While the situation here is a bit bad, we have already collected all our soldiers, and our morale is fairly high."

"That's true, since we've made it to our target. And many of our numbers have a burning desire for revenge... curses and anger can become strength."

"Yup, South Coimbra, on the other hand, has dispersed most of the troops who would guard Madress. Taking Madress in one go before they can even gather them is the fastest way, and we could minimise losses too."

It was true that they were on shaky ground, and that a single strike could become a death blow, but that weakened state was yet another reason to attack. The South was undoubtedly in turbulent times, too, and if they weren't able to manage it, they wouldn't be able to attack, meaning an urgent attack may have been the most efficient method. Noel believed that she could do it.

"I see. Yes, I can understand your reasoning, but will it really go that well? While our morale is high, we don't have any veteran troops. They cannot even act properly on orders."

"That's why we should bet everything on our first assault," Noel puffed out her chest, and pointed at herself, "If I take the Willa islanders, the White Ant Block, and Cynthia Corps, we should be fine. The ones behind us will just be there to make our numbers look better. If we clearly achieve victory, there won't be any problems."

She could win with the current circumstances. If the conflict was drawn out, the uncertainties would only rise; therefore she would seize the day.

“That was quite the explanation.”

“Well, I did have three years. Riglette and I thought out just how we could take Madress, right?”

“Well... there wasn’t anything else to do,” Riglette turned away, and tried to cover up, “If I’m going to beat that bastard Wilm, I could put up with that much.”

Elgar had secretly gathered his troops, and had received news from Siden that he had jumped to action at the opportunity Gemb had been supplying them. Also having heard, Noel had planned how to take Eveal and Madress together with Riglette in her free time. As far as Noel could tell, Riglette and Wilm had a similar way of thinking. It bothered her, so she would never admit it, but Riglette was the ideal imaginary opponent. She would degrade other people, had a great craving for the spotlight, and would do anything to get what she wanted. Riglette would even get like that that over trivial matters. Even still, she was one of Noel’s precious friends, and though the person in question would disagree, Noel thought they were, and that much was enough. Wilm, however, had a debt to pay, and she would make sure to destroy him. That too was important, and she could not afford to forget it.

“I’ve thought of most things. I talked it out enough that my voice started to hurt. That’s why I get along with Riglette now.”

“That was mostly correct, save for the end. I firmly believe that I do not get along with you.”

“That’s harsh, eh? Even though we’ve been fishing, swimming, and played...”

“Be quiet. Didn’t you agree not to say too much!?”

“Wait... Just what were you two doing on Willa island? While I had heard that your observations were rather lenient, I didn’t know you were that free!”

Cynthia was clearly shocked, and Barbas was laughing merrily.

“Ahaha, that just the start. Everyone grew closer through it all. Fishing, training, getting a boat, fighting pirates, we did all sorts of fun things!”

“P-pirates?”

Cynthia had become confused.

“That’s right. Some of the people I brought back were former pirates. We also went secretly to Gemb to eat lots of tasty food, to Giv to see the beautiful art, and to Karmbeeth to hear the proud preachers preach. I was actually pretty busy.”

“Wait... but how were you able to move about so freely!? Weren’t you in exile!? Do you know how much I was worried about you!?”

“Ahaha. I really wanted to get in contact with you earlier, but if I came here and was caught, it would make everything earlier into a waste. I mean, aren’t there all sorts of rumors about me? Sorry, Cynthia.”

“It’s fine. I’m just glad you’re safe.”

“I’m also glad you’re safe. And this is about what’ll happen from here on out, I’ve thought it through really carefully with Riglette, so it’ll surely go well. We’d thought up all sorts of things, but a decisive battle was the best one, right?” or so she asked Riglette, but it was as if she hadn’t been heard.

Her eyes were slightly glazed over, and she was blushing slightly; even shaking a little. Even on the island, she had sometimes displayed these same symptoms.

“Fuehehehe, soon enough... soon enough... they have to be in a panic some time soon.”

“Uh-oh, she’s at it again.”

“Sir Riglette... what is it?”

“Hm? It’s some kind of illness, isn’t it? Just ignore her for now.”

Riglette was deathly pale as she soliloquized under her breath, having escaped into her own world. Barbas looked disgusted by it.

“Fueheh, that filthy worm, you will rue the day that I take the capital with my own troops. After all, Madress is a strong fortress. I wonder if you’ll make a face when we take it with troops assembled in such a short time? Aaaaah, I’m looking forward to it. This is why I am alive. Ufufufu...” Riglett’s laugh had started to sound dangerous.

Everything was business as usual for Noel, so she hardly payed it any mind since Riglette would return to herself after about ten or so minutes. Barbas and Cynthia, however, didn't seem to be able to accept it, having never experienced it before.

"Anyhow, I understand. If you've thought it out, there aren't any problems. We just have to confirm what you don't believe. Let everyone know."

"Thanks, Cynthia."

Noel learned that persistence could turn the tables, as surely that had been the case this time, which was why Noel fully intended to rely on Cynthia. If she could avoid pointless hostility, she could make fewer enemies. She had been most worried about how to persuade Elgar, but it had gone much more smoothly than anticipated. In the worst case scenario, she would have marched her Willa island troops and forcefully gained allies. Sunny days really were the best when considering how many things could go well.

"We can only talk about this here, but do you want to hear what the foremost deciding factor for the invasion will be?"

"I'm not sure I want to know..."

"Then you don't have to. It's already been decided, after all."

"Wait... I'll hear you out for a bit. What is it this deciding factor?"

Cynthia got ready to hear the response with a serious expression.

Noel placed her hands on her hips and spoke with full confidence, "Of course, it's the great weather today. I bathed in the sunlight and thought, oh yeah, I should attack..."

"You idiot! Have you learned nothing in all this time!?!?"

Cynthia's fist struck for the first time in three years. Having grown thin, Cynthia's strike was weaker than usual, though it was probably just Noel's imagination. A sadness intermixed with her joy in a sentiment yet unknown to Noel, but she was still glad that everyone had survived. She could still protect her promises. They could play, make a fuss, and fight together. Noel thought about how her three years of patience had payed off as she ran her hand along her bident.

“By the way, it seems like you’ve grown. You also seem much more womanly than before.”

“Really? Thanks. Uh, you seem to have more grey hair, though.”

“Yeah... it’s been hard here in the North. I’ve seen lots of death. It couldn’t be prevented given the circumstances...”

Cynthia looked like she was about to cry, so Noel began motoring away to try and cheer her up, “Uhhh, you really don’t have any grey hair, so it’s okay. You’re still young, Cynthia.”

“Hehe, you’ve gotten better at complementing people. There are some things I have to tell you once Coimbra has been restored. Until then, I’ll be waiting for that promise from the harbour to be fulfilled.”

“Oh? I don’t really get it, but okay.”

Cynthia looked pained, but acted as to not bother Noel. She was stubborn, so she was probably still worried over the time she had drawn her sword on Noel, even though it was all in the past. Noel knew that she probably wouldn’t accept that, so Noel decided to leave it be. She had studied up, and these types of things weren’t the types to be rushed.

“I’m really sorry, but I have to fight.”

“Hey, hey, cheer up. Look, you’ll feel better if you bathe in Mr Sun’s lovely rays. That’s how it works for me!”

“Well that’s true. You’re always in a great mood on sunny days.”

“In these last three years, I’ve gathered up quite a lot of companions. I’ll introduce you, so come with me! Let’s go bathe in Mr Sun’s rays some time!”

Noel grabbed Cynthia’s garment and dragged her forcibly outside. Having withered a bit, Cynthia probably just needed some fresh air and some water. Noel decided to take her straight to the well and thoroughly spray her with water. Surely that would cheer her up, though it was all Noel could think of.

Author's Note:

Noel is about 17-19 years old. If she hit 20 before the end of the story, well, the title...

She's at an age between childhood and adulthood, and grew in all sorts of ways in her time on the island.

Chapter 36

The Fiend's Assault

Noel's force of five thousand departed from Evear castle and headed first to capture Rockbell. Afterwards they would take the Kanan highway and aim for Madress. The enemy forces in villages and outposts would be driven off by the promise to do no harm unless resisted. Noel, their commander, was incredibly infamous, so most of them gave up on resistance. The last war had proven what befell local lords who opposed her. Not wishing to be burned alive, they sent hostages as proof of compliance. The seeds Riglette had planted had finally sprouted.

Others simply joined their number, and Noel advanced, accepting all volunteers. It was then that Noel spotted a nostalgic face among the newcomers.

"Oh, if it isn't Mirut. What are you doing in a place like this?"

"I thought I'd meet you if I came. The other villagers and I were waiting for you."

"It's really been a while. So, have you been well?"

Noel gave Mirut an intense slap on the back which caused him to stumble. He had grown in the last three years, but was even more slender than before.

"Not really since I had to work in the mines the whole time. I was finally released thanks to the Red Circle Army."

The villages in North Coimbra had been ordered to send workers if unable to pay the harsh taxes, and the young were taken away to work the mines even though there was no way they would easily find anything considering that even Grohl had already given up on them. Countless lives had been lost to the never ending labour and cave-ins. Nothing could be gained from escaping, either, as the villages had all fallen into poverty. It was blessing enough to be in good health.

"I see, then that's good that you don't have to work anymore."

"Yeah, it really is, though it's rather strange to be saved by the Red Circle Army. It might

be fine to trust in Lord Elgar considering that he isn't pillaging like the previous one. That's why we figured it'd be best to join in."

Mirut plucked the string of his old bow with a fearless expression, surrounded by men who were most likely Zoim villagers. Noel had a vague sense that she remembered them. There were still former Zoim villagers in Noel Corps: the ones who had refused to go home after the last war. They were the ones who had acted in concert with the White Ant Bloc, and been overjoyed at Noel's return. Having desperately practiced to become a military band, their performances were top notch.

Noel stated her disapproval, "Ah, but you might die, you know. If you came here on a whim, I think you should go back. Death comes quick."

He looked way too thin to fight, and she didn't want Mirut to die after he had been so kind to her in the village. Hence she told him to stop.

"If you hadn't come, I'd have died in that mine, so I need to repay that debt. You're going to invade the South, right? In that case, you'll need as many hands as you can get. Please let me help."

The Red Circle Army had already absorbed a large number of such volunteers when they gained total control over North Coimbra. They were of one mind: wanting to get revenge on those who now smoked sweet perfumes. Their hatred for Wilm and Gaddis, the traitors of the previous war, was particularly vehement.

"What will Cal do? You can't leave her alone."

"She's already fine by herself. She lived fine in the village, even without me. She still treasures that picture book..."

Noel forcefully cut him off, "What are you saying? I can't have that."

Living alone was horribly lonely. Even with all her companions, Noel understood that. Just thinking about returning to her solitary wandering was horrifying, and Noel was sure she would be unable to bear it and die.

"But, I!"

"It's still lonely to be alone. I think Cal's just gotten stronger."

“We aren’t kids anymore. We can’t be together forever!”

“Then bring her along. If you work hard, you’ll even get food.”

Noel proposed a plan as Mirut bounced back. It would keep her amused, and keep Cal from being lonely, so it truly was killing two birds with one stone.

“Ah, but I really can’t let her get caught up in the fighting...”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. You can just run if it looks dangerous. I’ll let you go if that happens, so how does it sound?”

“Uh, eeeeeeh.”

“It’s fine if you don’t like it. It’s fine to go back and live happily with Cal. I think that’d be for the best.”

“I get it... to be honest I was worried about leaving her by herself. I’ll come back.”

“Yup, that’s good. Then we can play together again! Also, I’m sure it’ll go well this time.”

Noel laughed, and held out a hand to Mirut, who grasped in his own, heavily scarred hand.

“You really don’t change, Noe- Captain Noel. You’ve grown, though.”

“Ahaha, you’ve gotten old Mirut.”

“At least say I’ve become an adult...”

After returning to Zoim for a while, Mirut brought Cal back. With some thinking for a while on what to do, it was decided that Cal could be Riglette’s assistant. Essentially, she was busied with odd jobs. They made sure Cal overheard, so that she could feel better, even though Riglette’s duties actually increased considering she had to train Cal. Noel figured that sometimes troubles were good, and didn’t pay it any mind.

“Um, Noel-oneesan... Riglette seems kind of angry...”

“That’s how she is, so it’ll be fine once you’re used to it. She’s surprisingly funny sometimes, so do your best, okay?”

Noel tenderly patted Cal on the shoulder. Riglette was flaunting her glasses while striking an imposing stance with her hands on her hips.

“I don’t care if it’s a little girl from the sticks, or some foolheaded redhead, I just don’t feel like feeding them. Work hard so that you don’t starve. Essentially, I hate incompetence.”

“It sound’s interesting, doesn’t it?”

“Ah...ahaha...”

The first laugh she had heard from Cal in a long while was cramped. While she did think it was all a bit much, Noel figured that Cal would get used to it.

Even still, Noel’s companions had increased in number. The five thousand men who were cooperating with Noel were a real motley gang: the youths from her island of exile, the former pirates who had once attacked her, and even the Coimbran soldiers that had been on the island. On top of it all, she still had the White Ant Bloc as well as the subordinates from when she had been promoted to command of one hundred in Coimbra. At present, the Red Circle Army and the Zoim villagers were adding to her number, and Kai had happily sent them some of the light infantry from Gemb with their characteristic, wide-brimmed helmets.

I’ve gathered so many companions, and my world has really broadened.

Noel had traveled to many provinces during her time in exile. Because she had brought prosperity to the island, the soldiers guarding her had come to an understanding with her, so she had basically been free to do whatever. Siden had made arrangements for her to visit Gemb via Giv, and then move through Karmbeeth, so she had been able to speak with many different people. Every province had been suffering, and she had troubled herself with thoughts about bringing Amil down. As a result, all of the viceroys close to Siden had begun to form plans to make use of Noel. She had only gotten on board because she knew she would also be following Elgar’s plans. Noel had no intentions of being a disposable pawn, but she would cooperate and become companions with those who would help her further her goals. Furthermore, Siden had shown her much kindness for which she felt some gratitude. All this was why she had decided to take the soldiers from Willa island to Elgar when Gemb attacked Longstorm. That was how she could repay Siden for his conveniences as well as protect her promises to Cynthia and Elgar.

Siden appeared to be plotting something else, but it didn't seem to be particularly bad, so she was going to let it slide. She was curious about how meek Kai had looked, but she had been unable to get an answer out of him no matter how many times she asked. Gembites were not only famous for their valour, but also for their obstinacy to the death.

As Noel thought about various things, Cynthia launched into a dark soliloquy beside her, "But still, what will change will change. Who could have thought that the people hated Major Gene-, no, Wilm, enough to support us this much."

"It's simple. Whenever something bad happens, the people will want a scapegoat, right? As long as there is somebody in the wrong, and it doesn't matter who, there'll be somebody to stone. That is how humans are."

"You seem to have started saying wise things," Cynthia nodded slightly, "It seems that not only your height has grown, but also your character."

Noel's chest puffed up with pride, and she put on her glasses to emphasize her intelligence. They could double her persuasion powers.

"I've studied up these past three years, after all; interesting and annoying matters alike. Balance is important in all things."

"That's right; even of those who understand, and those who don't yet."

"To put it simply, it would be a problem if it was always sunny, so I've put up a little with that detestable rain."

There were sunny days, rainy days, and cloudy days that were neither nor. Though she would be in a great mood if every day was full of sun, the land would dry up around her. Conversely, if the rain did not let up, the crops would rot in the soil. Balance was the key. As far as Noel was concerned, the optimum mix was 7 parts sun and 3 parts rain. She could work the land when the sun was out, and stay in bed all day when it rained. It likely would only take that much to enrich the soil.

"While that is true, it seems a bit painfully obvious."

Cynthia gave a bitter smile. If something so obvious did not occur, the land would become horribly dry. Invading another continent to store up riches on their own had destroyed all sorts of balance. The greatest mystery of it all was how it continued

despite the knowledge of what the expedition had done. She couldn't comprehend it, but Riglette had said that it was simply how people were, so it couldn't be helped.

"Well, that's true, but you know, the most amazing thing is how I can put up with the rain."

She would still get irritated, but it no longer showed, or so she hoped, but the children on the island had told her that her face scrunched up all funny in the rain. She tried tutting.

"It isn't all that impressive, but considering you, it may be."

"Basically, it's thanks to the three years on that island."

After her suitable statement, Noel turned to gaze restlessly at her surroundings.

"Oh yeah, do you want to go check out that old, rundown fort? Is it still there?"

For some reason, Noel wanted to visit the fort where she had first met Cynthia, and she was incredibly curious about how it was doing. She didn't have time to mess around, but there was no preventing her curiosity.

"It's probably still there, but we don't have time for it. What would you do with those ruins in the first place?"

Noel gave her sincere plans while touching her glasses, "Explore it while bathing in memories? I'm sure there's plenty to do."

Cynthia's amazed expression was just like before. It was an face that Noel was fond of. It was the face of an untimely interruption with the intention of training a certain troublesome individual, and she could feel some gentleness inside it. She had spent those three years learning how to find just such a thing.

"Like I said, we just don't have the time. We're going to attack Rockbell. Try to be a little more nervous..."

Just then, a messenger rode in on horseback.

"Sir Noel! The gates of Rockbell have opened, and the city is surrendered! Please enter the city as is!"

“Yup, I hear you. Let everyone know. Also, pay close attention to those troops from Madress. Barbas, be careful, okay? I doubt it, but they might try for a sneak attack.”

“Roger that!” the messenger shouted as he turned his horse to face Barbas Corps.

Shocked, Cynthia was grabbed by Noel.

“Wait, what is this!? As if they would surrender without even crossing swords with us once! And that lord should be related to Wilm!”

Noel knew that, of course. In a serious fight, they would take serious damage, so they had surrendered. There were always those who would forget about their social positions and status when faced with their deaths. Riglette had been the source of information on her relative’s personality.

“I trusted the matter of negotiation to Riglette. I let her use any method to just get them to surrender. Looks like it went well.”

“S-sir Riglette did?”

“Yup. While we were on the island, Riglette further refined her tutting abilities, but that wasn’t the only thing she did, because it looks like she’s taught herself how to intimidate people. She grabs with all her strength once she gets her hands on somebody’s weakness, so you could even say that she’s even more tricky than before.”

“I, I see...”

Cynthia was clearly pulling back, not wanting to be too close to the yet monologing Riglette at Noel’s side. Poking fun at her was too tempting, so Noel couldn’t pass up the opportunity. The reactions were interesting, so it had become a habit. Seeing it all reminded her that Noel had praised Riglette earlier, saying that her perseverance was the same as always, but had started to look a bit more evil. The statement had been met with a tut.

“I’m known as the fiend right? So she probably said that if they don’t surrender, something horrible would happen, or threatened them like that. You have to remember my infamy. Is this the noblesse oblige?”

Always getting even with people, Riglette had continued with her distasteful hobby of furthering Noel’s infamy in their destination by spending her funds spreading tales of

the bravery of the fiend, as well as horrific stories of her exploits in full belief that those seeds would grow into a resplendent harvest. Noel herself was troubled by it, tiring of the constant threats and the fact that the Willa islanders had been calling her the fiend the entire time. It seemed to be a term of endearment, but that didn't help much.

"Right... what could it be?"

"Well, we really should avoid unnecessary efforts."

After a laugh, Noel gave a signal, and began to walk forward with her troops in tow; their target: Rockbell. The inside would likely still be destroyed as Wilm had neither the will nor the way to repair it.

"I wonder if it'll be torn up like always in there?"

"I've heard it is. Wilm focused on Operation Light of Dawn. Using the impoverished northerners as fodder, he spent money and men on his continental gamble. The results are as you can see."

It was unthinkable to try that kind of expedition, but Noel thought she wanted to try talking to him. She had the feeling that her world would expand. That was when she remembered the continental Irvan, and she thought about having a conversation with him as it seemed to be interesting.

"I thought I could do well for myself in the last war, but it seems a lot harder than expected."

"If you rise too high, you'll be saddled with a great amount of responsibility. That is what a leader is."

"That's true, but a single decision would effect everyone. That's really harsh. I'd end up in charge of so many lives."

"Those aren't the words of a military leader. The soldiers will become uneasy, so please stop it with that."

Cynthia gently prodded her head, and Noel once more felt nostalgia.

"Ahaha, that's true!"

“Haaa...”

“But if I make it big, I’ll get loads of companions right? That’d be, like, super fun, so I think I will aim high after all. I want to rise even higher.”

Noel took out her trumpet and displayed just how much more skilled she had become. The day’s music was: March of the Noel Corps. Not only the soldiers from Willa island joined in, having practiced it countless times, but the Coimbran troops they had at some point bonded with also joined in. Even Noel was surprised, and in the end they all marched as they sang. Rigarette’s bugling was as always, though. The twin hammer banner flew proudly as Noel entered the fallen city of Rockbell.



Merely five days after reports of the fall of North Coimbra had reached Madress Castle, reports of the fall of Rockbell —supposedly the final wall of defence before Madress itself— arrived.

“To think they call themselves Coimbran soldiers after surrendering without any fight!? Are they women!?!?”

“Viceroy, it is South Coimbra at present,” Perius spat bitter words, “And we had already sent our best troops to the continent. Though we do have numbers, they are all new recruits. No military pride has been instilled in them yet.”

Wilm gave him an irate glare. The reason he had made use of Perius, though knowing he was hated himself, was because of his popularity with the civil officials and the plebeians. There was also that he knew a man so upright would never betray him, and because Wilm did not have the luxury of being able to kill off capable men.

“Then notify the deserters that they will receive harsh punishment. I don’t care if I have to kill their wives and children to make an example! If we don’t put a stop to this, the army will collapse!”

“The Lord of Rockbell was one of your relatives. I can hardly imagine that he surrendered without any fight. If you wish to punish the men, your appointed officials would not be able to escape responsibility. Do you still intend to do it?”

“Hmph...”

Wilm could not find the words to respond. It had been none other than Wilm himself who had appointed that man. Count Barel Ludwig had died at the hands of the first rebellion. Wilm had placed his son Leue in the military and appointed relatives to control all the surrounding cities to solidify his position. He expected them not to betray him if they all shared a similar position, but his expectations had been betrayed fairly easily. Wilm never thought that they would bend so easily to spare their own lives.

“Either way, at this rate we won’t be able to defend every fort and city. Recall Leue from his defence of the highway. It might be best for him to remain in the castle.”

“Shall you wait for those reinforcements here? Hardening the defence before the rebels arrive.”

It was a cowardly strategem, but an attack had too many risks. The only commanders Wilm could trust were Leue and himself. Naturally, it was unthinkable for him to sally forth himself and leave Madress undefended. All he could do was wait.

The promotions of military and civil officials should strengthen the province by strengthening the soldiers. To think we’ve missed the main point of governance. Just how long have my eyes been clouded?

Wilm had surely been thinking of the province’s future before he had betrayed Grohl. Truly, he had wanted to help the people and enrich his home, but the ambitions that sprouted in him had taken over and he had only worked to further them alone. He hadn’t once thought of the people since Amil had become the emperor.

“But... can we stop them from advancing further?”

“Yes. Fortunately, Madress wasn’t caught up in the previous war, so the defences are still solid. We can last quite a while provided we remain supplied by sea. There is even a possibility that the rebel army will dissolve on its own over time.”

“Okay, so we’ll wait in the castle. Request reinforcements from Bahar and supplies from Ribeldam. If they are reluctant, tell them they’ll be next!”

“Understood.”

With a short response, Perius turned to leave, and Wilm called out to him as he retreated.

“Wait, Perius. Don’t you want to join the Red Circle Army?”

“Whatever do you mean?”

“Don’t play dumb! The late Grohl’s son is leading them, and I’m sure you’ve sworn loyalty to Grohl. Why are you still here?”

Even his relatives had betrayed him and surrendered. He had killed Grohl, so there was no way that Perius would forgive his usurpation. Wilm didn’t think he was the type to betray anyone, but the seeds of doubt had been sown in his soul. So he sought confirmation.

“I cannot accept changing things through military force. Forcing one’s own justice with force is the way of the world, but does it not merely spread more hell? Now more than ever... That is why I do not bear a sword, and that isn’t going to change, no matter who the opponent is.”

Perius’ thoughts would be incomprehensible to other leaders, but he was a man who would probably reprimand an emperor, even if it brought about his death.

“I see...”

“I do, however, wish that I could take your head and deliver it to the young master, however unreasonable that might be. I am very sorry, but please do not ask that again. I might get caught up in my emotions and try something rash.”

“Uh... oh, okay.”

Wilm averted his eyes, unable to bear the hateful gaze.

This shouldn’t have happened. Things went so well at first, but how could they have come to this? Just where did I go wrong?

The expedition that Wilm had been betting on had looked promising at first. They had brought over goods and gems, even people, and trade had opened up with a new province. When people began to return, the economy began to grow in South Coimbra. Wilm had brought about good for the people, and everyone recognised him as being more suitable for rule than Grohl. Then everything changed in an instant. Advances on the continent were brought to a halt as numerical superiority dwindled away, and as if to add insult to injury, the situation turned such that the money and men sent on the

expedition were clearly not going to return. If anybody tried to stop things now, Amil would become incensed, and take action on his own even more. Having gained his position through force, Wilm was unable to oppose anything. Gaddis had it worse in the north, requesting reinforcements every day. Wilm did not have the luxury of being able to support him, so he had ignored it all, inviting the present state of affairs.

The Red Circle Army arises in the face of misgovernment and takes Rockbell... could history be repeating itself?

Gohl's passing played in Wilm's mind: a death in despair amidst the disparagement of the people and his soldiers, having been betrayed by his most trusted advisor. He found himself imagining his own form in Grohl's stead. According to his men, the leader of the force was Noel Bosheit, bearing the twin hammer banner. At some point she had escaped Willa Island and had joined up with Elgar, likely having killed Riglette; not that it bothered him. He had no sympathy for that girl.

"She was unendurable to the end. Couldn't even observe someone right. Still, that Noel... just how much does she want to get in my way? I should have dealt with her when I had the chance!"

Wilm had never liked Noel, but he had been completely led by the nose as he had thought she was nothing more than a little girl with some martial skills. That was why he had been able to deal with her using only false accusations. She shouldn't have been so much of a problem, but all he had done was prolong the issue. And now she came for him. Wilm was struck by an unspeakable unease.

"Khh!"

Feeling something behind him, he whirled around. Naturally, there was nothing there, but he could feel a presence; some small black soul, as if he had seen the afterimage of a child running for cover.

"How foolish! Ha, I am the man who rules Coimbra. I'm up against no more than Grohl's son at the head of the Red Circle Army, and a little girl whom I have already defeated. There's no way I could lose. Any force gathered on the fly like that is highly brittle. They shall meet their end at my hand!"

Wilm raised his voice so that he would be sure to hear it, for if he could not, his mind would remain unsettled.

At any rate I have reinforcements on the way, and defending Madress shouldn't be too hard. It matters not how many times the enemy attacks. This is all well within my ability.

He had arranged to receive Bartheck, one of Amil's trusted and valorous retainer from Bahar, who had inherited the war wagons from the present prime-minister Mills. They had been entrusted with looking after their neighbouring province with their speed, and they had undoubtedly heard of the rebellion already. There was no need to send a messenger, so all that remained was to prepare. Wilm could trust him to make good decisions as he was also a seasoned military man.

Madress was defended by five thousand men at the time, and Leue's highway defence force also numbered five thousand strong. Gathering all the surrounding soldiers could probably net Wilm twenty thousand men. Reports stated the Red Circle Army had about ten thousand men. The land surrounding the castle was going to be damaged, but Wilm's disgrace was already inevitable. He should have initiated a purge to curb rebellion even if it meant butting heads with Gaddis. Dead men told no tales, after all.

Elgar, you brat... you've been coasting so far. I, Wilm, shall teach you that you can't win a war with willpower alone. Then I'll send you to greet your father in hell!

Wilm struck the ground with his swagger-stick as if to shake off the seething anger that had boiled up within him.

Chapter 37

The Woman who Took Hold of Joy

The six thousand men Noel had led to take Rockbell were heading west along the Kanan highway en route to capturing Madress. While they were occasionally assailed by those brave nobles who led their troops on the offensive, Noel was able to easily repel their attacks. Riglette sentenced those brave fools to be burned at the stake.

“It feels weird to reverse roles so quickly.”

“I never thought I’d be the one assaulting Madress.”

The road they took was the same that Ristih had at the head of the original Red Circle Army, the only difference being a lack of a coordinated counterattack from the forces of South Coimbra. Wilm may have decided that a head on collision with the soaring morale of the Red Circle Army was undesirable, likely opting instead to hold out for reinforcements in a siege before commencing a pincer attack. Given equal numbers of men, the defenders had an overwhelming advantage in their castle. Furthermore, they could buy time for the reinforcements to arrive from Bahar and Ribeldam. Although there would be no way to avoid sacrificing the people in the lands surrounding the castle, from the point of view of the commander, it was the correct decision.

“So Wilm’s preparing for a siege after all? It’s just like you said, Riglette.”

“Obviously. There is no way that man would risk it all in an attack. In fact, I wouldn’t be surprised if he used the plebeians as human shields.”

“I think that’s a bit much. Major General Wilm... I mean, Wilm is a viceroy, not just an enemy. To do that kind of thing to his own people would be...”

“Sir Cynthia, I think that’s enough. When will you stop giving him honours? He’s an enemy. Ah, but you don’t have to apply that to me, though we are related.”

Riglette regarded Cynthia with distaste. Going one or two words too far was her usual way. While Noel found it amusing, there were naturally many who kept Riglette at a distance because of it. The Willa islanders accepted it as a part of her character, but

they were the exception. While she was a minor irritation, it was not particularly apparent, though Barbas would call out in a loud voice about how fuckin' annoyin' she had always been.

"That's right, I'm sorry. It is as you say, Sir Riglette. Wilm should be a detested enemy. I shall take care from here on out.

"That should be fine. What? There's no reason to worry, I was expecting as much. On that desolate island, I had plenty of time to think."

"Riglette and I did military simulations. Uhh, I think about a thousand times?"

"1 257 times. Incidentally, you cheated 124 times."

"In real wars, earthquakes, floods, hurricanes and the like, all happen, you know?"

"As if they would, you idiot!"

"Ahaha, you got mad again. Weren't officers not supposed to get angry?"

"Are you picking a fight!?"

Ignoring Riglette's anger, Noel turned to Cynthia and explained everything that she had done until that point. It was in what was ostensibly free time on Willa island that Noel and Riglette had planned their liberation of Coimbra. Three years had already passed in which they planned and planned and planned. Noel had been busy with angling, swimming, more fishing, and playing, but Riglette had done nothing but circle her desk in a melancholic mood, pondering the fall of North Coimbra. The plan had been built slowly on the gradual trickle of information from Gemb. Incidentally, the plan for dealing with a direct attack from Wilm was to ambush him on the beach. It would have been unfortunate if the islanders' numbers had been severely diminished.

Thinking was but another pastime for Noel, but Riglette was a different matter, developing bags under her eyes, living with disheveled hair, and sometimes letting out strange voices as she plotted late into the night. All was for the sake of the father she had good reason to hate; all for revenge on Wilm. Sometimes Noel managed to stay up late enough to give her an uproarious applause, but it was always met with a tut of terrific proportions.

"To have thought it through that far... So all the youths and Irvan are to undertake a

training program according to the Red Circle Army policy... only, it'll be embarrassing to just wave swords around on your own."

"Distribution of roles is important too, you know. I mean, wouldn't the army become a writhing mess if everyone just moved independently?"

"I think so, but don't you say it. Are you not in the process of moving on your own after a brief thought?"

"Ahaha, it's fine if it's me."

Noel stuck out her tongue, and Cynthia made to go for a jab, but whispered, "By the way, how is your relationship with Sir Riglette? It looks better than before, but..."

"Well I'm not her friend, but she's an important friend of mine. I just can't feel satisfied without her there. She is my priceless aide."

"I see... well, I don't, but good for you."

Almost simultaneous with Cynthia's murmuring came a seemingly purposeful cough from beside her. It was Riglette.

"Please don't say meaningless things. Why don't you inform Sir Cynthia of the plan from here on out?"

"Sure thing. Um... we'll attack Madress with a strong and rappid attack to capture it in a timely fashion. If we couldn't, there'd be no meaning to a rushed assault."

