

Illustration よし☆ヲ

川口士

魔
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姫

ヴァナディース

8



「煌炎の魔姫。アレクサンドラ・アルシャーヴィン。
ファルフラム

参る」

王魔導弾の魔姫 ヴァナディース

8



「ウルス、です」

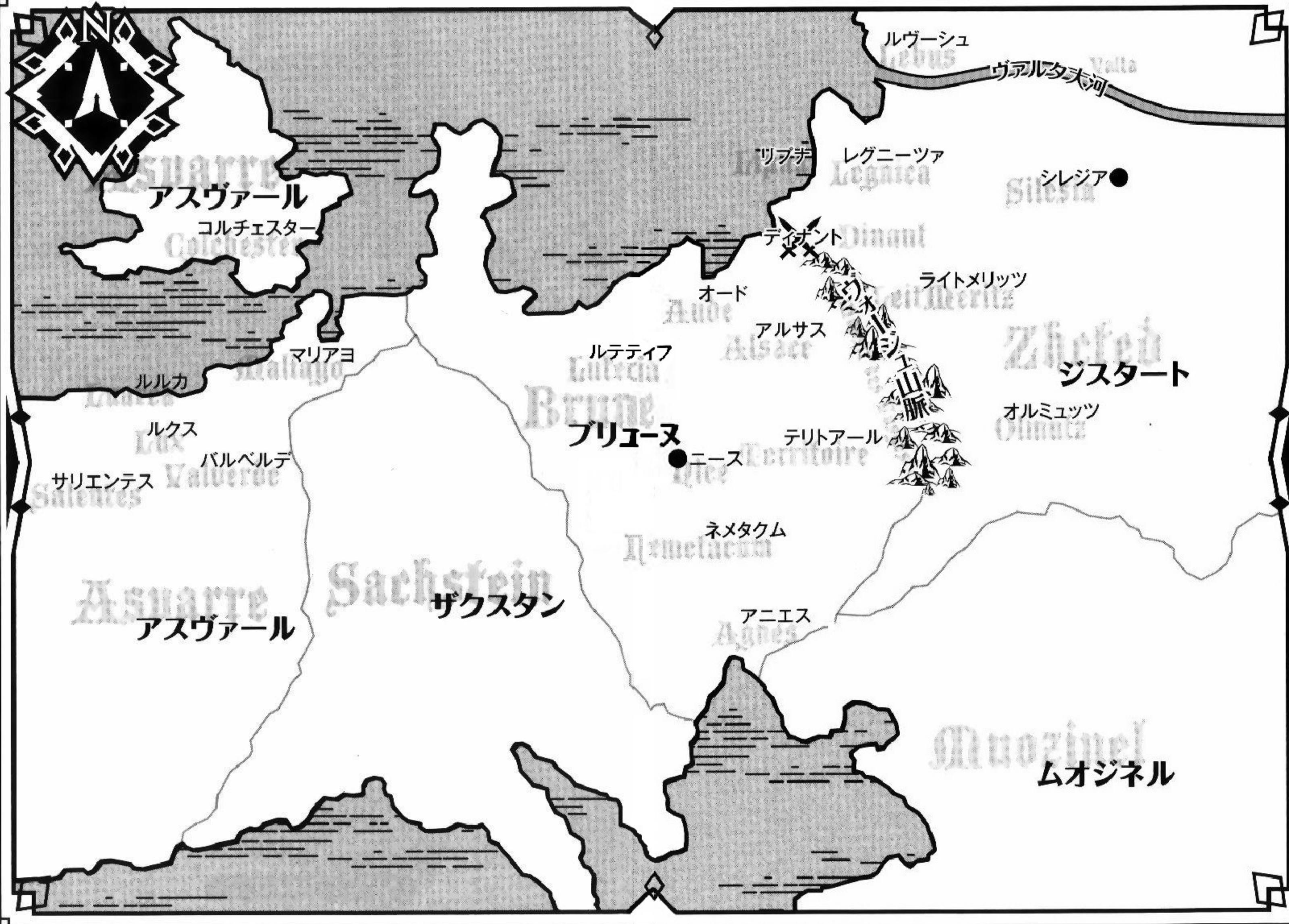
イトスクリーフ
『雷洞の閃姫』

エリザベス

「おまえの名は?」



エレンは身体をこすって汚れをすこしづつ落としはじめた。



Prologue

He recovered his consciousness. At the same time, he thought that it was cold, so much so that the root of his teeth shivered with a chattering sound.

His body shook, too. Rounding his back, as he tightly hugged himself, he first had to endure the cold. He even thought that his body was frozen.

Only after about a count of 1000 had passed did his mood settle down. It was much better compared to the coldness of the night sea, and lukewarm air probably gave him warmth. The youth finally raised his body.

His view was pitch-black and nothing could be seen. He put the bow, which he was tightly grasping, nearby and took off his cold clothes, dripping wet with the sea water. He also took off his trousers and underwear and wringed them. Since he did not have enough strength now, he could not wring them as dry as he had wanted.

As he felt pain to his head and touched it, there was something which appeared to be a wound. Though there was no slippery sensation, his hair was also wet. He sniffed the smell of the hand which touched the wound, and judged that blood seemed to have stopped.

Since he could not calm down as he was naked, he reluctantly wore his clothes which were still wet and cold. And then, the youth recognized that he was standing on a solid ground.

"...Where am I?"

Though a stupid question, the person himself was extremely serious about it. The youth's name was Tigrevurmud Vorn. Those close to him called him by his nickname "Tigre". Rummaging through his darkish red hair, Tigre desperately traced his memory of before losing consciousness.

Tigre was a noble of the Brune Kingdom, but due to various circumstances, he was currently in the position of guest General of the Zchted Kingdom. And as a messenger of that Zchted, he was in the Asvarre Kingdom until the other day.

He left Asvarre in a ship, and that ship was attacked by a Demon on their way back to Zchted in a few days. Tigre fell into the sea during the fight against the Demon and lost consciousness.

Recalling up to there, Tigre muttered again the question of earlier.

Where am I?

It was unlikely that Sophia Obertas alias Sophie, Olga Tamm, Matvey and company who were boarding the same ship saved him. If it was them, they should have done a more proper medical treatment.

There was no way that they would have left him drenched as is without even changing his clothes and putting a piece of blanket on him.

In other words, it was something different that saved him from the night sea.

Tigre picked up the bow that he put at his feet. Though it was a heirloom, Tigre learned just about a year ago that it possessed a mysterious power. That power often saved the youth from predicaments.

As he looked around at his surroundings, a light could be seen ten steps ahead. Tigre was walking up to there while staggering. He did not yet have power in his legs.

When he became aware of what that light was, Tigre unintentionally frowned.

It was surrounded by a wall on three sides there, and several things like short stones pillars respectively extended from the floor and ceiling. All the stones pillars reached only to Tigre's knees and the surface was rugged as if shaved from a rock.

Most of the stones pillars were pitch-black, but several other than that were wrapped in a white light. This was where the light came from.

『It has been a while.』

A woman's voice resounded out of nowhere. Tigre strongly grasped the bow and looked around while being on guard. But, the figure of the owner's voice was nowhere to be seen. No, Tigre thought. Maybe the space itself wrapped in this darkness might be the owner of the voice. He called out towards the darkness.

"It's you, who saved me, right?"

『Indeed.』

The owner of the voice affirmed.

"...First of all, I thank you for having saved me."

Tigre honestly bowed his head towards the darkness while saying "thank you".

"Why did you save me?"

『I said it before, right? "Deep in the darkness of night atop a mountain of corpses". Since the conditions were met, I just lent you a little hand. —That dormant child probably did not notice.』

He did not quite catch the latter half of her lines as she said them while muttering.

---Come to think of it, I have a feeling that I was told something like that before.

It was nearly one year ago. Since there were also other surprising things at that time, he had completely forgotten.

『You have forgotten, I guess.』

"Such a thing... No, um, I am sorry."

Although she hit the bull's eye in the voice that got more like mischief and he reflexively tried to deny it, Tigre shook his head and frankly apologized. A chuckle was heard from the darkness. Tigre pulled himself together and asked.

"By the way, where am I? And what about the ship I was boarding?"

『I cannot answer the first question. And about the second, I do not know.』

It was an honest reply. Tigre sighed and posed a question again.

"About the second question, what do you mean by you don't know?"

『I only saved you. I am not interested in anything other than it.』

"Can't you get me back to that place?"

『In the night sea?』

With fear and coldness brought back in his mind, Tigre's body trembled on its own. He would die this time for sure. However, he could not afford to be in a place like this forever. He entreated.

"Can't you do it other than by sea?"

『Where?』

Tigre was taken aback by the short question. Where did he want to go back to?

Alsace? LeitMeritz? Brune? Or Zchted?

The peaceful scenery of the hometown, where he was born and raised, and the smile of the silver-haired girl flashed simultaneously across his mind. Both were irreplaceable things for the youth. And then, the face of important people floated in his head.

『Oh yeah, the direction facing the sea will probably be good.』

Was it because she saved him when he fell into the sea? After a little thought, Tigre expressed his wish.

"—To Zchted."

That was it for now. The situation where he was placed now did not allow him to go back to his beloved hometown.

『Well then, I shall send you.』

The owner of the voice laughed and added.

『However, even I cannot determine where you will land in Zchted.』

Before understanding the meaning of those words, Tigre's consciousness rapidly receded.

Chapter 1 - Olsina

The bright moon of autumn quietly illuminated the group of ships, which floated on the night sea.

It was the warships of Legnica. It was composed of thirty one small galley ships called "Spear(Beaker)" and three large galley ships called "Crossbow(Rook)". Each ship hung big lanterns which lighted fire at the prow and the stern. They measured the distance to other ships by this light.

The subjugation of the pirates on the heels of the Zchted Kingdom was their purpose.

At the prow of the flagship "{{furigana |Iron Lion|Zhelezo Lev}}" of this fleet, one girl was currently up against a monster.

She was 22-year-old this year. Her glossy black hair trimmed around her shoulders, she wrapped her slender body with a black battle outfit.

In spite of her lovely features and body build, the presence of the two small swords grasped in both her hands and the fighting spirit colored in her black pupils did not give a lovely and delicate impression.

Alexandra Alshavin was the young girl's name. Those close to her called her by her nickname "Sasha". She was the supreme commander of this fleet and one of the seven Vanadis of Zchted.

The swords in Sasha's hands had respectively golden and vermillion colors and they were clad in crimson flames. It was not that something was burning. The blades themselves were emitting flames.

Those two blades with a mysterious power were Sasha's Dragonic Tool(Viralt), the Luminous Flame Bargren. It was also called "Twin Blades of Demonic Force(Toki no Sojin)".

The monster before her was looking down at the Vanadis of black clothing with a faint smile. His big frame was more than twice Sasha's, his shoulders and chest greatly swelled and he was burly enough to make one think that he could crush a human with one hand. There was a gruesome scar from his right shoulder to his right chest.

There was no body hair, and there was an uncanny texture in his white skin. Three curved horns had grown from his forehead and the right half of

his atrocious face reminiscent of an ogre coming out of a fairy tale was hideously burned.

The monster's right arm was cut around the elbow. The part that was cut from the elbow became a white lump of meat and fell down on the deck.

The monster went by the name Torbalan. Sasha had heard rumor of such a demon, but it was actually the first time she saw him.

However, Sasha did not falter. She set up her twin swords and carefully shortened the interval. The scars on the monster's face and shoulder were something he already had, but Torbalan's cut right arm was Sasha's doing just now. Since it was an opponent on whom blades had no effect, she did not hesitate.

---How will he attack...?

What she understood from Torbalan's attack patterns so far was that he was proud of his amazing superhuman strength. Moreover, he released an invisible shock wave from his whole body. However, since it was a monster, it was not necessarily limited to this much. As expected, even Sasha could not predict what kind of other attack means he had.

---I remembered that Olga said something.

Sasha tried to recall what the Vanadis Olga who fought against this monster said, but she had no recollection of information other than that he could release shock waves. It was a tough situation.

"It's a splendid display of skill."

Torbalan picked up his arm which fell down on the deck. Though the cut part was burnt black by the flame of the blades, the monster pressed it against the wound with practiced hands movements.

White smoke rose from the cut section. Ahead of the look of Sasha, who revealed a puzzled face, Torbalan removed his hand.

The arm did not fall. The Demon's right arm, which should have been cut, was connected (joined) as if such a thing never happened. Sasha was dumbfounded by this, too. It was not of the dimension of fast healing.

---This is... So, even if I cut his head, there is no guarantee he will die.

A line of cold sweat streamed down the black-haired Vanadis' temple. Torbalan waved his right arm so as to check its condition.

While the tense atmosphere increased its intensity, suddenly, a noise which rode on the night air reached her ears. Many lights appeared in a faraway place and were drawing near this place while swaying irregularly.

Sasha immediately understood that it was the soldiers and sailors. They probably heard the sound when Torbalan destroyed the gunwale and prow with the shock wave and came to check the situation.

Impatience blurred on Sasha's face. The soldiers aboard the flagship were all elite, and the opponent was an inhuman monster. It was not as different as facing a dragon.

It was when they were about to step forward, aware of the danger.

"—I shall retreat here."

These unexpected words leaked out from the monster's mouth. Torbalan took a step back while merrily watching the group of torches that were approaching. Sasha frowned and switched her twin swords to a defense stance. It might be a trap. She could not let her guard down.

The deck shook to a heavy, yet dull impact as Torbalan kicked it and jumped.