"That... may well be impossible. The smallest estimate for the number of enemies in Madress is currently five thousand, and as Wilm gathers more men from the surrounding lands, that number should only increase. I'd say that we're going to have to deal with ten thousand while we can only field six thousand ourselves."

"We might have a disadvantage in numbers. Even still, the defenders in a castle won't want to fight once the front breaks. They might not have the morale."

Noel had a general grasp of the circumstances from what her spies had reported. The experienced soldiers were away on expedition. Things might have been equal for the moment, but if they became surrounded, it would be a fatal flaw, regardless of who was where.

“On top of that, Madress is a strong fortress with two walls. Even if we breach the wall surrounding the nearby city, the inner wall will still remain. And since they have a harbour, we can’t prevent their resupply. If we attack before fully prepared, the losses will be horrendous.”

Cynthia worried and Riglette snorted. Naturally, this angered Cynthia, whose face turned bright red.

“Just what do you find so funny, Sir Riglette? I thought to merely be frank!”

“I don’t need you to even say so much in order for me to understand. I am a member of the Coimbran military of sorts. Is it not expected for me to be able to think, unlike a certain white haired monkey from somewhere.”

“That’s right, there’s no need to worry. Riglette’s just messed up a bit. She’s really good at grabbing onto her opponent’s weakness.”

After a tut, Riglette coughed and began to speak, “Ahem... let’s leave that stupidity aside. As we discussed earlier, we shall put our plan into action immediately upon arrival at Madress.”

“The plan, you say? Just what are you going to do this time?”

“It’s a plan you can look forward to seeing. The hint is that Barbas and the White Ant Bloc might not be there. Hmmmmmm, I wonder what everyone will do? Could it be a walk?”

Looking around restlessly, Noel made sure to speak in a prodding tone.

“Could what you were on guard about...”

“To deceive one’s enemies, one must start with one’s friends. Now let’s aim for Madress!”

Noel took a banner from a nearby soldier, mounted her steed, and energetically waved it around. The familiar sound of the March of Noel Corps could be heard. The weather was good, and things truly felt right.



The soldiers of South Coimbra lined the ramparts of Madress castle without any gaps, set up with bows trained and ready. Ordinarily, a siege would involve being attacked while setting up siege equipment and trebuchets, but it was not the case on this occasion. Doing so would take too much time, and would harm the local plebeians. For the sake of future endeavors, she wanted the castle to fall quickly. She and Riglette were of one mind on the matter.

“I know you have a plan, but what are we actually going to do? You couldn’t intend to build catapults...”

“Just watch. I bet Cynthia’ll get surprised too!”

Six thousand of the Red Circle Army spread out in formation for a direct attack, and before them all rode Noel. All eyes fell upon the lone horseman. She was within arrow shot of the castle, and the enemy commander readied his men to shoot. Noel planted her twin hammer banner and blew the charge on her bugle with all her might. In that instant, a thunderous roar erupted on the southern wall, a bugle sounded a charge, and Noel’s twin hammer banner rose over the ramparts, as soldiers began to charge the archers at the sound of a man’s shout.

“W-what!?”

“All right, let’s go. Riglette, sound the attack!”

“You don’t have to tell me!”

Riglette blew her bugle. The soldiers who were just as dumbfounded as the enemy hurriedly began their assault.

“T-that can’t have been Barbas and the White Ant Bloc!?”

“That’s it. See, Wilm has been gathering all his soldiers to hole up in his castle, right? Well we snuck in while he did.”

“You had them sneak in?”

“We’ve scrapped the bottom of the barrel, but so has the enemy. Suddenly adding as many soldiers as possible makes it impossible to distinguish between friend and foe.

We've probably got some spies with us too, but aren't our opponents the ones who lose the most?"

Noel urged her men toward the gate in a feint while the main force caused the southern rampart to collapse. The archers on the walls fell into a state of chaos having never expected an attack from within. It was possible to pressure the gate, not in a pointless attack, but to draw attention as if all the soldiers turned on the southern rampart, everything would have been for naught.

"To think you had been preparing this kind of plan... but how did you get on to the ramparts?"

"The combustion stones. We used them to undermine the walls, I'll show you later."

"I see, so that's how you got into Madress..."

"But, we probably won't be able to get away with it again. I bet this will be the last time it goes this smoothly. Well, it's a price that has to be paid. Hey, we should get going too."

"Fair enough. Okay, let's go!"

Noel and Cynthia brought their troops to the breach in the southern wall. Riglette stopped, and set something up; an effigy of what had gained so much ill repute in Coimbra: a stand for execution by fire. A great blaze was lit so that the castle could clearly see. Those soldiers who witnessed it with their own eyes immediately broke into a panic and fled in an avalanche of men. Even their commander threw down his sword and fled ahead of many.

They had seen how Noel had resisted Bahar to the bitter end in the previous war, and the great many nobles who had been executed by fire as punishment for their betrayal of Grohl. Tales of such a sort had spread beyond Coimbra and even as far as the neighbouring provinces, and it was widely believed that the fiend of Coimbra had not forgotten her grudge, and was waiting to enact revenge on Willa island. That very fiend had suddenly appeared before them, despite her banishment, and had even brought an execution ground. The threat that they were next had an immediate effect.

"I won't stop even if you ask. It is absolutely a useful tactic."

"The enemy... is running like they've seen a real fiend. It is shockingly effective, to be

honest.”

“It’d be nice to win with ease, but I have mixed feelings about this. I thought it’d be fine just to blow down the wall.”

If Noel had to put a finger on what she found disagreeable, it would be that the children would be too scared to play with her, and getting them to warm up to her would take time. It was hard to deal with children screaming, crying, and running away as soon as they noticed her.

“Well, isn’t it fine? You said so too, the important part is winning.”

“I had other people in mind.”

Barbas continued on heroically with a laugh down amidst the din of weaponry as Noel got in a huff.

“It went well, Captain! But still, we took it down rightly! It’s truly refreshin’, a real thrill!”

“Pops went and used half o’ the stockpile o’ combustion stones! Even though I told him we’d regret it!”

“Even though it’d ruin our reputation if we failed! I’ll absolutely pull through in what I’ve been entrusted with. Isn’t that the way of the artisan!?”

Noel applauded Barbas as he started to get full of himself.

“It’s a great achievement, Barbas. I’ll give you a handmade medal later!”

“Hehe, thank you very much! Ah, and if you would be so kind as to include any Gembi wine that you could find...”

“Of course I can. I got that stuff for all of you. We’ll have a massive party later, eh!”

“Much appreciated! Okay, you lot! Let’s take the castle in one sweep!”

“Yeaaaah!”

So as to add to the assault from inside the walls, Noel took control of the gatehouse,

successfully allowing the soldiers outside into the bailey. The guards resisted sporadically based around a chapel they had converted into a headquarters. The plebeians had hidden themselves in their houses afraid of becoming wrapped up in the fighting. They had nowhere to run even as refugees. Along with guaranteeing the safety of the people, Noel had prohibited looting. Her offensive wasn't over yet. She formed up her men, and turned to the keep and harbour, but they couldn't take them as expected. Though Noel attacked with force, the defenders had hardened the defences to the point that she hadn't been able to overwhelm them, and her own men began to fatigue. Barbas suggested blowing their way through, but Noel rejected that proposal.

"I won't play the same hand twice in one battle. Of course I will make use of them, but now is not that time. Plus, it'd be a waste."

They still had a stockpile, but if they wanted to blast down the walls, they were going to have to use the vast majority of it, and she wanted to have some ready for the most important battle of the war. Furthermore, that castle was a precious place to Cynthia and the young master; even akin to a home. If she could, she wanted to maintain its shape. If she could. If it was impossible, she'd just use the ultimate explosion to wipe the slate clean, leaving nothing behind, killing all occupants. Casualties would be mostly those close to Wilm, so it wouldn't be a problem.

"Still, that way would require a massive amount just to bring down the castle proper. That bastard Wilm has really fuckin' fortified it. Assaultin' normally would cost us a mountain o' corpses."

"Hmm, well it's war so it can't be helped. Still, let's minimise the number of sacrifices. At worst I thought we'd take the the harbour, though."

Noel's initial plan called for them to have already taken the castle, once again bringing to light how no matter much they trained, that things would never proceed exactly according to plan. At present, Cynthia was leading an assault, but the enemy was putting up quite a bit of resistance. The narrow streets were lined with walls in such a way as to efficiently allow for a small number of men to defend the castle. The port was incredibly important if they were to receive food or reinforcements from Ribeldam. Their ferocious willingness to defend it to the last breath was likely the reason why they had successfully protected it.

"Why don't we go and see if we can take it? There will be sacrifices, but this is war."

Losses could not be avoided. Naturally, she would do what she could to minimise the casualties, but there would be no meaning if she was so afraid that she never achieved anything. A commander had to aim for the optimum gain with minimum loss. Noel was burdened with the hopes of the dead soldiers, so she wanted to take to the front herself whenever possible. Of course, all this with no intention of dying herself.

“You are a commanding officer of sorts, but please don’t be so gung-ho about things. It is unbecoming,” Riglette butted in with her uninvited opinion.

Noel wondered just when she had gotten inside.

“But it’ll be bad if this drags on too long, I’m sure you know that much.”

“Of course. Reinforcements from Bahar will arrive if we tarry too long. Furthermore, if we press too hard, Wilm might try something.”

“Just what is that coward up to? Ain’t he just holed up in his castle?”

“If it came down to dooming the castle before reinforcements arrive, he’d burn the castle and flee, the cowardly worm. Most likely, he’s been able to place some spies disguised as plebeians. He could then escape in the ensuing chaos. If he’s lucky, we’d just die in that fire.”

“Oi, he wouldn’t go that far right!? Ain’t these your own fuckin’ people!?”

“You could bet your life on it, you white haired monkey. I would absolutely do that. If I would, he would, the worm.”

“Woah, that’s way too persuasive. I was impressed for a damned second there. *I couldn’t even complain.”

“Thank you for that. I’m so moved I might just cry.”

She repayed the inflammatory words in kind, and the usual response ensued.

“I wasn’t praisin’ you. If you take it wrong it’ll make me feel sick too.”

“I know that, of course,” replied Riglette, her mouth curving as she met Barbas’ disdainful gaze.

Her glasses shone dramatically. The time had long been coming, and so Noel too donned her glasses, eliciting a shocked look from Riglette.

“So, what is it? Your excellency, Noel? Do please offer up a command befitting of a commander. Only if you wish to become more famous, that is.”

“In that case, staff officer Riglette, I shall do as you so say. Perhaps you have something to mind? I shall accept full responsibility. This Noel Bosheit shall never run nor hide.”

Noel now gave instructions completely full of herself. The words had been polite enough, but the person in question had simply been fooling around, so the surrounding soldiers leaked a few laughs. There was even a man further in who hailed long life to her excellency Noel.

“Hey, don’t you idiots play along like that! I can’t have any more fools running about!”

“That’s harsh. You were even the one who started it with her excellency,” Noel objected.

“I can do it, I’m not a fool after all.”

“I wonder...”

Riglette glared at Noel for her jab, and some of the men from the White Ant Bloc spoke up to help pacify her.

“Uh, what are your thoughts anyway? If you could cooperate with us, we’d gladly help you out, though. We’ll do anything for the captain!”

“Hm, unfortunately, it is your turn now. I’m the only one capable of speaking with him.”

Barbas jumped in when he saw her waving her hand like they would only get in the way.

“What? Who exactly is this ‘him’. Don’t be so slow, just spit it out.”

“The one protecting Madress harbour, the Major General of South Coimbra: Leue Grambull. He is still my brother. Well, we’re connected.”

At the harbour at midnight Leue called out to the soldiers on guard and immediately

turned to face his pavilion. They were the men he had brought under his wing to protect the harbour when he had become a major general. He had fully equipped them and was giving them healthy rewards. They had been chosen as elites in case the situation worsened significantly in the province. Leue had personally persuaded his father not to send them to the continent. He had foreseen the inevitability of a rebellion.

“Still, to think that the famed fortifications of Madress could have the outer wall breached in a single day. Is this another page to our shameful history? I’m sure father is in a rage.”

Leue derided himself. Things were not supposed to have come to this. Everything was supposed to be revived once they had removed Grohl, but reality was another matter. He wondered if things had only become more tragic since then. The territory had spent all its money and men on the expedition and what remained had fallen into desolation. Furthermore, the soldiers who return bring disease, causing great damage to the inner hearts of those poor survivors. Death was easy for those with poor nutrition. As the nobles usually didn’t die, they gathered hatred from the people.

Sir Cynthia has probably joined the Red Circle Army with the young master.

Thoughts of the chivalrous female knight floated through Leue’s mind. She had refused his invitation and been redeployed to the impoverished north to take care of Elgar. Likely, the only reason she even forced herself to serve the traitors was for Grohl’s sake. She walked the path she had chosen for herself. In comparison, Leue was only doing as his father instructed. If he didn’t, he would end up like Riglette. He would be thrown away and lose his status, and so he had advanced. There had been no reason not to deny himself when faced with a glorious and prosperous future, or so he had thought.

But what of it? Is this really the future I wanted?

Leue crumpled the report detailing the horrors of the war in his fist and violently threw it aside. Just then, a subordinate entered the tent with a greeting.

“Sir Leue. A, uh, guest has arrived, but...”

“A guest at this moment of crisis? Ridiculous, what were you thinking!? What kind of situation do you think this is!?”

“But, sir, I was instructed to convey this... your guest is Sir Riglette.”

“My sister, you say...”

Interrupting him, Riglette entered the pavilion in the uniform of the military police with her customary sour expression. Her skin was pale save for the dark circles under her piercing eyes. Apparently, her treacherous nature had not changed.

“Long time no see, Leue. Oh, you were a major general now, right?”

“To think you were still alive... I had heard you were dead from father.”

“Do you really think I could die before witnessing you two fall?”

“You really haven’t changed. Still, I don’t remember agreeing to anything. I am rather busy at the moment so I would prefer it if you retired for now, though.”

Riglette snorted as Leue indicated the direction of the door.

“Hold off on that sort of think for the moment, okay? Your elder sister’s words are to be regarded as correct. You’ve been below me from the start, and you always will.”

“Hahaha, even that intolerable attitude is the same. You only ever say things that drive people away.”

“And you still appear to be that man’s marionette as always. Is it fun being a puppet?”

“I don’t want to be asked by the one whose strings were cut and thrown away to Willa island. This is how I’ve become a commander. Of course I am satisfied.”

His words drew out a composed smile across Riglette’s face.

“Huhuhu, I was not thrown away, but was the one to seize an opportunity. That is how I came here today. I also came to chase down you two fools.”

“Did you tire of your graceful island life? Shouldn’t you have been content there with the fiend? It would have only been for the best if you two had remained cooped up there your entire lives...”

Riglette’s life of observing her nominal superior had really just been a way of sweeping

a nuisance under the rug, but she and Noel had come back to repay them and were assaulting Madress. In short, Riglette had never had any intentions of observing Noel. Leue didn't know how they had done it, but it seemed they had even involved the soldiers on Willa island.

"Shut your mouth. I couldn't care less about that idiot."

"I believe you are her henchman at the moment, dear sister. Ahaha, and I'm sure you're happy about it. Have you no pride in your Grambull family heritage?"

Leue scoffed, and Riglette snorted in response, which only added more to his slowly building irritation. He really wanted to punch that smug face; maybe even understanding how much Wilm had wanted to keep her away in that moment.

"Huhu, I don't need something like pride. I'd even sell my soul to the devil to stand over you two."

"The fiend not the devil, right? Your master."

"Be quiet. Like I said, those stupid things don't matter to me."

"Would you mind explaining why you are with that idiot, then? Your foolish little brother is curious."

"She's an idiot, easily excitable, gets in the way, and is a childish demon, but she can understand a conversation, and she has the ability to follow through on things. She's preferable to some shitty worms," Riglette asserted confidently.

It was the first time he had seen her so certain.

"Now then, your business? You surely haven't come just to greet me. Or could it be you want me as an ally?"

"Huhu, this is a simple matter, Leue. If you want to help a member of the Grambull family, we two will have to collude."

"What foolishness. I am a major general of South Coimbra. Please think more carefully before you come out with these jokes. Whether or not I behead you now is riding on not being pushed too far, you know."

Riglette merely looked down on him for his attempted rejection with a nostalgic look of disgust. She was probably the best on the continent at making people feel like they had lost somehow.

“This is no laughing matter. Aren’t you only a major general in name? Wilm has all the true authority, right? That’s why you only have this many men despite being a major general who would normally oversee the entire army. Truly pathetic.”

“...”

She was correct. Leue had become a major general, but had never led so many as ten thousand men; at most three thousand. Military and civil affairs were controlled by his father, and Leue only carried them out. He had, of course, consulted Perius on how to deal with the situation, but had never been seriously considered.

“The only way to preserve the Grambull family name is to betray him. Wilm will have to die, though.”

“It is pointless no matter what you say. As if I could do something as cowardly as you by betraying my own father!!”

Riglette almost sang as she bore down on him, “At this rate you’ll be implicated in his crimes and executed with everyone else. Naturally, this includes those who surrender. There’s a grand fire to be displayed on the execution grounds we’ve set up out there. All those you hate will surely be dancing with glee. Didn’t you know? The Grambull family is hated all over. If you heard all the voices of resentment, I’m sure you’d go completely mad.”

“Even though you’re part of this family too!”

“Please don’t cast me aside and then suddenly try and make me a companion. I’ve cast aside this house Grambull. What need have I of it now when it is not but a symbol of traitors?”

Leue could only be struck speechless at her words. She had so simply stated that there was no more merit in their house. She threw away even nobility with it. His former sister wouldn’t have been able to do that no matter how much she was condemned by her father. That was just how valuable noble status was.

“To be honest, I actually want you to decline. That way I’d get to wipe out all the filthy

worms. I am the one who will give the execution order, of course. Don't think I'll let you all die easily. I remember every single Grambull family member who ever looked down on me, and not a one shall escape. Men, women, and children, not one will remain once I've killed them all."

She had started to smile madly. Likely that was how she truly felt, no, there was no doubting that she would do it. In Leue's mind, the decision to turn her down began to desperately flicker. He knew that the only reason she had even come to him was to further humiliate Wilm. She would gain merit for it if he cooperated. While he could kill her right there, it would possibly lead directly to the total eradication of the Grambull family. Either way Riglette's desires would be fulfilled.

"Did you not consider that I might capture you right now? I might even kill you if it strikes me."

"You really are an idiot. If I cared about my life, I wouldn't be here. Kill me now and that fiend will get revenge. There can be no doubt. Even if I die, your ruin won't be difficult to attain."

Riglette now smiled, tremblingly blissful with eyes equally joyous and mad. Her eyes told no lies, Leue could definitively tell. Striking her down would bring some sort of calamity or at least death at the hands of the fiend.

"So, sister, do you want us to evacuate the harbour and surrender? Is that how you want to help?"

"That wouldn't nearly be enough. If you want to be spared, you'll have to do something that can turn away the ire of the plebeians. Otherwise you'll never be forgiven. After all, you are the beloved son of that detestable Wilm."

"Just what are you trying to say?"

"It's simple. Enter Madress Castle, capture Wilm, and win a bloodless victory. Those are the terms. Loose a single arrow our way, and the deal is off," her smile vanished, and she menacingly drew their faces close, "I'll recreate the nightmare at Carness for you."

Chills ran up and down Leue's spine at her forcefulness, and he immediately declined, "This isn't some joke! Such foul play, how could I!?"

“You can. Aren’t you that traitor’s son? It’s only a simple matter for you. If you don’t I’ll just have to exterminate all the shitty worms. You have until noon tomorrow to think this over. This sister so concerned for her younger brother will give you a clear passage straight to the main keep. Make sure to be thankful for my favour.”

“I, I can’t! Surrendering despite my command, and capturing my own father on top of it all!! As if I could do something so disloyal!?”

He violently shook his head from side to side, but Riglette would not let him evade her. She aggressively grasped his hair and turned him to face her smiling visage.

“Think it over, Leue. The total assault begins tomorrow afternoon. That fiend feels no pity. All those inside will be killed. The fiend’s mood is going down so she might just burn the whole area down. You can spare all those people with just a little bit of effort. You are a hero, no doubt. But alas, what a wondrous thing it might be. To have such a wonderful brother will bring me glory too.”

Her rapid fire, shameless words pierced Leue through.

“S-sister!”

“Well, I don’t care either way. It isn’t much time, but reaaaly think it out. Isn’t that the first step to adulthood?”

Once she had said her piece, she released his hair, turned on her heel, and made to exit the pavilion.

“Sister... you are clearly of good humor. It must be because you can finally gain the upper hand over we who once looked down on you!”

“That’s right! I am incredibly, incredibly pleased to have survived!! I am supremely satisfied!!”

Riglette left with vigor and a full faced smile from the bottom of her heart.

The following morning, the gates of Madress Castle opened untouched. A white banner overhead, soldiers who had laid down their arms came forth from the gate. Replaced was the Coimbran Scale atop the tower by the Twin Hammer Banner of the Red Circle Army as proof of surrender and the laying down of arms. Confused Red Circle soldiers pushed past each other to watch Riglette accompanied by Noel to enter

the castle, chest puffed up with pride. It was the moment that Riglette's revenge had come. At long last the White Ant Bloc signaled magnificent victory on their bugles and gongs. The siege itself had lasted two days. The South Coimbra capital city of Madress had fallen. The viceroy, Wilm, had been arrested. Freed from his misrule, the plebeians rejoiced uproariously in celebration of the Red Circle Army's triumph. Noel stepped into the castle after surveying it all with bored eyes.

Chapter 38

With the Right Hand the Sword; Scales with the Left

Several days after they had gained total control of Madress, Elgar's force came leisurely down into the castle to cheers from civilians and soldiers alike. There was likely a strong sentiment that Grohl had been better than Wilm, and that Grohl's son would not be so unjust. That was why men and women of all ages lined up and cried huzzah as he passed. Elgar responded with a wave, though he felt it was unbearable.

"Irvan... Do you know what I am thinking right now?"

"By your will. What you are thinking —and this is my best guess, being that we too were chased out of our homes— is that people's hearts are fickle."

"These same people cheered for my father's execution as if it was a blessing. I shall never forget that scene. Do any of them even remember it, I wonder?"

Elgar's expression was dark.

"It is a desperate struggle to live day by day for them. That much doesn't change no matter the continent."

"Yeah... you don't need to say that again. I'm just grumbling."

After Elgar breathed a tired sigh, he once more masked himself in a smile.

When the time for the audience came, Elgar sat upon his throne flanked by Irvan and Noel. Cynthia, Riglette, and Nejj of the Red Circle Army lined up to his left. On his right stood those military, naval, and civil officials who served him; among them many faces that he missed as well as Perius and Leue. Elgar had no idea why they were there. Cynthia and Riglette aside, everyone had opposed South Coimbra. As a result, there were occasional hostile glares at the pair.

The divide between north and south has only widened. I need to create peace here

somehow. Father too, must have had some troubles like these.

Elgar looked down on the traitor kneeling before him with the memory of his late father's suffering in mind. Tied, on the ground, and pressed by the spears of the guards was the former viceroy: Wilm Grambull. He scowled at Elgar, Leue, and Riglette with a mortifying expression. It seemed he still had that much willpower remaining.

"It has been a while, Wilm."

"Elgar! You bastard, I spared you out of pity and this is how you repay my kindness!?"

"Just what tone do you think you can use, even though you're a traitor? You really are unequaled in that brazenness, though it looks like you're only at half strength."

Riglette then proceeded to drive her foot into his back.

"Gh... R-riglette, to think that you would not only bore of your duties with the military police, but also sell your soul to a traitor and abandon your father! Such a sin warrants only death!!"

"Uhuhu, I'd sell anything to take you down. I needed, *needed*, to see you make that face so much that I couldn't stand it. This is the end, so why don't you scream some more? If you cry, every detail will be recorded in its full pitiful state in the annals of history."

"A bastard like you...!"

"Oh, and I'll put down that you managed to lose Madress in only two days. The proud, strong walls of Madress in only two days! It is an unprecedented, unparalleled accomplishment is it not? True proof of your incompetence."

"S-silence!! If that traitor wasn't here, it wouldn't have happened!"

Riglette rained insults on Wilm, "You can surely see what position you're in. That is exactly how *you* became a commander, and a viceroy. I'll let the name Wilm live on forever as a symbol of incompetence in military leadership. Oh, but alas, as your former daughter, I might just die of embarrassment. Look, if you know any shame at all, bite your tongue off right now and commit suicide. Come on, hurry up and die."

Wilm himself was shaking in a rage, almost bursting a vein.

“Y-you cur! How much will you mock me!?!?”

“Good, good, that’s it. That’s the face I wanted to see. Aaaah, I might die of pleasure!”

Riglette held down her mouth to restrain the rising laughter. Shivering there for a moment, she then turned to Noel.

“Uhuhu, it looks like being ecstatic for too long is bad for my health. Hey, did you know that, Captain Noel?”

“I might not mind, but, uh... it looks like everyone’s drawing back a bit, so it just might be for the best if you stop making that face, don’t you think?”

“Ufufufuaueehehe!; I don’t care about that. Hey, look, this shitty worm looks remorseful!; I really can’t get enough. It’s at the point where I want to commemorate this with a painting! Could somebody please summon an artist to the hall, I wonder!? I know, since this is the end, why don’t you say something too?”

Noel had wanted to chide Riglette, but she had been unable to stem the flow of words gushing out of her mouth. Having forced his way to the front, Leue stood, mouth taut, scowling, his eyes cast aside.

“Father...”

“Why are you wagging your tail for this brat, Leue!? Do you know what you’ve done!? What awaits you is a ruin like mine! How could you not realize this!?”

Leue finally turned to face the indignant Wilm, “I... will acknowledge that; however, I want to do what little I can for my country. Even if it means I must be destroyed. That is my sole atonement.”

“You jest! If you bend the knee to these... people now, you will only further useless infighting! How can you not notice!? Do you think it will end with this!?!?”

“The one who lit the coals was you... father. At the very least, the late Viceroy Grohl had the people in mind. You lost sight of your roots in your ambition. Against all advice, you went on that fruitless mission, and now all that’s left is this mess.”

“I am not possessed by mere self interest! That expedition will be our road to wealth!”

“I do not agree.”

“In the first place, do you think that the empire, that His Majesty Amil will let things be as they are now!?” Wilm spewed vehemently, “It might not be soon, but a large punitive force will come! In the end all you’ve done is call down the ravages of war! You helpless fools!”

At a signal from Elgar, the guards prodded Wilm once more with their spears.

“That’s enough, guard your tongue. You’re the loser. Wilm, your sins are truly nigh-impossible to forgive, you bastard. Following Amil’s foolish plan you burdened the people with heavy taxes, and burdened them more with hard labour. You neglected infectious disease and hunger in the name of producing armaments, and you ignored your obligations as a statesman. What has befallen you now is only your just desserts. Can you not even take your punishment with honour?”

“Silence, boy! All you want is revenge for Grohl, you bastard! Do you think you can manage the country with just that!?”

“It’s probably over now that I’ve heard that from you. Did it feel good to sit upon the throne of my father after betraying him and the people?”

“Gh!”

“That fool Gaddis was deceived by you, and so I could forgive leaving him alive. He still had the important job of incurring the wrath of the surviving people. I think I’ll calm those people now by killing you. That blood will be the cornerstone of a reunified Coimbra.”

Gaddis had not been left alive out of compassion. The north was in shambles and rebuilding it would still take quite some time. Until it was repaired, they needed a scapegoat. That duty had been left to Gaddis; in one sense, it was a fate worse than death, but Gaddis couldn’t notice that with his failing mental health. He likely even lacked the will to die. Elgar would milk every last drop of the man’s soul for the good of Coimbra. Wilm, however, would die. He was absolutely going to die. Rebellion would only end with his life. His blood would tie the province back together and end the uprising of the Red Circle Army. Above all, there was no way Elgar could allow a once trusted retainer who had betrayed his father to live. Wilm would die.

“W-wait. No, just wait! I have lead ten thousand men. I will be useful in the war with

the empire. Killing me will paint your rebellion as nothing more than revenge.”

Wilm had become polite and instantly transitioned into begging for his life. His intention to merely save himself was transparent, eliciting wry smiles from the surrounding soldiers and retainers. They were watching the final days of the man who was once engrossed in his leadership of Coimbra as viceroy.

“So what? I won’t listen to your nonsense and begging, you bastard.”

“You can use me like Gaddis. I’ve only acted with Coimbra in mind. I just made a mistake. By no means did I betray your father out of self interest. I swear on the Sun God. Please think this through rationally. I can be killed at any time!”

“So I say why not just kill you now? Do you have any questions?”

“Y-young master!”

“Silence, dog! It is shameful that you were viceroy even for a second! Know you that my father met his death with honour that day!? Someone take this dog to the execution square!!”

Elgar signaled to his guards to force Wilm up. He didn’t want to see or hear him any more. Honestly, Elgar wanted the whole family dead, but doing so would also implicate Riglette so Wilm would be where the retribution ended. It would even serve as proof that it wasn’t mere revenge.

“W-wait! Please wait! I have a good relationship with the viceroy of Ribeldam. You gain from keeping me alive. Young master, this is where you should make use of me for the betterment of Coimbra. I can be used to ensure a peaceful rule, and without growing new resentments. That’s right, tolerance is an important trait for a viceroy! If you can’t even make use of people, the revival of Coimbra is...”

Noel approached him as he violently struggled, speaking, “Hey, you should give up now. There probably isn’t a single ally for you in Madress. People need to learn when to give up.”

“S-shut your mouth, fiend! Young master, I worked only for Coimbra! It wasn’t out of self-interest that I betrayed Grohl! You... unhand me! There is no reason I should die with shame!”

“It’s getting so bad it’s good. I just found that a little amusing,” Noel quietly leaked under her breath.

In all honesty, Noel thought it’d be most amusing for Leue to be down there with Wilm, but she knew right away that such a thing was too much at the moment. Doing so would not end well, and it would dampen the mood of all those nearby. All that Noel knew was that Wilm should have been killed on the spot. If Elgar spared him, Noel would split his head.

“Unhand me you fools! I am the viceroy! Do you bastards know what will happen to you for this!?!? Don’t touch me!”

Wilm resisted intensely to the end, but after beating him a few times, the spear-men were able to force him outside. Elgar and the rest followed to the same square in which Grohl had met his end. The people pressed from all sides to see just as they once had before. Wilm was pelted with stones as his head was placed on the chopping block. Elgar despaired a little at the sight of the completely unchanged situation.

Noel was the executioner. Naturally, bashing his skull with a hammer was too barbaric and so Elgar had given Noel his sword to use. She had twirled it around as if to acclimate herself to a longsword. After the crowd went astir with the realization that she was the fiend, a cheer erupted. She was horrible to her enemies, but a source strength to allies, it seemed.

Elgar closed in to give Wilm his final words, “The others of house Grambull will not be touched. Die in peace.”

“To... think that things would be just as they were with Grohl. Hehe, just where did I go wrong? Could it be that betraying Lord Grohl was the mistake? Or was it betting on Lord Amil? I was waiting for a glorious future, and I certainly got a glimpse of the sun. Just why did that happen, I wonder.”

“No clue. It could be just a run of bad luck. Such is the way of the world; it can’t be helped.”

Wilm finally gave a resigned smile after hearing Noel speak from the dais.

“Luck... is it? I should have taken you in after all. Who would have thought that you could do so much to thwart me. You’re really an eyesore to the end, girl.”

“Ahaha, you didn’t like me from the start. That’s pretty harsh considering you never spoke to me.”

“I had a bad premonition: that you would be my downfall. Thought I’d get rid of you quickly.”

“I see. The truth is that I’ve wanted to crush your skull the whole time. Since you always got in my way. Things probably would have gone better if I’d just gotten rid of you quickly.”

“Hehe, so it was mutual? Well then, it looks like you won in the end. Too bad.”

Wilm, calmer, shut both eyes.

“It should be about time to get this over with, Noel.”

“That’s true. Then, I’ll kill him shortly.”

“Young master... this probably isn’t a good time to say this, but please, take care of...”

“Do it, Noel!”

Noel’s sword cleaved through Wilm’s neck even as Elgar gave his order. With a spurt of blood, the head rolled into the bucket they had prepared for it. Such was the sad end of the man who had betrayed his viceroy and usurped his throne.

“The traitor is dead!”

“Long live Lord Elgar!”

“Remember Lord Grohl!”

“Long live Coimbra! Huzzah!!”

The empty cheers washed over Elgar. He didn’t like it in truth, but he had to maintain his appearance. The plebeians had high expectations for their new leader, and he couldn’t let them down.

My revenge is... complete. Gaddis is captured; Wilm is dead; the traitors are no more.

He didn't feel as elated as he thought. He thought that something more would well up in him, but nothing of the sort occurred. The crowd had erupted in cheers as if the damn holding them back had just collapsed. As their strength grew, so darkened Elgar's thoughts. Turning to Noel, he saw her flourishing the blade and wiping off the blood.

"With this, will my father rejoice? Shall my mother rest in peace? Was this... really the right thing to do?"

"You chose this for yourself, so don't be bothered by it. He was the only person who had to die. He absolutely would have done something horrible if you'd left him alive. I'd bet all my treasures on it."

Noel returned his blade, placing it back in its scabbard.

"Yeah... that's true. It's just as you've said."

"And, see, we've still got a lot to do. You have to give it your all, you know."

Noel gave Elgar a pat on the back and he nodded, and turned to walk towards the castle. En route, he passed Riglette and Leue, who was looking up to the sky to suppress his feelings. Riglette, on the other hand, was smiling so happily that tears were streaming down her face.

Once everyone had confirmed Wilm's execution, they gathered again in the conference room. There were many things that needed to be done, but might there have been some things he should have kept his hands off of?

"What is our stance on the local lords?"

"Those lords who publicly opposed us, I assume. They will be unlikely to oppose further if their social standing is protected. Even those land holders related to Wilm should be overlooked, as I'm sure you know, though we should change some heads to ensure stability."

"All right, I'll leave the adjustments to you, Irvan. Take appropriate action after consulting Perius. Threaten opposition with the fate of Wilm."

The news of his conquering Coimbra would likely spread quickly throughout the nation, and though there were likely many people who would withhold judgement due

to uncertainty, if they resisted, they had soldiers to face. Not a noble was willing to face that to show loyalty to the empire, and they were highly likely to stay complacent if aid was provided.

“Your will be done. Lord Elgar, we must first put the army in order now that the Red Circle Army’s objective has been achieved. I believe that we should allow those who wish to return to their villages to do so to increase the general manpower. More importantly, we should restructure the military as a first priority.”

After Irvan, the recently surrendered Peruis gave advice of his own, “Appoint a governor to the northern region to focus on administration. If possible, I would like someone who knows the situation well.”

Elgar was making full use of every South Coimbran official and officer. There wasn’t enough time to start a meaningless political purge. Every capable man would be used to exhaustion. Coimbra could never be saved any other way. To set a calm precedent, all useful personnel were gathered.

“Okay, we’ll leave behind those we need to keep the peace, and have the militiamen sent home. The Red Circle Army shall disband, but it’s spirit shall live on for an eternity in its banner. Irvan, pay them as fairly as we can; they need enough to survive.”

The reunified Coimbran banner boasted the Coimbran scales over the Red Circle as a symbol of the overthrow of a tyrant.

“By your will.”

“Young mast- Lord Elgar. Please allow me to ask a simple question. Just why does the Red Circle Army have so much funding? The north is a destitute land with no way of raising such funds. Just how did you do it?”

“One day I’ll let you know, but it is not something I can speak of right now. Is it not enough that we have the money to spare the people?”

Dubious of that kind of an explanation, Peruis stepped down. It most certainly wasn’t the time for such an enquiry.

“I understand. However, please hear me out about calming the situation. Our mission of reviving Coimbra must surely have been shared by Lord Grohl as well.”

“Yes... I know.”

Elgar could do nothing more than answer vaguely. If the truth came out, Perius would be indignant. That money had come from the profits of distributing censugrass in the enemy provinces; funds gained by luring their neighbours into misfortune. An upright man like Perius would require a lot of time to come to terms with such a thing. On top of that, they did not have the surplus required to dispose of their stores of censugrass as it had already become an important source of income. The farmers cultivating it for money had also approved. Irvan’s words came to mind: censugrass is taboo; those who use it or grow it will never rest easy. What awaits them is hell. *Are you really resolved for that?*

Irvan and his adherents had informed them of the plant and its cultivation methods, but had not raised a hand to assist the actual labour. It seemed they knew what happened to those in contact with it, and how it was bad for not only the users, but also the farmers.

Either way, it must be done away with, but not just yet. It will be impossible to revive Coimbra without the funds.

After a moment, Elgar mustered up some words to drive away the image of ruin in his mind, “The governor of the northern region shall be Nejj. I’ll ensure you have experienced advisors, so I expect you to fully devote yourself to this task.”

“Eh? I, I am!?”

“That’s right. All you need to do is listen to the civil officials and work for the sake of the people. If it’s you, I believe that the northerners will be able to sense the change. Naturally, I will provide you with as much support as I can.”

Nejj seemed indecisive, but Elgar nodded as he observed an unprecedentedly serious expression. He had set him on a road of suffering, but Elgar was sure that Nejj could handle it. Elgar would have preferred someone as competent as Perius, but there was much opposition to placing a southerner in charge there. There was also the fact that entrusting things to one who had served under Gaddis was unacceptable.

“As for the south, we should be able to relieve the frustration by lowering taxes and increasing charity. If they can tell we aren’t conscripting unnecessary soldiers, they likely won’t rebel.”

“Okay, I will leave that to you, Perius, considering you probably know the situation here best. You are free to do as you deem fit.”

“Certainly.”

“Now then, Lord Elgar,” Irvan enquired about Elgar’s future position, “With the fall of the two capitals, I believe we can safely say that Coimbra has reunited. What do you plan to do henceforth, Lord Elgar? Do you intend to bring order to the plebeians?”

Previously, Elgar had been titled as the supreme commander of the Red Circle Army, but there was no longer any need for that. Irvan wanted to know if Elgar would take up his place as a king to direct his subjects, or if he would create an entirely new system.

“For the moment, I will operate as the representative of the unified Coimbra. As for what comes next, we will have to consult with the Gembite administration. It is likely that they wish to fight the empire alongside we who rose against them. Furthermore, despite their declaration of independence, they have yet to form a new kingdom.”

Naturally, they were not going to remain in the empire. There wasn’t even a hair left on Elgar’s head associated with the Wardka family, but he wasn’t in the mood to found a new dynasty. Before the uprising, Elgar had heard the basics of their plans from a messenger. Either way, if he worried about that before securing Coimbra itself, he would only be counting his chickens before they hatched. No longer did he have the time to gather information as before. Things had also managed to end much faster than anticipated. Gemb had the initiative, but that much couldn’t be helped as far as Elgar was concerned.

“Understood. Then, we should dispatch a messenger to inform Lord Siden of Gemb about the reunification and liberation of Coimbra. Their own war is likely coming to a climax around now, too.”

Reports had arrived about the ferocity with which Gemb fought to retake Longstorm. Isolated and alone, Longstorm had been unable to fend them off, losing fortresses and cities, even apparently pushed right to the capital. Conversely, Giv seemed to be outnumbered, but details were scarce.

Noel had looked like she wanted to join in, and eventually cut in by raising a hand, “Um, do you have a moment?”

“What is it Noel?”

“Yup, well, aren’t you forgetting something important?”

“What is it you are so concerned about? Don’t hold back, and tell me what you think.”

“Okay then, can you lend me five thousand men again? I’ll just quickly strike the Baharan army. Wilm’s reinforcements should already be en route.”

“Please wait, Sir Noel! They should withdraw now that their objective is lost, and Wilm is executed. It isn’t even too late to send scouts to confirm the situation. We don’t need to fight any more than absolutely necessary. More importantly, our men will fatigue from battle!” declared Irvan.

Elgar supported the opinion, though, “Baharans are famously heroic, so they are sure to come. There’s no way they’ll leave after a single battle. They might aim to take some weakened district as a foothold. If we wish to prevent that, I believe an ambush would be most appropriate.”

Noel pointed out that they had nothing to lose if there was nobody to fight when they went.

“Then I will lead my adherents in the ambush. Please allow me to do it because Noel Corps is already exhausted after the capture of Madress!”

Irvan struck his desk for emphasis, then he turned to Elgar to appeal with his gaze. It was obvious what he wanted to say. If Noel was allowed to move too much, it would cause friction within the reunited Coimbra. Her corps had taken control of Ewear in the north, and Madress in the south. Not only was she an upstart, but her military achievements were skyrocketing along with her popularity with the regular troops and the plebeians. Elgar already knew of some soldiers who thought her more suitable for command than himself. Irvan was trying to tell him that if he wanted to win Barbas over too, he would have to go himself; that Elgar could not overlook any more than that.

“We’re fine, so it’s totally okay. Everyone’s ready to go with lots of energy from the sun.”

“This is rude and I apologise for it, but you don’t have the right to decide. Lord Elgar, you are the leader of the reunified Coimbra. In you rests the authority; not in I, nor in

Sir Noel. Please hand down the correct judgement!”

Elgar made up his mind at Irvan’s strong insistence.

“I understand. This time as well, I’ll leave things to Noel. Take the men and supplies you need and go. Is there anything else we should be wary of?”

“L-lord Elgar!”

“Let’s see... well the Ribeldam navy might be close, so we should be a little wary of that. I don’t think it’s much of a threat, though. Why not see if you can leave it to Leue?”

“Leue? Wouldn’t that be rather dangerous?”

Elgar turned to face Leue. He didn’t expressly state that he was worried about betrayal, but considering the man’s father was killed by him, thinking so was only natural.

“It’s okay. Not like he could betray us easily this time, anyway. And it seems like he’s good with ships. I’m sure he’ll work hard to regain his honour. If you won’t trust him now, you probably won’t ever make use of him.”

Certainly, it would be unthinkable for Leue to turn to Ribeldam right after betraying his own father. If he did, those family members he had finally saved would all be executed. While he likely harboured no loyalty to Elgar, he seemed the type to protect his duty. Above all, his soldiers were yet unharmed.

“I see, he certainly is a fit for the situation. Then let’s do everything as you’ve suggested. Now then, when will you depart for the front?”

“I was thinking we’d leave tomorrow at dawn. There’s a good spot for ambush.”

“I understand. With that we have set our policy. Noel will assault the Baharan army, and Leue will face the Ribeldam navy. This meeting is now adjourned! I expect each and every one of you to pour out everything in service to the reunified Coimbra!”

“Yes sir!”

Once everyone had departed, only Elgar and Irvan remained in the conference hall. Doubt and anger swirled in his eyes.

“Lord Elgar. Why... do you give Sir Noel such status? I understand that you two are good friends, but there are already those among the men who think that Sir Noel is more suited for leadership than you. If you don't make your position clear now, you won't be able to rule the unified Coimbra well!”

“Are you saying that you don't trust her?”

“That is irrelevant. I am not saying that you should appoint me instead. I am simply stating the need for balance among the merits of your retainers. Surely, Sir Noel is an unparalleled warrior; however, it won't be viewed kindly by the others if you give her preferential treatment. I think there will be some who would begin to feel rebellious if things continue this way for Noel. Coimbra is represented by scales, and I only ask that you weigh this decision impartially.”

Elgar knew that well, and nodded. He knew that if he continued to follow Noel's advice so much that civil and military officials would likely begin to feel resentful; most of them from the south, disliking the northern Noel as always. He didn't think it had happened yet, but a long history could not be resolved in a single night. The leader of the reunified Coimbra sought the ability to resolve that and bring everyone in step by step, but...

“I will entrust it to Noel this time as well. My father went to his death because he trusted Wilm's slander and distanced himself from her. I have no intention of falling into the same rut.”

“Am I slandering her in self interest now!? Has not the Ir sect brought you fortune, technology, and life!? Do you doubt us even now!?”

“It is true I have relied on you. That is why I shall reward you greatly, but Noel will not be rejected. I have zero intent to get in Noel's way.”

“Lord Elgar... please tell me, please tell me why you are so willing to be influenced by Noel?”

“Because I'd be satisfied even if trusting her led to my ruin,” Elgar declared with finality,

“Even if you lot are polite to my face and kill me in my sleep. Noel has saved me from death and I will be content with whatever results from my faith in her. I shall accept my fate.”

Elgar placed his faith in her like the plebeians did in the sun, and the members of the Ir sect put their faith in their god: the girl who had saved him once, and then continued to fight even after being cast aside by his father. He put his faith in Noel Bosheit: the one who had held onto an old promise and returned to him once more.

Chapter 39

Human, Hero, or Monster?

After the meeting in Madress came to a close, Irvan sent out a secret messenger to invite a certain someone to the waiting room. None were as relied on as the one who had just taken another castle. No one noticed Irvan's movements as the Military and civil officials turned to their new tasks in a rush. He had summoned the young hero of Coimbra: Noel Bosheit. Irvan surrounded himself with his most skilled militant adherents, and prolific assassins were waiting just above the ceiling. They numbered thirty in all, and nobody would stand in their way.

Lord Elgar's blind faith in Noel is too dangerous for us. I don't want to do this, but the order of the day is getting rid of Noel.

It was his best shot. The castle was still disorderly, and with the recent territorial gains, Wilm's final acts still had to be surveyed. Such a chance wouldn't come again. Irvan was navigating a slippery slope, but the dead couldn't complain. There was a rather high chance that he would be executed himself, but if he had to be crushed to take the initiative, he would prepare his death bed. The one thing he would never do was idly wait for his destruction. It would never again rise to great power and influence unless a great many risks paid off.

Elgar was betrothed to Irvan's daughter; a daughter who obediently followed her father's instructions. It had all the makings of a political marriage. Above all, she was a faithful adherent to the sect of Ir and she understood how difficult her position was; likely unbothered by questions of love. All was well before Noel appeared. As far as Irvan could tell, there was no mistaking Elgar's special feelings for her. On the off chance that the engagement fell through, the possibility of Noel becoming his legal wife would make any waiting on their part no more than watching their ever nearing destruction approach. Ir had nowhere to run and no backing on the continent outside of Elgar—in whom Irvan had invested all of their wealth—. More than a few sacrifices had to be made just to gain a foothold. Irvan had bet everything on a young ruler in hopes of finding a land to live in. No laughing matter, it would be, then, if everything was taken by one girl who had just entered the scene.

No matter how brave she is, if we strike fast, she will die. Even a hero is human.

He wondered if she trusted her ability, or was simply a fool, as she responded right away. All it took was a simple invitation to try some tasty wine from the continent. If she refused, he had planned to invite her under the pretense of a secret discussion, and if that was refused, it would prove that she was a threat. Irvan was prepared to go all out.

At any rate, I haven't fully decided whether or not to move. I would much prefer this go peacefully.

The newly formed reunited Coimbra's influence was the sect of Ir's only lifeline. Without that, the pagans in a majority sun-god worshiping land would be quickly swallowed up. For this reason it was necessary to confirm the intent of the girl who stood before him expecting wine.

"Is it... to your liking, Sir Noel?"

"Yup, this is really good. And this strange fruit here is super delicious!"

"This brew is known as Velta wine. Madress wine is also rather palatable, but the continental tradition has a different tenor. That green fruit is the Velta melon. With a rich sweetness and a mellow fragrance, it has a very captivating flavour."

"Mmmn, there's really all kinds of things over there, I kind-of didn't want to go, but now I'm a little interested. Oh, but it's a little far just to play around."

Noel tilted her head as she continued to dig in with a spoon. She drank the wine as if she intended to down it all in a single gulp; not a trace of nobility in her movements.

"A plebeian could survive for a few years off the price of just these two. That's just how rare they are."

"So that's how it is."

"However, if you find it that agreeable then we might find some use for it amid our troubles... at the end of the day, you are the hero of Coimbra."

"The hero of Coimbra?"

“How humble. Have you not heard the voices of the people? Do they not all praise you as the hero who defeated the tyrant Wilm? If we listen closely, we’ll hear that even the emperor Amil respects your valour. I invited you here because I thought it prudent to be closer to such a one.”

“I see. Well, thanks a lot for letting me eat something incredible! Looks like you’re a great guy, Irvan.”

Irvan could feel his venom draining at the sight of Noel’s complete lack of malice. After a few words he’d planned on distracting her, but now he started to feel like avoiding it. Finding himself smiling wryly, Irvan decided to change the topic to the main issue as he had started to feel that any more beating around the bush would lead to her misunderstanding him.

“Hahaha, I don’t know if I’m a great guy, but I have the responsibility to be upright. The lives of every adherent to the sect of Ir are resting on my shoulders. As such, I want to deepen our friendship with the famously valorous Sir Noel. I’ll spare no expense in my labour for their sake.”

“I see. I’m also giving my all for my companions. So it’s like that.”

Noel finished off her wine and Irvan brought up the main topic. He hadn’t fully grasped her personality yet. She looked pretty, that was for sure, but he couldn’t call her a lady. As a military woman she seemed rather hardy. She seemed to have the skill to actually lead men on the field considering how she had taken the castle; however, she was a child inside, and it would be fair to criticize her inexperience. Irvan could see a little of what had attracted Elgar. It probably wasn’t too much of a guess to say that he was attracted to her innocence in a world that only showed him atrocities, but if the girl was going to be Irvan’s political opponent, he wouldn’t forgive her even if she was a child. He held a glass in his left hand, and when he dropped it, Noel would die. Maneuvring for an assassination was the specialty of his sect; application was how they survived.

“The reason I called a woman such as yourself so late at night was to hear your true intentions.”

“What do you want to know?”

“I’ll be direct. What do you think of our sect, Sir Noel?”

“You’re companions that the young master is reliant on and my ally. You specifically are a great guy who gave me tasty food... is about all.”

She didn’t seem particularly nervous or guarded or anything. It seemed like she had no inkling of the notion that the man before her could become a future enemy.

“Hahaha, thank you very much. I, Irvan, am glad to have such a hearty companion as yourself, Sir Noel.”

“Ahaha, I guess I’m just glad I got to chat with someone from the continent. This was a good idea.”

“Finally, there is one last thing I would like to ask. How do you feel about Lord Elgar’s engagement to my daughter Illum? From what I can see, Lord Elgar harbours special feelings for you. Could it be that you feel the same? Of course I understand this is probing too much, but marriage should be a loving bond between both parties. We can’t have it go wrong.”

Irvan had asked in a very specific tone so as to easily notice any irritation, fully expecting opposition from Noel. A woman’s jealousy was fearsome; at times enough to bring down a nation.

He knew that there had been objections to the marriage since the formation of the Red Circle Army. The Coimbran old guard particularly opposed; Cynthia among them, who hadn’t been excluded solely because they didn’t think she would ever become an obstacle. She was a female knight adored by the rough and tumble regulars, but she had almost no political sway as evidenced by the success of the engagement. Had Irvan been in her shoes, he never would have allowed the marriage to succeed, knowing it would lead to disaster.

Irvan would further expand his influence because he had to expand the region in which the adherents could live. There was a need to propagate favourably and find allies he could trust, hence his strong backing of Elgar. The two could use each other, but that was not the only reason for his investment: Irvan had bet on Elgar’s future; the young man had been through hell and somehow survived with a strong tenacity and will. Likely all he needed to become a magnificent ruler was knowledge and experience.

“Well then, I would love to hear your thoughts, Sir Noel.”

“I heard about the young master’s engagement from Cynthia. It’ll be a new family, eh? I hope everyone turns out to be happy. Oh, and invite me to the ceremony, okay? I’ve never been to one so I’d like to see it up close. We’ll celebrate with delicious food and fun music right?”

“Ah... yes, yes that’s right. I’m not sure of the traditions here, but on the continent we host a grand blessing.”

“I see, I see. Yup, I’m really looking forward to it!”

Noel finished off her melon with a laugh, scratched her red hair, and praised the flavour of the fruit. Thereafter she gave no hint of jealousy or hostility, only thinking to properly attend the ceremony when hearing about the wedding. If all was an act, she was quite the knave. Irvan stepped forward. The real issue was whether or not she would become an enemy; remaining unsure changed nothing.

“Sir Noel... I’m sure we both share the goal of bringing good to Coimbra in these troubled times. From here on out I would like to cooperate all the more intensely. I’m sure that if we combine our continental knowledge with your valour we can bring forth great fruit in Coimbra.”

“Hey, this Mundonovo continent has, like, all sorts of amazing things doesn’t it?”

“Y-yes. Well, I don’t have any here, but there are many...”

“Are there people who can use magic?”

“You... might laugh about it here, but over there, there are certainly people who could be described as such.”

“Can they fly?”

“They... they can’t fly, but they can produce flames and water.”

“Oh, I’ve got a bident that can spit flames! I’ll show you!”

Noel laughed pleasantly. Irvan smiled politely to indicate he looked forward to it. The entire event had been about probing Noel, but the results so far had been good enough. Irvan smiled internally as well.

“Hmmm, magic, eh? I didn’t really want to go, but I might have to adjust my thinking a bit. Ah, I think it’d be great to cooperate from here on out. We’re companions, so let’s do our best together!”

After Irvan politely wiped the sticky juice off Noel’s extended hand, he accepted her handshake, feeling a bit mentally drained as if he had been dealing with an actual child even though she looked by all accounts to be in her late teens or early twenties. Her mental age was far too low.

I don’t really know for sure, but she doesn’t seem to be one to be too cautious of. That is fine. We won’t have to shed any unnecessary blood.

“It was a truly enlightening conversation. Now, finally, Sir Noel, shall I give you something as a symbol of your friendship with the sect of Ir? Is there anything you would like? Maybe some money, rare spirits, precious metal, a gem, or some continental art? I’ll gift you whatever you want, so don’t worry and let me know what it is.”

He intended to fulfill any request that wasn’t unreasonable; even offer up a young man if that’s what she wanted. People bought with things were easy to deal with and saved him trouble. The dangerous ones were those who wouldn’t move without duty or conviction.

“Let’s see... I’d like a rare toy, I think. If possible one that I can use to play with Cynthia and Riglette too.”

“What?”

“There are loads of rare goods there right? I kind of want to know what the kids play with.”

“Ah... yes, I see. Er, well, of course we have some. Chose whichever one you like.”

She had caught him off guard, but he quickly regained his composure. Irvan had gotten much more than he had hoped: everything would go well for only the price of a child’s toy. No undue investment was required; a great success. Noel could not become a political opponent, and was not one to be feared even on the off chance she ever did.

It was then that he knew: the girl was a fool. With the mind of a child, she had survived on military prowess alone. No other conclusion could be drawn. The plans that had

captured Ewear and Madress most likely came from Riglette. She was the brain of the hero, and that wasn't a problem at all. Irvan had enough ammunition to deal with her on the basis of her status as a daughter of the Grambull family. If she ever became a hindrance, a few baseless rumors would drive her close to death. From his research he knew that she had a horrible reputation with soldiers and plebeians alike. Noel stood, humming, clueless of Irvan's true thoughts. He sat as he watched her recede, poured wine into the glass that was supposed to be a signal, and drank to his victory.

I'm really glad that it always goes this well. It may be that the God we have devoted ourselves to has finally smiled upon us after so long.

"Hey..."

An angry voice came from behind him as he let out a laugh. His breath stopped and his heart pounded.

"S-sir... Noel?"

"If you want to kill me, you'll need to bring three hundred men, you know. Thirty aren't nearly enough. Would it be okay to burn them all when they try to attack at once? If I really went for it, I'd burn right down to the bone, and everyone might end the up same."

"W-what are you..."

"Ahaha, you're a great guy Irvan, so I'll overlook it this once: a special service just for today. It's heavy stuff to kill a companion after all. So take care from here on out, okay?"

Smiling, Noel gently smoothed out Irvan's green robes before slowly closing the door behind herself as she left, but Irvan had seen that her eyes held no trace of a smile. His breathing was irregular and he knew she had been out for blood. Shaking, he couldn't stop himself from sweating. Wine spilled like blood over the edges of his glass. The assassins in the ceiling silently came out, as did the adherents in the surroundings; all with pale faces.

"Lord Irvan... that one spotted us, there is no mistake. It seems that she had been looking in our direction the entire time. A-also, there was a strange presence behind us."

"W-we report the same. Even though nobody should have been there, it felt like

something was. It was as if we were bound by iron, unable to move.”

“Then... had I given the signal?”

“I believe everyone would have died for sure... Sir Irvan, she is a monster. A monster seeking our destruction is on this side as well! Oh, God!”

“What... is this?”

Irvan staggered to the desk, leaning with both hands upon it. What a horrific thing he had done. They had woken the ire of a dangerous beast. No more than luck had kept him alive.

“L-lord Irvan, shall we observe Noel after this point? If we continue, she may kill us all on a whim.”

“Lord Irvan, I believe we should avoid danger for now.”

The assassins were worried. Once they had thought their observations to be fruitful, but everything had been seen. It was as if the grim reaper pressed his scythe to their necks. Despite the Ir sect’s lack of fear regarding death, it was difficult to hold back the dread. Touch a flame and find it hot, touch water and find it cold; this was the same. If they crossed the line, reason would go out the window.

“We will stop. We will all observations of her. Absolutely do not raise a hand to that thing hereafter. Don’t even oppose her accidentally, understand?”

“Y-yes sir, understood, sir.”

“At best, it won’t view us with hostility without getting too involved in our business. We don’t know what it wants, but we probably won’t be rolled up in anything if we don’t oppose her. It should be okay if we stay out of her way.”

Irvan made his decision based on optimistic thinking. It didn’t seem like she had romantic feelings for Elgar. He wasn’t sure what she was aiming for, but it looked like some of it involved the revival of Coimbra. For the moment, the most important thing was staying uninvolved. Noel had likely been honest about overlooking things this time, but there wouldn’t be a next.

“That was a monster without a doubt,” Irvan began his instructions firmly, “A monster

just like the one that sought our destruction. The same as that monster that spread death on the continent. Under no circumstances are you to raise a hand against her, you hear me? We must not lay a hand on monsters.”

The other adherents nodded without attempting to hide their fears. There were monsters in that world. People only appropriately described as such certainly existed. A monster they thought only existed on their continent was here as well. Irvan had seen the menace himself as a child. They were things that must never be disturbed. Irvan’s own late father had opposed a monster, and met a tragic end even though he had been backed by the hegemonic power of the church of the star. As a result, Irvan’s sect became known as heretical on the continent.

Then another monster came incessantly after them to eradicate the heresy. It had wielded a scythe like the grim reaper himself in the name of the inquisition and killed all the brothers and families who had hidden themselves and vowed to return. All the adherents who resisted had been slaughtered. As a child, Irvan had only survived due to luck and so the fear of such monsters was deeply ingrained in him. He would keep his hands off at all costs.

At the end of the day, I’ve been spared. I’ve been saved, and saved again. Even facing a monster, my luck prevailed again! My God, oh how I thank you!

Irvan was grateful from the bottom of his heart for the grace of his god that had spared him from death by a hair’s breadth.



Noel was playing with a supremely displeased looking Riglette in her room with the toy she had gotten from Irvan. It was a solid body toy called a star tower. Various addons could be connected together to raise the tower, then each piece would be removed one by one in turn and the one who caused a collapse would lose. Between one and three pieces could be removed per turn. While it was a good idea to try to force the opponent into a bad position, the tables could quickly be turned. At any rate, the fate of the tower was to fall into ruin. Irvan had talked about ‘faithfully rebuilding everything they had accomplished’ with a dark expression.

“Is it over, is it over? I’ve gotten tired.”

Noel yawned deeply. She wasn’t tired at all, in truth, but it was also an important part

of the game to get under the opponent's skin. As per usual, a vein bulged along Riglette's forehead. Noel had set a trap for her that seemed about to work, but Riglette held the piece in place as the tower wobbled.

"H-how annoying. Just shut up!"

"Your will be done."

Suddenly, Noel was mimicking Irvan in what might have clinched the game.

"Didn't I tell you to shut it!?"

Riglette tutted, fingers trembling. While she had been blindly focused on bringing about Wilm's death, she now had returned to her usual self. It seemed like she was now thinking of how to tease Leue. If he was under her direct command, she seemed the sort who really wanted to rub it in. Unfortunately for her, it wasn't going to happen as Elgar had no intention of letting that occur. There probably wasn't anyone who wanted to go so far out of his way to stir up trouble in the ranks. Incidentally, he had told her that it was okay to retire if she was happy now, and had received the ultimate tut in response. Noel thought that it looked like she would be around to play for a little while longer, which made her happy, and when she voiced her gratitude, Riglette had gotten mad at her even though she played with Noel despite having gotten angry. She was now a precious friend that Noel couldn't send away.

All that aside, her hand wasn't moving; it was on the piece, and it wasn't shaking at all. With that, the game would never end.

"Okay, well tomorrow is an early day, so from now on we've got a ten second limit. Ten... nine..."

"Wa-wait, suddenly being unfair..."

Hastily pulling the block, Riglette brought the tower down with force. All the pieces crashed down with a resounding sound.

"All right, that's a loss for Riglette. I'll leave the cleaning to you, loser!"

After a victory stretch from Noel, she nimbly got into her pajamas. Riglette left with a groan. Noel threw herself onto her bed, which felt refreshingly cool.

“Ah, this bed’s great. I’m about to pass out.”

It seemed as if Irvan felt as if he couldn’t win. Noel wanted to get along with Elgar, but there was a chance that she would cause some tension by killing his father-in-law. Usually after that much intimidation, people wouldn’t go after her anymore, but she wouldn’t hold back on him if he ever did that again, and she really would kill all those members of the sect of Ir.

“Hmmm, was I too lenient?”

“What was lenient about using an unfair time limit!? You fiend!”

“Ahaha, you’re funny Riglette.”

“Shut up!”

Noel slowly shut her eyes as she watched Riglette violently clean. Next, she wanted to play with Cynthia and Elgar, but she didn’t know if she could because of how busy they all were. It seemed like becoming important inevitably decreased personal time.

When will I become important? It might be cool to become a major general?

She imagined lying around self-importantly in a major general’s armour with loads of medals. Wilm’s devious face floated through her mind, and it bothered her a bit. When she then tried to imagine herself as a general of the army, Cynthia’s scolding fist somehow came to mind so she decided it was about time to get to sleep.

Riglette was moaning sadly even in Noel’s dreams, so she consoled her a bit.

Chapter 40

Bring Light to the Dark of Night

The day after the fall of Madress, Noel made her triumphal departure with five thousand men. The injured and all those who looked fatigued were sent as a flying column down the Kanan highway. The remaining four thousand were led by Noel down a different route to their objective. She had given every commanding officer the outline of her plan that morning as there was minimal risk of an information leak.

Riglette was in charge of the flying column, which included Mirut and the other men who were unused to battle. Riglette had helped her formulate the plan on the island, so she knew the important parts well enough. Barbas' objections had been overruled by Noel in order to place her in charge.

"Still, it's a bold plan."

"I know right? Even if we fail, we'll stop the enemy's movements. If they don't come, we'll just pull back. Whichever events unfold, it'll be to our advantage. That's why I pushed it so hard in the meeting."

"Lord Elgar truly has deep trust in you. To be honest, I never expected he would overrule Sir Irvan's objections."

"The speed of it all was a huge help. I really want to play with the young master, but it seems like he's so busy somehow. That being the case, I figured: why not just do what I can, too?"

Noel had returned to fulfill her promises with Cynthia and Elgar. It could be said that she was fulfilling them in that very moment. Everyone could live happily if they were able to bring affluence to Coimbra when the fighting came to an end. In that case, Noel was sure that she would live happily too.

"This plan... was it also devised on Willa island?"

"That's right. We wrote up a whole bunch of scenarios and thought through how to handle each and every one. By the way, our scenario is going well. Worst case would

have been a protracted siege of Madress with the black sun cavalry to contend with. If it came to that, we'd have hidden ourselves and resorted to sabotage."

In reality, given such a situation, Noel thought it would be best to abandon Coimbra and join up with Gemb. She was fairly certain that no amount of effort could overturn a pincer attack with those overwhelming numbers. In the war three years prior, she had learned the importance of being able to accurately judge her own personal capabilities. Dying alone was one thing, but considering she was burdened with the responsibility for the lives of all her men, she couldn't do anything reckless; so she thought over things arduously.