But, it was not an action for attack. The monster's big frame crossed over the gunwale and fell to the night sea. A bunch of loud sounds of water were intermittently heard.

---No way, did he really run away...?

Or did he invite them by making them think so?

As she started to run up to the gunwale, Sasha stopped her movement. She stared straight at the darkness motionless. She stayed just like that for a time of about ten counts.

---It lessens, huh.

Sasha took a small breath. She did not stop because of her wariness against the monster, but due to the pain that occurred within her body. The pain was not that much acute and only to the degree of making slightly dulling her movements, but it could not be ignored in this situation.

The soldiers and sailors, who gathered with torches blazing of flame in hand, stood motionless at the sight of the surroundings' disastrous scene. They came to their senses as they saw Sasha's figure; their expression changed and they rushed over.

"Vanadis-sama, are you safe?"

"...I'm all right. You don't need to worry about me."

Sasha's reply was delayed for a moment, but no one noticed it in the hectic atmosphere. While putting the twin swords in which flame disappeared in her waist, the black-haired Vanadis continued.

"I was attacked by something. When I cut it, it ran away. Since it was dark, I don't really know what it was, but it may have been a sea dragon(badva)."

Thinking that it would only scare them more than necessary if she was to talk about Torbalan, Sasha intermingled lie and fact and explained to her subordinates.

Everyone, who was boarding this ship, knew the story that a fleet returning from Asvarre was attacked by a sea dragon(badva). It should have been very easier to understand than the monster.

"There may be some people who fell into the sea. Even if it's just around the ship, please, search them."

"Understood. Vanadis-sama, please wait for the report in the cabin."

It was the captain of the "Iron Lion(Zhelezo Lev)" who respectfully bowed. He was an excellent man, be it as a sailor or as a warrior, and it was for this reason that Sasha chose this ship in which he served as the captain as the flagship.

However, Sasha shook her head at the captain's offer.

"I will stay here until the search is completed. After all, if the sea dragon(badva) was to appear again, I would be to kill it."

The sailors looked at each other; certainly, no one except the black-haired Vanadis could face the sea dragon(badva).

"Vanadis-sama, please use this."

Among the sailors, Matvey stepped forward and held out a blanket to Sasha. He was a Charismatic man who was the owner of an outstanding

large build body even compared to the sailors around, a fierce look and crimson coat on which a White Dolphin was stitched on the back. He was a former sailor.

He was also a man to whom Sasha had a deep trust. He volunteered himself for this battle and boarded the ship.

"Thank you."

Sasha did not feel as cold thanks to the Dragonic Tool(Viralt) hung on her waist, but she appreciated Matvey's consideration, thanked him and received the blanket. The black-haired Vanadis who put it on lost herself in thought while watching the sailors' work. She wondered what that monster's purpose was.

"Matvey. There is something I want to ask you."

As Sasha called out to the scary looking giant in a lower voice, he sent a signal with a look to the captain and left the place with casual steps. The sailors were busily moving around and almost no one had noticed that the two people's figures disappeared.

Also because most of the sailors had been roped in work at the prow, there were few people on the stern's side. As Sasha stopped and looked back, she directly cut to the chase.

"Could you tell me more about the monster that attacked you riding on a sea dragon(badva)?"

Matvey's expression completely changed at these words. Suddenly swallowing his loud voice that was about to come out, the former sailor confirmed in a voice that repressed his intense feelings.

"Did that guy appear?"

"Probably. It was the first time I saw him."

As he nodded to that answer, Matvey talked once again about the appearance of the monster he saw. Sasha, who heard it, confirmed that there was no doubt that it was the same monster.

"He is in the vicinity..."

Matvey shook his large build and scowled at the night sea. His emotions which were mixed with anger and fear were swaying within the man's pupils. Waiting for him to calm down, Sasha opened her mouth.

"Please, keep this secret to everyone. Since there is the coming battle with the pirates, I don't want to upset the soldiers and sailors."

"But, Vanadis-sama. There is the possibility of Torbalan leading the pirates..."

"That monster?"

Though Sasha looked doubtful, she immediately recalled what Olga and the others said. Torbalan disguised himself as a human called Lester and concealed himself in the Asvarre Kingdom; he was accompanied by soldiers and was responsible of the defense of a Fort.

After a little thought, Sasha shook her head and said.

"Let's keep silent about it. Even if I explain it to the captains of each ship, we don't have enough evidence to make them believe it. But, you're right... Let's opt for instructions along the line 'if the flagship raises a yellow flag, then hurriedly retreat' for example, in such a special situation."

"Understood."

Matvey nodded with a sigh of relief. Like this, in case the sea dragon(badva) appeared, he could explain with an easy-to-understand example.

When the two people returned to the prow, the number of sailors decreased as the work was coming to an end and the commotion had also been settled. The ship's captain spotted Sasha and Matvey and walked towards them.

"Vanadis-sama. Excuse me, you should change the flagship."

"Is the damage so bad?"

Sasha furrowed her eyebrows. The captain nodded with a sad look which could not conceal his regret. Serving as the flagship of a fleet of this scale was, for a sailor, a great honor. Moreover, the supreme commander was the Vanadis Sasha. It must have been a tough decision after a very thorough thinking.

"It can endure the sailing and battle, but as expected, it's impossible to restore it in one night. Keep using a ship in such a state as Vanadis-sama's flagship will be our shame."

The black-haired Vanadis guessed the captain's innermost thoughts which he could not put into words. Sasha and company were scheduled to join with the fleet of Lebus tomorrow. He probably did not want to show the people of Lebus the figure of his master boarding a damaged ship. With a wry smile, Sasha answered that she understood.

"Well then, please give me your opinion about which ship should be used as the new flagship."

The Iron Lion(Zhelezo Lev) was a Crossbow(Rook) type galley ship, and there were another two ships of the same type.

The captain recommended a ship named "Armor Fish(Dospe Ryba)". The captain of the "Armor Fish(Dospe Ryba)" was a man named Pavel who was once a subordinate of the captain of the Iron Lion(Zhelezo Lev).

Pavel who heard the order to make his ship the flagship was surprised at first, before being pleased; and then when he learnt of the circumstances, he thought about his past boss's regret and deeply sighed. But, he soon put on a serious expression, directed his crews and went to pick up Sasha.

After hearing once again the story from the captain of the Iron Lion(Zhelezo Lev) and tapping his shoulder so as to comfort him, Pavel advanced up to Sasha.

"I thank you from the bottom of my heart for having chosen my ship as the flagship. Although this body lacks ability, I shall exert this poor ability for Vanadis-sama."

Pavel was 45-year-old now. His back was slightly plumper than the average, and he was wearing leather armor on which a large quantity of iron scraps was sewed in scale shape. When he bowed to Sasha, the iron scraps sewed on the armor made a sound as they rubbed against each other. Though his manners were sloppy, the sincerity in his expression and tone could be felt.

"I am sorry for the short notice, but please take care of me."

And while Sasha was moving to the new flagship, the search was over.

Although it was found out that about three sailors were missing, they did not even find their bodies in spite of the strenuous search.

The next day, Sasha meet with the fleet of Lebus as scheduled.

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The sky was clear blue, and under the glittering sun, the sea was boundlessly spreading with vividness as if melting the jasper^[1]. The fleet of Lebus appeared from the other side of the sea.

Similarly, the warships of Lebus were composed of two types of ships like Legnica, that's, the small galley ships and the large galley ships. Although the details were different, they were not that much different in terms of performance (efficiency).

The flagship of the Lebus troops was a small galley ship called "Margarita". Unlike in Legnica, which often used the name of animals, in Lebus female names were mainly given to ships.

Fluttering aloft the mast were the Black Dragon flag(Zirnitra), which was the banner of the Zchted Kingdom, and the large banner of Lebus. In the vivid purple ground even from a distant view, the golden whip, which made the design of her Dragic Tool(Viralt) "Lightning Flash of Broken Calamity(Saika no Sentei)" Valitsaif, was drawing a splendid arc.

The supreme commandant was Elizavetta Fomina also known as the "Flash Princess of the Thunder Swirl(Isgrifa)". The Vanadis of "Rainbow eyes(Laziris)" born with left and right pupils of different colors showed up that day wearing also a gorgeous purple dress with plenty of laces and frills.

Roundly bundling and holding the black whip at the waist — Valitsaif, and letting her red hair and the hem of her dress flutter about, she was standing at the prow of the Margarita.

Her dignified attitude and beauty were enough to make even the Legnica soldiers, who were not holding a good impression of Lebus, leak a sigh of admiration. The Lebus troops retreated so as not to conflict against the Legnica troops, and only the ship Margarita moved forward.

The Armor Fish(Dospe Ryba) waved the large banner of Legnica, which showed that it was the flagship and informed the Margarita of its position.

With gold and vermillion blades crossed diagonally on a yellow background, it was also a design that was eye-catching as much as Lebus's.

The Lebus soldiers and sailors had lined up on the Margarita's deck, and they were sending a challenging look to the Legnica troops.

The Legnica troops confronted to it did not lose, either. After all, the soldiers and sailors, who were lined up on the deck, returned a glare in response to it. Both parties were thinking "we are only comrades just for this time". Sasha could only smile wryly.

The Margarita came alongside the Armor Fish(Dospe Ryba). Elizavetta accompanied by two captains got on the Armor Fish(Dospe Ryba). In fact, Sasha intended to go to Elizavetta's flagship in today's war council. However, the Vanadis of Rainbow eyes(Laziris) declined it and instead came up to here.

One did not know whether she did it out of consideration of Sasha's physical condition, or she simply hated inviting the Legnica soldiers to her ships. Or it might be both.

Sasha stepped forward and held out her hand so as to welcome her.

"Welcome. Thank you for coming all the way here."

However, Elizavetta did not take her hand. As she stuck out her chest, folded her arms and glared at the Legnica soldiers standing behind Sasha, she opened her mouth with a disinterested expression.

"We don't have much time. Let's quickly begin."

The war council was carried out in a cabin of the Armor Fish(Dospe Ryba). Aside from Sasha and Elizavetta, there were four men. There were two from Lebus's side, one captain from Legnica's side. And Matvey.



On top of the big worktable fixed to the floor, several sea charts and pieces were placed. The six people surrounded the worktable and looked down at them. Elizavetta said.

"We have thirty one ships. That's Five big ships and twenty six small ships."

"Our side has thirty four ships. Namely three big ships and thirty one small ships."

The enemy was about eighty ships. Though it was something they knew, even if summing both armies, they were fewer than the pirates.

It is said that a numerical factor/advantage is more effective in a battle of the sea than in the battle over land. In addition of being a vast battlefield, this was not because there was a big difference in performance between friend and foe's ships, but because the attack methods were also limited.

"About the enemy movement... Our scout ship detected about ten pirate ships yesterday."

In response to Sasha's words, the captain of the Legnica troops put a piece on the chart. Elizavetta turned her pupils of different colors towards the captains of her own army.

"Even the scout ship we sent have discovered the enemy yesterday's afternoon. Similarly, it seemed that about ten ships that they noticed were escaping to the west."

A new piece was put on the chart. The captains shortly groaned. They could not yet narrow down the enemy position only with these two. Elizavetta folded her arms and turned a provocative look towards Sasha.

"Alexandra. Can you let me hear your opinion?"

"They have investigated our position and number while aiming at Zchted."

Sasha received the red-haired Vanadis' look and replied with a gentle demeanor.

"Let's assume that the number of pirate ships is eighty. I think that they divided it into eight parties of ten ships, and after deciding of the meeting place beforehand, each party proceeded at different angles. The enemy discovered by our scout ship was probably different from the enemy found by yours."

Matvey nodded, impressed.

"I see. Now that you mention it, with a large army of eighty ships, they must have a hard time with both mobilization and anchorage; but with about ten ships, it's easier to anchor in small islands of the neighborhood."

There were countless small islands located in the sea which spread from Zchted to Asvarre, and some had been used as hideouts of pirates. Not only Zchted, but also countries such as Brune and Asvarre happened to dispatch warships in such small islands more than once and cleaned up the pirates.

However, new pirates settled in these islands as one or two years passed.

No matter how much money and manpower they were, it was not enough to manage every single island, and having no choice but to deal with them at all such times was the actual circumstances.

"Isn't there a possibility that those guys shut themselves in small islands?"

Elizavetta stared at the chart and raised a question. Sasha shook her head.

"I don't think that they have enough food to get through the winter."

The wind carrying cold air incessantly swept over the sea of winter, and the waves also increased their intensity. Since there was also the danger of freezing to death in addition to the overturn, even merchant ships hardly left ports in winter. It meant that they would be no prey for pirates, and if the food on hand was used up, they would continue starving afterward.

"Vanadis-dono. As you said, let's assume that the pirates are divided into parties of ten ships each and they advance. Isn't it possible to think that they let us go past and aim straight at the continent?"

One of the captains of Lebus asked Sasha with a cautious tone.

"If they are blessed with wind, they might do so."

Sasha's reply considered the other party's viewpoint. If she did not feel the need, she would just have cut in by saying "it's impossible".

"But, in that case, they would then throw away their advantage of large army. Furthermore, they would expose their back and flank to us, who are chasing them in return. Also, if the enemy number is around ten ships, they

would probably be being held in the port town. We should just advance while crushing each one of them."

The captain of Lebus shook his big body and groaned, and Elizavetta from the side butted in.

"The pirates will first crush us and attack the port town driving the momentum. You seem to think so. As our side which falls behind in number, how do you intend to fight?"

"You're right. Shall we hear what you propose?"