That aside, the biggest problem still hasn't been sorted... Hmmmm, what should I do, I wonder?

Noel pondered methods to counter the Black Sun Cavalry. Along with Riglette, she had thought and thought and thought of how to defeat them, but a direct attack still didn't seem like it would go well. An ambush would be easily escapable for their mounted opponents. Therefore, she had considered barriers and trenches, but there was no reason to believe they would go out of their way to attack that on horseback. If left unchecked, they were sure to strike somewhere on the continent. Truthfully, the best option was to win them over, but dealing such a heavy blow to the empire would be difficult.

It's a real problem... they don't seem the type to let their guard down either...

The biggest problem was the redheaded Falid. Noel was unfortunately unable to get a good feel for how to defeat him considering how she hadn't been able to follow his movements in their previous encounter. Most likely, a second encounter would unfold in a similar manner. To summarize: if she couldn't come up with a plan to counter them, then she couldn't see a path to victory. Even while playing around on the island, the issue had been worked over thoroughly in the back of her mind, there, a shape had slowly emerged from the haze in her mind.

At any rate, Falid had to be killed at an early stage. Rumor had it that some soldiers changed at dawn with some sort of augmentation. With time those soldiers would gain experience and knowledge, becoming ever more formidable. Falid, their commander, had to die before a second or third division of the Black Sun Cavalry could be formed. Doing so would undoubtedly cause confusion in the ranks given that they had a tendency to value force of might over loyalty. Noel remembered what had happened

when Rebecca had beaten her like it was yesterday. If she brought down the pack leader, those beasts would undoubtedly fight for status. Lastly, Noel needed to cut out the root of the problem behind Operation Dawn.

“The black sun cavalry? We’re most likely gonna have to fight them again at this rate. They’re a real danger. I think we’d be best off avoiding direct confrontation.”

“Well, leave it to me when that happens. I’ll do something.”

“I shall assist, of course.”

“I’ll accept that sentiment.” Noel clearly expressed her refusal.

Cynthia would surely die in a single strike. Even if the enemy was surrounded en masse, they’d likely retreat with composure after a brutal fight. Noel was thinking hard because she didn’t want to pointlessly throw away her friends or companions. She would use every method to deal with the problem while suffering minimal casualties. As such, she had to be the one to kill them. Such was the duty of a commander.

As Cynthia didn’t look like she was going to quietly accept that, Noel forcefully changed the topic, “By the way, that Irvan of Ir is a great guy, isn’t he? Last night I got wine, melons, and even a toy from him!”

“That... just what happened?” Cynthia raised her eyebrows.

“He called me out to have an important talk, but he just said ‘let’s do our best’ and I got loads of gifts.”

“Wait, it couldn’t be that you just went all happy-go-lucky to that kind of invitation all by yourself!?”

Noel covered her ears as Cynthia started to shout.

“We’re allies so there’s no reason to have my guard up, right? We’re even companions now.”

“How... careless. While it is true that we cannot go without Sir Irvan’s knowledge and strength, I just can’t trust him. They have their own... expectations after all.”

“Why is that?”

“They want to spread their religion and secure somewhere to be. It may become a disaster in the future. There are already warning signs.”

Cynthia had a sharp gaze. Most likely, the censugrass had been propagated by none other than them. Noel too, had heard of the funds. If a large dose was administered, a false happiness would follow. Noel had no interest in that, but the painkilling effects were convenient. Treating those on the verge of death wouldn't be crossing any lines, and it seemed like there were other useful applications. She figured that if it was strictly regulated, and there weren't any mistakes in its administration, then there wouldn't be any problems, but that was also likely one of the reasons that it wasn't good. After all, people were how people were. From what Barbas had told her, there were some northerners who had become poisoned while cultivating it. Even selling it for money seemed to administer a false pleasure that lead to death. People tried to quit, but it was too late.

Even if they know it's bad for them, they can't stop. Censugrass: after a brief moment of bliss returns people to unbearable agony, eh? Hmmmm...

That being the case, it would be best to burn it all and be rid of it; but due to a conflict of interests, that wasn't an option. Politics was as expected, difficult. Noel would incinerate all of the plants and accept the resistance if she was in charge. Perhaps she would merely place severe restrictions on its use. Such a response was obvious, especially considering that they hurt allies as well as enemies. Noel thought she'd bring that up with Elgar at some point, though she had no intentions of believing in divine punishment for committing a taboo act. At any rate, they were not something to be kept.

“What's the matter? Suddenly going quiet.”

“No, I was just thinking. Um... in that case, are you going to kill the Ir sect off once you're done with them?”

It seemed like they were being exploited, and it was painfully obvious that such an option wouldn't lead to anything good. Fear would begin to spread about who would be next. Noel's horrifying reputation served as a deterrent, but even when considering that, such an act would probably lead to greater opposition.

“N-no, I never said I would go that far, but I am saying that we shouldn’t just leave them be. As long as we have eyes, they won’t be able to go too far. I merely believe that we must keep them in check if we want to proceed down an acceptable path.”

“Yup, I think we should face forward. People have to be cheery!”

“Was it really nothing? No suspicious movements?”

“Nope, it was fine. We just had a happy chat about bringing bounty to Coimbra.”

“I see... it’s good if that’s the case...”

There was a pause in the conversation. Cynthia and Noel were forced to gallop to catch up with the corps’ advance; not that they had gone too far ahead. For a moment, Cynthia looked like she wanted to voice her opinion, but then she suddenly dismounted and straightened up.

“Noel.”

“Y-yes?”

“I’ve always wanted to say this, but I didn’t have an opportunity. Please let me say it now that we’ve recaptured Coimbra.”

“S-sure.”

It seemed like she had something important on her mind, which made Noel a little nervous.

“I’m really sorry about what happened at Bolbo,” Cynthia apologised with a deep bow, “Friends turning their swords against one another is unacceptable. I betrayed you. More than just retaking Coimbra, I intend to repay you. I am even willing to accept death.”

It was clear she had presented her neck for a beheading, and Noel hurried to get off her horse and place a hand on Cynthia’s shoulder.

“It’s fine, you don’t have to do something like that ’cause I’m not mad at all. I don’t even know what would have happened if you hadn’t stopped me there. Isn’t it fine that we’re all able to be together like this?”

“But you were the only one punished with exile!”

“Life was fun on that island, super fun. And it ended in the blink of an eye, so I’m not bothered at all at this point!”

Noel pulled Cynthia back up, and saw her eyes had gone red. Since she had no intention of teasing her for that, she let it be. Some questions were best left unasked, even if she was just curious or wanted to know. Noel had studied that. Worried that it might be bad if the other soldiers spotted the scene, Noel offered her a handkerchief.

“Here, you can wipe your face.”

“Thanks, I’m really sorry.”

“I played lots while I was there. I studied all kinds of things, and thought very carefully, you know. On top of that, I feel like I was able to find something I was looking for on that island.”

“It couldn’t be... the method to find happiness that you’ve been searching for this whole time?”

“Close. I feel like I’ve seen its tail.”

“Would you mind explaining just what that was?”

“Ahaha, that’d be no good. I’d be so embarrassed if I was wrong, so I won’t tell.”

A mischievous smile floated across Noel’s face. She wouldn’t tell anyone yet, and it was properly recorded in her happiness memo just in case. If something did happen, Riglette or someone would probably dig it up and tell everyone for her. Now that she thought of it, Noel hadn’t interviewed anyone about a way to find happiness while on the island. She didn’t know when she’d stopped. Her friends, companions, and treasures had all piled up, but all she got for her notebook on the island was that one thing. That’s just what it was like.

“Is that so... but it is good that you found something.”

“Thanks, Cynthia. I’m sure that I’ll tell you some day, along with a mountain of stuff I’ll teach all my friends. I also need to teach it to the young master. Riglette... well, if she’s interested, I guess. Seems like I’ll just get made fun of, though.”

She didn't want to bully Riglette, but Noel didn't have any intentions to be straight with her either; just to keep things interesting.

"I'm honoured. Ah, it's a little embarrassing to express my gratitude like that."

"Ahaha, don't be so formal, just say whatever. Everyone went and got some of the gifts from Gemb."

After the two of them shared a short laugh, they once again mounted their horses. Cynthia's ever stiff expression had eased considerably. The matter seemed to have haunted her up until this point. If Noel had executed her, she'd be the haunted one, without a doubt. That, Noel thought, would really be a bad idea, but that was Cynthia's way.



Near the Coimbran-Baharan border, the governor of Bahar had opened a meeting about Major General Bartheck stopping his troops.

"According to the reports from our scouts, Madress fell in only two days. Even if we set out now, I think we would be too late."

"Your excellency, I believe we should pull back temporarily and organise a second punitive force. We are accepting a request for aid, but there is no way for us to accept any orders now that the capital has fallen. With the current manpower, we won't be able to retake it quickly."

The staff officers advised caution. They had one thousand cavalry and one thousand war wagons. There were three thousand men riding them, and six thousand footmen for a total of ten thousand men. The war wagons had been assigned by the now prime-minister of Horsheido, Mills who no longer led men from the front. He had to distribute the wagons to keep an eye on Coimbra, Gemb, Giv, and the rest. Usually, their numbers would be adequate, but it was unclear whether or not they could take Madress castle. Considering their lack of siege equipment, and that the enemy could dig in, it was doubtful that they could succeed. Recapture, in summary, was impossible.

"However, at this rate, we won't be able to take anything back. I would like to strike a blow to the rebels' morale even as they occupy Coimbra," Bartheck firmly declared.

Life wasn't a game for children; it wouldn't end just because he had been late. He had to think of the future; of how to retake Coimbra as quickly as possible. Emperor Amil had his heart set on the expedition, so they couldn't afford to waste any strength. It was true the gears weren't turning at the moment, but the conquest would eventually proceed. Amil had that much ability at least. That was why the continental Verdun was still secure. He was turning enemies aside and gaining land. All those who couldn't see the long term were stirring the ire of the masses and driving them to revolt. Siden of Gemb was the sole man responsible. It was scheming that had Giv, Gemb, and Karmbeeth had sought independence. His guile had even reached as far as Coimbra.

We should have taken the opportunity to get rid of him along with Grohl in the previous war. In fact, he was the biggest problem. What we thought would avoid needless confusion at the time, only came back to bite us.

"We will acquire a bridgehead to retake Coimbra for his honourable Majesty. I would like to send the cavalry and wagons ahead with the occupation of Rockbell as their objective."

"Please wait. The road ahead is none other than the narrow pass at Yavits. It is way too dangerous to not send the infantry ahead with caution."

"Of course. I agree to that. That is exactly why I've already sent out advanced scouts to ascertain the situation in the pass and on the Kanan highway."

"I spoke presumptuously without knowledge. I apologise!"

"I don't mind at all. Giving your thoughts and opinions is the duty of officials and staff officers. Please speak without restraint as always."

The arguments from the staff officers came after Bartheck gave his explanation and the meeting went on. Finally, after all the opinions had been stated, the news from the scouts arrived.

"Good work. How is the situation?"

"Yes, sir, the report, sir! The traitors who call themselves the reunified Coimbra have begun to set up anti-cavalry barriers and palisades on the Kanan highway."

"It seems they fear our cavalry and wagons."

“However, they are not making much progress. Considering how unused to the construction they are, it is likely that they are forced labour.”

“Hmm...”

Bartheck rubbed his chin as he thought.

“And Yavits?”

“We saw no suspicious shadows. According to a local hunter, the majority of the Coimbran forces are gathering around Madress.”

“It seems... that they’re prioritizing the defence of the capital, and that they intend to wait for us at the Kanan highway.”

“My Lord, from the reports we can tell that they have neglected Yavits. They must be unable to mobilise the army so quickly after reunification. Now may be the best opportunity for a raid.”

The staff officers canceled the cautious plans, and suggested bolder ones. Bartheck agreed. In fact, if they waited too long, the fully deployed anti-cavalry barricades would become a problem. With their heavy wagons and siege equipment, it would take too much time and effort to attack if the highway wasn’t cleared. The Kanan highway had to be fully under their control to capture Madress.

“Okay, the cavalry and war wagons will go first, and I shall command the front line. The infantry will protect the heavy wagons in the rear.”

“Apologies, but isn’t there no real need for a major general to take that command? We shouldn’t have any problems sending a commander of one thousand.”

“No, adaptability is key. I don’t have the time to idle away in the rear. I may be old, but I am still a knight of Bahar. I don’t intend to be slow.”

There weren’t any objections to his firm statement. The staff officers saluted, and began making preparations. Victory or defeat lay in the timing. He would crush the working soldiers on the highway, and attack before the enemy could shore up their defences. From there, he would retake Rockbell. Though it would be difficult, it was nothing that the disciplined cavalry of Bahar couldn’t achieve. While there were many new men in the wagons, the cavalry was comprised of hand-picked elite veterans.

Bartheck had full faith in their bravery and martial prowess.

Bartheck's men proceeded under the cover of darkness through Yavits pass with the cavalry in the lead, with the war wagons following just behind. Even if they had to do it in the middle of the night, the first order of business was kicking about the workers on the highway.

Good thing the moonlight was sufficient... but it's too quiet.

Ominous bird calls rang out from between the trees on the mountains, and there was a chill despite the summer not having ended.

Bad memories came to mind, and he turned to a staff officer for confirmation, "Are there any signs of an ambush?"

"There are no problems. Our scouts scoured the area thoroughly."

"I see. If anything happens, report it right away. We do need to hurry, but we can't afford to sustain any damage by rushing."

"Yes, sir!"

Bartheck strained his eyes as he searched the tall, deep foliage to his right and left. It was the most perilous time. Of course, they had prepared for that. In the unlikely event of an ambush, the cavalry had been ordered to dismount and form a shield wall. That preparation was why he had risked the dangerous raid.

"Yeah... it's too quiet."

Bartheck recalled an incomparable sense of disquiet, but he didn't know the cause as not a single shadow of the enemy had been discovered and things were ostensibly progressing without a hitch. The staff officers were in the same state as always. Cold sweat began to run down his spine: long years of experience told him to turn back right then and there.

But I can't retreat without sufficient evidence. We are the cavalry of Bahar, and I cannot sully that name.

He couldn't let it be known that the commander had lost his nerve. Bartheck turned his gaze to the tri-sabre banner before him as if to shake off the dread; their pride

fluttering in the torchlight.

“Your excellency! We’re near the exit, but the way has been blocked by felled trees. Shall we begin work on their removal?”

“Okay. All troops are to remain on alert. The men in front shall begin the removal!”

The soldier saluted and galloped away on his horse after hearing Bartheck’s orders. It was most likely an attempt by the enemy to gain time, but would prove pointless as it could only gain them about an hour. Most likely, it was half finished despite the fact that they should have blocked up the entire pass with stones; doing so would have lost them the support of the territories around the border.

“Fufufu, there was something. Well, considering they’ve just unified, they couldn’t just abandon these territories. Though, this works out for us.”

Just as Bartheck began to sneer at them, a large number of fire arrows came from the front, and the sound of screams echoed through the pass.

“A, an attack!! A Coimbran raid!”

“There were pests in hiding after all! Everyone dismount and use the wagons as shields! The enemy is few in numbers, calm down and we can deal with them easily!!”

Bartheck watched as all his men carried out his orders. They quickly dismounted and took minimal damage in the shadows of the wagons. Once they had located the enemy, soldiers would be dispatched to deal with them, but...

“Y-your excellency! T-the wagons!”

The staff officer’s face went stiff as he raised his voice. When the fire arrows struck the ground, no, when they struck what looked to be rocks, they would explode ferociously in a ball of fire. As a result, they had overturned the wagons, trapping men beneath them.

“T-these aren’t normal fire arrows!?! Just what in the world!?”

“They’ve buried something under the road!”

“Enemy attack! Enemy attack!!”

On top of it all, after the hail of fire arrows, with the terrific sound of a bugle call, enemies came screaming angrily down in a charge from the high ground. Their foe came ferociously upon the highly disorderly Baharan train, the wagons holding men like fish in a barrel. Several seconds later, a war wagon erupted in flames and screams.

“W-what? Just what’s going on here!? How can such sturdy wagons be destroyed so easily!?”

“I don’t know, but this is dangerous! Please let us fall back! Let’s retreat and rally! It isn’t a battle like this!”

“All right. Everyone, fall back for now!! Prepare to make a counter attack!!”

As Bartheck gave the order to retreat, an avalanche of logs came crashing down behind them. Shrieks echoed from the rear. Pinned men cried desperately as they struggled, but fire arrows quickly made contact with the logs, turning rapidly into a blaze. It seemed that even the logs had been steeped in oil. A wall of fire burned into their eyes in the night, cutting off their retreat.

“M-my God...”

Bartheck found himself speechless. He had been pulled into a perfect killing ground.

“Uaaaaaaaah!!!”

“S-somebody, h-help me! It, it burns! The fire, the fire!!!!”

“L-lord Bartheck!! Your, your assistance, please!”

Bartheck could make out the enemy flags that flew above them in the light of the fire as he heard the screams of his men. He remembered well the twin hammer banner of Noel Bosheit: the fiend who brought a fiery hell to the men at Carness.

“That... that flag is the fiend Noel Bosheit, is it!?!? When did she get back from Willa!? If I knew she was here I never would have taken this pointless risk!!”

He had been so aggressive because the enemy was supposed to be worn out. He never would have been so reckless if he knew his opponent was Noel, especially since she had attempted an ambush there before.

“Your excellency! We should abandon the horses and wagons to flee into the mountains! If this keeps up we’ll just die in the flames! If we slip into the dark, they won’t be able to pursue!”

“I hate it, but we have to disengage! We can’t fight Noel the Fiend like this! Now we have to minimise casualties!”

“Fall back! Fall back!! Abandon the horses, and take to the mountains! Hurry!”

“Damn that unkillable fiend!! One day, I’ll repay this...”

Grasping his sword with anger and disgrace, Bartheck suddenly cut off his words. When the staff officers turned to look, thinking he hadn’t finished, they saw...

“Eh, uaaah!!”

“Y-your excellency! Your excellency!!”

A flaming arrow had pierced between his eyebrows. It had pierced through his thick helmet, and something red was incessantly flowing forth. No matter how they looked at it, he had died instantly, but that wasn’t all: even the staff officers who attempted to remove it faced a slew of arrows aimed at their throats.

The force consisting of cavalry and war wagons who had their supreme commander shot were unable to regain a state of order. The majority of the men who had fled to the mountains were safe, but all those who chose to fight either burned or were shot.

“Continue the attack until you run out of arrows since it doesn’t look like they plan on surrendering.”

Noel had been loosing arrows even as ascertained their situation. She had already confirmed that there were enemies hiding in the wreckage of the war wagons. They had no reason to go so far and sacrifice so many. Noel felt that it was all a bit of a waste of arrows, but they could always make more later. The combustion stones, on the other hand, were nearly depleted and couldn’t be used any more as there wasn’t enough time for them to mine any more. She would replenish stocks later, but the enemy wasn’t going to give them the time to do so. Fortunately, Barbas’ ambush had taken virtually no losses when it had attacked the war wagons. Preparations had been made for the night attack to turn into a free for all, and it was a blessing that it hadn’t come to that.

“Captain, ain’t it about enough? At this rate, we’ve already taken their commander’s head. Don’t know his name, though.”

Barbas showed the helmet and arrow to Cynthia, who had taken command, and Noel, who had become engrossed in her archery.

“That... that’s Bartheck! I can’t believe he came to the front!”

“You know him, Cynthia?”

“Know him or not, he’s the major general of Bahar and the magistrate! Basically, we have killed the supreme commander of Bahar! This is a great achievement!”

Cynthia was making a fuss, but Noel didn’t bother over it and continued to shoot down the few remaining enemies with her bow, until her bowstring snapped with a disquieting sound.

“This is why bows are no good. It’s too flimsy.”

She tossed it aside without a second thought as it wasn’t a treasure.

“They’re built pretty strongly though. That means yer mighty strong, captain, eh?”

“Hmmm, I guess it depends on the person. Shoot ten times and it’s totally done. Should I use harpoons next time?”

Laughing, she picked up a fire arrow and threw it at the enemy line. It fell to the ground with a plop before reaching them; unsurprisingly, it didn’t have enough force behind it. Noel thought that a harpoon could pierce the war wagons, but throwing them would quickly deplete her stocks, so there were some issues with that as well.

“Well then, it’s about time to be announcin’ our victory. Looks like it was quite the achievement this time.”

“Yup, seems like it. Since it’s been a while, let’s do it with force! Here goes, okay?”

Noel took a deep breath.

“I am Noel Bosheit of the Unified Coimbran Army! I have killed the Baharan commander Bartheck!! Huzzah!!”

After her shout, which seemed to resonate through the entire pass, Noel thrust her bident high. In response, the men in the mountain who had been loosening arrows all erupted into a great cheer. Cynthia too, had thrown her fist into the air at some point, elated. It made Noel glad to see Cynthia's face with some energy again.

"As expected of captain Noel! The White Ant Bloc's with you for life!"

"She's the pride of Willa Island! Huzzah for Miss Fiend!"

"Oi, you bastard, the fuck're you sain'!? Captain Noel's our captain! Don't but in, stranger!!"

"Shut it! We've been with her the longest! You lot just got dragged along!"

"Haa!? We've been her subordinates since three years ago, you know!? Shall I beat a lesson into you?"

"Only been with her for a year, and yer talkin' like that! I'll show ye the fuckin' power of a former pirate!"

Looking over the soldiers that had begun to quarrel, Barbas finally got them in check. He would enforce discipline harshly in battle, but it wasn't a problem now that it was over. Noel gave a satisfied looking nod at how good it was that they were full of energy.

"Now then, what shall we do? The enemy seems to be retreating, but a pursuit..."

"Let's not, okay? I'm a little tired, and all. They've lost a big-shot major general, so they probably won't be able to move, you know. Isn't that enough?"

Cynthia nodded in agreement as Noel smiled proudly.

"That's a calm judgment. Quite unlike you. You've grown."

However, Noel reversed her opinion after thinking a little.

"Let's chase a bit after all, eh? I feel like it's somehow the time to attack."

"Oi, don't just change what you've said!"

"It's fine, it's fine. I'll just wave my flag a bit and scare them. If all goes well, we might

plant the seeds of fear. I'm not Riglette, but I do think it'll build up and be useful later."

Noel attached Bartheck's head to her bident, and was off on the pursuit. Fresh off the victory, the men still appeared to have plenty of energy to move. After having Barbas signal with his bugle, Noel ordered the attack.

"All forces attack! Pursue thoroughly, and show them the might of the Coimbran army! Kill the enemy, and plunder their supplies!!"

"Yeahh!!!"

The enemy had already lost all the will to fight, and the soldiers who had seen their commander slain all began to rout at once. While they hadn't dealt a massive blow to the enemy, they had completely seized all the supplies from the heavy wagons.

"Hmmm, I wonder if Riglette might complain about this later?"

"Well, I don't think she expected this much military success to pile up."

"Hehe, it'll be good for that schemin' woman. Looks like she's been involved in the planning lately, so it'd be ridiculous if she gets annoyin' about it!"

"Oh, but she's gotten a bit brighter recently. If you look real close, you can tell."

"Captain, that's just proof yer eyes are goin'. It might be best to keep those glasses on."

"You think so too? I'll try putting them on for a bit."

Noel took out her glasses, and adjusted them with pride as Barbas nodded in satisfaction. Cynthia looked surprised.

"Those look worn out, as you'd expect from their age. Should we get you some new ones this time?"

"No, no, it's fine. Now then, it's about time we headed back, eh? Irvan and the young master and the rest will be surprised with all these souvenirs that we'll be bringing back! And there are so many amazing horses!"

Noel grabbed hold of a baggage horse that had lost its master. It couldn't be used for a cavalry horse, but there were plenty of uses for it still. Noel's first thought was riding

it for a stroll, but she figured it would be better to consider it thoroughly later. For the moment, they had managed to buy some time.

However, they had been winning a lot recently, and as a result, they might suffer a loss some time soon. It would be fine if she survived, but there was a chance that once she became great, there would be situations in which that standard would no longer apply. Now, she had become burdened with the lives of many companions, and not just her own; even more than before Coimbra had capitulated, and she couldn't abandon them.

Becoming a big shot brings in loads of companions which is good in some respects, but also all kinds of trouble. Well, I guess it's better than dying sadly by myself. And every day is so much fun, too.

When she thought of death in a hole, pounded by rain, with nothing but a name, it seemed that she could handle anything. With all that running through her mind, she sprang atop the horse.

Chapter 41

The Rising Sun and the Setting Sun

In a meeting hall in the imperial capital of Firuth, Emperor Amil, Prime Minister Mills, and a line of civil officials were discussing the problems of the day. Their agenda was the issue of the Libelikan rebellion, matters of the Mundonovan expedition and the manufacture of new soldiers strengthened by dawn; the commencement of Operation Heaven's Sun.

"Lord Mills... I'm afraid to say that I must ask just where you will find the money, manpower, and resources for all this? Just reinforcing Verdun has put our economy into a state of poverty."

Mills raised his hand and joked in a way that no one could tell how serious he truly was, "Don't bring up irrelevant things, okay? If there isn't enough we'll make some, or at least squeeze it out. Coimbra, for example, had the internal capacity to rise up against us with force. This won't bring us down, it's merely proof that we're being too lenient."

"Prime Minister, they have raised a rebellion as a result of being pushed to the brink of death. Any more squeezing will only wring out blood. Your Majesty, why not cease enlarging the military and leave it where it is at now?"

There was, however, an objection to the cautious plan of the civil official.

"That would put our management of Verdun into a dangerous position. Rather than any promising new plans, we should put more funds into Operation Dawn."

"No, we should simply abandon Verdun. If our foothold is trembling, there's no point in a new territory."

"That's unreasonable. If we did that, all our investments will have been for naught. Try not to pointlessly suggest actions we cannot take."

Rebuttals continued to fly between the civil officials, but no conclusion had been drawn in a scene that was no different from usual.

“Then we should exploit them as much as we can. Use them as a sacrifice to gain more control over Mundonovo. From there we’ll gain goods and enrich the empire. Am I mistaken?”

All went silent at Mills’ words, but Amil had no particular reaction. In short, the present course was to maintain course. That being the case, Mills’ proposal was the only one to be used.

“Mills, Operation Heaven’s Sun is fine, but what will become of Operation Dawn II? Tell me the situation.”

“I have already prepared for the addition. At present, children taken from the continent are being raised as the third generation. I’m thinking of merely transferring the energetic ones to Operation Heaven’s Sun. Lord Befnam expressed great interest in this too. If it proves successful, it will be less expensive, and the augmentation will be greater. Furthermore, the instillation of loyalty may already be half done.”

The present super soldier programs had been implemented by the previous emperor Befnam. The man had secluded himself in a church to fervently progress his mad experiments. The one who had unified their efforts under Amil’s reign had been Mills, who was observing Befnam to ensure he didn’t simply do as he pleased. They took the enhanced subjects to another location to be raised where they would undergo harsh training, and the education they called brainwashing. Their training took too much time, and if they could reduce that, the long term benefits would become much greater.

Still, for him to have dedicated so much of his own personal assets was beyond my expectations. There were rumors that he had unlocked the secret of the Sun Emperor, but it just might be true.

According to Mills, Operation Dawn, at present, would be impossible to progress without Befnam as it seemed he carried the key with him at all times. If Amil made the wrong move, it might disappear, or even be destroyed. To escape that predicament, Amil wanted to push the research, but not even as the incumbent emperor had Amil yet been able to fully comprehend all the details of operations Daybreak and Dawn. Befnam didn’t seem likely to hand over the details of his plans either, and Mills hadn’t been able to gain much information. Befnam was better protected at the facility than even the strengthened soldiers. Catching him unaware would likely be supremely difficult.

I really should have granted my father an early death, but he is already senile. One day I shall inherit it all. There's no point in panicking now that I've come this far.

Personally, Amil was grateful that Befnam was cooped up at the research facility rather than saying unnecessary things. Naturally, killing the man right after being enthroned was too obvious in Amil's book as all that would have bought him was animosity from those loyal to his father.

"More importantly than the fact that my father is in charge, I believe it would not be a mistake to say that the new plan has succeeded, would it not? Do something about the funds and supplies, and take however many more men you need from the continent. Make immediate arrangements to contact Ernarz."

"Yes, my Lord."

Amil massaged between his eyebrows after giving his orders. The expedition was not going according to plan. Originally, he was supposed to have gained total control of the North-eastern region with his second expedition. He never expected that the force augmented with the soldiers from Operation Dawn could be repulsed. That was just how strongly the enemy was resisting. If he could recover, Amil would gain hegemony. All that was left to do was wait to see who would give up first.

He knew that the ruling Church of the Star didn't have much territory nor military might, ruling over the lords in name only due to their holy status. For this very reason, the capture of Verdun had been so easily accomplished. The continental South-east was impious and many of the lords acted in self-interest, making it an area exceedingly easy for Amil to move through.

I should spread out the Verdun lords, and bring in more augmented soldiers. I need to crush internal rebellion immediately. I'll also have to make an example of them with a thorough punishment this time.

Falid had been appointed to lead ten thousand men and his Black Sun Cavalry against the rebellious Giv and Karmbeeth, and he had fought his way to the border of Horn. There had been reports that their forces were superior, so he expected him to launch an invasion of Karmbeeth soon. He had arranged to send thirty thousand men to the southern region of the province Gemb wished to retake: Longstorm. Provided they arrived before the capital fell, they would be able to alter it into a protracted war.

The Red Circle Army that had sprung up in Coimbra wasn't a threat, but Amil had informed Bartheck of Bahar to go deal with them if they became too dangerous. There was a strong sentiment that mere plebeians could not change the situation all that much. In the first place, they had about five thousand soldiers in South Coimbra, which would easily be enough to deal with the problem. Small fires went out quickly. Gemb was the real trouble.

He didn't think at all of stopping the expedition like some of his retainers did. It was the worst possible course of action as doing so would instantly hurt the authority of the emperor, making all his investments a waste. What he had to do was spread disorder on the other continent and take advantage of it. There was already a plan in action to achieve just such a goal, fanning the flames of the anti church sentiment all over the continent; from flame to hell fire was only a matter of time. Amil thought it best to strike once the burns had festered.

Taking a short breath, Amil spoke to end the meeting, "I've collected all your thoughts. I will provide my orders later, so..."

Just then, there was the sound of a knock on the door. Entrance to the room had been forbidden for the duration of the meeting unless it was an emergency; guaranteeing that something had happened.

"Enter."

"Pardon my intrusion!"

An imperial guard entered and saluted.

Amil suppressed his anger and pressed the man, "Just what has happened?"

"Yes sir! South Coimbra has fallen into the hands of the rebels from the north! The enemy commander is Elgar Ludwig, eldest son of the late Grohl!"

"It's hard to believe that this occurred so suddenly. Just what were Wilm and Gaddis doing? They couldn't be equaled by children and plebeians?"

Amil was completely flabbergasted. He had information that the red circle army had begun an offensive, but he had never thought they could capture anything so quickly. He would have to ask Bartheck about it later. Defeat at the hands of the plebeians brought great shame to military men.

“Yes, sir, that is...”

“What? Out with it.”

“Ah, yes. Noel has escaped from Willa island and shown herself in the ranks of the red circle army! Many betrayed the floundering Coimbran army and may have greatly increased the strength of the rebellion.”

Noel. The Fiend. Noel Bosheit. The little girl Amil had pardoned to Willa island. She was a foolish woman who stubbornly denied all his requests for her to join him. It seemed as if she had bared her fangs once more at the behest of an old grudge.

“Truly a foolish woman. To think she couldn’t read the flow of time right to the end. Contact Bartheck at once and have him send troops. Bahar’s elite have been prepared in advance just for this purpose. We’ll send reinforcements from the imperial capital, so have him begin to dwindle their numbers in advance.”

The imperial guard was unsure of what to do upon hearing Amil’s orders.

“What are you doing? Did you not hear my orders?”

“M-major general Bartheck is...”

“What exactly is major general Bartheck doing? I’m really curious. Go on, hurry up and let me know.”

Tears began to stream from the eyes of the imperial guard as he cried out in response to Mills’ enquiry, “Major general Bartheck has fallen in battle with the enemy in Yavits pass, South Coimbra! The one who killed him was Noel Bosheit of the rebellion!”

“Bartheck... died, you say?”

“He lead his cavalry and war wagons to capture Madress. That was when he received a surprise attack! Baharan casualties numbered over one thousand!”

His bitter voice caused a stir in the meeting room. Bartheck’s death in battle had serious implications as he was not only a major general, but also the governor of Bahar. The fact that a rebel, furthermore the Noel who had been such a thorn in their side, had taken his life would surely cause the enemy forces to gain strength no matter how much Amil hated it.

Another soldier ran into the meeting hall, "I have a report! Rebels claiming to be the Bahar liberation front have appeared near the western Baharan capital of Loldo! The insurgents are marching on the city as we speak!"

"Liberation... front?"

Western Bahar had been in a state of unrest for some time. Likely, they had thought Bartheck's death to be a good opportunity. They were a gathering of fools who thought they wouldn't be defeated, and still held on to the antiquated idea that they could regain the glory they had before they were dominated by the Empire. This was how they repaid him for overlooking them, and Amil regretted letting things get to the state they were in. A thorough purge was the best way after all.

"Your Majesty, this is a serious problem!"

"What shall we do, Your Majesty!?"

Deeply disturbed, Amil gave his orders with his usual expression. He was the absolute ruler of the Libelikan continent. He would not be defeated. He could not be defeated.

"Mobilise the thirty thousand men we've prepared in eastern Bahar and notify them to be on the defence at once."

"We won't be able to hold Longstorm!"

"The officers, people, and goods of Longstorm have been evacuated to Horn. In the first place, that province was created to guard against Gemb. The land itself has no real value. It'll be fine to prepare another operation to retake it."

Gemb was burning with a passion to regain its lost territory, but from Amil's perspective, it wasn't a big deal. Thinking about the situation, the salient would have been next to impossible to defend.

"U-understood."

"Inform Falid that there is no need for his Black Sun Cavalry to defend Horn, and that he is free to approach the Baharan situation however he pleases."

"But what shall we do about Giv and Karmbeeth? We have reports that if they attack, they will rush through and take the land like an avalanche."

“Those pathetic provinces can fall. Above all, we cannot lose the highly important province of Bahar. I believe we will need the strength of the Black Sun Cavalry once more if we are to stop the fiend. Make preparations at once, and defeat the rebels. This time we’ll execute every last one of them! Kill every last retainer who supported them!”

“Yes sir!”

Amil bit his lip as he looked over the civil officials who had begun to move without any sense of urgency. If Bahar fell, it would certainly shock the imperial officers and men as well as the plebeians; the military men especially, considering the large number of them who came from Bahar. Karmbeeth and Giv were an eyesore, but the liberation front had to be dealt with. Gemb was the largest problem, and Longstorm unfortunately had to be abandoned. Preparation would be made to defend Bahar, and the problems would be dealt with one at a time.

But to think that Noel bastard would repay me like this even after all I’d given her after she was defeated. I’ll take the heads of those in the liberation front, and give Bartheck’s soul some rest!

Amil trembled in silent rage, and Mills approached him with his unchanging gentle expression.

“Your Majesty, there is just one thing I would like to test, but...”

“What is it? Don’t hold back, just tell me.”

“Yes, well I would like to implement a plan I have for creating distance between Coimbra and Gemb. Well, it seems like it’ll be difficult, but even if we fail at first, it may have come back to benefit us.”

“A plan to break them apart?”

“Yes. The topic is giving little Elgar the chance to rejoin house Wardka. Let’s make him officially a viceroy. If he accepts it, good, and if he doesn’t we’ll spread rumors that he is a tyrant who starts wars without a care for the people. In reality, he is undertaking some suspicious activities himself. He is that Grohl’s son after all, so public opinion of him could probably turn for the worse in an instant.”

Mills smirked, and his eyes looked like a snake’s. The plan wasn’t bad: it would drive

a wedge between two enemies, or it could serve to defame one. Even if it failed, it might just end with the messenger beheaded. On the off chance that he agreed, Amil would make him a viceroy, and clear one issue off his plate. Amil didn't really think that Elgar was that foolish, but anything was possible with the son of his brother. After thinking for a while, Amil nodded.

"Act however you please. You might as well even promise to return the honour of my brother. He might happily go for that."

"I am pleased you approve. Please leave everything to this prime minister Mills."



Noel Corps was greeted by the people around Madress castle with wild dancing after thoroughly defeating the Baharan army. Wilm was hated by the people for pressing them for taxes and Amil was for repeatedly sending out expeditions. Noel was a perfect hero in the eyes of the people for dealing a blow to the military of the home province of the emperor. She maintained her expression all the way into the castle, having made her way through a crowd that thronged around her as if she was the emperor; a certain thing in her hand.

"You're a total hero now, eh? I bet there ain't a single man in Coimbra who doesn't know your name."

"It's really a good thing. We'll be done right away if we lose, too. What is important is that the people here stick together in tough times. That's why they'll all be my important companions until the end of the war."

Elgar had a pained expression in the meeting, and Irvan seemed rather pale beside him.

"You've done well. Thanks to your work, the Unified Coimbra was able to set out on a new path to peace."

Noel knelt respectfully as she honoured him, "Yes, sir, thank you, sir!"

Even with close friends, there was etiquette. That was one word she had learned in Gemb. She had to put in effort on her own to make sure that her friends wouldn't be troubled.

“You captured Madress, Ewear in the North, and even took the governor of Bahar, Bartheck’s life. There is no issue with calling you the hero of Coimbra. I personally wanted to reward your efforts with a promotion to major general, but...”

Elgar halted his words there, disappointing Noel who had thought she might have become a major general. If she gained great status, she would be able to move on her own without being hindered, and her companions would increase.

“Sir Siden of Gemb has told us that he strongly desires you wait before taking an important office. Normally, I wouldn’t allow him to interfere, but he has helped and loaned us much up until this point. Furthermore, he did not particularly speak badly of you, and for this reason, our discussion of the matter was ended there.”

“Yes sir! Understood, sir!”

“Well then, Noel, come here. I will call in a guest, and I want you at my side so I can hear your opinion.”

“Yes sir!”

Noel held her small cloth-wrapped gift behind her as she went up to stand beside Elgar almost perfectly opposite to Irvan. Essentially, it was a proclamation that he valued the two nearly the same. Noel gave Irvan a little smile and wave, and he stiffly twitched his own face into a smile.

“Then, it won’t exactly lift our spirits, but call the ‘special envoy’. We have a guest from Ribeldam.”

“Yes, sir!”

The palace guard went out, and returned with a single man in tow. He was Griel, the man who had once payed a visit to Grohl. He knelt with a detestable smile.

“It has certainly been a while, Lord Elgar. Goodness, how handsome you’ve become. You have my heartfelt celebration of your victory this time.”

“I will accept those words for the moment, but you are from Ribeldam, a province serving the empire. Unfortunately, that makes us mutual enemies.”

“Hahaha, it is nothing so complicated, I hope... But still, you are really heroic just like

your father.”

“Mr. Griel,” Elgar plainly bared his anger, but had to endure just to maintain a steady tone, “I don’t want to hear any needless formalities. I’ll say this now: I don’t trust you at all. My father marched to his own destruction on your words, after all. I have never forgotten that, not even for a second.”

Seeing this, Griel felt he had made the right choice to maintain his own pace. He was a veteran negotiator, and confidant in his experience. A young, inexperienced ruler was his opponent, so he had made sure to poke him where it hurt. Griel had won over Grohl with his own hands, and his son was of a similar caliber, making his mission easier than taking candy from a baby.

“Dear me, how harsh. However, the next order of business is a splendid gift that may help to counter my previous disrespect. I am confident you will be grateful.”

“What could it be?”

Elgar was doubtful, and Griel pulled out a letter from his breast pocket.

“This here is a letter from your honourable uncle, the emperor Amil.”

“Are you mocking me, you bastard!?!? Was he not my father’s enemy!?”

“Let us not rush things. Who, I wonder, might deliver this to Lord Elgar?”

Irvan stepped forth and accepted the letter, confirming the authenticity by its imperial seal. Elgar signaled with his eyes for Irvan to read it, so he stood, opened the letter, and read it out in a clear voice:

“I have heard of South Coimbra’s wretched state, and I know that these recent events have been elicited by the cries of the people. By nature, Coimbra should be ruled by a member of house Wardka. There has been an unfortunate conflict, but I believe it is now time to put it to rest. Thus declares Amil Wardka, fourth Emperor of Horsheido: Elgar Ludwig, representative of the people, unifier of Coimbra, will be appointed viceroy. Once more, in acknowledgement of this, Elgar has been permitted to return to the Wardka household. This will apply at once to Grohl as well, and his honour shall be restored.

“I will be... made viceroy, it says?”

“Yes. To be perfectly honest, this is an offer of peace... and I wonder how you find it? I don’t believe the conditions are lacking. Gemb is certainly formidable, but we must not forget its brutal defeat at the hands of the Empire of the Sun. Even now, Falid’s Black Sun Cavalry are headed there, and the results will likely be no different from before. You have no further reasons to carry on with this war beyond petty revenge... Am I mistaken?”

“I see. You may have a point.”

Elgar appeared interested.

Griel moved his entire body along with his performance, “Anger is but for a short while. What is important for now is to grant peace to the people, and bring wealth to the nation. Those who stand above others must throw away their selfish desires. You should bury your grudge and once more be united with the empire so that you can devote yourself to civil affairs. Doing so will not only grant you fame as a great ruler of Coimbra, but also return your father’s honour!”

“I understand what you are saying, Mr. Griel. The contents are truly splendid, or so I think. What are your thoughts, Irvan?”

“Yes, sir. We are those who will follow Lord Elgar down any road you take. Please proceed how you deem fit.”

Irvan had withheld his opinion as he knew it wasn’t his turn.

“I see... then, Noel, my friend, what do you think of Mr. Griel’s story?”

Having secretly donned her glasses, Noel put forth a smile. Elgar looked about to explode in comparison, but he somehow maintained his composure.

“I believe it to be a wonderful story. Truly it is a gain with no significant downside! If we proceed as Mr. Griel recommends, we can once more head down the path to destruction!”

“W-what are you saying!?”

Noel made a show of smartly adjusting her glasses at Griel’s raised voice. Next, she imitated Riglette.

“You want to know? Anybody can see that the empire is in decline; a setting sun. The emperor is a fool who set his hands about a childish ambition on another continent while neglecting his own foundations. A guarantee of status as a viceroy from such a person carries no weight, does it not?”

“Is this not an affront!?!?” Griel shouted, forgetting the basics of negotiation.

He had been significantly affected by the way the woman before him had just spoken. Her eyes looked down on him as if he were some inferior insect, and her words were difficult to swallow. Whatever the case, Griel had just crossed a line and he could not go back. Even as he regretted his rash words, he knew he couldn't apologise.

“Everyone knows that Ribeldam doesn't have any room to maneuver. Is that not why you came all the way here just to try and win a reward from your emperor? I mean, you're also wracked with plague, are you not? Ahaha, it looks like you haven't changed at all since before, dog of the empire!”

Elgar and the rest smiled as Noel cackled away. Griel trembled with rage. Incidentally, Riglette was also angry considering just who Noel was mimicking.

“Ghhaa! You traitors! If the Empire seriously faced you, you wouldn't be able to resist, you bastards!”

“Oh my, but this traitor is the one you wanted to make viceroy, even bring him back into the prestigious house Wardka. Not only is this emperor mentally slow, but he also has bad eyes, eh? Lord Elgar, it may be best to just burn that letter.”

“Irvan, burn it and leave no trace. It's viscerally disgusting.”

“By your will.”

Irvan held the letter over the flame of a candle until nothing remained; reduced to ash in an instant and blown away by the wind.

“I, I'll make you regret that! At any rate, this will take you down the path to the same grizzly end as your father!”

“Lord Elgar, what do you think of letting Mr. Griel go empty-handed after coming all this way? Shall we give him a souvenir?”

“I don’t mind. What do you have in mind?”

“Please look this over.”

Noel took up the bundle she had left by her feet and tossed it to Griel. As Griel found himself catching it, the force of the throw caused the cloth to flutter away.

“E-eeeeek!!”

“It is the head I took from Major General Bartheck. Could you bring that to your glorious imperial majesty? He’ll surely be pleased.”

“Are we not splurging a little on this, Noel?”

Noel joined in on Elgar’s little charade, “You think so?”

Griel was so shocked he barely remained standing.

“Well, it should be fine. Guards, our special guest is leaving! Take him and that head out of the castle!!”

“Yes sir!”

After Griel was forced out, Elgar spoke to everyone in the room, “We had no reason to accept that kind of message from the start. Even ignoring any sentiment, we have nothing to gain by joining the empire. We would only go right back to being squeezed.”

“It may lead to war, but it is still better than returning to hell. We must wipe away the ash of that which fell in the fire.”

Perius agreed, having only stayed quiet to watch the performance unfold. From the beginning, joining the empire under the current circumstances was the worst possible path to take out of all options: destroying Coimbra for the purpose of imperial subjugation of the other provinces.

Irvan expressed his misgivings with a sharp look in his eyes, “Lord Elgar, we should consider this messenger to have been sent expecting refusal in an attempt to spread rumors that you value revenge for your father over the peace of the plebeians. They have likely snuck in agents for that purpose.”

“So what do you think our best option is?”

“Ignoring it will be merely falling into their hands; therefore, we should be honest with the people. Let us place a large notice on each city’s bulletin board informing them of the matter. While it is true that the people are tired and don’t want war, we shouldn’t have any problems if we strongly push the idea that we must reject the empire’s peace with heartrending grief if we wish to avoid returning to the days of exploitation.”

The plebeians had taken up the sword to break out of that hell. If they went back to hell just to put off the next war, there would be no meaning to anything that they did, but there was a chance that the exhausted population would look only to the present and miss the future, so the situation had to be properly dealt with.

“All right, I’ll leave the management of this matter to Irvan.”

“By your will.”

After Elgar watched Irvan salute and step back, he opened his mouth once more, “We may have achieved victory for ourselves, but Gemb, Giv, and Karmbeeth, those provinces who also stand against the empire, are still fighting. While Coimbra is exhausted and that is important, if we merely watch, we may suffer another imperial invasion. In the first place, if we hadn’t received aid from Gemb and the rest, we wouldn’t have been able to spring into action. That is a debt we must not forget.”

No objection was raised. It was highly probable that the next target would be Coimbra if the tough fighting in Giv and Karmbeeth ended in their capture, and having to put up a defence so soon after gaining total control would push them to the limit.

“Now then, a meeting of princes has been decided upon to discuss a plan to oppose the empire. It was only decided just the other day, so I apologise for not informing you good sirs about it earlier, but we could not take any risks that might have caused the information to leak.”

Elgar’s announcement elicited a collective “oh?” from the audience. If the disparate, independently fighting provinces could instate a system of cooperation they would be able to produce enough of a military force to directly oppose the empire. The empire which was forced to spread out its military force by their continued presence on the Mundonovan continent; a situation that meant they could come to rival the empire in an instant.

“Lord Elgar, just when will that happen?”

“In ten days, in a Gembi city called Fresno. We will gather all those who waver, or seem like they might waver in their opposition of the empire. This may be an event that changes the course of history on this continent,” Elgar explained with a flitting tension to his expression.

He had been unable to stop his body from trembling when he had first heard the news from the Gembi messengers; he couldn't understand how the door to standing alongside every prince could be opened to one as young as he. He did, however, believe that he could handle it. He had strong companions, and believing in them, he had to move on without being crushed by the pressure.

“Irvan, also Noel. I'll have you two come with me. I would like to have your wisdom as a man from the continent, and I appoint Noel directly to the Gembi administration. By no means are you to forget, or sleep in.”

“May your will be done. This humble Irvan is greatly honoured to be allowed attendance and participation in a meeting that may yet leave its mark upon history.”

“Yes, sir, understood, sir.”

Noel's hollow response greatly contrasted Irvan's becoming overwhelmed with emotion.

“Noel, I want you to promise me with your own words that you won't oversleep on the day of departure. You have a bad habit of forgetting things you aren't interested in.”

“I... intend to put forth more effort than I have in the past.”

“Lord Elgar,” Cynthia stepped forward, “I will personally make sure to wake her up by force, so please entrust this task to your humble servant.”

Noel's blanked out expression cracked a tiny smile, and Elgar's sense of tension seemed to dissipate, leaving no trace of positive or negative mental strain.

“Seriously... well then, I'll have Cynthia join as a guard as well. Gentlemen, what comes next will be critical. I expect even more work from you from here on out!”

“Yes sir!”

Noel attempted to escape in a hurry after a salute, and had to contend with a strong blow from Cynthia. Elgar was unable to hold back his smile at the spectacle.

Translator's Note:

A salient is, in a military context, a bulge. It is the bit that sticks out into enemy territory and is therefore surrounded on three sides.

Chapter 42

A Red Birthday

Before the departure to the Gembi city of Fresno, Noel was seen off by Barbas and Riglette, though Riglette had been dragged out by Barbas, and subsequently forced into it. Unfortunately, the two were going to be house-sitting.

“So, what kind of souvenir would be good? There’s lots of rare stuff in Gemb, you know. Lots of tasty stuff, too!”

“Haha, I’m fine with anythin’. More than that, I want you to come back safe.”

“As for me, I’m fine with anything that isn’t pointless. Well, considering Madress fell in large part due to my efforts, can I safely expect a suitable reward?”

Riglette looked proud enough to ascend to the heavens. Barbas, on the other hand, bore an astronomically displeased expression.

“Ummm, okay, so dried fish should be about right? It’s good grilled, and it goes great with spirits. Ah, I’m drooling just thinking about it...”

Barbas nodded happily as Noel went to wipe her mouth, “Hehe, that’d be great. Ah, and this is only if you can, but I’ve been into that Gembi wine, so if you could... man... I got absorbed in it...”

He was miming what he’d do with his alcoholic reward

“Got it. I’ll buy the best one. Everyone did their best up till now after all.”

“Hmph, I’m not some cheap woman who could be lured in by food or drink. how foolish...”

Riglette tutted with a sour expression. Even though she said that, Noel had seen for herself how Riglette hadn’t left any food on her plate when they had visited Gemb. Riglette had even bought herself some souvenirs from Willa island. She tried to hide it, but it was still as clear as day. Incidentally, there was quite a difference between the

flavours of Gemb and Willa. While Gemb's was gentle, Willa's used many spices. While both were delicious, it seemed that Riglette had been taken in by the Gemb cuisine.

"Oh? Well, I guess Riglette gets nothing, then. Too bad!"

"Well... if you are going to insist, I'll oblige you by receiving it. It would be a waste to have any leftovers."

"So I should bring back about a thousand?"

"A-are you an idiot!? As if one person could eat all that!?"

"Ahaha, I never said it'd be all for you, Riglette. I'm going to bring some for the soldiers who fought so hard this time. For a commander, this is the time to splurge. Isn't that right, Staff Officer Riglette?"

Noel stabbed her finger at Riglette's nose, whose face turned completely red, before warding the finger off: a reaction as amusing as always. Thanks to her, the three years on the island hadn't been boring at all, and it would surely continue to be like that.

"Captain... I was worrying over whether or not to say this, but hasn't your personality gotten ever so slightly worse over the last three years?"

"Hmmm, you think so?"

"No doubt. My nose doesn't lead me wrong, and I can smell treachery. It's best if you wash that out real quick."

"Hmmm, might be like a certain someone. Who could it be, I wonder? I'm a little worried now..."

"Hehe, no need to worry!" Barbas joined in on Noel's playing dumb, "I'll find the cause for you while you're out, Captain!"

Riglette went back to Madress with a sharp tut.

"Well, jokes aside, please be really careful. Everyone will wait for you to return!"

"Have a nice trip, Captain!"

“Go get ’em Miss Fiend!”

“Yup, I’ll be off, then! I’m leaving Coimbra to you!”

Noel waved at those who were seeing her off, leapt onto her horse, and went to Elgar’s side.

The fortress city of Fresno was just a short ways east of the Gemb capital. It was a strong-point designed to serve as a shield for the capital in an emergency, and could survive a protracted siege as it was self sufficient to a degree. The city had been created by Siden who had learned from all the fortresses that had fallen in the previous large war in preparation for their coming day of independence.

Gemb had taken full control of Longstorm province in only a few days. Many of the people there were mostly culturally Gemb. Control was taken with relative ease as the Longstorm army had traitor after traitor, and they had been ordered to retreat to Horn. Siden had finally achieved the goal he had harboured since his inauguration as viceroy: the recapture of Gemb territory. The people of Gemb were elated with the victory, and the sounds of celebration resounded in every city and town, but Fresno alone maintained a sense of tension. Special guards formed a gate without openings, blocking the roads so that not even an insect could enter the Lord of the castle’s manor. Adding to the unusual situation were the endless patrols around the outside of the city. In reality, they had already captured several people who had seemed like imperial spies and they were being tortured thoroughly. On top of that was, naturally, the fact that it was the day when all the leaders who would waiver in their opposition to the empire were gathered. The meeting that would decide the rule of the continent, that historic moment, was about to begin. It would either become a permanent thorn in the side of the empire, or the place where everyone was captured at once. To prevent that, the Gemb officers had worked to instate such a strict guard, and were strengthening it still.

And so, the meeting of princes finally began. A round table was in the meeting room that was clad in a particularly heavy atmosphere. Beside each leader stood a staff officer with documents and plans, and each guard had his hand on his sword as he surveyed his surroundings. Every participant would present in turns: Siden represented Gemb with Haksek as his staff officer; Elgar, Noel, and Irvan represented the unified Coimbra with Cynthia as their guard; Giv and Karmbeeth had also supplied their viceroys and their close aides; and finally was Burns, who represented the Bahar Liberation Front. His highly sun-burnt skin was dark red, and he stood out the most.

This is bad. I've gotten sleeping... but if I get tired, I'll be in trouble. Why do all their stories have to be so long?

Even if it was obvious, it seemed to be the rule of the meeting that every single thing had to be confirmed. Siden advanced the proceedings, and though he was good at getting to the main point, the others were verbose so the meeting became rather prolonged. Noel could see the tension in Elgar was not insignificant by how his back was straight yet stiff in his chair beside her. Irvan seemed to already be used to such settings and occasionally offered an easy to understand explanation to Elgar. They seemed like master and apprentice.

They'd be mad if I went for a little walk, eh?

Noel got gradually more bored, and when she moved to give a large yawn, she received a punch from Cynthia to her back. As a guard, Cynthia had no chair. Noel had completely forgotten that a terrific demon was behind her, and she quickly straightened up and pretended to listen carefully. Thirty seconds was all it took to make her drowsy once more.

The meeting of princes had been convened on a number of matters, and it proceeded at a snail's pace in the face of pandemonium. Common among them all was animosity and hatred towards the empire. Not a single person in the room wished to drag things out, but they had to obstinately confirm that they would not be placed in a disadvantageous position in the future. Hence their taking much more time than needed. Even Siden wanted to wince, but he didn't show it on his face.

“Then, would it be acceptable for every province, no, every kingdom to form a unified front in solidarity and link our fates to form a Libelikan Commonwealth in opposition to our sworn enemy, the Horsheido Empire?”

Siden's question was met with a unified response from the other princes: “No objections!”

Gemb, Coimbra, and other provinces had declared independence and were now independent kingdoms. Commonwealth kingdoms would unconditionally provide mutual defence, creating a duty for all the member states to operate as one to defend whoever was attacked. In short: the establishment of the Commonwealth was a simultaneous declaration of war on Horsheido. Each kingdom would join the Libelikan Commonwealth, but their leadership would remain the same; the difference

being a title change from viceroy to king. The matter of utmost importance was that the meeting of princes had brought them to a unified opinion. If there was disagreement, it would be worked out by majority vote. What the kingdoms had not done before the unification of Horsheido was to consider operating as one.

Simply changing their titles didn't change anything, but there was a chance that a man being referred to as His Majesty would cause a sense of satisfaction. Proof lay in the fact that they hadn't simply dismissed the notion as mere foolishness. Gemb and Giv had a history of breaking out into wars over truly pointless trivialities, and neither was Coimbra entirely unrelated.

"Well then, we will use a red and white banner for our Commonwealth that represents the sun and the people. This way we can implement it right away without extra work. Are there any objections?"

"That should be fine. Lack of funds is rather common. As long as we can tell friend from foe, it should be fine for the moment."

"I see no problems either."

Elgar, nervous, was the last to give his assent, "N-neither do I."

The flag adopted by the Commonwealth was simple: vertically split between red and white. White symbolized the people, red symbolized the sun. It proclaimed that the sun did not shine for the emperor's whims, but on all people equally. While it sounded noble, the primary motivation had been cost reduction. Each kingdom had been funding their own efforts until recently, and the economy was hurting because of the war, and there was nothing left to devote to design.

"In regards to the continent, we shall send an ambassador to befriend the church of the star to inform us of the details there. According to Mr. Irvan, they aren't in a position with much leeway either. As we share a common foe, the talks may proceed favourably. It may even be acceptable to repatriate all those forced to come here."

Having heard Irvan's report on the continent, everyone had, for the moment, come to the same conclusion that friendship should be pursued. Even if things went well and peace with the empire was obtained, it would be bad if they were tied together. The Libelikan situation was to be clearly explained, and that they should fight together to strike at the violent empire. In the worst case scenario, the continental army would be

possessed by revenge and invade the commonwealth. Such a situation had to be avoided at all costs.

“The situation will be favourable in many ways if we can exhaust our foe by having Amil continue his expedition. It may be best for us to harry the imperial navy to gain the trust of the continental leaders. While menacing, the imperial navy is not unstoppable by any means.”

“I see. That’s a very good thought.”

“There may be many more things we could do, but it is our way in Karmbeeth to triumph with the least possible resistance.”

As the various leaders raised their opinions regarding the continent, several voices were raised as some had reached their limits with the slow progression of the meeting, “Pardon me!! I am terribly sorry, but I would appreciate it if we got to the main issue soon! May I be frank in stating that the flag and some other continent don’t matter!?”

“Please be calm, Sir Burns.”

Burns of the Bahar Liberation Front, struck the round table as he responded, “As if I could!?!? Even now, our Liberation Front is being fiercely attacked by the empire! I would like to request of these Commonwealth Kingdoms, military reinforcements! That is why I slipped away from the fighting to come here!”

Unable to bear his feelings of frustration about the leisurely progressing meeting, he even seemed about to burst into violence, but without that fiery fervency, he would have already been pushed into a corner in his fight with the numerically superior Baharan army. He had raised an army in western Bahar and occupied the city of Laldo because Bartheck’s death in battle provided a good opportunity. Most of Bahar had sworn loyalty to Amil, but there were still those who were dissatisfied. It had taken a considerable amount of time to gather all those dissidents and hide their swords and wait for an opportunity. Sometimes they had even abided by Amil’s tricks. The uprising had been able to gain total control in the land surrounding Laldo, but had not been able to take the capital city of Vesta. Enemy reinforcements had been unable to retake Laldo, but he had seen the Liberation Front’s influence and numbers whittled down before his very eyes. If they could not recover from this, they would be annihilated. Burns had wagered his fate on this meeting, making it only natural for him to be so desperate.

“I understand your desire to hurry, Sir Burns. I too hold the ideal of helping our brethren in the Commonwealth; however, I would please have you wait just a while longer for the matter of reinforcements. I would like our Giv to receive priority for Commonwealth assistance. We have been beyond our limits recently, so would it not be best to reinforce us to prevent the loss of territory?”

“What are you saying!? Will you abandon us!?”

“I am not suggesting that at all. Only that we be prioritised.”

“Giv is good at joking I see! Should not the historic Karmbeeth be the priority! We are the ones facing off against Falid’s Black Sun Cavalry! Do you understand just how much damage that will cause!?”

“That is absurd. Giv is dealing with soldiers under Falid. Don’t think that you are the only one struggling!”

“Who are you talking to, bastard!? You used to be our vassal! Don’t you know your place!?”

“At the moment, we are brothers in the Commonwealth. The past is the past and the present is the present, is that not so!?”

The kings of Giv and Karmbeeth glared at each other. Before their absorption into the empire, they had been suzerain and vassal. As a result, they had estranged themselves from each other, but their feelings for the empire that had forced them to hard labour and heavy taxes were the same. That was why they had put aside their differences and come to cooperate in Horn; however, neither of them had truly experienced the war. They had been unable to defeat the prepared and well guarded defences of their enemy. The empire even went so far as to assign one of their elites: Falid, the general of the army, and his black sun cavalry to combat them. After a significant loss on the open field, their armies routed, and now they were the ones being invaded.

The ones who had won victories in their unified uprising against the empire were Gemb and Coimbra. The others had fallen into a state of disarray. The purpose of this meeting of princes in the mind of each king was to sway the leadership and gain support from the others to draw out the conflict.

“Firstly, I’d ask that you all calm down. If we hate even our allies, it will lead to the empire’s victory. Have you forgotten that our current troubles are because our

predecessors once lost to the empire of the sun for that very reason!?”

With Siden’s roar, the room fell into silence.

Looking around at the situation, he drew in a new breath, and started again, “I, Siden, wish to fully understand all your difficulties, gentlemen. Before you see this as an opportunity, please remember your duty. Now then, this is something I mentioned much earlier, but I would like to consider someone to lead our unified Commonwealth army.”

“Sir Siden, do you really intend to create such a thing?”

The kings exchanged glances. He had certainly brought it up before, but nobody had considered it seriously. In the first place, the foundation of the Commonwealth had only been a dream at that point. Siden had likely been the only one to consider it, given he was the one who had organised the whole uprising; especially since Giv and Karmbeeth had their hands full, and Coimbra and the others like it had to regain control of their own countries.

“Of course. I have been seriously considering it. We are the ones tasked with forming a front line against the empire. We had to gather each kingdom’s elite.”

“Well... that is fine, but as I mentioned before, we do not have the capacity at the moment. The number of men we can send is extremely limited. In the first place, just who would be qualified to be entrusted with those troops?” the king of Giv questioned, “I cannot send a single soldier until that is answered.”

He seemed glad to send some troops of his own if he was helped first, but he would refuse if it was only a matter of sending men to help another kingdom. The same went for Karmbeeth and the Liberation Front. Elgar was the only other king who understood Siden’s line of reasoning, and had knitted his brows.

“That is only natural. I shall now explain everything. First, our Gemb, having not taken much damage, will constitute the main force, and I intend to work to establish a governor general. Furthermore, that governor general will be based out of Laldo and support Mr. Burns’ Liberation Front. I believe it to be highly important for us to establish western Bahar as its own kingdom.”

“W-wait, Sir Siden! Will you abandon your brethren and send troops away from lands we have yet to solidify our influence!? What are you thinking...”

“Listen to everything I have to say first!”

Siden pointed at the indignantly standing king of Giv, and who quietly sat down when he noticed a murderous glint in Siden’s eyes.

“I am well aware of the threat posed by the black sun cavalry. Knowing this, why would I focus strength on Bahar? Located in the centre of the continent, if we can pressure Bahar, the enemy will be forced to turn the black sun cavalry’s focus there. That much is assured.”

“Might you inform us as to why you are assured of that? We are the ones currently threatened, so if you have no evidence, we cannot consent.”

“If you think it over calmly, it is a very simple matter. Bahar is the home of the incumbent emperor Amil. His most dependable imperial troops were primarily drawn from Bahar. Even just looking at a map will reveal that on the off chance that Bahar falls, it will drive a wedge through the empire. It is, therefore, of the utmost strategic importance to the empire. In summary, if we can cut into them there, the pressure will surely ease on Giv and Karmbeeth alike.”

“I see...”

“Certainly... it’s as you said. I apologise for letting the blood rush to my head and not considering it.”

The king of Giv’s meek apology was immediately followed up by one from the king of Karmbeeth, “I too am unused to war, and so was unable to think so far ahead. Sir Siden, gentlemen, I sincerely apologise for raising my voice.”

“We are brothers in arms in our fight against the empire. Do not worry over such things.”

“Thank you for your consideration. Then, Sir Siden, to whom, exactly, do you intend to grant the position of governor general. We must appoint a man of great valour if he is to oppose Falid.”