Sasha turned a slightly nasty smile towards Elizavetta. Though Elizavetta squinted in displeasure, she stuck out her chest and responded.

"Divide the enemy and crush them one by one. Avoid enemies with great number, or break through and aim at the flagship. We only have these two options in this situation. I want to move by the option which aims at the enemy flagship."

"Then, let's do this way. The battle formation will be the center, the right wing and the left wing; after that, as for the organization of the reserves troops in the rear..."

Sasha picked up several pieces and displayed them on the chart.

"Legnica will take charge of the center and the left wing. I will have Lebus in charge of the right wing and the rear. From here on, it will depend on the enemy's attitude, but in case where the enemy's right wing is weak, Legnica will attack the enemy's right wing together, and crush them. In case where the enemy's left wing is weak, then it will be Lebus to do so."

"...you said together, but do you mean that, in case that Legnica moves, both the center and the left wing shall become one group?"

With her pupils of different colors retaining unexpectedness and vigilance, Elizavetta asked. Sasha answered with her unchanging serene expression.

"Indeed. In case that Lebus is to attack, of course Legnica will support the offensive at the enemy."

One wrong move and they might give the opportunity to the enemy to crush them one by one. It was a stern move hard to imagine from Sasha's

calm demeanor, and the other captains could say nothing because of too much nervousness and admiration. Only Elizavetta was not shaken.

"And in case that the enemy's right and left wings are thick to the same extent?"

"I want Lebus to attack. We will support you for a long time after all."

"In case we were to move, there would be no reserves troops left, you know?"

Originally, the reserves troops were a unit for supplying in situation where the military power was absolutely necessary.

"We are fewer than the enemy. Some patience is required."

Sasha answered without hesitation, and Elizavetta revealed a satisfied smile.

"I heard that you were in convalescence, but it looks like it's needless to worry."

Afterward, they moved to trivial arrangements such as the signal of attack. They finished all these in about a quarter koku; and Sasha hailed Elizavetta who were about to leave the cabin with her captains.

"Elizavetta. I have something to tell you."

Although the red-haired Vanadis looked back with a dubious face, she told her two captains to wait outside as she realized that Sasha's expression was serious. Sasha also gave a signal with a look to the captain of her army and had him wait outside.

Only the three people Sasha, Elizavetta and Matvey remained in the room. In the indoor atmosphere where feeling of high tension drifted even more than during the war council, Elizavetta felt slightly confused.

"This is a serious talk." Sasha said as introduction.

"Have you ever seen a Demon?"

A silence of one minute of breathing fully controlled the cabin.

"Huh?"

What broke it was the reaction of Elizavetta, who could not hide her amazement. Sasha and Matvey looked at each other so as to say that her expression was understandable. But, they could not afford to end the talk like this.

"I didn't say this to surprise (scare) or deceive you. There is no helping if you hear so, but it is true."

Sasha winked at Matvey next to her. It was for this purpose that she had him to be there since the war council.

Matvey talked about the matter where the ship which was returning from Asvarre was attacked by Torbalan and a sea dragon(badva), while being careful so as not to become emotional. It was at this time that Elizavetta learned for the first time of the news of Olga, whom she did not know the whereabouts, and that Tigre fell into the sea.

"He~e. So Olga came back."

Elizavetta revealed a scornful smile. She did not know what kind of reason Olga had, but Olga who she could only see as someone, who ran away from what she should do was an object of contempt for Elizavetta.

Although Matvey frowned, he refrained from rebuttal. He understood that even if he was to talk about Olga's personality here, it would not have any meaning.

"But, Alexandra. In the letter that I received from you the other day, I think it was only written about the sea dragon(badva)."

"I'm sorry about it. At that time, I myself was half in doubt about the existence of Demons. Even though I know that there is no way Sophie... Sophia would tell such a lie. And I was not expecting that I would also get involved in it."

Sasha frankly admitted her fault and lowered her head. Though Elizavetta suspiciously narrowed her eyes, it was not about the black-haired Vanadis' attitude, but about the contents of the speech.

"What do you mean by getting involved?"

"Last night, my ship was attacked."

At Elizavetta, who opened wide her eyes, Sasha talked about the time she encountered Torbalan at the prow of the Iron Lion(Zhelezo Lev) last night

with an indifferent tone. Even about the monster's appearance and his paranormal abilities.

"Torbalan disguises himself as human and lay hidden in the Asvarre Kingdom. He was left with the defense of a Fort, and he seems to have the ability to command three thousand soldiers. The possibility of him leading the pirates is non negligible."

"...Is there any evidence except the fact that he attacked your ship?"

"From the number of ships, eighty vessels, we can guess that the pirates number easily exceed ten thousand. Bringing together that much number of people and make them go not towards Asvarre or Brune, but towards Zchted. Don't you think it required a considerable amount of ability?"

Elizavetta dropped her eyes to the worktable, and sank into silence as if to verify Sasha's words. Before long, she asked with a sigh.

"What is that monster's purpose?"

"I don't know. According to Sophia and Olga, he seems to know something about Vanadis. Anyway, in this battle, I want you to keep in mind that Torbalan may appear from anywhere and attack."

"I gratefully accept your advice. —Are we done talking with this?"

As Sasha nodded, Elizavetta turned her back letting the hem of her dress flutter about. Though Matvey was about to move to send her off, she opened the door by herself earlier than it.

"Well then, see you again tomorrow."

She said so and walked away. Matvey put on an amazed face, and Sasha saw off Elizabeth with a wry smile.

"Will it be all right?"

"I said what I had to say. I can only expect that it will be."

Sasha's tone of voice got dry. Although she did not hate Elizavetta, she did not hold so much trust to her as to rely on her, either.

In a place ahead of the sea of about a day and a half from the sea area to the west where the fleet of Legnica and Lebus had gathered, there was an island called Olsina.

The origin of the name was not known. Since it was called so since ancient times, one wondered whether it was not probably the name of the person, who discovered it. On the uninhabited island with nothing but rocks, merchant ships, which often happened to pass by the neighborhood, took a rest and anchored to avoid wind and rain.

And now in that uninhabited island, indeed eighty ships were anchored. The folded sails were painted in pitch-black and eerie, huge eyes were drawn at the prow.

All were pirate ships. It was a group led by Torbalan across the sea from Asvarre. As Sasha predicted, they advanced while dividing into ten ships each and investigated the enemy movement, but they gathered to this island by order of the leader Torbalan.

Torbalan called the captain of each squad in the center of the island, and held a war council. His identity being hidden, he acted as the human called Lester, the same as the time when he had lay hidden in Asvarre.

Though Torbalan sat on a wooden chair that was brought by a subordinate, the captains sat down on the ground. It was a scene like that of a King and his retainers.

"What is the number?"

Torbalan asked a question and the captains answered in turn. The pirates' number had decreased by nearly three hundred people compared to when they left Asvarre. If there were those, who died from aggravation of injury and accident during the voyage, they were also those, who ran away. This result was within Torbalan's range of expectation.

"What about the weapons, food and water?"

While shaking their body to the cold wind which drifted the sign of winter, the pirates answered. That there were enough weapons, and that food and water could last another two days, too.

As Torbalan contentedly nodded, he told with a happy smile and voice.

"We will leave this island in the early morning of the day after tomorrow, and engage the Zchted army."

A wave of tension and shiver ran among the captains. They were originally pirate veterans, but they had never fought against the army of one country from the front and moreover on such a scale. Applying a surprise attack on the merchant ships and its escort ships, depriving them and burning them was their way of doing.

"The enemy has approximately sixty ships. As I thought, there are fewer than us. If we were to defeat these sixty ships, there is nothing that will get on our way up to the port town which lined up in the coast. You shall attack it, deprive it and burn it to your heart's content."

Cold sweat blurred on several pirates' faces. For them, Torbalan's cheerful voice sounded like that of a monster out of a fairy tale which invited one into deep darkness.

In that fairy tale, those invited were deprived of the sense of sight, then, the sense of smell and hearing within the darkness, and the sense of their whole body gradually became dull with them no longer knowing whether they are moving forward or they are turning back; and they would have been greedily devoured by the monster lurking within the darkness.

The pirates' imagination was right in a sense. After all, the person sitting before them was not human. But, there was no one who noticed that.

"—Gerhard. Moritz. Albert."

Among the captains sitting in front of Torbalan, the three people whose names were called stood up.

Gerhard was a big man whose face was nearly half covered with red hair and beard. Owner of a burly body, he had a double-edged battle axe and a dagger put on his waist as weapons.

In contrast to Gerhard, Moritz was a short man of small stature. He had short golden hair and no beard. This man's weapon was two daggers hung on the waist.

Albert had a gloomy face and was usually less talkative. But, he was a brave man enough to take the lead and charge once a battle began. The spear, which was put at his feet, was this man's weapon.

"I leave the rear to Gerhard, the left wing to Moritz and the right wing to Albert."

It was not only for a wide range reconnaissance that Torbalan divided the eighty ships into eight squads, but also for the purpose to ascertain the ability of the captains of each squad. These three people passed his selection. They had enough capability, be it as warriors or as captains.

"Rest up to tomorrow night and recharge your batteries. Drink as much sake and water as you want and eat to your heart's content."

At Torbalan's instructions, the captains simultaneously bowed their heads so as to show their gratitude. But, on their faces staring at the ground, it was not joy, but resignation mixed with awe that was blurring.

They had accurately sensed that the supreme commander's intention was not just to raise the morale of his allies, but that he also intended to cut off their retreat by not giving room in food and water.

And the captains also understood that they no longer had any choice except to follow him.

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It was the early afternoon of the next day that the scout ships of Legnica and Lebus' Allied Forces discovered the eighty pirate ships which had anchored on Olsina Island.

Sasha and Elizavetta, who received the report, headed towards Olsina Island at less than half the normal speed in order to let the soldiers and sailors rest in turns. Now that they knew the enemy position, there was really no need to rush. Moreover, there was another reason to drop the speed for the Legnica troops.

This day, Sasha had a fever since morning and was lying in bed. The fact that she was steadily conscious and she had meal even a little made the doctor, the captain Pavel and her personal attendant Matvey, who were riding together in the flagship, relieved.

"I cannot do much while we are heading for the battlefield, but please calm down and slowly rest your body."

Though the old doctor who grew his white beard long revealed a smile, from his shaking eyes, one could easily guess that he was irritated at himself, who could only say such a thing. Matvey and Pavel were standing side by side behind the doctor and were looking down at Sasha with grim faces.

"Vanadis-sama. Please, do not push yourselves too much. Vanadis-sama rides on this ship and is in the same battlefield as us. Just that alone gets the soldiers fired up."

When Pavel spoke words of comfort, Matvey also said with a smile.

"When something would be up, we may also leave it to Vanadis-sama of Lebus. I understand your feelings, but please do not overdo it."

That 'something' Matvey said, referred to Torbalan in this case. So as not to reveal it even to Pavel, the captain of this Armor Fish(Dospe Ryba), he shaded it off.

"Yes. Thank you."

On the forehead of Sasha, who answered so, sweat blurred and some of her black hairs had clung. The old doctor softly wiped the sweat with a clean towel.

Leaving Sasha to the doctor, Pavel and Matvey left the room. They looked at each other.

"Do the soldiers know about this?"

Asked by Matvey, Pavel shook his head.

"But, since we left the port town of Lippner, Vanadis-sama behaved as much as possible so that her figure catches the soldiers' attention. Those with good intuition may have noticed though."

"I wonder if we can't keep on covering it the whole day by the war council. Given the distance between the enemy movement and us, tomorrow will be the battle. If we explain so, there won't be any doubt."

"At any rate, given the situation, the Allied Forces are troublesome. It can't stop suddenly, either."

As Pavel irritatingly shook his body, the scales of the armor he was wearing made a strange sound as they rubbed against each other. Both Matvey and Pavel wanted to rest until Sasha's physical condition improved, but they could not help being furious in the situation where they could not say such a thing.

Early morning of the next day, the pirates finally left Olsina Island.

Back to the western sky that the white light of morning could not yet reach, a deep black outline of a ship appeared. It which looked at first like one ship increased to two, then to four ships in a blink of an eye, and spread through the azure sea.

The scout ships which were near Olsina Island immediately returned to the side of the Legnica and Lebus Allied Forces. At this time, the Allied Forces were in the sea area in about ten Belsta (about ten kilometers) to the southeast from the Olsina Island. Both soldiers and sailors were in a state where they could move at any time.

"—Let's depart."

Standing at the prow of the Armor Fish(Dospe Ryba), Sasha calmly told. Fortunately, her fever calmed down in one night, and she was on the deck with a composed attitude. The morale of the soldiers and sailors rose at her appearance, and they strove to work with vigor which blew off the cold air at dawn. Matvey and Pavel also stroked their chest in relief.

Regarding the Lebus troops, too, Elizavetta showed her dignified figure at the prow of the Margarita. As they must not fall behind the Legnica troops, the fleet of thirty one ships went forward as it sliced through the waves.

And then, it was when about one koku had passed that both armies recognized each other's figures. The sun was not yet as a small deer top, and it would be the period of time where one wondered whether or not those living in cities and towns had finished eating breakfast.

One could not say that bright clouds spread thinly in the sky, and the wind showed no signs of being able to count on both the blowing direction and its strength. Both the Allied Forces and the pirates already folded sail and switched to navigation with only paddles.

Though the distance between both armies was about two Belsta (about two kilometers), both sides did not immediately advanced their ships and clashed. At one sea area, a little less than one hundred fifty ships in total (counting both armies) floated. Between the sky and the sea, the sound of drums and trumpets echoed, and even just reforming the lineup was not easy task.