All present held their breath as they surveyed the room. Whoever was the governor general would seize the initiative, and become the face of the Libelikan Commonwealth. Though he would lack total political control, it mirrored the emperor’s status in the empire. In reality, all of the leaders would jump at the

opportunity as was natural of one with ambition, but they kept their mouths shut, and nobody moved.

“I’ll ask just in case, but is there one among us like that? Of course, both bravery and valour are necessary. While the governor general will forfeit his vote at the federal assembly, he will be given a large responsibility.”

Seizing the initiative was worth much more than giving up the right to vote at a meeting decided by majority vote, but the one who did would not only become the face of the Commonwealth, but also its sword and shield. Then, he would immediately have to confront Falid, and be faced with what would certainly be a difficult fight. In the event of defeat, he would not only be forced to take full responsibility, but also lose his life. It was a post in the shadow of ruin, and would be far too harsh on the nerves.

Siden looked over the room to confirm, and spoke, “It appears there is none.”

Everyone had determined that Siden would take the position for himself. There wasn’t really a problem with it, considering that the majority of the soldiers sent would be Gemb. Above all, he had taken Longstorm in a short amount of time, and there were no objections to the political influence that had arranged everything up until that point. The rulers each had an expression of resignation. There was no discussion if victory wasn’t achieved.

“Then, while this is rather forward, I would like to express my opinion. I believe that the most suitable personage is one you all know, a valourous and exceedingly effective military leader who is most feared by Bahar.”

With his words, the room went abuzz with quiet voices asking, “It isn’t Siden?” and, “Is he going to entrust it to someone?”

“J-just who?”

“Present over there is Sir Noel Bosheit, who I believe is likely to be most suitable. Gemb recommends this woman.”

“Ha... hahaha, Sir Siden, enough with the jokes...”

“T-that’s right. You can’t just say anything like...”

The kings of Karmbeeth and Giv reflexively began to mock, but quickly shut their

mouths when they seriously considered her qualifications.

“While I am sure you are all well aware of why she is suitable for the task, I shall explain. Once appointed to her position as governor general, she will bear the brunt of the might of Bahar. She participated in the previous Coimbra-Baharan war and has experience fighting the black sun cavalry. Furthermore, she took to her feet and seized Evear in North Coimbra along with Madress in South Coimbra; not to mention her taking the head of Bartheck, viceroy and major general of Bahar. None can object to her bravery or leadership skill, or even popularity with the plebeians. I do not believe that there exists an individual of equal qualification alive today.

Complicated expressions flashed across the faces of all in the room. While she may have been valorous, they could not accept a mere knight and a commoner girl at that, to rise to equal status with themselves, but this was not the appropriate place to mention that.

“While... I understand your reasoning, Sir Siden, she is a woman. Can she really lead a large army?”

“That is irrelevant. Age or sex matters not. Important above all is getting results, and she has splendid achievements.”

“T-that is true, but...”

“Still, I do understand your hesitation. For this reason, let us despatch observers from each kingdom to monitor her.”

“Hm-hmmm... When you put it that way, I have no objections, but...”

“We in the Liberation front have no issues with this whatsoever. Rumors of Sir Noel the Fiend have spread to every corner of Bahar. Our enemies will certainly tremble with fear. She will be very reliable as reinforcement indeed.”

Mr Burns nodded strongly. He knew how fearsome the fiend was, having participated in the previous war and witnessing for himself how she fought.

“You have been quiet since earlier, but I would appreciate your input, Sir Elgar. Sir Noel is a retainer of Coimbra. If you don’t agree, we can’t force you to.”

Elgar was troubled, having figured out where it was going before Siden’s question had

even finished.

“W-well, I...”

His true desires strongly opposed it. If he could have, he wanted to shout his opposition in a loud voice. Why did Coimbra have to hand over its best officer? She was a Coimbran retainer without a doubt. Elgar wanted to have her work with him as a major general to get Coimbra back on its feet. Together, they would bring wealth to the kingdom, which Elgar thought was at least connected to happiness; however, he could see Siden’s point. If his brethren in the Commonwealth fell into ruin, the flames would eventually spread to Coimbra. There was a chance that it would only end in his going to meet his fate surrounded by enemies as his father had: the worst possible scenario.

What should I do? Is it correct to send Noel away now? She might not ever come back...

It wasn’t just for Coimbra’s sake that he wanted to keep her. Elgar was aware that his own feelings were well mixed in with his judgement. He also knew that those feelings were in vain. He already had a fiancée in Illum. Nothing was going to happen. Noel had already served him enough. She had retaken Coimbra for him as per her word. All that remained was their cooperation in the search for happiness: a task accomplishable if they both worked for the Commonwealth. That was it, he forced himself to consent to hold back the emotions boiling within him.

I’m clearly giving Noel special treatment. I know it, but I can’t stop. It’s impossible.

Elgar knew that his appointing Noel to her high status had sent ripples through his retainer base. Perius had been policing the situation and gently hammering the issues down. Nothing had happened so far due to the strict enforcement, but Elgar knew it would continue to occur. If he crossed the line, the scales would tip. If that occurred, he had a premonition that it would cause Noel unhappiness. That was why Elgar forced himself to consent. He had to decide to give up a treasure that should never be sold, a treasure that he absolutely wanted to keep, and entrust her to the Commonwealth. He knew that he would regret it enough to want to die.

“Noel...”

“Sir.”

He spoke softly to Noel as she drowsily rubbed her eyes.

Aside from some red in her eyes, Noel's expression was the same as always. Elgar's own emotions were about to overflow, but he desperately held them in. He was the ruler of Coimbra. He had to cast aside his personal desires. He had to survive and work for the sake of the people.

"If it is you, I believe this task can be brilliantly accomplished, what do you think?"

"But... what'll happen to the promise I made to serve you, young master?"

"Serving the Commonwealth will serve Coimbra, and thereby me as well. We are people of the Libelikan Commonwealth after all. Even if you are the governor general, it won't change that."

"Yeah, but..."

Elgar forcefully cut her off, "You have served Coimbra enough: once under my dead father, twice under me. If you still want to achieve happiness, I think you should take up this grand post."

She gave a small nod.

"Okay, I get it. Then I'll accept the position of governor general."

Her casual response had Elgar finding himself smiling. She really didn't feel any tension. It made him feel like a fool to have been so worked up. She wouldn't change no matter what status she rose to, and it made him a little bit jealous.

"Please wait, one small moment, Sir Noel. I would like you to promise us before you accept the position. Promise that you will work for the sake of the Libelikan Commonwealth, and for the sake of its people. I would like you to protect the plebeians as though they were your companions."

"Okay, I understand."

Noel nodded, but Siden didn't accept it. He had already seen through her equivocations. She would always keep her promises, but when she didn't want to, or didn't care, she would casually spout, "yeah, I understand." Kai had looked into it, and it seemed to mean that she understood what was being said, but didn't care to do anything about it. Essentially, her statement meant: I heard you.

Knowing that, Siden asked once more with a bit of a headache, “That is not enough. I would like to request a clearly stated promise. This is a highly important matter, and we cannot afford to equivocate.”

“Sir Siden, is there really a need to go so far?”

“No, this needs to be done. It is an important ritual for her. I would like to drive home the point and prevent any future troubles from cropping up.”

Siden wanted to make very sure of what was going to happen, having experienced many painful memories in his previous interactions with Noel.

Noel made her announcement reluctantly after about three minutes of agonizing over it: “I will, while acting in my position as governor general, work for the sake of the people of the Commonwealth; again, I promise to strive to protect them.”

Noel had given her promise in an extreme monotone whilst holding up one hand. Hearing that, all present began to feel incredibly uneasy, but there was nothing to be done about it. If Siden wanted to regain control of the situation, he would have to cause that feeling to abate.

And so, having taken half of a day, the Fresno meeting of princes came to a close.

A grand proclamation was made on the bulletin boards of the kingdoms of the Commonwealth: “The four kingdoms announce a brave alliance, a union of fates, the establishment of the Libelikan Commonwealth. We, the Commonwealth, declare war on the empire that has ruined the continent in self interest. Furthermore, we announce the establishment of a governor general to lead the front against the empire. Noel Bosheit has assumed the office of First Governor General of the Commonwealth Army.”

News rapidly reached the provinces of the empire, along with emperor Amil himself. The Libelikan Commonwealth had been formed, and it declared war on the Horsheido Empire, but the most discussed news was the appointment of a girl of common origin, Noel Bosheit, to the position as first governor general of the commonwealth army. Commonwealth citizens hailed with celebration the birth of a hero of common birth, and the citizens of the empire remembered the dread of the fiend which had come back to haunt them.

Noel herself was in a good mood because she got to wear the cloak and armour Siden

had prepared for the governor general. The armour was the red of the commonwealth, and her white cloak bore her twin hammer crest. Adorned with countless fripperies, the armour appeared rather dashing. Noel was glad to witness the birth of another treasure. With that energy, she ran atop the ramparts, and accepted the adoration and celebration of the people of Fresno with raised hands.

“I’m the Libelikan Commonwealth’s governor general, eh? Isn’t that super high class? So, is it better to be a commander-in-chief or a governor general?”

She didn’t have a fief, but it was still great status. If she failed somehow, it seemed like her position would be stripped with haste, but it would be fine if she worked hard to ensure that didn’t happen. Noel thought positively about it.

“Y-you’re... the First Governor General of the Commonwealth Army... am I dreaming?”

“Want to confirm it, then?”

Noel closed her fist with a smile, and Cynthia quickly rejected it. It probably wasn’t serious, but there was the possibility that it was revenge for all the previous blows she had received.

“Nono, it’s fine. I’m just a little overwhelmed. Mn, I’m fine.”

“I bet everyone’ll be surprised. I can’t wait to go back!”

“Is this... really okay?”

“It’ll probably be fine. Look at the sky, see. What a gorgeous sunset!”

Noel pointed at the view. The bright red sun was lowering behind distant mountains, but Cynthia’s gaze was captured by something else: Noel’s face as she gazed coldly at the setting sun. She had one leg up triumphantly on the rampart, and her hand heroically on her hip, but she seemed a different person than usual. Her full body was bathed in red, her glowing hair billowed like a flame in the wind, and she almost appeared to be a hero from a fairy tale.

Chapter 43

Invitation to Military Rule

Noel temporarily returned to Madress. The castle already flew both the reunified Coimbran red circle and scale, alongside the recently founded Libelikan Commonwealth banner. Thereafter, Coimbra would aim to rebuild as a member of the Commonwealth. Of course, they had to prepare for a counter attack from the empire. The road ahead remained long. Greeting Noel were the people of Madress and the soldiers of Coimbra, all of whom were lined along the streets to see their new king Elgar and the rumored new governor general. In front of them all was Barbas, with a proud expression, bearing a medal on his chest with poor calligraphy that read: Governor General's #1 Subordinate. It wasn't a handmade medal from Noel, but one he had seemingly made on his own.

"Captain, no, Governor General Noel! Welcome back! You know, I was so shocked when I heard the news, I thought I'd throw out my hip!"

"Thanks. Oh, and I brought back souvenirs, so be sure to share it with everyone. There's wine, of course."

"Hehe, thank you very much! Listen up you rascals, this here's the work of her excellency, the governor general! Take it gratefully!"

"Thank you, Governor General Noel!"

"Long live the Governor General!"

"Long live Miss Fiend!"

The Willa garrison seemed like they were always going to call her Miss Fiend. As it seemed like a term of endearment, Noel thought it fine to let them do as they pleased.

"Well then, I'll see you later!"

"We'll be waiting in the grand dining hall! We'll feast till tomorrow mornin'!"

After she was seen off by Barbas and the plebeians had all scattered, Noel received words of gratitude from countless important-looking people, and gave out countless handshakes before she finally made it to the castle. At some point, even Cynthia, who had been following her, seemed to look worn out.

“Ah... I’m really wiped out!”

“Mnh, I feel the same. I know everyone has their expectations, but it really is tiring.”

“The feast is starting, what’re you going to do, Cynthia?”

“I think I’ll show up after getting my reports in order. I also want to thank the soldiers who have been fighting for us.”

“I see. Then, I’ll see you then!”

“Okay, then... I mean, understood, Governor General Noel, your honour.”

Cynthia’s praise had Noel deeply disturbed and it showed on her face.

“It’s fine to be like usual. It’s kind of... really disturbing.”

“But...”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. If you overdo it you’ll get more wrinkles and gray hair.”

For an instant, Cynthia was glaring at her fiercely, but she gave a small nod. Recently, it seemed that Riglette had rubbed off on her, and she said things that would anger people more often. Noel admonished herself for going too far with the comment about wrinkles. Wrinkles were too far.

“Well, if you say so. The truth is, I’ve received my orders for the campaign. Basically, I’ll be continuing your training.”

“That’s harsh.”

“Don’t you say that. I’ll have you learn the correct etiquette and manners of speech for a governor general. Naturally, you can’t neglect actual military affairs.”

“Ech...”

“Psh, what a pathetic sound for a governor general.”

After Noel had been appointed to her post, limits on the power of the governor general had been decided. It wasn't as simple as giving her total control of the military with no interference. She had to gain permission from the council before undertaking any military action outside of emergencies, and she would immediately have to step down if the council ever determined her unfit for her role as governor general. In the event of her stepping down, she would be temporarily confined. On top of that, the governor general was assigned a great many advisors and observers. Each kingdom had sent several men to report in detail her every move. Much authority was given to the observers. They had the right to invoke a motion to dismiss her if she undertook inappropriate action, and dismiss her with a majority vote.

Incidentally, Noel herself had the same right, having secretly snuck it into the paperwork with the intention of invoking a motion to dismiss herself if she ever got tired of her role, or if it became too troublesome. The reason why she had resorted to such methods was because Siden had glared at her with incredibly terrifying eyes when she had casually asked him what to do if she wanted to resign. Siden would subtly harass her if she made him angry, so she had to be careful. Her meal size would decrease, or her snacks would go missing, or she'd have mountains of dull work. Noel had become the governor general, so she couldn't just run this time. It was a truly hazardous situation.

After another round of congratulations from the officers and civil officials, Noel turned to leisurely stroll to the barracks. Her current outfit was a military uniform that Gemb had prepared for her and it made a point of being red. A garment of red made her stand out rather blatantly, but it had a big medal on it, was bright like the sun, and cut a dashing figure on her. She had become a redhead in red clothes, but wasn't particularly dissatisfied. Her hair was tied back and she had Cynthia's seal of approval for attending any ceremony while so attired. Confirmation was found in the splendid military figure Noel saw reflected in the mirror. She looked like a different person, so Noel had tried giving a sloppy grin and it really was her in there after all. The others were all nodding around her so there was no mistake. People were such that they could change painlessly with just status and clothes.

I want to be proper like a real governor general, but it's a pain to always make a face, Noel thought as she walked, yawning, and with wine in one hand.

She spotted Riglette leaning against a wall with her usual military police uniform and

her aura that clearly didn't want anybody coming too close. As soon as she spotted Noel, she straightened up, fixed her glasses, and gave a salute.

"Welcome back, Governor General Noel, your honour!"

"Yes, good work. How was the castle in my absence?"

"No problems at all, sir!"

"I see, how splendid. You've fulfilled your duty well, so you may retire for the day!"

Noel saluted, and was going to continue on her way as she was, but she unexpectedly found her uniform caught behind her. She thought it would have been funny to leave things as they were, but it looked like that wasn't going to happen after all.

"Just wait a minute! There is a reason that I came all this way to stand there alone, waiting for you. Just how long do you intend to keep me waiting, you idiot!?"

"Your saying that doesn't change the fact that I didn't know."

"I'm not saying anything!"

"You're really getting things mixed up now."

Noel unintentionally smirked and Riglette grabbed her by the lapels, grinding her teeth. Noel didn't expect to be attacked, but she readied herself a bit just in case. If her counterattack didn't go well, Riglette would be seriously injured.

"In the first place, why did you of all people suddenly become the governor general!?!? That's unreasonable!! I really, truly cannot comprehend it!"

Riglette was stamping and tutting as if she had lost her mind. Noel thought it looked like it would be a pain, but she was already caught.

"I heard it a few days ago. So now you've skipped becoming a major general in Coimbra, and gone straight to being the first governor general of the Libelikan Commonwealth? 'The birth of a great hero to fight the evil empire!' Aaaah, damn, damn, damn!! I can't accept this!!"

"Uh, why're you angry? Did I do something wrong?"

Finally having freed her lapels, Noel went to gently pat Riglette's shoulder and was strongly shaken off.

"Shut up! I'm just jealous!"

"Oh."

"Why is it only you that gets good things!? What's the difference between you and me!? Is it inborn talent? Shit, or will you say it's the will of god or something!? Shit! Fuck!"

"Uh, would you like to swap places? If I talk to Siden, I might be able to work something out."

But probably not.

"You retard! As if that would work!? Try thinking a bit more before you speak you ginger! Or are you trying to make me angry on purpose!? Aaaaaah, it's infuriating!"

As Riglette was going on about not being able to take it anymore, her glasses fell off. Surprisingly, her skin was healthy and void of blemishes or wrinkles.

"Um, so what should I do? It'd be weird to apologise."

Riglette put on a mask of calm after a deep breath; the corners of her mouth were still twitching, though.

"Of course. This is just an outburst of anger from a foolish woman. I feel refreshed now that I've vented at the great Miss hero... I'm very sorry. I shall be calm now."

"Yup, okay, here. Thankfully, it looks like they didn't break."

Noel picked up the glasses and passed her them. Riglette accepted as if nothing had happened.

"In reality, it isn't as if I have no positive reaction to it. You are, tentatively, an acquaintance of mine. I never thought that somebody I knew would become the grand hero and face of the Commonwealth. As a woman myself, I am slightly proud of you. Only slightly, though."

The look in her eyes was obviously malicious, which surprised Noel a little.

“Ahaha, you’re nice and docile today, eh? If you were always like this, I think you’d have more friends, though.”

“It’s only for today. Tomorrow I will return to being a glasses adjusting wily woman. More importantly, I have something important to discuss. Would you come over here a little?”

After Riglette carefully checked their surroundings, she took Noel by the arm and began to walk, taking her in that way to what appeared to be a room used for servants.

She turned with a question, her eyes filled with determination and resignation in an expression hitherto for unmatched in its gravity, “I apologise for my sudden rudeness, but this cannot be overheard. Again, it cannot be overheard.”

“That’s fine and all, but what do you want in such an unpopular spot?”

“I’m here to ask your true intentions.”

“My true intentions?”

“That’s right. You have been elected governor general by the kings who have recognised your bravery and meritorious deeds, and have become the face of the Commonwealth. It cannot be described as anything but a grand exploit.”

“Yeah, that might be true.”

Noel was essentially of the same opinion. She didn’t mean to be conceited, but it was probably something that she could be proud of. There probably hadn’t been a plebeian in all of history that had been so impactful and had risen so high. Naturally, Noel knew well why she had been entrusted with her position: the kings wanted the support of the plebeians. It was also favourable that her support was from Elgar. Siden had decided that he wasn’t planning on using Noel for any plots. Furthermore, she was disposable if she failed. If she lost a decisive battle with the empire, she would probably be replaced. It was easy to push the blame onto her as she held no fief. While it would cost the Commonwealth some momentum, it would do minimal damage to the influence of each individual king. In that case, they would probably create a new hero to appoint as governor general. Noel had accepted her position knowing all that as she had wanted to become a big shot.

“You’ve settled into a place where you can grandly oppose each king despite being a

commoner, moreso, a woman. This is very nearly a miracle. You will probably be given command of fifty thousand of the choice troops from each kingdom.”

“Yup.”

“That’s enough military force for an entire kingdom. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

Riglette drew her face in close, and though Noel could meet her gaze, she couldn’t respond.

“ ... ”

“If you conduct yourself well hereafter, you may become the ruler of the continent. Military prowess, leadership ability, good luck; I believe you have all of these things. Even if you don’t want to talk about it, you must have noticed. You may be an idiot, but I saw earlier how you can get things done.”

“ ... ”

Noel had nothing to say in response. It wasn’t just a delicate subject, the topic was completely hazardous. At the very least, it wasn’t something that even a close aide could say.

“You’re oddly skilled at gaining the soldiers’ trust... and the man who once conquered the continent, the sun emperor Bergis was the same. The charisma that draws people in regardless of background. It is said of his soldiers that they advanced on and on without fear of death. Bergis used that power to conquer the entire continent. It might be possible for you.”

“ ... ”

Noel checked her surroundings. Thankfully, nobody was around. If somebody heard it, he would have to be silenced for Riglette’s sake.

“If you wanted, you could doubtlessly win over Elgar’s Coimbra. Look at the state of things: if you raised a third power, it would rival anything on the continent. I’ll ask this just once: do you intend to use the empire and the commonwealth as stepping stones to continental conquest? If that is the case, I have made my resolve to work to that end from here on out.”

“Can you... wait a little?”

Riglette’s face was dead serious, so Noel gave her response due diligence. To speak of ambition: Noel had none at all, but she had wanted to become important. Hence becoming the governor general. The logical conclusion of aiming for status would be the ruler of the continent; it was obviously the summit, and nothing was above it. If there was, it would be an expedition like Amil’s, but Noel did not have any interest in that.

Hmmmmm, a third force, eh? Would it really go well?

If Noel had to say whether or not she could do it, the only thing she could say is that it would be difficult, but rationally thinking it over would probably grant her about a twenty percent chance of it. Firstly, the empire would have to be defeated, and the third power would have to rise out of that confusion. There was also the possibility of assassinating Siden and usurping the throne of Gemb via a puppet. If the special quality that Riglette saw in her was the real thing, there was an even higher chance that it would work.

If I just play around I won’t have to worry about it at all, though.

She would probably have gladly accepted the challenge in a board-game for practice. The confusion would be amusing. This, however, was no game. Many of Noel’s friends and companions would die. Siden had a rotten disposition, but aside from that, he wasn’t too bad. The other kings had seemed pompous enough to die, but when she actually talked to them, they turned out to be perfectly interesting people. Riglette’s proposal lead down a bloody road. Noel had to consider things not just for her own amusement, but with the gravity of one who is responsible for the lives of others. At any rate, there was no mistaking that it would be a painful road to take. How long would the fighting persist? Elgar and Coimbra had a high chance of going along with her just like Riglette had said, but Siden and Kai and the others were a different issue. Many soldiers would return to their homelands, and above all, those who accompanied her would die in droves. Noel wouldn’t be happy even if people went gladly to their deaths over a dubious special quality. Noel did not want that. She did not want her playful, boisterous companions to die off. Noel wondered if she would really be happy in a seat of glory after crossing a mountain of corpses to get there.

It’d probably be empty. That’s how it feels.

She had no basis for assuming that, but it was still what she thought. It could be more or less gathered by looking at the various emperors of history. For them, happiness had to be sought, starting from the position of ruling the continent. Humanity would never be satisfied with merely maintaining the status quo. That was exactly why the incumbent emperor Amil had enacted his reckless expedition to the other continent in pursuit of his own happiness. Emperor Befnam had sought out his dream by using his own subjects as experiments to further humanity to its next stage. Noel wondered if it was truly happiness if it sowed thorns among allies and enemies alike; no, it most likely wasn't. Surely, such a thing would wrap one in an indescribable sense of irritation. She did not want to be like that; like those who had died in that shitty place. Noel would hate it if she only increased their numbers. Even as she thought of those things, she wondered if she would change if she rose to the top. She did not want to change. Noel was fine as she was.

"I... don't intend to rise any higher, you know. I don't want to become the ruler of the continent."

"Why not!?"

"Simple: I'd lose more than I'd gain. And don't mention this again."

Noel put a finger to her lips and strongly insisted that the conversation would never leave that place.

"..."

"I think that being a governor general is grand enough. I mean, this uniform is super cool. Everyone also calls me 'your excellency' you know. Ahaha, It's really amazing, isn't it?"

Noel stood as she quickly rattled off her reasons, and after breathing a deep sigh, Riglette tutted and her face returned to its usual, suspicious expression.

"What's with that? It makes me look like an idiot for coming up with so many plans. Even though I'd prepared all kinds of steps for you to gain military control. Did you know that I've been mostly sleepless recently over this? Damn, was all that just a waste of time?"

"Ahaha, well I guess you'd better burn those plans and forget them right away. Nothing good will come of any lingering attachments to them!"

“Even if you don’t tell me to, I’ll just drink enough to die and my mind goes blank. Ahhhhh, how stupid. Even though the summit was right there...”

“I don’t even think that standing at the summit with a load of territory would even be a good thing. You’d have to think up all sorts of things, and above all, it’d be so huge, you’d never be able to clean it well!”

“Kingdoms and houses are totally different, you ginger! Ahhh, that’s enough. I’m going to eat and drink and not leave my bed for the rest of the day. I’ll forget it all!”

Riglette snatched the wine out of Noel’s hand and began to gulp it down straight out of the bottle, spilling it all over her uniform.

“Then, let’s hurry and return to the barracks since I think that wine might stain. I’m sure that it’ll get lively.”

“Okay, okay. I shall gladly accompany you, Governor General Noel, your excellency.”

“Good. Then, shall we go, Staff officer Riglette.”

Riglette tutted irritably at Noel’s jest. Unfortunately, the tut wasn’t particularly clean that time.

When they arrived at the barracks, the festivities had already begun. Everyone was drinking happily and discussing the future of the commonwealth with rosy cheeks. Only now did it truly feel as though they were finished with the grueling task of liberating Coimbra. When the men noticed Noel’s arrival, they greeted her with applause, and to get things rolling again, a man began a marching song as a toast.

“Listen up ya bastards! I will sing our Governor General Noel, her excellency, a marching song as a toast! Listen gratefully! I’ll fuckin’ send ye flyin’ if yer too annoyin’!”

“Ain’t you the most annoyin’ one here, pops!?”

“I can’t see the governor general, so fuckin’ move ya dirty bastard!”

Barbas raised a bottle of wine, ignoring the boos and jeers, “Shut up! It’s fine if it’s me you retards! Hey, you, the treacherous woman over there, hurry up and sit down!”

“Tsk, you’re as annoying as ever you white haired monkey! I can sit without you telling

me to! Out of my way, you nuisance!”

“Ha? Who do you think you are, coming so late!?”

“What was that?”

After the White Ant Bloc had it out with Riglette for a while, the room finally went quiet.

“Ummmm, I’m the one who just recently became the first governor general of the Commonwealth: Noel Bosheit.”

Great cheers erupted when Noel gave her greeting as she stood before them, the sight of which caused Noel to quietly smile.

“Thank you for celebrating with me. I’m incredibly happy that I’ve been able to have so many companions.”

“Congratulations, Captain!”

As they cheered, Noel decided to speak mostly seriously. There was a chance that such an opportunity would never come again, so she would tell them what she needed to say.

“This is really important, so I want you all to listen carefully... once the preparations are complete, I will be established as governor general in western Bahar where I will be the front line in the fight against the empire. I will once more have to fight the most elite unit of the imperial army: the black sun cavalry. Not only that, but I must engage in a prolonged fight against many enemies as per my duties as the governor general.”

The soldiers listened quietly to Noel’s words, and the various voices died out in the hall.

“I fully intend to fight as hard as I can. I promised that when I became the governor general, but I can’t win all by myself. I’ve learned that there’s a limit to how much a single person can do,” after a brief pause, Noel continued, “but if we’re all together, no matter the enemy, I think we’ll be able to fight to the end. That’s why I would like you all to please fight to the end. Of course, if you think it is impossible, you don’t have to come. This is a war, so there will be many casualties. I don’t want you to come because of my orders, but because of your own thoughts. This isn’t just a celebration, but also

a farewell party.”

Barbas immediately stood when Noel finished speaking, “I’m going with you, Captain! No matter where, and no matter the enemy! You lot, though, you don’t have any obligation. Just like in the mines, use your own heads to think it out! I’ll fuckin’ kick the shit outa you if you complain after you’ve decided!!”

“We’re gon’ fight with miss fiend right till the end. We’ll follow wherever you go.”

“M-me too! I don’t quit halfway! I’ll protect my land with my own hands!”

The White Ant Bloc, the garrison from Willa island, and even Mirut stood up. One after the other, every they rose to their feet. Riglette, Cynthia, and Elgar had joined in at some point, too. Most likely, there were many of them who had been merely caught up in the momentum. That was just how morale worked, but Noel was still glad. She had asked them to follow her, and they had answered with their feet. That made her think that it was okay.

“I see. You can’t be helped, can you? Even though I said that many would die... even though I said that you can leave...”

“Hehe, are you really goin’ to say that, Captain? You’re always headin’ off to the front.”

Noel scratched her nose to hide her embarrassment at Barbas’ words.

“It’s cause I’m impatient.”

“Then hurry up and strike a toast. Whew, my throat’s dry and I can’t wait any more.”

Barbas poured wine into a glass.

“Yup, got it. Are you ready everyone?”

“Whenever you are!”

“Okay, then, here’s a toast to everyone here, a toast to our companions in the Commonwealth!!”

“Cheers to her excellency, Governor General Noel! Long live the Commonwealth!”

At the signal for the toast, the hall erupted in a greater uproar than it was in before. Elgar was crushed in a throng of drunk female soldiers, and Cynthia hurriedly pulled him out. Barbas was angrily throwing wine bottles at Riglette. Mirut and Cal were slowly sipping away at their wine amidst the merriment. Leue and Perius were quietly tucked away in the corners. At some point, the father daughter pair of Irvan and Illum had arrived along with the adherents, and they were performing some strange congratulatory ritual while drinking with the rest. The rest of Madress was likely the same.

People from all over are all together in a lively gathering. If the whole world was like this, I bet it'd be more fun.

That was, if the barriers of social status, race, nation, and religion could be scaled. It would be highly difficult, but Noel could see it playing out before her very eyes. It was possible at the very least. With that in mind, Noel felt better, and dove into the circle of soldiers.

Chapter 44

Two Suns

Once Noel had completed her preparations for departure, she went to give her parting words to Elgar. While it wasn't an eternal parting, they probably wouldn't be able to meet as often. She had fulfilled her promise to him, but all it had done was change to one of their both serving the Commonwealth, and their friendship had not changed at all.

"See you, young master. Take care of yourself."

"You too, Noel. I pray you fight well. Contact me right away if something happens. It doesn't matter where you are, I'll come running to help you."

"Ahaha, that's my job. I'll definitely make it to your wedding, so make sure to invite me, okay?"

"Illum... said she also wanted to talk with you. Seems like she wants to hear stories from the army."

"Do you think we could become friends one day? We haven't met yet, so I'm curious."

"She's rather docile, but if you can get close to Riglette, you shouldn't have a problem with it. As for the wedding... do come."

Elgar had briefly looked as though he had something he wanted to say, but his expression quickly returned to normal; one of earnest concern and thought for the people and kingdom. He was wrinkling his brow, truly the most appropriate expression for a troubled young man.

"I've wanted to say this for a while, but if you keep making that face, happiness is going to run away, you know."

"I'm still a novice. If I don't do this, nobody will follow me."

"You'll find the composure sooner or later. That's how it was for me, so I'm sure you'll

be fine.”

“Yeah, I guess so. I’ll work hard so that happens.”

Finally, Noel told him what had been bothering her, “Um, this is about censugrass, but I’ve been looking into it for a while, and I think it’s best if something is done about it. If it is left alone too long, its roots will grow deep. As long as it is used correctly, I think it could become a powerful medicine, though.”

Noel knew a little about medicines with horrible effects.

“Yeah...”

“If that’s just not possible, I think it’d be best to just burn it all.”

“I know that much; how dangerous it is. Perius gave the same advice, but restricting it with the law would be difficult, and we can’t afford to get rid of it.”

“If you ever want to be rid of it, don’t forget to call me because I’ll help you out.”

“Haha, I bet that’d be difficult for you as the governor general. Thanks for worrying about me, though. I’m glad.”

“It’s no big deal. We are friends after all.”

Noel patted Elgar on the head, and he gave a tired sigh as he nodded with a face that looked as if he was holding back tears. Noel would have given the children from Willa island some candies to make them happy, but unfortunately, she didn’t have any on her at the moment, so all she could do was pat him. With no clue what to do in a situation like that, Noel had many things she still had to study.