The small galley ship Margarita, which could move faster than the big galley ship Armor Fish(Dospe Ryba), advanced before the fleet of the Allied Forces while leaving trails of white waves. Though it was for confirmation of the lineup, it was also meant to encourage the soldiers.

Elizavetta who was standing at the prow of the Margarita suddenly turned her eyes around when they were passing in front of the Armor Fish(Dospe Ryba). Her eyes and the eyes of Sasha who was standing at the prow of the Armor Fish(Dospe Ryba) met.

As Sasha smiled, she unsheathed the twin swords at her waist and raised them high. Getting hooked on it, Elizavetta tightly grasped in her right hand the black whip, which was roundly bundled and raised it so as to push up her fist. From between the soldiers and sailors, who saw it, cheers also similar to battle cry arose.

In a place far away from the Armor Fish(Dospe Ryba), Elizavetta lowered her right hand. It was not only due to the cold sea breeze that her face had been dyed red.

The Legnica and Lebus Allied Forces formed a lineup almost as planned.

The Legnica troops led by Sasha took charge of the main troops of the center and the left wing. It was a distribution of twenty ships to the center and fourteen to the left wing. Commanding the left wing was a knight named Zaul, who had plenty experience of pirate subjugation. He was a man who had enough ability to be left alone in charge of one side of the battlefield.

The Lebus troops led by Elizavetta took charge of the right wing and the rear. They were twenty ships to the right wing and eleven to the rear.

The pirates also finished deploying their eighty ships. The flagship "Boogeyman" where Torbalan rode on was hoisting a large flag floating to the mast. It was something ominous, which drew red eyes on a white background.

The main troops to the center led by Torbalan had thirty five ships. The right wing commanded by Albert and the left wing by Moritz respectively had ten ships, and the rear troops of Gerhard were fifteen ships.

"So it will be us to catch (receive) the enemy, huh."

Matvey, who was at Sasha's side let the tension blur and muttered.

Clouds which thinly spread in the sky increased in size and thickness, and gray lumps obstructed the sun. Torbalan who was looking up at the sky on the deck of the Boogeyman grinned.

Though the Allied Forces had the sun at their back and the pirates had become a shape bathing in sunlight from the front, the cloudy sky erased the handicap of burning their eyes in the rays of the sun. They were thinking about how to buy time until the sun reached right overhead, but that was no longer necessary.

"I suppose we shall start."

The sound of drums and trumpets echoed from the pirate ships and the advance guard of ten ships began to advance.

This sea area had no name. Therefore, the name of the near Olsina Island was used. The battle called "Naval Battle of Olsina" or simply "Olsina" began.

The wind though not strong, was cold, and white waves were beginning to be conspicuous in the azure sea. To the roar of the waves and the sound in which rowers handled dozens of huge paddles, the hustle and bustle on the deck mixed with the soldiers' noise and the sailors' bellow became tremendous.

---Since it may be cold, if a strong wind blows...

Looking up at the sky, Sasha could not help thinking so. That, even though the sun would light up the sea if clouds were blown off.

The Armor Fish(Dospe Ryba) which was Sasha's flagship was floating slightly in front the main troops.

Though the black-haired Vanadis wanted to stand at the vanguard, she gave up in Matvey, the captain as well as the sailors' strong opposition. Since they firmly requested her to be in the rear of the main troops, this was the position that was in accord with each other's request by half.

Though Sasha was standing at the prow until the battle started, she was now around the center of the deck. This was not because there was a demand in particular, but because the soldiers, who set up a large shield in order to defend against the enemy's bows, crossbows and arrows lined up at the prow.

Matvey was diagonally behind Sasha. He had not forgotten about the purpose of looking for Tigre after this fight, but he was also ready to become Sasha's shield.

"The enemy has formed a horizontal line and is heading towards us. Their number is about ten ships."

The captain Pavel made the report. Even within the hustle and bustle, strangely, his voice was properly audible.

"Judging from the numbers, I wonder whether they are the dew sweeper.... sacrificial pawns. Have they mounted a naval ram?"

The naval ram is a weapon which is substantially mounted right under the prow. When simply built, it uses a sturdy log whose tip is sharpened. One could make a hole in the tonnage of the enemy ship and sunk it by installing this and doing a ramming (suicide) attack. Pavel replied with a stern look.

"I cannot assert, but I think that there is no doubt."

"I leave it to you as planned."

For Legnica which had plenty of experience in naval battles, unless in extreme circumstances, this level of conversational exchange was enough. Otherwise, no matter how much time there was, it would not be enough.

Though there was no opening because several dozens of paddles stretched left and right, the ten pirate ships, without destroying their formation of horizontal line, gradually increased the speed and pushed forward. The huge eyes drawn under the prow looked like something sinister to the Legnica soldiers.

Similarly, there were pirates, who were standing on the deck of the pirate ships and they set up bows, crossbows and a large shield, but if anything, there were more people, who were holding the large shield. The captains of the Legnica troops, who knew of that by the report of sailors, were convinced that the enemy intended to attack by means of the naval ram.

In the Legnica troops, which were confronting these ten ships, only ten ships like the enemy started to advance slowly. On every small galley ship called "Spear(Beaker)", unlike the enemy, there was no naval ram installed. The other ships moved their paddles reversely and retreated.

The pirate ships and the Legnica troops mutually shortened the distance.

From each ship, arrows and bolts for crossbows were simultaneously shot.

If the arrows, which went flying along and were drawing an arc in the sky, incessantly rained overhead of them, the bolts tore the wind and aimed straight at the enemy, pulverized the large shield and deeply pierced their bodies. The bolts could not be prevented with something like leather armor. It was also a serious injury if arrows were to hit the faces. Groans and screams of pain rose from here and there on the deck.

While the arrows continuously flew, the sound of drums and trumpets strongly reverberated. It was the Legnica troops'. The captains gave orders in loud voices like barking, and the ten ships of the Legnica troops quickly stowed the paddles on the right or the left side while subtly shifting their course in order to avoid the ram of the enemy ships.

Realizing the aim of the Legnica troops, the captains of the pirate ships got impatient. They hurriedly issued instructions to retract the paddles of the ships which they themselves directed, but it was late.

At that instant, several great, hard overlapping destructions sounds enough to burst the ears echoed.

The Legnica army ships, by avoiding the rams of the pirate ships and advancing as is, rattlingly broke several dozens of paddles stretching from the sides of the enemy ship. The scream of rowers followed in succession from inboard of the pirate ships.

To the extent that in case of failure, the ships which received a hit of the ram would sink, it was a movement impossible to realize if one, did not possess an extraordinary resolution in addition of an outstanding ability.

In fact, it did not mean that the ten ships all succeeded. The three ships which failed in the interception were pierced near the prow by the rams and inclined their hulls as early as possible.

In the ships drilled of holes, it was the very pandemonium.

Those, who were on the deck, while feeling the ship was sinking with their whole body, were busy to deal with the enemy immediately before them, and the others gathered in the place with the hole and desperately held back the inundation.

They used whatever which could be used for mending such as clothes, sails and woods to block up the hole and extracted the sea water with buckets while being submerged with the sea water up to the knees.

However, when they understood that it was no longer possible to rebuild the ship, they hurriedly escaped to the deck. At this time, the inclination of the ship got more and more worse, those who were on the deck could no longer even think of fighting.

Since the pirate ships also escaped so as not to get involved in overturn or sinking, the soldiers and sailors threw away their weapons and jumped down to the sea. Screams and jeers flew about and confusion was steadily accelerating as instructions were not transmitted.

The unlucky ones tumbled on the deck hindered by the ropes and gears thrown out due to the inclination of the barrels and ship, and they shared the same fate as the ship. They did not even have time to pray to the gods or to mutter the name of their beloved ones in their last moments.

At this stage, one could not yet say that those who escaped in the sea were safe. This was because the current dragged in the sea by the sinking of the ships occurred in the surroundings. And if caught up in it, even skilled sailors could never again surface to the surface of the sea.

Those, who desperately escaped from the sinking ships by swimming, clung to the wreckage of wood chips scattered from the ships and drifted to the surface of the sea while being careful of the arrows and humans who were falling down.

The water of the sea was nearly cold as the winter, and the allies being in the middle of a fierce battle had no room to save themselves. After all, one should say that most of the people who were boarding these three ships were not saved.

About eighty soldiers, twenty sailors and hundred rowers were riding in the "Spear(Beaker)" type galley types of Legnica. The three ships having sunk meant that nearly six hundred lives were lost in a little time of a count of several hundreds.

Even if they had lost three ships, it did not mean that the battle would be interrupted. As the remaining seven ships of the Legnica troops passed through the flank of the pirate ships, they spread out right and left while drawing an arc in the swelling surface of sea.

The pirate ships were not able to chase them. With just three ships of the Legnica ships sunk and the other ships, which folded their paddles and fell into a behavioral incapacitation, one could say that they were unscathed.

There, the ten ships which retreated regarding the assault of earlier approached. There were also three "Crossbows(Rook)", which were large galley ships here. One of them was the "Armor Fish(Dospe Ryba)".

"What about the movement of the enemy main troops?"

On the deck of the Armor Fish(Dospe Ryba), Sasha asked Pavel. The plump captain checked to the sailor, who was widely looking out over the battlefield from above the mast, and answered.

"Currently, there seems to be no sign of progress."

"So, the first ten ships were sacrificial pawns after all."

Though emotions disappeared from Sasha's face, it was only temporary. While Torbalan investigated their ability, he had sent with the intent of sacrifice, ten ships in order to exhaust the Legnica troops even a little. And three ships had already been sunk.

"Pavel. Regarding the enemy proficiency, I want to hear your opinion."

"With just these ten ships, I can't make a judgment."

Introducing so with a cautious tone, the captain replied while jolting his scaly armor.

"But, I think that they are tough. Perhaps their main troops may be faster than us."

"I see. There are still more enemies. I ask based on it."

Sasha's words, was meaning to thoroughly crush them without relaxing their guard.

The seven pirate ships which could hardly move mercilessly poured arrows and bolts when the Legnica troops approached up to a certain distance.

The pirates were desperately fighting back, but contrary to the Legnica troops, which struck a rain of arrows while freely moving around the pirate ships, the pirate ships could not move as they wanted. They turned to the right or the left only with the paddles on one side and they could not move forward.

In addition, the Legnica troops started to shoot stone projectiles with a catapult.

This catapult was a size smaller than the one used on land, its flying distance was just about 100 Alsins (about 100 meters) and it was a stuff which could only be loaded into a "Crossbow(Rook)" due to its weight.

But, the destructive power could not be compared to that of an arrow or a bolt.

The stone projectile being something which packed an amount of stones of fist size necessary to fill a barrel, the pirates directly hit by this were instantly reduced to a bloody lump of meat. In addition, the barrels were broken by the shock, and the stones which were packed inside popped out and attacked the pirates who were near.

Their body was squashed, their bones were smashed and screams mixed with blood splash and confusion expanded.

The three pirate ships which could freely move did not try to save their comrades who had fallen into a predicament. Deciding the aim of the rams at a new prey, they savagely pushed forward.

The three ships from the Legnica troops closest to the pirate ships, which coming towards them, changed their course and began to advance. They were all small galley ships of "Spear(Beaker)" type.

They shortened the distance and mutually shot arrows and bolts. Though neither of both armies slowed down, the Legnica side slightly shifted their course in order to avoid the ram. But, the pirates, already aware of that method, also changed the angle.

A roaring sound echoed. The Legnica warships and the pirate ships collided from the front. The soldiers and the pirates fell on their knees and endured the intense shaking. The Legnica side barely avoided the rams.

After the space of about two minutes breathing, the battle along with battle cry switched over to the next stage — hand-to-hand combat. The Legnica soldiers and the pirates, who had gathered on their respective prows, threw away their bows and crossbows and switched weapons to hand axes and small swords. They scrambled to take the lead and tried to invade to the enemy ship.

They wielded small swords and hatchets, charged with spears and threw hand axes. The people, who were in a faraway place from the prow, grasped the crossbow, charged it with a bolt and aimed at the enemy far away.

Rather than ship and ship, human and human clashed, and they shed blood letting drawn swords glitter. They smashed the head with hand axes and thrust down the large shield to the sea. They gouged belly with spear and crushed jaw with hatchet. Anyone was pushed from behind, thrust away from the flank, dragged by the feet and taken down.

Screams drowned out roars, and these screams were likewise shut out by other screams. Bloodshed of dozens of people dyed the deck red, was trampled underfoot and countless red shoe marks were done. Corpses, pieces of meat and entrails fell to the sea and disappeared into the white waves.

Both armies had high morale, the number of soldiers (of both sides) who had gathered at the prow was almost the same and though one did think that the battle would drag on, it did not happen.

The other ships of the Legnica troops took a roundabout path in the left, right and the rear of the pirate ships and mercilessly showered bows, bolts and stone projectiles. There was no one among the soldiers and sailors of the Legnica troops who hesitated to surround and gang up on the pirate ships.

Arrows pierced all over the pirate ships, the masts were dyed with blood and corpses piled up on the deck. The Legnica soldiers got in there one after another from the prow.

The pirates up to the rowers left their post, picked up weapons and fought, but they could no longer overturn their inferiority. They abandoned resistance and jumped down to the sea.

Though there were those, who threw away their weapons and surrendered, the spearhead and the tip of small swords were thrust and dropped into the sea. The rowers were no exception, too. This was because unlike the Legnica side where there were respectively soldiers and sailors, in the pirate ships those who fought as well as those engaged in work inboard were all pirates.