The office of the governor general, headed by Noel, departed from Madress and arrived in the western Baharan city of Laldo. Having been assailed by the aggressive Baharan military, they suddenly struck a firm blow against their confidant foe. Many were cut down as they retreated, and thus, they successfully drove out the enemy from the land around Toldo; a brilliant result for the first campaign of the office of the governor general.

“Any more than this and everyone will show up, so it’d be pointless if everything were undone.”

Noel thought that she shouldn't dive too deeply into enemy territory aside from capturing Toldo. While Toldo itself was a highly strategic point, going any farther would lead to the capital city of Vesta which not only had the majority of the enemy forces, but they were also aiming to quickly retake Toldo. The better decision was to avoid a pointless battle and to strengthen the defences around Laldo to wait for the reinforcements from the various kingdoms of the Commonwealth. The governor general would target Vesta once the forces had been augmented. Above all, what stood before Noel was most likely the black sun cavalry. She couldn't let them survive; if they did, many of her companions would die, and so she had to destroy them right there in Bahar. Noel predicted that the deciding battle would be fought on the plain between Toldo and Laldo, the plains of Altvear.

On the other hand, the Horsheido empire was also massing troops in Vesta. Falid had been redirected from the retaking of Laldo to chase down an advanced party. Noel was focused on gathering as many soldiers and supplies as she could from the surrounding land while she fortified Toldo. There was a sense that the next battle was soon approaching. The enemy aimed for the same Altvear plains as Noel. The gently rolling grassy knolls were a suitable place to array a vast army, but more than that, the elite black sun cavalry could be used to its greatest effect. Mid autumn would probably herald the battle once the harvest was done. Emperor Amil had not recognised the formation of the Commonwealth and had begun to prepare troops to quickly subjugate them. Furthermore, it was announced that those traitors who called themselves a commonwealth were to be executed regardless of status, and this resulted in the viceroys of the provinces immediately attacking the commonwealth as a show of loyalty to the empire. The time of the decisive battle between the Horsheido Empire and the Libelikan Commonwealth drew nigh on the vitally important central plains of Bahar.

Noel gathered her companions to plan the decisive battle in the office of the governor general in Laldo. Those who had the honour of participating were Barbas, Rigarette, and Noel's direct subordinates; Cynthia, Kai, and the observers from each kingdom; the officers despatched from Giv and Karmbeeth; and the various soldiers like Mirut and Cal who were charged with conveying orders.

"We've really gathered, eh? The city's almost full up isn't it?"

"That's right. Those who don't fit are camping outside. Thankfully we have the provisions for it so there aren't any problems, but we cannot remain this way forever."

Noel nodded at Cynthia's words.

"Once the war is over, we'll have the soldiers work the fields. Those who don't work don't eat. That was a Gembu saying, right?"

"That is correct. You did well to remember it."

"It's a good saying. Should we make it the motto of the governor general?"

"Your excellency, please stop that. It would anger the kings."

"Ahaha, I get it, you don't have to look like you're going to cry."

With what was known as colonialism, they were able to train their main forces as well as gain basic supplies, all good things; however, it was necessary to gain the approval of the people as they would be borrowing their inheritance, their land, for quite some time. Burns had obtained a kind of permission, but that would only be of use if they won. Even knowing that, Noel had to lay the groundwork. More important than talking about it after the fact, was to comprehend events before they occurred. That was how Irvan had put it simply in his advice on how to stand at the top. It seemed as if he had been through a lot himself, and he sighed when Noel consoled him with a pat on the shoulder. If Riglette was the master of tuts, Irvan was the master of sighs. Noel was sure that she needed to hear his secrets on it.

"Now then, do we know the status of the empire? Have we sent out our spies?"

"We have, and they have about 100 000 men. It may exceed 150 000 if they forcefully conscript."

"We have 50 000 of the office of the governor general, 10 000 of unified Coimbra, 20 000 of Gembu, and 10 000 of the Bahar liberation front. Giv and Karmbeeth are presently fighting their own battles, so it seems unlikely for us to receive any more reinforcements. In short, the Commonwealth army must fight with 90 000 men. We have a numerical disadvantage."

The room was full of serious expressions as Cynthia read the reports. Noel held up her hand to let them know it was all right.

"It isn't something to worry about. What's important is how the battle goes at the front line. It isn't like everybody can all fight at once. When the tides of battle turn, no matter

how many men are in the back, they can quickly fall into a rout. Well, we're in the same position, though."

"Hmm, might you have a plan Governor General Noel? I would be honoured to hear it if you please. I must fulfill my duty as an observer."

"Ahaha, I don't have anything convenient."

Sighs resounded in the room. Cynthia and the rest shook their heads and rubbed their temples. It was pretty harsh treatment from people without any good ideas of their own, but Noel had resigned herself to such a fate as the governor general.

"I'll properly explain. Okay... well I don't think it'll be easy to move such a big army until the next battle. We're all doing our best and training hard, but we won't win with just that. If we fail to move well, or attempt a fancy maneuver, we'll open a chink in our armour. The black sun cavalry won't be so kind as to ignore that kind of a thing, so I think it is best to attack them head on."

"I see. While it is true..."

"The most important thing is knowing where to strike, right? If the enemy lays out a trap, we need to be sure not to get caught up in it; though that's pretty obvious."

Voices of acceptance could be heard around the room, and Noel didn't think they had any particular objections. The battle would probably be in one or two months. Noel had decided to get everything done that she could before then. Obviously, they had to be wary of their enemy's movements. Cavalry was highly mobile, so it would be hardly surprising if they tried something. The worst case scenario would be them driving back her allies just as a large enemy offensive began. A decisive victory wouldn't then be obtainable. While Noel fully intended to make use of small-scale ambushes and sabotage, it wasn't going to have an impact on a major battle. A direct confrontation with 100 000 enemy men was completely different from everything she had done so far. While Noel had never experienced it before, but she had an idea: that kind of battle was decided by morale. A large number of soldiers made up the backbone of the army and if they were pushed too far, they would rout, causing a chain reaction that would spread through the army like an avalanche. Even without taking much damage, a routing army was impossible to rally.

"That said, we need to do what we can. Barbas!"

“Yes sir!”

“Have the White Ant Bloc practice on horseback. I don’t care if it’s just for show. Learn how to get away as quickly as possible, so don’t worry about it being surface level. I’ll have the cavalry assist you.”

“That’s fine, but we can’t fight the black sun cavalry just by getting on horses.”

Said Noel, “Ahaha, I won’t have you do anything pointless like that, so don’t worry. I’m only going to have you ride out and come right back. Let’s say I’ll have you be mounted grenadiers in a way that only you can be.”

Even that much would be difficult, but they were the only ones that could function as grenadiers with the combustion stones. No amount of practice would be too much, and Noel wanted to rely on their experience.

“Hehe, understood! Leave everything to me! We’ll stick it to those fools!”

Noel nodded, apparently satisfied with Barbas’ entused response.

“Thanks. Cynthia, you are to secretly secure cooperation from the other commanders in the liberation front. This is extremely important: don’t make use of anybody with a different background, and make sure to only bring soldiers you know are with the Commonwealth. If anybody complains, send him to me.”

“Understood. Leave it to me.”

“Yes sir!”

“I’m really counting on you. It’d be a shame if we lost just cause we were dragging our feet.”

Noel narrowed her eyes at them, and the officers straightened up into a salute.

“It is true that there are some who argue needlessly. We’ll discipline them thoroughly, so no need to worry. Also, our men are motivated so morale isn’t an issue. All we need to do is increase discipline and training.”

“Yup, I’m counting on you, Commander of One Thousand Cynthia.”

“You can count on me, Governor General Noel.”

Observers essentially didn't need formal language, as Noel was lenient on that front. It was basically okay to do as she pleased, but she straightened up and spoke correctly to Cynthia. Cynthia got nervous in front of other people, and when Noel had pointed out to her that it might lower the combat effectiveness of her troops, Cynthia had acknowledged the comment with her fist.

“Burns of the Liberation Front will be in charge of fabricating rumors. Spread tales of the vile empire far and wide. If we can increase the chance of a Baharan independence, we won't be at a disadvantage. It may seem cowardly, but it is important to lay foundations.”

“Yes sir!”

“Also... Riglette and Kai, I have something to ask you so stay behind. Now then, the rest of you are dismissed. Get to work.”

Everyone returned to their official duties, leaving Noel, Riglette, and Kai alone in the room. Cynthia was curious about the topic of discussion, but withdrew to follow her orders about training. There were advantages to becoming important after all.

“Now then, Governor General, your excellency, just what could it be that you were willing to send people away to ask? Could it be that the great hero of the commonwealth is plotting something less than acceptable?”

“I will do anything within my power that you ask of me. There is no need for restraint.”

“Yup, this is something I can only entrust to you two. You probably won't like it, but I will have you do it, so I'll apologise in advance. The burden will lie upon me.”

After her apology, Noel clearly stated her request, the contents of which caused their faces to stiffen in disapproval as expected. She explained the reasons it had to be done at Kai's probable objections, and offered a suitable reward. Riglette, knowing that Noel was serious, and that there was no backing down, merely nodded reluctantly. Though objecting to the plan adamantly, Kai too eventually nodded after seeing the determination and will in Noel's eyes. From their faces, Noel could tell that their opinions weren't going to change; Kai's pain was particularly blatant. Men of high rank were entrusted with many lives, and they had to give orders that would send men to their deaths. Such was the responsibility of a supreme commander. That was why Noel

prepared her plan to minimise total losses while attaining victory.

I really don't like saying that it can't be helped, but this is war so it can't be helped.

About a month after Noel had begun her preparations for the battle, she received a letter from an anonymous emissary of the empire. The sender was Falid Alain of the Horsheido Empire, the commander of Noel's most troublesome enemy: the black sun cavalry.

The contents could be understood as follows:

Noel, your excellency,

Congratulations on your promotion to governor general of the Libelikan Commonwealth. Though divided as enemies at the moment, I believe our thoughts for Libelikan people are the same. To protect the suffering people, and prevent the sacrifice of more soldiers, I would like to meet and try to find a way to avoid war. I sincerely hope that Governor General Noel Bosheit, her excellency, can attend. I believe we will be able to discuss our dreams.

The rest was all superfluous. Noel showed the letter in full to her companions, and rejected it.

"Even if we met now, nothing would be solved, so I won't go."

"Unfortunately, that is the wise choice. Being called out to talks at this point is highly likely to be a ruse. The emperor Amil has already announced his intent to put us all to the sword. That doesn't leave much room for negotiation."

"I can't tell if he genuinely wants to stop the war, and it's probably already too late anyway. I am of the same opinion as Sir Cynthia. You should not go."

"Also, there is a high chance that there is something else we haven't noticed. With all the false information around, it can't be helped. Right, oh oft reshuffled in the ranks Governor General Noel, your excellency."

"Ain't that yer dad's fault, you fucker!? The fuck you sayin' bout other people!?"

"I have thrown away my relations to the Grambulls. In the first place, I have no interest in the dead. I just stated the truth."

“What a heartless bastard!”

Barbas and Riglette snarled at each other, but Noel, unfortunately, didn't have the energy to tease them as she wanted to concentrate.

“Anyway, I won't meet him. I'm sure there'd be all sorts of problems,” mused a Noel that was highly experienced in both being promoted and demoted.

Noel didn't know when all the rumors had spread so far, and if anybody harboured ill will toward her could use them to maximum effect; if done there was nothing Noel could do about it, and she would be forced to fight alone once more. As governor general, Noel had to take a certain degree of care when moving. That was one of the things she had researched. She did, however, fully intend to respond. It would be pitiful to just stand by and watch. In preparation, she wrote that she would tell him directly on the battlefield. Noel would use whatever methods she could.

“Still, this is a strange letter. Ain't the second half basically a love letter? Like that mention of the promise at Madress, that 'Beloved Noel, your excellency,' and such. I get the strong feelin' that he's still wantin' to praise you.”

“Tell me, Mr. white hair, are you really an idiot? You're talking about the enemy empire's general of the army.”

“Shut up. It's my honest impression. Any man can understand that. Ain't that right, Kai?”

“Hmm, now that you mention it, I can't say that I don't feel something along those lines. It really does have that effect.”

Barbas happily whacked Kai at his agreement.

“Don't it!? Hehe, there're some things only a man can understand!”

“I see. How stupid. Don't just say that you muscleheads. Haaah, I want to die listening to this white haired monkey.”

“Heh, some bitch would never understand. Looks like you ain't got no man in your life. I won't let any of my men help you out with that even if you ask. I couldn't leave them to that misfortune.”

“What? How about you die once!”

Neither Noel nor Riglette had understood the letter, but the sense that he wanted to meet and talk was clearly delivered. He likely wanted to personally meet despite the circumstances, or there would be no reason for the imperial general of the army to send that kind of letter; a crude plan. It was, however, too late. Nothing could be done. The black sun cavalry was an enemy that had to be killed. The end was more important than the question of Falid as ally or foe.

There would never be an opportunity for such a talk again.

Chapter 45

The Girl Changed, the Boy Did Not

Autumn finally reached the tumultuous Libelikan continent. On Amil's orders, with supplies supplemented by the harvest, 120 000 men set out towards western Bahar. Sallied forth were more than just Baharan soldiers as Ribeldam, the eastern provinces, and the capital were all participating. The fight was not only to destroy the liberation front, but also had orders to crush the governor general's office, and retake the traitorous Coimbra. Emperor Amil was camped in the rear and the army was run by Field Commander Falid Arain. The conditions were all set for what would clearly be an easy victory.

The commonwealth, on the other hand, had also set out to meet the imperial army under the command of Governor General Noel Bosheit. They were prepared to set up camp in the Altvear plains and ambush the imperial army. Siden of Gemb and Elgar of the unified Coimbra had sent reinforcements along with Giv and Karmbeeth, who had seen a lessening of pressure from the empire. As a result, they had accumulated 100 000 men; more than initially forecast. The empire brought 120 000; the Commonwealth 100 000. The largest battle since the first unification under the Horsheido Empire was about to begin. The curtains rolled back for the battle on the Altvear plains.

Entrusted with the front lines, Falid stretched out the meandering formation from north to south, set on preparing a war of attrition. Opposing troops moved under Noel's directions to match them, stretching both armies out in straight lines upon the planes to face each other down. Noel's fears did not play out as the Black Sun Cavalry did not immediately launch a devastating assault as the empire was not willing to commit to such a risk. Falid had suggested striking a crippling blow right away, but Amil had rejected it for he feared losing his prized Black Sun Cavalry so soon. The two commanders repeatedly sent out skirmishers to avoid significant losses. If such large formations were to move, openings would be revealed that, if exploited, could prove to become a fatal wound.

The armies continued to exchange blows like fencers cutting and parrying. A buildup and attack by the right flank once set about would be quickly opposed. On the front

lines, the rear ranks were forced onward to fill the gaps, but such minor engagements would not bring an end to the battle. Falid's cavalry would be ambushed if they attempted to target the supply wagons, and Noel's ambush force would be harried by the imperial archers if they pursued too far, and so the front lines ebbed and flowed. There had been Gembi officers of a simple mind to fight honourably and directly, but Noel had rejected that at once in favour of a war of attrition. The first to move was at the disadvantage for the moment as the enemy troops lying in wait would be able to respond. Each side whittled away at the enemy resolve. The excruciating fight continued for a month. Amil and Siden had been working over plans to break the deadlock, but neither Noel nor Falid would move yet. They observed the armies by telescope day after day, searching the men, weighing their fatigue and morale, but they both sensed that an opportunity was approaching. The matter of where to move, or where to make the enemy move would decide the victor. Both commanders pushed their concentration to the limits in search of the decisive moment.

As the second month began, Noel decided to move first; to finally begin the operation they had prepared and trained for.

“Move the governor general's headquarters to the front lines, and construct a fort as a launching point. The guard and the workers will be handpicked by Riglette. The rest of my personal troops will be temporarily divided among the other divisions.”

Noel abruptly stated countless incomprehensible things in the war council, and Siden and Elgar voiced their surprise. Their objective was to wait for an opportunity and take the enemy there; the tactic that the former Sun Emperor Bergis had prided himself upon.

“What are you saying? I haven't heard of a plan to construct an offensive fort. Even if we can complete it safely, it won't provide much tactical advantage.”

While it was defensive, it was different from a castle. While it may have affected morale, when weighing the risks, Siden's opinion was correct.

“That's probably right, it's like you are asking to be attacked.”

“If you know that, rethink this. You are the symbol of the Commonwealth as our governor general. On the off chance you get captured, morale will plummet. If you mean to provoke them, there are other ways.”

“It’s as Sir Siden says! There’s no reason to transfer you to the front!”

“That’s why I have to go. If we put out high quality bait, the beast that’s caught the scent will have no choice but to come.”

“I can see what you’re saying, but if it fails, it’ll be the cause of our collapse. Firstly, we should restrict what the black sun cavalry can strike. If I was the imperial commander I would sacrifice other troops in search of a use for them. By no means should we allow them to get involved... Noel, please think carefully.”

Siden was highly insistent, but Noel shook her head.

Noel was more harsh than usual, “It’s fine. If I move, they will. Without a doubt. That’s where we win or lose. As the current supreme commander, at least allow me this much.”

In reality, Siden had also been thinking of how to break the stalemate. None of them had been so risky as hers, but they had been all searching to create an edge.

“Even if we lure them out, we can’t ambush them halfheartedly. The black sun cavalry are to be feared... have you any plans for that?”

Noel nodded coolly in response to Siden’s stated concerns.

She spoke in hushed tones, “Of course. It’s fine to leave that troublesome Falid and his black sun cavalry to me. I’m the supreme commander right now, eh? And everybody is watching and waiting for an opportunity. When they see a chink in the armour, they have to move.”

Noel had intended to take to the vanguard and entice the enemy from the start, but at great opposition from her allies, she had requited her position. Just as Siden had earlier, they would assuredly wonder why she would have such a dangerous opinion. If she had still forced her way through, there may have opened a fissure in her allies’ cooperation. She had learned as much from the previous Coimbra-Baharan war. Proof was needed to convince people.

Therefore Noel had waited; had pushed her allies and enemies alike to the brink with a war of attrition that merely whittled away manpower and strength. The observations that decided the time to move was now had been of ally and enemy alike: both sides had begun to complain. In such a situation, Noel could cause a disturbance

by dangerously moving her headquarters to the front, and simultaneously building a fort. It would guarantee Falid to move, even if he knew it was a trap, he had to respond to Noel's provocation. Lack of movement would not only cause him to be labeled a coward, but also was likely to lower morale in disappointment.

Noel then turned to Barbas and issued orders to drive the point home, "Barbas, take the dragoons to repeatedly strike the enemy's central camp. Maintain a range from which you know you can fall back. Don't overdo it!"

"Roger that! Leave it to the White Ant Bloc. Hehe, looks like we got the best job!"

"I'm going to say it again, Barbas: Don't overdo it. The goal is not to deal a crushing blow, but to pull them forward. Remember what you are supposed to do."

"I perfectly understand without you telling me twice! Please leave it to me, Governor General, your excellency!"

Noel gave a small nod upon hearing Barbas' reply. While hesitant, Siden and Gemb came to accept her plot, and no further objections arose. All that remained was for the enemy to make his move, but Falid firmly refused to move. After three days and nights of the White Ant Bloc's provocation, Falid had still prohibited movement. The soldiers of the commonwealth jeered and blew bugles as they threw fire and shrapnel upon them, enraging Rebecca and the others in the centre, but he continued to order them to remain on standby.



"Why hold us back!? Won't we gain momentum by butchering those fuckers!? Why do we have to turtle up!? Didn't you also say we have the advantage in cavalry, bro!?!?"

"That's what they want us to do. There's no reason to respond to such obvious provocation."

"I can't accept that! On the continent we always won! We even beat that fiend bitch once. There's no reason to be worried!"

"Do not disturb the formation. Stand down!"

Rebecca kicked aside a nearby chair and returned to her formation. It wasn't as though

Falid couldn't understand her feelings as she walked away disgusted, and the other soldiers were most likely impatient as well. The enemy clearly wanted him to move, and that was why they had launched night raid after night raid in provocation, apparently having pushed the Black Sun Cavalry, and the soldiers only physically strengthened in operation Dawn to their limits.

I can't just sit here forever. If I don't do something, morale will suffer.

He was waiting for the enemy to lower their guard. He couldn't allow Noel's fort to finish construction. It wouldn't make much of a difference, but it would take the wind out of the sails of the imperial troops. He could see that there was a trap. If he had to sacrifice troops to stop them, he would, but Falid was holding off on that. Amil had requested that he set appropriate troops to the matter at once, and it was the first time that Falid had ignored Amil's direct orders.

I can fully understand his majesty's thought process, but I want to avoid being the one who captures Noel, if at all possible. I would just like to speak with her one more...

Noticing a report had come in from a red stained messenger, he looked up to the sky: red. The sun was setting. At that moment, Falid heard the sound of a terrific explosion followed by screams and the trumpet signals of an advance.

"What's this!? I never ordered an attack!! Who's responsible for this!?"

"My apologies! Sergeant Rebecca's party is leading the assault! She is furiously pursuing the enemy cavalry!"

"That idiot's gone and done it!"

Falid cast the report aside, but quickly changed his mind. This might have been a surprisingly good chance. The enemy may have been lulled into a sense of security and struck too deep. If that was the case, it was the time to move. Falid closed one eye and thought hard about what he should do; about what would be best for the empire and for himself. If he went, he could lead the Black Sun Cavalry through the enemy cavalry and assault Noel's headquarters. On the off chance it was a trap, he could kick about a few soldiers, and a large number of soldiers could be occupied by the Black Sun Cavalry which would allow him to return alive. Above all...

Noel is inviting me over. This may be my last chance to speak with her, and that means I have to go.

Falid's thoughts pulled slightly away from the long war of attrition, prioritising his own opinions over Amil's orders, his real self coming to the forefront. If he went personally, he would be able to directly talk to her; a decision best not made under normal circumstances. The voice inside him that was loyal to the emperor was screaming at him to stop that it might be a trap. Amil had ordered him not to waste the Black Sun Cavalry. A supreme commander was not to be reckless or show off his own valour, but Falid cast aside the warnings, choosing to accept Noel's invitation. It was the first time in his life that Falid moved on his own volition.

"All right, we follow after Rebecca's party! Our objective is the headquarters of Noel of the Commonwealth! Sound the bugle to send the Black Sun Cavalry to the front!!"

"Yes sir! Everyone, sally forth! Don't leave a rebel standing!"

"Yeah!!"

A low blast rang out across the battlefield as the Black Sun Cavalry began to move. Racing across the red plains, they approached the base of the fort with vigor. It was still a long way from completion, with logs and other building materials left lying about. It wasn't enough to disrupt the cavalry. Falid gripped his spear amid his Black Sun Cavalry, bearing the flag of the empire of the sun. His target was the audacious Commonwealth flag. With the white dyed red in the sunset, it almost seemed to be a monochrome scarlet flag.

"I won't let you approach Sir Noel!"

"Out of my way!!"

The infantry clashed with the cavalry to obstruct them. Perhaps the enemy was exhausted, or unusually slow, for in an instant he had hewn threw dozens of them.

"Advance! Our one target is Noel! Take her, and we win the war! Show these rebels the might of the Black Sun Cavalry!"

"Huzzah!"

They brandished their spears at Falid's encouragement. A distant explosion could be heard, and flames were spotted where Rebecca had run.



At Noel's headquarters, the position of the Black Sun Cavalry was confirmed via telescope. They could likely reach her without taking many more casualties.

"Your excellency, Sir Barbas has died in battle. He was using explosives to draw in the enemy."

"Transfer command of the White Ant Bloc to Gorn."

"Yes sir!"

Barbas had likely made the decision knowing that night raids alone weren't provoking the enemy, and so had opted for a more dangerous method at dusk. He had pulled in the enemy cavalry, even the black sun cavalry, but at the cost of his life as he had been unable to retreat. Somewhere deep down, Noel may have known that with Barbas in charge, it would have come to this, but she had no other choice. She wanted to cry, but she bore it with a severe expression; crying would only weaken her. A commander could not cry.

"Your excellency..."

"Yeah, we have things to do before we grieve. Send messengers to Riglette and Kai. Once it's begun, instruct them to show no mercy. If they are half-hearted it will all be fruitless. Leave the rest to Siden and the young master."

Noel rose with her bident in hand, and entrusted the warhammer at her side to the messenger.

"Your excellency, this..."

"Yeah. If I don't lighten up a bit, I won't win. I'd hate to lose it, so hold on to it a bit, okay?"

Putting in its place a dagger on her belt, Noel lay in wait. The sky was a deep red sunset, but the slight haze was probably more than just her imagination.



The Black Sun Cavalry continued its thrust. Falid wielded his spear from his horse, ending a commonwealth soldier who fell with blood leaking from his lips. No matter how elite they were, they should have been able to fight back a little more. The enemy was Noel the fiend and her soldiers. These men were much weaker than the ones at Yavits.

There's some kind of trick at play here.

Falid had a bad premonition, but to order a retreat amid an apparently successful push would be the pinnacle of foolishness. They had learned once that weak attacks were to be avoided, and so Falid had always done so. The cavalry pushed through the soldiers, entering into the fort. Instead of hiding behind the wooden walls, the commonwealth soldiers took up their swords and charged. In the centre of the bailey was published the twin-hammer banner. It was the headquarters of Noel, Governor General of the Commonwealth Army. From inside came Noel; slowly, and with a smile.

In that instant, a large number of flaming arrows came flying into the fort. Falid rushed to knock them aside with his spear, as did the other Black Sun Cavalry. Such an attack wouldn't be enough to finish them. In fact, the only victims were the commonwealth soldiers, who caught fire, no, burst into flames upon being struck with the arrows, becoming human torches as their own bodies fueled the fires one by one. The fire spread to the walls, the goods, and even the corpses. The force of the flames was unnatural.

"W-what's going on!?"

"S-stop, stay back!"

In the confusion, Falid heard the screams of the Black Sun Cavalry. The burning commonwealth soldiers were grasping the Black Sun Cavalry with smiles. Perhaps by use of oil, the flame quickly spread to the Black Sun Cavalrymen, engulfing them in the pillars of fire. Even near the headquarters, the scene was repeated: spooked horses threw their riders, who were grabbed by the blazing commonwealth men, spreading the flames. Man after man that Falid had personally trained, died with unutterably horrific screams. Now that he was paying attention, he saw that the fort had concealed a ring of flames. Walls and bodies were used to complete the flaming barriers which roared on, reaching the sky.

“What is this? Noel, what have you...”

“Fire. I thought, ‘it really is the best.’”

“Surrounding yourself in flames is insane.”

“You want sanity in a war?”

“No, but this is clearly a mistake. You ordered your own men to die!”

“Yup that’s it. Hey, isn’t it mysterious how they’re all so glad to die? We used that sort of medicine, so they don’t feel the pain. I’m sure you’ve seen it before.”

It was probably the censugrass that Amil was so worried about, the vile plant that spread like a disease through the empire. Aside from causing hallucinations, it could also numb the senses and remove pain, though that caused some to harm themselves to the point of death.

“Is that what a commander should do? You... you’ve thrown away your own companions?”

“I’m a commander. I have to minimise casualties. Above all, I have to succeed. In fact, even if we didn’t do this, these men would have died just the same.”

“They would have died?”

“Yup, their guts are all rotted out because of that disease you brought back from the continent. So, I gave them a choice. If they cooperate with me, I’ll look after their families, and they will be entered into house Bosheit. Just like that and they gladly volunteered. Ahaha, I might be a little happy with all the family members I’ve just gained.”

Noel looked proud as she brushed off the falling ash. She had gotten the heretical tactic approved, and her face showed no shadow of doubt or regret.

“Just to draw us in... you’ve come up with a plan using so many deaths and yourself as bait...”

“Your black sun cavalry are the soldiers of death, aren’t they? So it’s unfair on both sides. And so here we are in the centre of this flame ring made with their lives. This is

my 'flame ring' stratagem, thought up specifically to burn you all to death. Aren't monsters weak to fire?"

"Flame ring..."

The fort created a ring of flames fueled onward by human lives. The men of the commonwealth, and the black sun cavalry were immolated, leaving only the two monsters of Operation Daybreak.

"All that's left is to settle our differences. I may be fine dying here, but you might not."

She brandished her bident, and Falid quickly readied his spear. The flames weren't going to calm down, likely fueled by the combustion stones said to be used at Carness. No, that didn't seem to be all, Falid sensed some other power was involved.

"Did you intend to go down with me from the start? You can't run either with flames like that."

"I learned that I have to be resolved to die when drawing the sword on my own friend. That's why I'm here too. It's been a while, number 8."

"Hahaa, what so you knew? In that case, it'd have been fine for you to just drop by. You saw my letter right, number 13?"

Falid revealed a bitter smile.

"Didn't I tell you I couldn't go?"

She had even told him to meet her on the battlefield. Thinking back, that was one of her invitations, perhaps having intended to hint that he couldn't just speak to her.

"Even so... I wanted to meet you. I thought that if you remembered me, we might have some other road we could take."

In reality it would be difficult, no, if she was caught, or... Falid smirked to himself, finally realising why she hadn't come.

"I'm really sorry. We're friends, but enemies. You're in the empire, I'm in the Commonwealth, and neither of us can switch. Isn't that right, General Falid?"

He had entreated her many times when she was on Willa island specifically because he hadn't wanted it to come to this.

"Why did this happen? It didn't have to be this way. The truth is, everyone should be happy. That's why I fought so hard, but nobody seems happy at all. Why?"

Falid had worked hard like his teachers had taught him. There was no mistake in the word of the emperor. Everything should have gone well. Noel gave a troubled smile, the nostalgic face momentarily fascinating Falid.

"You're the general of the imperial army, after all. You'd better work hard. I think it's really amazing. Anybody'd be glad to have the position."

"You really think? Don't they all hate me? I mean, I'm the only one beside Amil..."

"It's fine, nobody's mad at you. They're praising all that hard work you've done."

"Haha, when you say it, it sounds so believable."

"I mean, that's cause it's true. I think they've all been watching us this whole time."

Falid felt some levity at her words. Deep down he had always harboured feelings of guilt as the only survivor; the unfulfilled promise. Just how much would he be saved if what she said was true?

"I've been running hard without rest until now, believing that serving Lord Amil would bring everyone happiness, but it didn't go well. Was I mistaken? Where? Governor General Noel, you wouldn't happen to know, would you?"

Falid loosened his expression, and Noel shrugged in response.

"I think that our objectives were probably the same, but we just took different roads at some point. I bet it was just bad luck, so it couldn't be helped."

"Yeah, that may be. It's really sad, but such is the way of the world."

Both eyes closed, after a deep breath, he glared at Noel, prepared to kill. While she did have her bident ready, she wasn't about to murder him.

"I don't need to die for Lord Amil. I'll take you here, and escape. As long as I survive,

no matter how near death, Lord Amil will win the battle. Once you, their hero, are dead, the scales will tip in favour of the empire.”

“As the governor general of the Commonwealth, I don’t intend to lose either. I cannot let you get away. There are others who can be a governor general, but with you gone, the whole imperial army will collapse, and with the head gone, the augmentation of operation dawn will be crippled. The black sun cavalry won’t be able to be maintained. Even if we kill each other, it’ll be my win, so I’ll have you die right here.”

In the midst of that blazing purgatory, Falid and Noel faced off against each other with their specialized weapons. Falid could feel the heat scorching his skin. Any longer and his body wouldn’t bear it. Falid hardened his will to kill his former friend, companion, and the woman he loved.

I can’t lose, no matter what, I can’t lose!!

He would kill Noel and take her head to Amil. With the death of the hero of the commonwealth, the death of their symbol, morale would plummet. If that was capitalized upon with a full assault, they would rout. The crossroads of fate were right there in that moment.

“Here I come, number 13!!”

At the crackle of a nearby flame, Falid cut through the hot air as he charged toward Noel. He could see all of her movements, and she couldn’t follow his. Her spear could never reach him. Just like all their practice matches, just like their last combat, Falid would be victorious.

In three paces he would be in striking range, and Noel’s bident hadn’t been prepared. Two paces away and she hadn’t moved; one pace, and she hadn’t moved.

Within striking distance, Noel dropped her bident for some reason. Did she intend to surrender now, of all times? Falid was already attacking, and he could only move on. There was no stopping him now.

But, is this really okay?

“Hrrrgh!!”

Falid cast aside his idle thoughts, planting his feet, and twisting his body to send out

his best thrust. It was a thrust that had swiftly ended countless foes. The point of his spear found the flesh of its prey. Blood splattered across the surroundings.

“-Khh, ghhhn...”

He coughed blood, his body heavy, legs shaking. For some reason, he couldn't put strength in his arms. Furthermore, he felt the sting of burning. Looking down, he saw Noel's left hand held the dagger that had pierced his side. It had gone through a gap in his armour, penetrating deeply, destroying several vital organs. It was a fatal wound, wreaking havoc inside his body. It was incredibly similar to the tactic that Falid had used at Yavits pass, the difference being that Noel had gone so far as to receive a strike to draw him in and deliver one of her own. His spear had clearly pierced her shoulder, dyeing her armour and hair even further red. His target, however, had been her heart, and somehow, he had missed. Why had that happened? Perhaps at the very end, he had been soft. Noel's arm wrapped around his back, and her left hand drove the dagger further in. The wound clearly had stopping power. If he wanted to resist, he could have. He had enough strength to bring her down with him, but he did not. Falid wrapped his own arms around her in an embrace; an embrace covered in blood, but one that still made him glad.

“Did you know... I would hesitate?”

“I'm really sorry. This was all I could think of. I couldn't beat you in a fair fight since you're more skilled.”

“Ha... haha... w-well said, 13.”

Falid collapsed on top of Noel. There fallen, the two rolled apart to face the sky.

“Is this that promise you made?”

“Yup. It wasn't pretty, but I thought we'd fight it out. Sorry for being unfair.”

She had promised to take up the sword for Amil, and also that they would fight together. She hadn't worked for Amil's victory, but for his defeat. It was obvious sophistry, but Falid didn't have the mind to be angry, only that it was inevitable with number 13.

“Heh, you're so stubborn about the strangest things. That's why the teachers were always mad at you.”

“Is, is that so?”

“That’s right. You’re an obstinate one.”

They each gave a pained smile.

“So this match is a draw, eh?”

Noel’s breath was also becoming shallow as the flames approached. The two would be swallowed soon enough. Thinking about it, their talk may have been a stalling tactic, to ensure he died, but Falid couldn’t care less. They had been able to have a proper talk in the end, and he didn’t feel so bad about their deaths anymore.

“If we can’t tell who won, it’s fine to say I lost... You’re even less fair than before... no, I should say you’re stronger.”

“I studied a lot. I talked to all sorts of people. There were fun things and painful things that I got to experience.”

“Is that how it was?” Falid spoke from the heart, “I’m really jealous. Well, it’s been that way since even back then.”

The only things he had studied had been about war, but Noel had likely experienced a whole range of studies. He wondered how she had lived so freely. Ever since the time in that church, she had been free.

“Death by fire is pretty hot after all. I thought that before, though.”

“Haha, even, even though it’s your own plan... I should be the one saying that having been burnt by you twice.”

“That’s true. I might be regretting things a little right now.”

“Haha, that’s so like you.”

Falid laughed in amazement, spraying blood on Noel’s face.

“Will everyone forgive me? That’ll end it all, though.”

“Don’t worry. It’s not over. It isn’t over at all... I won’t let it end.”

Falid mustered all his willpower to stand, took up Noel's bident, and threw it at the flames as hard as he could. The outer wall of the fort broke, creating a visible crack through which he could see a female knight calling Noel's name. Once he had confirmed the direction, he pulled Noel up by the arm.

"What are you doing?"

"Isn't that your friend? Get going. I'll wait for you with everyone else."

"No, 8, I'm coming..."

"Adieu, 13, no... Governor General Noel Bosheit. I'd like to meet again once you're released from duty. At that point, the empire and the commonwealth won't matter."

Falid mustered all his might, all the force he had left to live, and threw Noel toward the gap. Noel's body made a disjointed sound when he threw her, but he would have her bear that much. She could live with a few fractured bones. Then she could bear all their hopes and dreams; Falid's too. Falid felt a little regret as he let go of the treasure in his hands, even as he died, but he had already resigned himself to the good that lay therein.

"I'm... tired, but I wonder why it doesn't hurt?"

Falid collapsed once more, having thrown away his strength. He knew the flames were enveloping him. It wouldn't be strange to scream with the burns, but he didn't feel anything in particular. He had some luck at the very end, it seemed. That was good, at least. He looked to the twilight sky, wreathed in flames, or so he had attempted to do, but he couldn't see anymore.

An apology to Amil flashed through his mind, but he had done his best, and he felt he would be forgiven. Falid couldn't decide what was correct, or what he should do, and he didn't want to. He didn't want any regrets.

"The... flame ring, eh? Haha, that's really not fair. I mean, I never..."

A smile leaked out as he was engulfed in the blaze. The last thing to cross his mind was an image of Noel's elated face after her victory.

Author's Note:

Noel and Falid's objective was the same, but their lifestyles became polar opposite.

Chapter 46

My Happiness

Having successfully rescued Noel, Cynthia immediately retreated and called a surgeon to treat her wounds. The wound on her right shoulder was particularly severe, and she was bleeding heavily. To top it all off were the burns she'd suffered. According to the surgeon, however, her life could be saved. Relieved, Cynthia's arm was reassuringly grasped by Noel who had something to say to her.

"H-have the whole army advance. Now is our only chance. Quickly... the order the attack..."

"We know! Sir Siden is already leading an offensive! As are the other rulers including Lord Elgar! You need to be quiet and recover! I won't permit you to have survived thus far just to die!"

"Yup... okay."

"It's ridiculous to involve yourself in a fire trap! What were you thinking!?!? Why didn't you tell me!?!?"

"Sorry..."

Noel shut her eyes in order to sleep after giving Cynthia her one word response, likely at her physical limit. Water dripped down onto her ash covered face as a wet cloth wiped her clean. Done with the cloth, Cynthia's eyes turned to the battlefield. A deep crimson sunset illuminated the battle. A grand army was stretched out across the plains, littered with red banners; cloth dyed by the light of the sun. The crimson corps advanced across the scarlet plains.

It almost looks like the banner of the sun.

Red was the sun, and white were the people, the flags of the commonwealth stained in the blood of their bearers. Cynthia wondered what Noel would have thought had she seen the scene. Taking a breath, she then turned to retake command.



Fear of the fiend was rekindled once more in the hearts of the Baharan soldiers at the sight of the sudden all engulfing inferno at the centre of the battlefield, as if the flames of purgatory had descended upon the plains. Then came the heated warcry of the Commonwealth forces, a proud cheer at the return of the Governor General of the Commonwealth, Noel, and the death of the Commander of the Black Sun Cavalry, General Falid. The majority of the black sun cavalry had not escaped, and the stench of burnt flesh wafted across the battlefield. With rising morale, the Commonwealth forces began their assault before night fell. The empire would likely have ambushes of its own, but the morale of those who strode forth was proving difficult to break. Above all, emperor Amil had been dealt a heavy blow through the loss of his right hand man; his most trusted advisor. As the chain of command had been broken, each commander struggled to cooperate, and they slowly gave ground, unable to halt the enemy force. Amil had already lost the trump card that might have turned the tides. Already, the right flank had been breached, and the centre was flanked by the Commonwealth forces, driving the imperial soldiers into a state of panic. Report after report of the death of commanders in battle came flooding in, bringing tidings of Amil's defeat.

"That's enough. Have the rear-guard move in and withdraw the army. We're abandoning Toldo and Vesta. The front lines will move to the city of Cyadre."

"But, Your Majesty, that'd mean..."

Abandoning Toldo and Vesta meant ceding control of over half of Bahar. Cyadre certainly had formidable defences, but the scope was not comparable with Vesta.

"We haven't prepared enough supplies to maintain a force of this size in Vesta. We wouldn't hold out long against such a motivated enemy, so this is the best way for us to minimise casualties in our retreat, whilst planning ahead to retake our lands. Hurry out and give the orders to move the people, soldiers, goods and treasures! Keep as much as you can away from the commonwealth!"

"Y-yes sir!"

The staff officer ran off, and the other officers outside the tent began to move in a hurry.

"To think that I would lose so massively... just why did Falid respond to the enemy

provocation?”

Amil sighed and flopped down into a chair. More than anger, he felt loss at his first significant defeat in battle and the death of Falid. That alone was enough to wound his spirit. Falid had surely known it was a trap. Looking at the situation, it would have been fine to order another corps to attack. Even if a large portion of the Black Sun Cavalry went ahead on their own, if Falid himself hadn't gone, the damage would have been minimal, but he had sallied forth. In the first attack he had carried out of his own volition, he perished, leaving nothing but a vacancy in Amil's heart.

Falid had probably gone to personally secure the fiend. Why, I don't know... so it was his first and last violation of orders, huh?

And then there was the matter of the survival of Noel Bosheit, the fiend, whom Amil had previously overlooked. She would likely continue to stand against him as the fiendish governor general of the commonwealth as long as she survived on the front against the empire, and the man who should have been able to stop her had died.

“Kkhhhhhhhhh... If only I'd killed her then! Did my softness cause all this!?!?”

It had also been a result of his own negligence and pride. Amil regretted his past choices in order to hide from himself his boiling fear. The fear in him that the fiend of purgatory would continue to stand on the battlefield with the intent to kill him. She would follow him across the highest mountains and the deepest oceans until he was slain.



Having taken control of the commonwealth army, Siden did not slack off in his pursuit as night fell, ordering a forced march. He had also proclaimed that all who surrendered would be spared in an attempt to limit resistance. Naturally, there was no quarter to those who resisted. The lord of Toldo accepted the call to surrender when he heard of the imperial defeat at Altvear. Siden entrusted Vesta to Burns, and was told that if given a week, he could take it without blood. All this was approved by the council, and as promised, after a week, the red and white two-toned flag of the commonwealth flew proudly over the city. Beside it flew Noel's twin-hammer banner.



Burns changed the power balance of the continent with the battle of Altvear, using it as proof that the Libelikan Commonwealth was not merely hastily thrown together, but it was instead already capable of wielding military might that rivaled the Horsheido empire. The news drastically decreased the influence of the empire and its emperor Amil, who, signed an armistice with the Commonwealth so he could turn towards dealing with internal unrest in the provinces. The great emperor himself had been the one to send out a letter requesting an armistice with mere rebels and insurgents; therein acknowledging formally that the Libelikan Commonwealth was worthy of negotiation. It was an indication of how cornered Amil was.

On the other hand, the Libelikan Commonwealth was also exhausted by the war. While they had a mind to destroy the empire in a decisive strike, Noel, the one who had won them their great victory, suggested that accepting the armistice was a good idea, and the kings had agreed. In accordance with the treaty, Western Bahar was separated into the Commonwealth, and Burns joined the council as its ruler. Vesta, the city captured bloodlessly during the war, was its capital, and the plebeians were relatively satisfied given their leader was a fellow Baharan.

Noel proposed to maintain the status-quo at the meeting of princes.

“It’s pretty convenient to just leave the enemy be. Won’t people be super motivated if we have a hated enemy? And if that hated enemy goes, we can just make another one, so it’s fine to leave things as they are.”

If they tried to forcefully unify the continent, things would obviously fall apart rapidly. Already, various signs of such an inevitability could be seen here and there. Storing up the hatred was the easiest action for the moment.

“But still, we don’t know what they’ll do when cornered. We in Gemb have a saying: a cornered rat will bite a cat. Should we not crush them while we have the chance?”

“Do we have the strength, though? I know it’s your own suggestion, but it seems pretty hard to keep fighting forever even when the empire offers us an armistice.”

“But...”

“It’s fine.” Noel confidently smiled as she responded to Siden’s worries, “Let’s take it

slow without panicking. We've still got a long road ahead of us."

At the present, it was best for the commonwealth to regain its own strength. There was no need to have another massive battle. Furthermore, they wouldn't let the empire remain unafraid forever. Encouraging uprisings, they could invade under the pretense of defending the new nation. The troubles in the imperial provinces were enough that they would gain sympathy. Noel's proposal for Commonwealth policy was to support liberation. There was no reason to bear the full brunt of the imperial force, and the idea was to provide military support while genuinely allowing for the province to remain as independent as possible. Naturally, Noel would oversee this as the governor general. While the discussion was fierce in the assembly, the final conclusion leaned towards Noel's proposal as her suggestion was approved of by Elgar, Siden, and Burns. Noel figured that forcefully taking the continent would nullify all the Commonwealth's gains. She couldn't have it turn out to merely create a new leader and repeat the cycle, and so it was best to allow the empire to continue to exist.

"I see... so you mean we place all the blame for the unrest, dissatisfaction, grudges, and sense of loss on the empire?"

"It's the best idea we've had so far, so it should be fine with that. And if they reform and start governing well, they might end up having good relations with us. That might just bring peace to the continent."

Even as she had known it was impossible, Noel had spoken. Good governance meant they first had to abandon the expedition, but not only would that further discredit the emperor, it would also leave them vulnerable to a counter attack from the church of the star. The Commonwealth had already established a friendly enough relation with the continental powers, which meant that it would turn into a pincer attack. Therefore, that new territory was being propped up as a wall to defend the empire, and no one knew how long it would last. If they managed to push too far in, the might that had gained independence for the Commonwealth would turn on the empire to assist their enemy. Each position would change with time, but Noel would deal with that when it happened.

"Well, I guess we should do our best on our own. Everywhere we look is in need of repair."

Once the meeting was adjourned, Noel grabbed her subordinates and made graves for Barbas and those who died in battle. While there may have been no meaning in

praying to such stone monuments, it at least served as proof that she would never forget them. Barbas had a wife and a young child, so Noel invited them to join the office of the governor general. That was how she had received the two.

The office of the governor general was presently stationed in central Bahar near Toldo. Vesta was nearby, and they could watch East Bahar and threaten them with force. The fifty thousand fighting men in the office were first set about farm work in an attempt to revive the province. That being the case, Noel had not been made the local lord of Toldo, but she was there to provide assistance. The domestic affairs were left to him. Noel said it was fine because the office would relocate if anything happened. The soldiers had been informed that they could settle if they wanted to. While resting her body a little, Noel thought about all the important things they still had left to do. Cynthia, Kai, and Riglette were all subjected to the whims of the governor general from start to finish.



A short distance away from the capital city of Firuth lay a hidden chapel by the trees. A place where horrific human experiments were underway. It was the place where orphans, prisoners, and abandoned children had originally been made into augmented soldiers, but it had been transformed into a dungeon built to sate the lust for eternal life of the former emperor Befnam. The twisted experiments yielded regular results. Befnam succeeded in slowing the human aging process. At the cost of one human life, another could be moderately extended. Befnam had used many prisoners from the continental campaign without Amil knowing. All continuation of Operation Dawn under the pretense of Operation Heaven's Sun was a lie to cover up the experiments aimed at obtaining eternal youth. Cooperation from prime minister Mills had been needed to conceal his activities. He had his own ambition, something he wanted, having looked into what was handed down by the original sun emperor. More importantly to him than finishing Operation Dawn, was to make his own dream a reality. Thus, he poured all his money into Befnam's research. He wanted to steal it all right at the end.

"Lord Mills, we have depleted our adult male population. What do you think of substituting children?"

"Sounds fine, get to it right away. We can always take as many as we need from the continent. Well, we need to ensure his majesty continues his expedition to that end. Huehue, I'll have him seated on that throne until he burns away."

Soon enough, perpetual youth would be attainable. Mills would take it without letting Befnam see the fruits of his labour, and then he would take the empire when the opportunity presented itself. He could conquer the continent then, so there was no need to rush. Once the formula was complete, he would have all the time in the world.

“Hmm?”

A strange noise reached Mills' ear from the lower floor around the entrance to the church. The building was encircled by a sturdy wall, and had five levels of basement below for the experiments. It was guarded by handpicked elite soldiers from Operation Dawn to prevent the possibility of a bandit raid.

“Lord Mills! An enemy raid! Ah, ahh, aaaaaahhhh...”

“What? If you don't calm down and explain, I won't understand you.”

“The fiend, Noel the fiend is...”

The soldier's head was then crushed, his gray matter splattering onto Mills' face. Standing behind the man who had lost his head was a woman in red armour: Noel Bosheit, the governor general of the commonwealth; the corners of her lips curled up slightly. Mills knew her face from the negotiation of the armistice. While she had appeared suitably cold for a commander in the commonwealth, she now had the expression of a wolf licking her lips in the face of her prey. She held a rusty hammer in her hand, and countless nails.

“M-my my... to think that the hero of the Commonwealth, Noel her excellency, herself, would come to a place like this. Had you come officially, we would have greeted you with fanfare... I don't quite have a grasp on the circumstances surrounding your visit, but for the moment, we have an armistice with the Commonwealth. At any rate, this is clearly a violation of that.”

It had taken great effort on the part of Mills to suppress his surprise and maintain his gentle demeanor.

“I came in secret. Isn't the imperial administration in upheaval everywhere? So, I figured that now was the only time to smash it. It isn't a problem if I don't get caught. I'm fairly sure that the armistice will continue for a while yet.”

“I-it isn't very restrained to smash things. In, in the first place, how did you find out

about this place? This is supposed to be one of the most secret places in the empire!”

“Do you really want to know?”

“Y-yes.”

“Well, I won’t tell you. I mean, if I told you right before killing you, it’d be a waste of time.”

Catching Mills by the nape of his neck as he tried to quickly escape, she forced him to the ground. Though resisting as much as he could, he couldn’t get his body free.

“I bet you’re just doing more worthless research, aren’t you? You’ll bother everyone if you keep it up, so I’ll have you die now.”

“Woah, wait, j-just hold off a little! Th-th, the research here is about eternal youth. You hear me? It’s almost complete. Naturally, we’ll share the results with you, so hold off on killing me just yet! And I’m the prime minister of the empire! I’m a very useful man to have!”

“Hmmm... I don’t really need you, though. If I ever got tired of living forever it’d be hell. Besides, it’s pretty fun as things are, so I think it’s enough. And I don’t even need your power. It’ll be way too hard on me if there are two people with horrendous personalities.”

Noel pressed several nails onto his head, smiling all the while.

“S-stop that. Oi, quit it! Stop...”

“Ei!”

With her shout, Noel drove three nails into his head at once, and then broke his neck just in case. She defenestrated the convulsing corpse. Her injuries hadn’t fully healed yet, but this much activity was fine. Noel dusted off her hands as Cynthia, Kai, Riglette and the White Ant Bloc finally arrived.

“Governor General,” reported the new boss of the White Ant Bloc, Gorn, “we’ve secured the church. We killed all the fuckers who resisted.”

He didn’t seem quite used to his new position, but he was working with ferocious

effort.

“Weren’t they pretty strong?”

“Physically, yeah, they were very strong, but their movements were amateur. A little cloak and dagger, and the whole thing went smoothly.”

“As expected of the White Ant Bloc.”

“Thank you very much! I can’t let Barbas’ tradition die.”

Cynthia entered the conversation after Noel patted him on the shoulder in praise.

“I don’t quite know what’s going on here, but it doesn’t look like a good establishment. It stinks of blood.”

“Yup, it’s best to burn it down soon. We’d better leave no trace.”

“There are fifty children locked in the basement, what should we do about them?”

“We’ll take them to Toldo for now and figure it out later. If they want to stay in the city, I won’t mind caring for them.”

Cynthia’s eyes went wide at Noel’s response, and Riglette tutted as she expected more troubles to begin as she was the one who was going to be in charge of ensuring the children were cared for.

“It’s rare for you to say something like that.”

“Yeah, I guess. Is there anything else?”

“Yes, there’s no black stone here like the one you mentioned, and neither was Befnam anywhere to be found. If you think we should search the surroundings, then we can leave some soldiers behind.”

After looking up to the ceiling to think over Kai’s proposal, she decided against it as there didn’t seem to be any problems left.

“No, no, it seems fine.”

“Still, if you think he’ll be a problem later, should we not search for him? I don’t mind staying behind alone.”

“It’s fine. Everyone’ll be glad to have some new toys. Now, let’s set up those combustion stones and burn this place down. Burn the documents, drugs and corpses. Burn away all traces of this place and let them blow away in the wind.”

“We’re going that far? It’ll stand out and people will come for us.”

“Yeah, sorry about that, but if they’re going to see it anyway, we might as well make it grand.”

“Then leave it to the White Ant Bloc. We can set it up to go off when we’re long gone and nice and safe. Of course, it will be effective. We’ll shock those imperials out of their skin.

“Sounds fun. Now make your preparations and head out to high ground!”

Befnam had hidden himself in a secret passageway when Noel had begun her raid. It was natural to have one just in case. He had risen to the seat of emperor to protect his project. He climbed up a ladder, and removed the lid from a well. It was a path that led to the church’s graveyard. The assailants in the surroundings did not notice him.

I don’t know who did this, but to think they found out about this place... Could it be Amil’s doing? I don’t know what he’s thinking with such foolishness...

Amil may have attempted to use military force to gain the results of Operation Heaven’s Sun in his desperation. Family were the most distrusted people for Befnam. Whatever the case, he had to hide himself for the moment. Then he would use his hidden funds to rebuild his research centre and continue its operation. He had already succeeded in dramatically decreasing his rate of aging, most likely having increased his lifespan by three times as a result of his experiments on babies. Grasped in his hands was the secret black stone that was the key to eternal youth; a secret formula left behind by the sun emperor Bergis: the inheritance of the sun. As long as he had it, Befnam could return to power.

“Ehehe, the commonwealth is expanding its circle of influence, but I don’t mind if the empire is destroyed once. As long as I’m alive, I can always rebuild. Ahaha, the only one fit to rule this continent is me!”

Befnam laughed as he went to leave the graveyard, but suddenly stopped. Or rather, he was suddenly stopped. Something had caught on his foot, perhaps some foliage.

“Shit, what is it now!?”

Looking down, he saw a fleshy corpse, an arm with visible bone had caught his foot. The body was incredibly revolting, riddled with maggots. A hollow eye socket reflected nothing, and a sickening stench reached his nose.

“W-what!? What is this!?!?”

As he tried to escape, he could not free his foot as the body would not move. He dropped the secret stone when he went to use his hands to pry off the arm. Quickly bending down to retrieve it, countless arms came up from the muddy ground.

“Ugh-gaaaaaaah!!”

They wrapped around his body and worked to drag him into the ground. The secret stone was being crushed in between bony fingers. The sound announcing the instant that Befnam’s dreams were crushed, but it wouldn’t end in mere despair. The sound of cackling children echoed through Befnam’s mind, teasing him; accusing him.

Let’s play. Let’s play. Let’s play. Play with us until we’re satisfied. That’s your responsibility. Realise what you’ve done.

“A-are you kidding me!? I’m the emperor, you monsters, I am the emperor!”

“What a pathetic death for a former emperor,” spoke a severed head with a remarkably deep voice.

It chattered away, held up amid the bones. It was a young man used once for a live experiment: Fraser. He had been incredibly healthy, and Befnam remembered how he had survived even after being reduced to just a head, only dying at last when Befnam had stopped prescribing him medicine. The nightmarish existence had pleased Befnam’s sadistic heart, and he was now faced with the unbelievable reality of that Fraser sitting right before his eyes.

“No! I’m not like you corpses! I, I’m alive!”

“You’ll catch up.”

With those final words, the rotten corpses dragged Befnam into the earth. Other small corpses swarmed to the surface to watch the church explode with satisfaction before returning each one to its grave. Silence reigned once more.



Noel watched the church erupt in flames from a high place, as did Cynthia. Riglette was busy worrying about how to escape given the fifty odd parcels of unnecessary baggage.

“Just what was that place?”

“Hehe, I wonder. But I think it’s good for the Commonwealth that we destroyed it. Doesn’t it feel like a suitable job for the governor general?”

“It’s fine if you don’t want to say. No matter how you look at it, it wasn’t a good place.”

“That’s true. It’s a shit place.”

Noel stretched grandly.

“What will you do from here on out? Do you intend to continue as governor general?”

Cynthia seemed uneasy. Ever since Noel had announced she was tired of the position and intended to retire, Cynthia hadn’t been energetic. It was only a joke, but it seemed to have been too effective. Noel had kept it up to the point that if she revealed it was a lie now, she would be punched right in the face.

“I still have much to do. And I’ve just gained 50 new family members.”

“Surely, you can’t intend to add more to the Bosheit family!?”

“Isn’t it fine. It won’t go down in value. If there are more people with my surname, it’ll be like my family’s increased, and it seems fun.”

“Even if you say that, you’ve already got over a thousand. Can you even name them all?”

“Of course. Want me to?”

“No, I’ll take you up on that some other time. We don’t have much time, and Sir Riglette is glaring.”

She really was glaring. Noel could even hear tutting.

“Haaa...”

“What’s up with that weird sigh? Didn’t we just burn our troubles away?”

“I was wondering if I’ve obtained happiness.”

“You haven’t?”

“I don’t know. If possible, I’d like something I can see, though.”

Cynthia gave a wry smile, “That’s as unreasonable as always.”

“But once I’ve figured out what happiness is, I’ll add it to my notebook. I’d better lock it up in a safe only accessible to the governor general.”

“Oi, didn’t you promise to share that information with me!?”

“You can check when I die.”

“Don’t say such horrible things!”

Noel received a punch for the first time in a while.

“Well since the weather’s nice, let’s head back to base! I’m sure everyone’ll be craning their necks to see our return.”

“What an incredible misrepresentation.”

“The office of the governor general has people with terrible personalities after all!”

“Did you say something about me?”

“I didn’t mention your name at all, though.”

“Your eyes say it all. In the first place, just why do you make it so hard on me!?”

“Uwaaa, I’m being chased by some wily glasses! Everyone turn and run!”

Noel took the children and headed for a wagon concealed in the forest with Riglette chasing along, her face bright red. Behind her, rushing to ensure everyone was guarded were Kai, Cynthia, and the White Ant Bloc.



Later on, Noel received land in Bahar as a reward for meritorious service. Not personally, but for the office of the governor general. It ended up being assigned to a lord in the office of the governor general. With the city of Toldo falling under the direct jurisdiction of the office of the governor general, Noel menaced the empire and put her all into both work and play. When the war rekindled once more with the empire, she was sent to the front to fight and fight and fight. Naturally there were times when she won and times when she lost. Many companions died, and many enemies were slain, yet Noel continued to fight, burdened with many lives. As a result, the Commonwealth was able to increase its sphere of influence without being whittled away itself.

Noel continued diligently in her duties as the governor general, delivering such warnings as, “We are capable right now of destroying the empire and becoming the rulers of this continent,” and others that came out as threats from kings with burgeoning pride. While her job as governor general had gotten more laborious with it now directly controlling land, she felt that the responsibility for all the peoples of the continent would be too much to bear. There were limits to what man could do, and it was important to know them. That was why Noel relied on her friends and companions, and didn’t push herself too far. Assisting her were the usuals, as well as the great numbers of new members of house Bosheit. Noel learned all their names, strengths, and weaknesses; and she placed each in a suitable position. Of course, her own entertainment was always in consideration as well. On her arbitrarily decided birthday, Noel put forward a motion to dismiss herself from the office of governor general in an effort to make a tradition of Cynthia’s scoldings. It always alarmed everyone in an amusing way. When the founding of the city was celebrated in a grand festival, serious and treacherous alike enjoyed the festivities.

Naturally, it wasn’t always fun and pleasant, but also sad and painful. Fortune and misfortune were two sides of the same coin; so too was the weather. All Noel could do was try her hardest to make things as enjoyable as possible. Even still, there were some things that didn’t go well no matter how much time she spent. The reunified

Coimbra, for example, was embroiled in riots and uprisings for over ten years, directly leading to Elgar's untimely death from wounds received in battle. Struck with grief, Illum poisoned herself and died. Their son Norn was crowned king, and Irvan and Perius were appointed his regents. Noel had held Elgar's withered hand right to his final moment. He had desperately tried to tell her something, but she had not been able to make out what it was. Noel took his warhammer as a memento. Though she hadn't wanted it to, the warhammer returned to being her own treasure. Holding the two hammers in a place no one could see her, Noel cried. In accordance with Elgar's dying wishes, Noel thoroughly established a ban on censugrass. The growers had fiercely resisted, but she had removed all of the Coimbran strain with all the brutality of a fiend.



There were many opportunities to crush the empire during Noel's governor generalship. 60% of the continent had already been conquered, and there were many who pressed to push soon and destroy the empire to bring peace to the land while they had the opportunity, but Noel stressed maintaining peace, keeping a conclusion at bay as even if the empire was eliminated, internal conflicts would simply arise. Man could not live without creating enemies. Noel had concluded as such after observing a great many people. She therefore decided it was best to keep the empire neither alive nor dead as a target for wars of revenge. While there would come a time when the peace ended, Noel could maintain it as long as she lived as per her promise when she became the governor general. She had to do what needed to be done.

“Would destroying the empire and placing the Commonwealth in control really bring peace?”

When Noel voiced her opinion to the kings of the Commonwealth, there wasn't a single one who could directly object. History had repeated itself countless times. Maintaining an advantageous position in the rivalry was most profitable. Even the kings with ambition were not courageous enough to oppose Noel and her long record of military service. The armies of the office of the governor general were already well known as the pillar of the Commonwealth.

Ten years after the founding of the Commonwealth, the continual warring between it and the empire was brought to a sudden halt with a peace treaty signed in the city of Levve. Noel represented the Commonwealth, and the treaty was recognised by the fifth emperor of Horsheido. That day brought an end to the first Libelikan war. When

the empire negotiated with the church of the star, the discussion was stormy, but the lengthy expedition finally came to a close with an agreement to much reparation. As for why the talks had even happened, it was a simple matter: the empire had lost all its clout on the continent, and Verdun was presently ruled by the local people. Rather than an imperial expedition, it had become a regular territorial dispute. The wishes of the church of the star to avoid more intervention, and the desire of the empire to avoid a second loss happened to coincide. Fighting on the continent continued.



When discussing the history of the Libelikan Commonwealth, the foremost prominent name was that of the first governor general: Noel Bosheit. Her tracks suddenly vanished on her self-styled fiftieth birthday. It was officially announced that she had died, and the office of the governor general held a grand funeral. The cause of death has been ascribed to things such as dying of a heart attack while playing with Cynthia's children, slipping and falling, choking on a piece of bread, falling from a tree, somehow managing to drown while napping on a riverbank, etcetera, etcetera. There was also talk of her not having died but instead living on in a carefree secret life, or changing her name and moving to Mundonovo, or going on a journey around the world to fulfill her final promise. All of the stories are dubious, but remained dear to those who loved Noel.

At any rate, however, Noel had not appeared upon the public stage since that day. A mountain of treasure had been left in her room in the office of the governor general, but what drew the most attention was a sealed safe, as rumors abounded that she had locked in it the secret to happiness greater than life. The box, however, could not be opened. Locksmiths could not open it, and when struck, the hammer would break rather than the safe. Having decided it couldn't be helped, those who remained collected all her belongings and they are kept together with the most valuable treasures of the commonwealth, two rusted hammers, under strict guard to this day.

As for the contents of the box, assistant to the governor general Cynthia Edrich and head of the governor general's military police Riglette Bosheit left valuable testimony.

"Noel's handwritten notebook is in there. It contains methods to finding happiness, but I don't know the details. She promised to tell me one day, but... well, let's look for the answer out in the world. I feel like I can understand that response."

"Listen, that's just a prank left by an idiot. Paying attention to it is ridiculous. Even if

you work hard and open it, you'll just get a note saying 'too bad,' or something. If you find out how to open it, tell me right away. That's an order."

In any case, the woman known as Noel left the world with many mysteries: where had she been born, from whence came her military prowess, how did she inspire such confidence in her men, where did her favourite bident disappear to, why had she remained youthful in appearance despite her age, how had she died, where was her body, why had she increased house Bosheit so much, and finally, just how much had she accomplished.

At present, a large number of historians follow the trail of the progenitor of house Bosheit, Noel Bosheit. Despite having no children of her own, the Bosheit name remains. Men, women, and children of all races included, they numbered initially ten thousand, and their descendants continued the history of the governor general as soldiers fighting for the Commonwealth with the belief that it connects them to her memory.

Author's Note:

My thoughts on writing are that I want to relay many actions through my words.

Thank you for reading to the very end.



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