If they could afford, they would have captured the ships, which became empty, as spoils of war, but Sasha, without showing hesitation, ordered to set fire on them.

The report that the central troops of the enemy began to move was brought, and Sasha suddenly looked up at the sky. The gray clouds were still hovering in the background and covered the sun.

"We have seventeen ships. And the enemy has thirty five ships, huh..."

If it was as planned, the Lebus troops led by Elizavetta in charge of the right wing should join with the rear troops and make a great detour in order to attack the enemy flank. Also, the fourteen ships of the Legnica troops in charge of the left wing were probably clashing with the ten pirate ships of the right wing by now.

"It's tough, eh. We have no choice but to do it though."

Actually, Sasha only had one more card to play.

However, it was not something that she could reveal right now, and if possible, it was a strategy that she did not want to execute.

◎

It was the Lebus troops of the right wing commanded by Elizavetta Fomina which were engaging the ten pirate ships commanded by Moritz since now.

The time that the battle began in the center, Elizavetta had joined with the squad of eleven ships which had been deployed in the rear. With this, the military power of the Lebus troops became thirty one ships. It was three times the enemy number.

Without throwing this number at the enemy from the front, Elizavetta made it advance to the northwest as she created a column of two rows. Which meant that she took a roundabout path to the left side of the enemy.

The wind came blowing from the north, but it was not to the extent of impairing the ship navigation. The front row of the Lebus troops cut their way through the waves and proceeded with great speed, but the back row was slightly slow and it looked like it could only advance at a speed of about half that of the front row.

The figure of the Margarita which was the flagship was in the rearmost row of the column. Though it was strange not to have stood at the vanguard of the army, Elizavetta did not rebuke in the slowness of the movement of the Margarita and turned her gaze towards the azure sea which continually played the sea roars.

Regarding the movement of these Lebus troops, Moritz also gave orders to his subordinate ships. The pirate ships were lined up in a row, but the ship at the right end advanced first and the ship next to it followed behind.

Repeating this flow sequentially, the ten pirate ships changed their lineup to a vertical line at an amazing speed.

If the Lebus troops moved to the northwest, a huge empty space would be born between the main troops in the center under Sasha's command and them. Moritz got in there and intended to attack the central main troops from the front.

"—It is as planned."

Elizavetta, who saw the movement of the pirate ships, smiled with the eyes of a hunter looking at his prey walked into a trap. The Margarita had already begun its reversal.

If you create an opening by making a detour, the opponent will come aiming at there.

Elizavetta who thought so ordered some ships including the flagship to drop the speed while advancing, and moreover deployed the Margarita in the rearmost row.

The Lebus troops were divided in sixteen ships which continued to make a detour and fifteen ships to attack the enemy who were coming. Standing at the vanguard of the fifteen ships was the Margarita. Dozens of paddles ransacked the sea as they let a violent sound of water echo. The Lebus troops which sharply cut the waves attacked.

The pirate ships, which noticed that movement, turned to face the Lebus troops while drawing a distorted curve on the surface of the sea. There was still distance to the central main troops which they were aiming at, and it seemed that they decided to take down the Lebus troops first.

The distance between both armies narrowed every second. The figure of Elizavetta standing at the prow of the Margarita, also her vivid red hair and purple dress immediately caught the pirates' attention. Vulgar jeering rose from the pirate ships. There were also those who whistled.

Elizavetta, far from being frightened by such a provocation, pinched the hem of her dress and gracefully bowed with a scornful laugh. Though the pirates' wild cries became more and more awful, they turned into screams the next moment.

Tearing the cloudy sky, countless arrows were shot from behind Elizavetta. Both armies were already close enough for the arrows to reach. The

Margarita's soldiers, who felt that their master was insulted, let the sound of their bowstring resound with their face dyed red with anger.

Though the pirates fought back by shooting arrows, too, they were forestalled, their posture crumbled and their momentum was weak. And as they noticed that Elizavetta was still standing at the prow, even they also harbored suspicions.

She was still a young girl who had not yet reached 20-year-old, but she intended to fight without wearing armor. Moreover, the captain and the soldiers showed no sign of trying to stop it.

Actually, the captain and soldiers had partly given up on it, too, but there was no way that the pirates knew that fact. Battle cries overlapped in the space, the heat emitted by each one and the fighting spirit became entangled and formed the atmosphere of the battlefield.

The wind increased its ferocity, raised its groan and the prows collided with each other. Or each other's paddles got entwined and they got bogged down. After the violent impact and shaking, the path leading to the enemy ships was opened.

The first one, who began to move at the prow of the Margarita, was none other than Elizavetta. The Thunder Swirl, which had been hung on her waist, was already in her hands.

A black shadow tinged with light, passed from right to left in an instant. A strong explosive sound, which gave one the impression of the slap of a giant, echoed and many blood sprays danced. The echo was drowned out by the duet of scream.

The whip which Elizavetta wielded blew nearly half the faces of the pirates and exposed their bones, or it completely shaved their arm flesh and moreover tore off the shoulders of their leather armor. No one would have imagined that the thin whip held in her small white hand, was endowed with this much destructive power.

Some staggered and fell into the sea without hesitation, some had already crouched in the pool of blood spawned by themselves and raised a soundless voice with a confused face.

Elizavetta, ignoring them, turned her wrist and slammed a second strike. Lightning with a black core scampered and a roaring sound also similar to that of lightning tearing off green wood pressed the atmosphere (air).

Short screams and groans overlapped, another six pirates gouged their bodies somewhere and fell down on the deck. They held their bloody head, belly or hand chipped of its fingers and shook their body in pain.

The pirates, who were setting up their weapons to try to board the enemy ship, stood stock still in blank amazement and were staring at Elizavetta with eyes as if they saw a monster. The red-haired Vanadis looked around the pirates with a sweet-looking smile.

"—Don't you come here?"

While kicking the prow of the flagship and letting the hem of her dress softly flutter, Elizavetta lightly jumped to the pirate ship.

The pirates, who finally came to their senses, raised hand axes and hatchets from right and left and attacked Elizavetta. And they rolled over while scattering blood and pieces of meat by the flash of the Thunder Swirl.

Whenever Elizavetta wielded her black whip, a flash of light and thunder stroke raged in all directions and the pirates fell down in the spray of blood. It was a too much one-sided fight, and her figure which proudly advanced on the deck filled with corpses was worthy of the nickname "Flash Princess of the Thunder Swirl(Isgrifa)".

"Arrows! Shoot the arrows!"

Someone driven by fear shouted, and the pirates who were behind him shot the arrows without even caring about involving their comrades. They set up the crossbow and shot a bolt. There were also those who threw daggers and hand axes.

Elizavetta, not even trying to avoid them, turned her wrist. Valitsaif drew a spiral with fluid movements, and surrounded the red-haired Vanadis. The black whip became a defensive wall tinged with thunder stroke and repelled not only the arrows but even the bolt and the hand axes.

The pirates faltered. Their faces grew pale and they could not take their eyes off Elizavetta, however they stepped back trying to take distance even a little.

There, the Lebus soldiers raised battle cry and invaded their ship. The pirates had already lost their fighting spirit. Even those, who were barely holding their ground, were already at their limit. Either they crushingly

turned their back and ran away or they jumped into the sea. Those who surrendered were pushed down in the sea.

Elizavetta left the control of the ship to the soldiers, turned her head and confirmed the situation.

Not only here, but also the other ships collided and a battle following it occurred. The Lebus troops hit from the side the group of pirate ships which were going straight ahead. One might say that it was a natural result that it would become a melee. But, Elizavetta felt a sense of incongruity and sharply narrowed her eyes.

As she was lost in thought, one of the soldiers hurriedly ran on the deck. Spurts of blood on his face and armor made a spotted stain of pattern due to sweat and waves splash.

"The rowers surrendered. The others dropped into the sea; we almost have complete control of the ship."

"Very well. Well then—"

Elizavetta turned her gaze. With her whip, she pointed the pirate ship floating directly next to this ship. Here as well, a fierce battle between the pirates and the soldiers of the Lebus troops was unfolded on the deck.

"We will now invade that ship. Bump this into it."

Even though it was immediately near, they took enough distance so as not to entangle each other's paddles. Even if it was Elizavetta, she could not jump.

The rowers were also pirates, so in this case, it became a harmful result once they held a weapon and appeared on the deck. In accordance with the words that they would be released if they, who were scared by Elizavetta's power, moved the ship as instructed, they immediately turned the ship around.

The prow, which turned, mowed down dozens of paddles which extended from the side of a ship ally. The noise wildly struck the eardrum, the fragments of broken paddles pranced at the deck and struck the mast, and the soldiers reflexively held down their head.

The pirate ship moved forward and ran into the allied ship^[2] and a roaring sound oppressed the hustle and bustle and the sound of weapons, and

taunted the humans' ears. Elizavetta ran taking the lead, jumped from the prow on to the pirates.

What was deployed there was, like earlier, a merciless infringement by Valitsaif. Moreover, since the pirates here were already crossing blades with the Lebus soldiers, it became the form where they were incessantly attacked from two directions.

Elizavetta wielded her black whip and continually created a bloody wind on the deck. The morale of the Lebus soldiers, who saw her figure, increased more and more and the pirates saw their number decreasing very fast.

However, Elizavetta, more than the control, had her attention focused on another thing. Though she boarded the ship from the port [3], she crossed the deck straight ahead while kicking about the pirates and headed to the starboard.

The azure sea was spreading over there while setting wood chips and human beings adrift on the waves. In the distance, there were figures of pirate ships forming a line. It was five ships.

--The enemy's reinforcements? No, it isn't.

Elizavetta immediately denied the question which welled up in her mind. This was because the group of pirate ships was gradually going away.

She suddenly heard a cry of resentment saying "they are running away". It was from the pirate ships which were away.

Opening wide her eyes of different colors, Elizavetta stood stock still in blank amazement for about two breath minute. The red-haired Vanadis bit her lower lip so as to restrain her highly strung emotions, but even so it looked like it was still not enough and she strongly gripped the gunwale with her empty left hand.<-- 呼吸ふたつ分ほど-->

"So, it's like that. They have done it..."

Glaring at the group of pirate ships going away, Elizavetta spat out hatefully.

It was one part of the enemy who had charged. Without even joining the battle, they abandoned their comrades and retreated.

Elizavetta finally discovered the real nature of her sense of incongruity which was shadowing her. She felt with her skin the atmosphere and noise

of the battlefield which rapidly became small due to the fact that the enemy decreased.

Elizavetta returned to the Margarita while either flooring in a sea of blood the pirates who came swarming with a weapon in hand, or knocking them down in the azure sea. The captain rushed over as he was impatiently waiting the return of the supreme commander.

"I am well aware of Vanadis-sama's strength, but please stop putting yourself in dangerous situations."

"Leave the scolding for later and tell me about the status of the current situation."

With a curt reply at the entreaty of the elderly captain, Elizavetta asked without beating about the bush.

According to the captain's report, among the ten enemy ships which had attacked, the five ships which were in the front row remained in this place and fought against the Lebus troops, and the remaining five ships began to retreat before clashing with them.

"I was cautious on the fact that they would make a detour and intend to aim at our flank or rear, but it doesn't seem to be the case. We were also able to orient several ships, but until I grasp the enemy's intent..."

"Well done."

Elizavetta praised the captain's judgment. The Lebus troops had already divided their force in two. Further dividing their force here was dangerous.

While the Flash Princess of the Thunder Swirl(Isgrifa) was checking the situation, five pirate ships were brought under control one after another. The Lebus troops which were here were fifteen ships. So, it was respectively three warships against one pirate ship. In addition, there was also Elizavetta who literally showed the ability of being a match for a thousand.

After a quarter koku, the Lebus troops sunk two pirate ships and captured the three others. In fact, it was not unscathed. One ship of the Lebus troops was also sunk. Moreover, another one was seriously damaged and was in a difficult state to keep fighting.

"Those who can still move, follow me. Those, who cannot, remain here and do what you should do."

As Elizavetta ordered like that, the captain called the sailors and gave instructions. The sound of drums and trumpets soon rode through the sea breeze and echoed, and the Flash Princess of the Thunder Swirl(Isgrifa)'s will was transmitted to each ship.

The one ship which was damaged waved a large blue flag. It meant that it remained here. But, it did not mean that they would just idly wait for the fight to be over. Rescue as many people, who fell into the sea as possible, and afterwards pull the captured pirate ships and leave the battlefield. That was their job.

Leading the remaining thirteen ships, Elizavetta proceeded west. They had to join one koku earlier with the sixteen ships which had gone ahead and assault the enemy main troops.

Multiple signs of ships could be seen before long. The soldiers and sailors of the Lebus troops raised voice of surprise. Elizavetta softened her breath, too.

The sixteen ships of the Lebus troops which took a detour were half surrounded by a group of pirate ships. One could understand even from a distance that they were in a disadvantageous situation. The enemy number was without doubt more than ten. It might be twenty.

Hurry up. Elizavetta swallowed immediately the cry that was about to come out of her throat. She strongly grasped Valitsaif to the point that her hand hurt. While persuading herself to calm down, she drew the battlefield in her head.

---It's hard to think that the military power of the main troops was cleft. They probably put into this place without leaving the reserve troops in the rear. It was in order to keep us away from the enemy main troops the left wing came out to the front...

Elizavetta saw through Torbalan's tactics. Also from the fact that he had gathered nearly half the number of the whole army, that's thirty-five ships, in the central main troops, his thought must be to crush the Legnica troops at the center in a short time. And then, he intended to crush the Lebus side one by one.

In that case, the role of the right wing and the left wing was to prevent the enemy's detour unit from approaching their main troops.

In case that pirate ships of the left wing which had been projected were stopped by the Lebus whole army, the pirate ships in reserves would increase the thickness of the battle line for the rear of the left wing and the battle would drag on.

In the case that the Lebus troops let one part of their military power make a detour, the reserves troops in the rear would strike that detour unit. On that occasion, while the left wing which was projected was to draw the enemy main troops at the expenses of sacrifice of their several ships, the remaining would retreat as much as possible and join with the reserves troops. It was to the bitter end to reduce the number of the enemy that was in a place near the main troops.

Though it was a strategy which used his allies as a decoy, Moritz did not hesitate at all. He did not even tell anything to his comrades that he intended to abandon. It was because he was that kind of man that Torbalan left the left wing to him.

In addition, the leadership of Gerhard who was left the reserves troops was very ingenious. He did not directly stand in the way the detour unit of the Lebus troops. He first attacked from the right side, moved his pirate ships subordinates little by little and sneaked around to the front.

There, the five ships led by Moritz attacked from the left side of the detour unit and completed a half encirclement status. If it wasn't for those two, the pirate ships would not have been able to surround the sixteen ships of the detour unit of the Lebus troops in this much short time.

While standing at the prow of the Margarita and glaring at the enemy who gradually increased and her ships allies, Elizavetta spoke bitterly.

"We were splendidly outwitted; to think that they easily abandoned their allies. I should say it's as expected of the pirates."

The distance to the enemy ships narrowed. If they advanced straight like that, they would probably strike the squad led by Moritz from the side or behind. However, Elizavetta gave an order other than advancing.

"—To the southwest."

Which would mean to the left and diagonally forward. The Margarita which was advancing at the vanguard changed its course to there and the following twelve ships emulated it. Blade sounds, roars, the sound of water

and the crash sound of ships. The sea breeze carried various sounds of the battle to Elizavetta's ears.

Pushing the anger welling up within (her), Elizavetta hung up the Thunder Swirl and fixed her breathing.

The fatigue was felt, but she could fight.

Though Sasha told her to preserve her stamina, it was probably still all right.

The distance to the pirate ships narrowed down to several hundred alsins. The pirates who noticed their presence shot arrows, but probably because most of them were concentrated on the attack of the detour unit, there were few (arrows).

The Lebus troops passed through the side of Moritz's squad and approached the squad led by Gerhard.

Elizavetta pointed one ship with a finger.

The Lebus troops increased their speed. The sea breeze increased its strength and coldness. In spite of the arrow which fell with a clattering sound, the Margarita pushed their way kicking about the surging sea.

Since the pirate ships faced towards the detour unit, the Margarita used a strategy which aimed at the stern (of the ship). Dozens of pirates set up their weapons and gathered at the stern with a fiendish smile. They intended to invade the moment that the Margarita came in contact.

However, that 'moment' that they eagerly waited for never came.

In a place at about ten alsins (about ten meters) until the Margarita came in contact with the pirate ships, Elizavetta raised Valitsaif.

The black whip, which cut the air and danced, was divided in nine parts from the tip of the handle, and each part was wrapped in white lightning. It was too much dazzling, to the extent that the figure of Elizavetta who held it in her hand could not be seen. A sound, which burst the air that swelled due to the electrical discharge, struck the earlobes of the pirates who stood stock still in surprise.

Brightening her golden and azure pupils with a strong will of destruction, the Vanadis of Rainbow eyes(Laziris) shouted.

"—Burn and Split Heaven and Earth(Gron Lazriga)!"

Nine flashes of lightning growled and burst in the pirate ships and lightning illuminated the area. A huge column of water blew up along with a thunderous sound, and poured down over the pirate ships and the Margarita in a rain of sea water containing a large quantity of wood chips. Screams rose from the pirate ships and many sounds of water followed it.

The time that lightning melted in the air and that the humans' eyes recovered the view of the surroundings, the stern of the pirate ships were greatly destroyed and were sinking with a tremendous force.

Rather than saying that it had hole, it would be appropriate to say that the stern was scooped out. The pirates who had gathered in the stern fell into the sea all without exception; the sea water became an unusual torrent and was sucked up inside the ships. What Elizavetta aimed at was not the pirates, but right under the ships.

At Elizavetta, who heaved a small sigh, the soldiers holding the shield rushed over. From this situation, there was no telling whether or not arrows might come flying. They had to protect their master.

As the Flash Princess of the Thunder Swirl(Isgrifa) walked up to the captain, she ordered to keep attacking the squad of Gerhard. The captain did not answer "understood" and with a sullen face, said this.

"Would you please behave yourself from here on?"

"I have been behaving myself for quite a while, you know?"

Elizavetta brushed her hair that was about to fall on her forehead and answered. She was quite tired. Considering the fight against Torbalan, it would better that she no longer used her Dragonic Skill(Veda).

Using the opportunity at which the pirate ships were confused by the lightning which appeared on the ground, the Lebus troops took a roundabout path to the flank of Gerhard's squad. They bumped into the pirate ships with ferocity like a shark attacking its prey, raised battle cries and got in.

Although the pirates fought hard, too, they, who did not know the Dragonic Skill(Veda), were not able to forget the sight of the earlier attack and their morale did not increase very much. One ship, then another one were brought under the control of the Lebus troops or sunk, and the number was

reduced. There were also ships which were set on fire and were sinking while blowing up black smoke.

If Moritz and Gerhard could keep their coordination, they might have taken a little more effective response against Elizavetta. But, now that they were completely divided, it was impossible.

After all, the pirate ships, which Elizavetta sank with her Dragonic Skill(Veda), were playing the role to convey to the enemy the intent of Moritz and Gerhard respectively. This was not a coincidence; the red-haired Vanadis aimed at it and passed by the side without attacking Moritz's squad.

Even Torbalan who gave the plan to Moritz and company did not expect that Elizavetta would accurately devise the division up to here.

By Torbalan's assumption, the Lebus troops should come straight to assault Moritz's squad in order to save their allies surrounded by the enemy, and Moritz would invite them within the encirclement formation by pretending to break through and annihilate them together with the detour unit. It should have been so.

Elizavetta, or only at this time anyway, outwitted Torbalan.

The detour unit of the Lebus troops which was released from the half encirclement status left its friendly troops deal with Gerhard's squad which was on the right side, and started a counterattack to Moritz's squad which was on the left side.

Elizavetta's Dragonic Skill(Veda) was something which rang a bell to the pirates.

A white lightning and roaring thunder were the proof that she was fighting in the front line where arrows flew about and blades were jumbled together. There was no Lebus soldier who did not cheer up after knowing it. Even those who were severely wounded and fell to their knees stood up with bloody weapons in hand and attacked the pirates.

If they had no weapon, they fought with shield or held boat for work with several people and threw it. If there were those who took the weapons on the corpses lying down and slashed, there were also those who received a body blow and fell together into the sea.

It was a tremendous offensive to the extent that the pirates who were used to fighting scene turned pale.

At this time, Moritz's squad had four ships remaining, but two ships sank in the sea within a short time. The detour unit of the Lebus troops, which was attacked from three directions, the front, the right and the left until just a while ago, threw all the anger they stored without saving anything.

Moritz abandoned resistance. He retreated using one ship ally as a shield and turned back the ship that he boarded.

He ran away. He deserted his comrades.

Though the detour unit was also surprised at this, it could not be compared to the shock that the pirates received. From the ship used as a shield, those who gave themselves up to despair and jumped into sea and those who threw away their weapons and surrendered appeared one after another. It did not mean that there was no one who kept fighting, but their fighting spirit had visibly declined.

Moritz's withdrawal, not being even conveyed to Gerhard's squad, also gave them unrest. Similarly here, there were also those who threw away their weapons and surrendered and those who tried to escape by boats for work; they divided here and there.

Gerhard had eagerly taken command in the flagship, but seeing the Lebus soldiers invading one after another from the prow and stern, he finally gave up the command. As he tightly grasped the double-edged battle axe which was in his hand, he raised a beast-like roar and charged.

Though the Lebus soldiers held up their swords, set up their spears and shot them on Gerhard, the strength of this red-haired pirate who was proud of his big frame forged in war and rough seas was not average.

A blow of the battle axe which was spun from his strong arm smashed the cranium along with the helmet of a Lebus soldier and threw out blood and gray matter on the deck. As he pulled out his bloodstained axe with all his strength and kicked down the corpse, this time he swung with a side blow and sent flying the head of a second person.

The pirates recovered their fighting spirit to the valiant courage of their commander and the Lebus soldiers, overwhelmed by their intensity, moved backward by several steps. While spreading new blood on the deck painted out with blood of allies and foes, Gerhard pushed forward.

Ahead of his gaze, there was the figure of Elizavetta who swung the Thunder Swirl and defeated the pirates.

Her black whip made irregular movements, and partly because it had a long range, the Lebus soldiers had opened a distance of three or four steps. Her vivid red hair and purple dress, which could clearly be confirmed even by soldiers far away, encouraged them.

Being able to turn the tide of the battle by defeating the enemy commander was also possible even in sea battle. Gerhard who either pushed the Lebus soldiers or mowed them down with his battle axe attacked Elizavetta. He released his right hand from the battle axe which he was holding with both hands and raised it only with his left hand.

As Elizavetta glanced at the redhead pirate, she silently turned her right hand.

The handle of the battle axe was blown off along with a dry, plosive sound, and the dark gray double-edged blade flew in midair while rotating and pierced the gunwale. Gerhard who seemed to have lost his weapon, however, pulled out the dagger on his waist with quite natural movements.

He defeated most of the opponents with his battle axe, but against a formidable enemy, while attracting attention with his big frame and battle axe, he aimed at the vital part with his dagger. That was this redhead pirate's way of fighting.

He could not defend against the whip. The soldiers were not in time, too. Gerhard while being convinced of his victory tried to thrust his dagger on Elizavetta's face.

The next moment, the redhead pirate's view made an about-turn. The dagger cut the sky and Gerhard's big frame was slammed on the deck.

As Elizavetta who did not even try to avoid the dagger extended her empty left hand and casually grabbed Gerhard's face, she dragged it down with all her might. Not by destroying his balance to make him fall down, but with physical strength and grip.

It was an unbelievable strength enough to make one think that even the term "superhuman" was somewhat kind to describe it with. Gerhard's big frame covered with muscles was heavy to the extent that it would be difficult even for an adult to lift it. But a young girl who had not yet reached 20-year-old managed it with one hand.

However, Gerhard was not even given enough time to understand that fact. As Elizavetta released her hand from the pirate's face, the Lebus soldiers, who rushed over, one by one thrust his body with spears. With a stunned face as could be, Gerhard died.

Due to Moritz's flight and Gerhard's death, the battle finally came to an end in this area. The pirate ships which were still remaining scattered about and escaped.

Elizavetta gave strict order not to chase them. It was not out of mercy. This was not because there was no need to wipe out pirates, but because there was still an enemy that should be defeated.

"Postpone the damage check. It's also fine not to reform the ranks. We will attack the flank of the enemy main troops."

Elizavetta ordered to the captain and he turned the prow of the Margarita to the west. The main troops of pirates led by Torbalan should be over there.

As the sound of drums and trumpets conveyed Elizavetta's order to the other ships, the Margarita stood at the vanguard and pushed its way through the sea. The twenty ships which could still fight followed; the three ships which were damaged to the extent that they could no longer fight were left in this place, and they would deal with the rescue of those who fell into the sea.

"It took more time than I thought. Even the ships and people..."

While hearing the report at the bow of the Margarita, Elizavetta bit her lower lip with an annoyed expression. She wondered how the battle of the center and the battle of the left wing turned out.

"Please hold out until I arrive."

It was at that time that the Legnica army left wing was wiped out by the right wing squad of the pirates.

◎

The battle between the Legnica army left wing commanded by the knight Zaul and the pirates right wing led by Albert was as followed.

Regarding each military power at this sea area, the Legnica troops were fourteen ships and the pirates' side was ten ships. When Zaul knew that the enemy number was fewer than his army, he changed his lineup that was one horizontal line. He made a bow type formation by making the left and right advance and the center retreat. He intended to exterminate the enemy with half encirclement.

On the other hand, the ten pirate ships with Albert as their commander organized their fleet in a vertical line. It was clear that they intended to go around behind the Legnica troops by a central breakthrough.

In this clash, Albert was the winner. The pirate ships which charged straight bathed in a rain of arrows, ate Zaul's fleet even though they took out three ships damaged by receiving the Legnica army's ramming attack, tore it off, divided it and came out to the back.

The pirate ships made a detour to the left like that, half surrounded one side of the Legnica warships which were divided. Losing the advantage of the number, the Legnica warships which were attacked from the flank and rear were burnt one after another without putting up a good fight and were sunk.

"The flagship. Search the enemy flagship!"

Zaul who commanded the Legnica troops shouted with a hoarse voice and fiercely advanced the flagship which he boarded to the enemy camp. Although this greatly raised the morale of his allies, it was a failure as a result.

One pirate ship had set a strong blow from the side and Zaul's ship was caught up by (in) the reef. Albert who was the commander of the pirate ships knew well where in this battlefield the reef was.

Although Zaul's ship desperately moved the paddles, it could only either ransack the sea surface with waves or hit the reef. The Legnica troops left wing, whose flagship's movement was sealed, was confused and their movement began to be disordered.

The pirate ship which managed the blow also ran aground on the same reef, but it intended to crash into it to from the beginning.

The pirates started shooting arrows towards Zaul's ships one after another with the bows and crossbows they had prepared. In addition, even other pirate ships hit fire arrows from all directions.

"This is as far as I can go, huh... I would not even be able to apologize for letting the soldiers and sailors entrusted to me by Vanadis-sama die"

On board a ship which can no longer keep fighting with the fire, Zaul regretted. While the rain of arrows poured incessantly, he ordered to his remaining subordinates to take down all the boats for operation on the reef. And then, that they picked up the soldier and sailors on them and escaped to the sea as far as possible.

However, he himself would remain to the end and share the same fate with the burning ship. The time that his body disappeared within the flames, it was said that more than thirty arrows were stuck to his body.

The flame which wrapped up the ship also spread to the pirate ships which ran aground on the reef. The two ships turned into a huge torch on the reef and kept blowing up black smoke until they burned out.

Though it was thought that the morale of the Legnica soldiers fell due to the loss of their commander, it was opposite.

They, who knew Zaul's heroic death, turned their sorrow and anger into fighting spirit and bravely continued to fight. Those who escaped from the flagship were rescued by other ships, but they again challenged the pirates without even taking a rest.

The side of the Legnica soldier, who defeated the pirate in front of him, was scooped out with the battle axe of the pirate who came attacking from the flank. That pirate was also beat with a club and fell into the sea and with his face applied to the water's surface, he never moved again. Such a scene was unfolded countless times while changing the details.

Speaking from the results, the Legnica army left wing squad was wiped out. However, they reduced the number of pirate ships to two by then.

Albert, who was the commander of the pirates stood many times at the vanguard, boarded the enemy ship and each time dyed his favorite spear with the Legnica soldiers' blood, but he was killed by receiving a stray arrow in his head.

It was a too disappointing death which could not be imagined from his severe way of fighting.

There were only two remaining ships on the pirate side, but both, full of damages, were no longer in a state to fight.

Above all else, due to the loss of their commander Albert, they were not able to decide how they should move.

As they pulled up their comrades who were floating on the sea surface, based on the talk between those who were playing the supporting role, they arrived at the conclusion to observe a good time and join with their allies. Then, they began to move slowly.

However, they were discovered by the Lebus troops led by Elizavetta about a half koku after and captured.

Chapter 2 – Bird of Fire(Phoenix)

It was the morning of the day that Sasha and company and the pirates clashed near Olsina Island, that Eleonora Viltaria arrived at the port town of Lippner.

Wrapping her body in a robe which got slightly dirty, she was wearing a dark hood which covered her eyes. The clothes under the robe got dirty with sweat and mud and her silver hair hidden in the hood had an unkempt, strange look .

Her cheeks became hollow due to extreme fatigue, but only her red pair of eyes gave off a dull shine. When looking at this figure of the girl, who was called by her nickname Ellen by those close to her, one would certainly be dumbfounded.

It was four days ago that Ellen had left the Imperial Palace of LeitMeritz. As literally stated, she had made her horse gallop without sparing time for sleep. Even the horse that she was pulling was weary like its master, to the extent that it was visible at first glance. Its mane got dry, and it had clearly lost weight.

By the way, there were two horses. Though it was only one horse which had accompanied her at the time she departed LeitMeritz, since the fatigue was conspicuous around the time that she entered the territory of Legnica, she dispatched a replacement horse on the way.

She left the horses to the custodian at the castle gate. The gatekeeper who received a silver coin as custodian's wage directed a suspicious gaze to Ellen. This was because she was currently a traveler with dirty attires and she did not look like a person holding a silver coin. However, he immediately understood after seeing her identification papers.

"Are you the maid Eleanor who serves at the Imperial Palace of LeitMeritz?"

"Yes" replied Ellen with an exhausted voice. In principle, she could not just come as Vanadis, so she prepared forged identification papers. Although false, the papers used as identification including the seal were all genuine.

While the gatekeeper returned the papers to Ellen, he said with a cautious tone just in case.

"Sorry, but can you take off that hood and let me see your face?"

Though she hesitated for an instant, after the thought that her face should not have been known, Ellen took down her hood as troublesome. Although the gatekeeper had a tired expression reminiscent of a sleepless night, when he looked closely, he noticed that it was a young girl with beautiful features.

"Okay, you may pass."

Bringing back the hood, Ellen passed through the castle gate while nodding. The gatekeeper added.

"It may be an unnecessary concern, but you can go clean off dirt in a bathhouse once you've settled down."

Ellen did not say anything against it, but when she entered the town and advanced by about ten steps, she suddenly stopped. While bringing her wrist near face and sniffing the smell, she tilted her head to the side.

"...Do I stink?"

As the gatekeeper said, should she stop by at some bathhouse? She thought such a thing, but Ellen who sighed, thinking it was troublesome shook her head left and right. For what purpose had she come so far by making the horses run without so much rest? There should be more pressing business than taking a bath.

Taking her load up to her shoulder again, she touched her Dragonic Tool(Viralt) hanging on her waist, the long sword Arifal. Although she wrapped dirty clothes around both the hilt and the sword guard and rubbed mud on the scabbard so that it did not stand out; Arifal did not seem to like it. It raised a soft breeze and caressed Ellen's face in protest.

"Bear with it for a little more. Even you don't want to be caught up in a troublesome matter, right?"

Ellen laughed and patted the long sword on the scabbard. This long sword which might also be referred to as the Silver Flash seemed a little dissatisfied, but it still honestly made a concession.

After asking several passers-by, Ellen finally knew where the mansion of the town's mayor was. Dragging her body which accumulated fatigue, she went there.

The mayor of Lippner went by the name Dmitry and his mansion was near the port. Though the iron fence around the house was quite large, the

mansion itself was not so big. It was a two-storied building whose upper part was the shape of an arch and had innumerable windows, and which displayed sculptures such as mermaids and dolphins on the walls.

Even here, Ellen named herself as Eleanor, a maid of LeitMeritz. Although her slightly dirty appearance was quite suspicious, she was let through the mansion after she showed her papers. However, she gave Arifal which she had always been carrying to custody.

"My master is currently very busy."

It was a maid of about 40-years-old who guided Ellen to the guest room. She apologetically shrank her body with a troubled smile.

"I hear that many pirates are moving towards here. Vanadis-sama also departed for the front from this town the other day."

---I didn't make it in time, huh...!

Even though she had been prepared for that, Ellen staggered her body at the shock. As the maid misunderstood that reaction, she waved her hands so as to reassure her.

"It's all right. Since Vanadis-sama will surely do something about it. But, Master cannot readily get time due to the help he is providing her. I have informed the Master about you, so please wait a moment there. When Master finishes with his business, I will come to call you."

"Thank you."

Ellen bowed her head obediently. Though a little bothered by the maid's way of speaking which was as if she was persuading a child, since she was currently passing herself as a maid, it might be like this.

After a fire was put in the fireplace, the guest room was warm enough. Ellen sat down on the sofa waiting to be called, but sleepiness rapidly struck her as she settled down like this.

As her shoulder was gently shaken, Ellen suddenly opened her eyes. When she stood up with power enough to overturn the sofa, she met the maid's eyes with a surprised face.

A time count of about three was necessary for Ellen before she understood that she had unwittingly fell asleep. As she looked downward with an

awkward face, the maid floated a friendly smile. Only the sound of fire burning in the fireplace was audible to the silver-haired girl.

"Um... How long was I sleeping, no, was I sleeping?"

She recalled that she passed herself as a maid and immediately corrected herself. The maid answered as she was not particularly offended.

"I would say about a half koku. Master still has his hands full, but since the bath was ready, I came to call you."

Although Ellen looked puzzled to the word "bath", she consented after looking at her body. Until she came to this mansion, she could not afford it even mentally.

"However, using too much firewood for me..."

"Once Master admitted you into this room, it meant that you are an important guest. You should clean off the dirt, become clean; having an audience with Master is something you should do, isn't it?"

It was quite right. As she nodded that she understood, Ellen was guided to the bathroom. As for the bathroom, only a small ship-shaped bathtub had been brought into an empty room.

Hot water was already put on the bathtub and petals with sweet fragrance were floating. A thick cloth to wipe the body, a soap made from tallow, a change of clothes and the likes had been put on the side.

Ellen thanked the maid, took off her clothes and softly soaked a foot in the bathtub. The hot water was not too hot and just the right temperature. Immersing her foot just like that, she put the other foot in the hot water. And then, she slowly immersed herself up to the shoulders in the hot water. She unintentionally leaked out a sigh.

As she stretched out her feet in the bathtub and enjoyed the warmth of the hot water for a while, Ellen began to remove dirt little by little as she rubbed her body.

It was after a half koku that Ellen wore the change of clothes which had been prepared and came out of the bathroom. Though she did not normally spend this much time, she had soaked in hot water just now.

Though the clothes were plain hemp clothes and they were one size bigger than her body, it was not uncomfortable to wear. As she soon returned to the guest room with that appearance, Ellen was called by the maid and headed to the reception room where Dmitry was waiting for her.

Dmitry who was sitting on the sofa saw the silver-haired Vanadis enter and slightly moved his eyebrows. But, he did not open his mouth until the maid calmly closed the door.

"Dmitry-sama, nice to meet you. My name is Eleanor. I thank you from the bottom of my heart for having spared time for me today—"

Ellen tried to take an attitude of a maid as she joined her legs and straightened up her back, but Dmitry shook his head left and right and said with a reproachful tone.

"Do you intend to talk with me as the maid Eleanor?"

Ellen opened her eyes wide and stared at Dmitry. He was a long-faced man who had probably already reached 40-years-old. Of course fire was also burning in the fireplace in this reception room, and it seemed to be warm enough, but he was wearing a jacket which had fur to the collar and sleeves with leather trousers which reached up to his ankles.

"...It should be the first time I've met you."

"I once heard from our Vanadis about silver hair and red pupils."

"Our Vanadis" here referred to Sasha. Dmitry continued his words with a wry face.

"In addition, when you entered my mansion, you left a splendidly made sword in my custody. I can tell even if it is covered with mud. Furthermore if I may say, whatever kind of urgent business... No, it is precisely because it is urgent that one would not do something like sending out a young girl alone to such a town without even supplying her some attendants."

"It saves me the long talk if you understand."

As Ellen bowed to Dmitry, she sat down on the sofa at the opposite side. Dmitry stared at Ellen with a sullen expression.

"For what kind of business did you come today?"

"First of all, I want you to read this letter."

Ellen took out a letter from the hem of her clothes. After she returned to the guest room after using the bath, she put it in her new clothes. Dmitry silently received it and broke the seal.

It was the letter that the old man servant who had been serving Sasha for many years had addressed to Ellen.

It was about the fact that pirates were heading to Zchted with a large army of eighty ships. And that Sasha departed for the front in order to ambush them. The letter had been concluded with the wish of whether as Sasha's close friend, she could ascertain her fight.

The expression of Dmitry who seemed to have finished reading became more sullen. As the mayor of Lippner carefully folded the letter, he gave it back to Ellen.

"I will pretend that I did not see it."

"...Why?"

Because of her surprise, Ellen's words were delayed for an instant. The silver-haired Vanadis had felt an illusion as if the indoor atmosphere got instantly cold.

"If I understand well Viltaria-sama, you would like to get on a warship and support Alexandra-sama. You also want to watch even if you won't bear with it. Right?"

At Dmitry who said with a stern look, Ellen nodded. While rubbing the fur which decorated the cuffs of his coat, the man's face grew in severity.

"I absolutely forbid you to go to the sea. If something were to happen to you, we would not be able to bear the responsibility."

"I won't do something like make you bear responsibility—"

"Tigrevurmud Vorn."

Dmitry interrupted her desperate appeal with one name. Ellen who was taken aback stared at Dmitry's stern face.

"I hear that he is the young hero who suppressed Brune's civil war. Although I have never met him, he is highly esteemed by an acquaintance of mine. Due to the fact that he fell from the sea and is now missing, I wonder how the current situation is."

The expression "is now missing" was probably in consideration for Ellen. Without even being able to refute a single word, Ellen tightly grasped her fist on top of her lap and sank into silence.

"I will say it once again; I absolutely forbid you to go to the sea. Alexandra-sama's departure for the front was in order to protect Legnica, but you are just acting according to your feelings without thinking about your position. Please, do not act rashly and do not neglect the territory which you yourself govern."

"I don't remember having neglected it. Even now, I leave it in the hands of a trustworthy person..."

Though it was a feeble tone of voice which lacked of her usual self, Ellen rebutted. However, Dmitry did not break his stern behavior like a wharf which had endured many years of wind and rain.

"I do not know to whom you entrusted it with, but at a time if something was to happen to Viltaria-sama, that person will not necessary become Vanadis."

Ellen was once again at a loss for words. It is the Dragonic Tool(Viralt) which chooses a Vanadis. It was not clear to what extent Dmitry knew about it, but the indication that the person, whom she entrusted her territory with, would not necessary become a Vanadis was totally right.

"It looks like you have come here by yourself without taking any attendants, but that may be a problem, too. This time when autumn is over, one must be more cautious of wild beasts and bandits of the plain. Although you have confidence in your sword, isn't it overly careless?"

Ellen made a face as if having vinegar in her mouth. Dmitry was emitting from his whole body an atmosphere to which it was impossible to say something like "isn't it fine since I'm safe?".

"From the King of a country to the chief of a village, why do you think that the person who governs one territory settles in a safer place and is protected by many people? I do not deny the existence of rulers running

about for self-interest, but if those people are not there, then order will be lost and confusion will arise."

Ellen looked down with an unbearable expression and dropped her gaze at the table between the two of them.

It was not that she could not rebut.

For example, it was possible to refute by saying "the fact that I come like this by myself is the proof that the friendship between LeitMeritz and Legnica is firm both inside and outside."

Moreover, it was also possible to use Tigre's name by saying "I came in order to confirm the detailed situation regarding Lord Tigrevurmud. LeitMeritz has been entrusted with him. The fact that I myself come for his safety would be natural considering our relationship with Brune."

Tigre's name was especially a powerful weapon. This was because it was none other than King Victor who had requested Tigre to go to Asvarre. Whose fault do you think it is; even without saying those words, it should be transmitted to those who knew the circumstances.

However, Ellen did not use these reasons.

As Dmitry said, Ellen came up to here for Sasha. She did not want to put foreign matters in his thought.

Silence fell. A time of about ten counts passed and Dmitry opened his mouth.

"This is all I can say as the mayor of Lippner, but does Viltaria-sama have something to say?"

Ellen silently shook her head.

"No. I thank you for having spared time for me while you are busy."

They should have finished talking with this. Ellen was going to stand up from the sofa, but she noticed that Dmitry's expression somewhat softened and reseated herself as she guessed that he still had something to say. As expected, words which came out from Dmitry's mouth were not greetings of separation.

"Well then, I will express myself just as merely Dmitry from here on. For the sake of your friendship with Alexandra-sama, as one of those who

admires her, I sincerely wish to express to you my gratitude for having come until a place like this."

Ellen fixedly stared with a look of surprise and confusion at Dmitry who put his hands on his knees and deeply bowed his head. Some time was necessary for her to understand this man's intention.

"You don't need to thank me. Sasha is my friend. Though we were able to meet simply because we both were Vanadis, even if either of us stopped being Vanadis henceforth, I believe that it wouldn't change the fact that we will still be friends."

As Ellen said so, Dmitry raised his face. Though he made a wry face, a gentle light was burning in both his eyes.

Suddenly, Ellen recalled a certain person. The man who taught her etiquette at the time when she just became a Vanadis possessed an atmosphere similar to that of Dmitry.

"Sasha is a good ruler."

As Ellen joyfully said, Dmitry greatly nodded. He removed his gaze at the silver-haired Vanadis and turned it to the table. But, the mayor of Lippner seemed to see not the table, but his nostalgic past floating in his mind.

"It was seven years ago that she came to Legnica as Vanadis... There are two ports close to the Imperial Palace, this Lippner and Prepus, but she came to both once a year. It was after quite later that I learned that she suffered from a disease."

One of the reasons why Sasha visited Lippner and Prepus on a regular basis was to maintain the maritime security. This was because for Legnica, the profit gained from the commerce with various countries, be it material or immaterial, was very important.

In addition, she liked to see various things brought from the sea and the world on the other side of the sea. Sasha enjoyed hearing the story of Dmitry who had served as the mayor of this town for many years and Matvey's rich experience as a former sailor.

"You have behaved as a friend of Alexandra-sama."

Dmitry continued in a sincere tone.

"As a friend of that person, I am willing to help you, but I do not intend to work for another Vanadis-sama. Even if a minimum of courtesy should be exerted."

--- He is an honest man.

Ellen, without showing it on her face, inwardly smiled wryly. He was saying that he would cooperate with her not as Eleonora the Vanadis of LeitMeritz, but as Ellen a friend of Sasha.

"Thank you."

As Ellen briefly expressed her gratitude, she asked about the current status without delay. However, she unintentionally stiffened her face when she heard that it has been five days since Sasha departed this town leading the Legnica army.

"Well then, is the battle against the pirates already over?"

"I do not know. That they safely joined with Vanadis-sama of Lebus two days ago is the newest information that we received."

If it was the Vanadis of Lebus, then it meant that it was Elizavetta. Though Ellen reflexively frowned, she immediately shook off the needless feeling.

"Unfortunately, I don't have experience in naval battle, but don't you frequently stay in touch with Sasha's army?"

"Please consider the bandit subjugation for example. Let's say that bandits roost in an abandoned castle located at about five days from this town and an army was sent out for their subjugation. Would the town and the army diligently keep in touch in the meantime?"

Of course not. Unless there was a very big change in the situation. Although Ellen consented, she darkened her face.

"In that case, don't you even know where Sasha is currently?"

"We can only make a rough guess. We may get in touch with them after a few more days. Given the situation, it would not be strange if they have already begun the battle."

At first, surprise, then disappointment and discouragement floated on Ellen's face. But, she could not give up yet. For what purpose had she

desperately ridden horses from her Imperial Palace to this town otherwise? Ellen leaned forward and stared at the mayor of Lippner.

"I want to see Sasha's fight with my own eyes. No, I must see it. Is it really impossible? Absolutely? Even I alone—"

"I understand how you feel, but horse and ship are two different things. By rowing paddles by yourself, you can at best only go until the coast. To go far, a big ship and many people would be required. Even for a Vanadis, it will be impossible alone."

Dmitry's voice remained perfectly composed to the extent to hurt one's feelings. His explanation being logical, Ellen was once again at a loss for words.

"If by any chance you were able to employ the required amount of rowers, even if you found Alexandra-sama's location, there are pirates in the vicinity. And you will definitely be attacked if you encounter them. Have you the resolution to put the sailors and rowers in that danger?"

Ellen strongly chewed her molars and desperately held back her urge to shout. Fury raged within and tried to stir up her body. The face of Sasha who smiled, the face of the attendant who sent the letter and the face of Lim who saw her off flashed across her mind.

Although her eyelids got hot and her eyes were wet, she only endured not to cry. Even so, she was unable to suppress her voice.

"So, I can only wait for Sasha's return!"

"Me, too."

That very short answer poured cold water on the feelings of Ellen who was tinged with a strong heat. After winking several times, Ellen stared at Dmitry's face in blank amazement.

The wry face of the mayor of Lippner increased in severity before one knew.

"I do not intend to compare the friendship you are holding towards Alexandra-sama and my loyalty to her. However, when I saw her off five days ago, I want you to know that I was also one of those who inwardly shed bitter tears."

There was no fluctuation of emotions in Dmitry's voice and that made Ellen calmer. Ellen who became noncommittal reseated herself on the sofa and violently rummaged her silver hair.

"...I am sorry. I lost my cool."

"I will prepare something to drink."

As Dmitry lifted the bell put on the table, he rang it two or three times. After an interval of about ten counts, the door was knocked from outside. It seemed to be a servant of Dmitry. The mayor of Lippner turned to face Ellen as he asked the servant to prepare the honey wine(Medovukha).

"What will you do from now on?"

At Dmitry's question, Ellen did not immediately answer. He groaned with folded arms.

How many days will you wait here? How many days can you wait?

"I don't know when Sasha will come back."

"Let's assume that they encounter pirates today, fought them and won. Still, it will be after about two days at the earliest that they will return to this town. It may take another day. Of course, there is also the possibility that they have not yet encountered the pirates. In that case, it will take more time."

There was a land that Ellen should govern, and something she had to do. Although Sasha would also someday come back, the reality was that she could not wait indefinitely here.

Ellen thought while looking at the fire of the fireplace. At that moment, the maid appeared and placed two porcelain cups filled with honey wine(Medovukha) on a tray.

Staring at the maid's profile for no particular reason, Ellen suddenly recalled Teita. It was the maid of chestnut hair who served Tigre. Though this maid and Teita were not bearing the slightest resemblance, her atmosphere and the way she worked might have made Ellen remember Teita.

---Teita also spent her days with such feeling, like her chest was tightened whenever she sends Tigre off, huh.

Waiting for the maid to leave, Ellen called Dmitry's name.

"For the time being, I will stay four days in this town. If you get new information in the meantime, I will decide again based on it."

"Then, as just a traveler Eleonora I would be happy to offer you one of the guest rooms."

Removing the porcelain cup from his mouth, Dmitry floated a smile. Assuming Sasha finished the pirate subjugation and returned, it was probably this mansion which would receive the report at the earliest.

"I will gratefully accept your kindness. I will depend on you for a while."

Ellen reached out her hand to the porcelain cup. The honey wine(Medovukha) had faint warmth.

Arifal was returned to Ellen who left the reception room, and she was once again guided to the guest room. At that room on the second floor, unlike the place where she first entered, a balcony was established in the back.

As she went out to the balcony, the fragrance of the tide tickled her nose and the sea breeze gently brushed her silver hair.

The mansion was very close to the port and the azure sea fully spread to Ellen's view. The sky was clear and without a cloud, and far off the blue of sky, and the blue of the sea melted into each other. Sea birds could be seen in the distance.

Though Ellen was silently staring at the sea for a while, as she sighed, she turned her gaze towards the long sword on which she removed the mud from earlier, and was neatly polished. She let a bitter smile blur on her mouth.

"I wonder if I can't fly up to Sasha with your power. Arifal."

The long sword with a guard which mimicked wings raised a spiral-shaped wind from the root of the blade and softly rolled up Ellen's hair. That could be interpreted as both comfort and encouragement of this Dragonic Tool(Viralt), and the silver-haired Vanadis lightly tapped the pommel of the long sword as she nodded.

When she turned her look, dozens of warships and merchant ships were folding their sail at the port, or they were respectively taking off the mast and lined up.

Since the embargo had been ordered, there were very few people around the merchant ships whereas many figures of sailors and soldiers could be seen around the warships. This was because once there was a change in the situation, the warships would have to immediately equip the mast, put (stretch) sail and depart.

"If the warships anchoring now in the port are to depart, then it will mean that they will have found that either Alexandra-sama lost and escaped. Or the pirates avoided Alexandra-sama and have approached up to the neighborhood. It will be either of these."

Dmitry had said so. He had also given strict order so that there was no selfish act of departure.

Ellen once again turned her pupils of ruby towards the sea. The coloring of blue and blue^[4] where many people would feel exhilaration looked like something awfully ominous and annoying.

"For some reason, my affinity with the sea seems to be bad."^[5]

Tigre fell into the sea and went missing. Sasha was currently somewhere in this sea. She might be letting the ships advance in the search of the enemy, or she might be already crossing swords with them.

--Sasha. Please, at least you, be safe.

Unsheathing the long sword on her waist and embraced it with both her hands, Ellen prayed to the gods.

And then, after wavering for a while, Ellen once again prayed to the gods. Coincidence. Miracle. Whatever I don't care, she thought. In Countries of the far south, there was a story of a hero who wandered in the sea and was washed ashore on a foreign island at the end. And there was also a story of sailors, adventurer and pirates who survived while drifting in the sea for many days.

Then, wasn't it good even if Tigre was safe?

About twenty days have passed since Tigre fell into the sea. She should have already come to terms with it.

However, when looking at the boundless sea like this, the young girl could not help praying.

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Dozens of ships were jostling and milling around.

Even in this place in the vast sea, there were only many gaps which slightly peeped out between ship and ship. Bellows flew about on those ships and sounds of weapons were jumbled together. There was no gunwale which did not stand of arrows, and no deck which was not dyed with blood.

Similarly, the flame accompanied by black smoke was beginning to stand out here and there. There were also many things which burned. While the water in large quantities was immediately near, it was however far from the fire. Rather than putting out the fire, everyone was desperate to cut down the enemy in front of him.

It was as if human beings seemed to compete for variety of rough voices and screams. Intense screams which appealed for pain drowned out short groans of death. And even those who emitted those screams soon lost power to utter their voice and turned to corpses which did not talk.

The nose was paralyzed before one knew, and one could no longer make difference between the smell of burned ships and the smell of blood. Even the ear which was hit with battle cries and roaring sounds lost its normal hearing ability. Was this because it was on top of the deck; or because the feet had lost their strength that the visibility was not fixed (swaying)?

On the deck of the "Armor Fish(Dospe Ryba)" which was the flagship of the Legnica army, Alexandra Alshavin was silently standing. The bloody killing was unfolded as if it was already natural immediately near her.

Sasha was cornered. The Legnica army main troops which were seventeen ships had been reduced up to less than half that number. Even among the remaining ships, including the flagship, none was unscathed.

However, it did not mean that the Legnica troops were just silent without putting up a fight. The pirate main troops led by Torbalan had lost more than ten ships.

Sasha's command was steady and tenacious.

For example, if she knew that a certain warship received damage on the right side of the ship's hold, it would be made to change its direction and placement skillfully so that it turned to the ally side there. In addition, soldiers and rowers moved little by little to other ships, and the ships which became empty were used as an obstacle to attack the enemy's flank.

Even in the hand-to-hand fight on the deck, the movements of the pirates who had invaded the ship were weakened; barrels, ropes and ship materials were used so as to divide them and many obstacles were set up. If they had abandoned the choice to get in the enemy ship and devoted themselves to a defensive fight, then such a thing would be also possible.

What was clever was the strategy which invited a pirate ship with the "Spear(Beaker)" high maneuverability and ambushed it with two large galley ships "Crossbow(Rook)".

The "Crossbow(Rook)" did not clash with them from the front, and while moving so as to sandwich the pirate ship from both sides, each "Crossbow(Rook)" stowed away their paddles on one side. The pirate ship which saw it thought that the Legnica ships' intention was to break their paddles, and similarly stowed away their paddles inboard.

Then, as if waiting for it, the two ships "Crossbow(Rook)" drew near with an exquisite navigation and put a strong pressure from both sides.

This could not be done with small ships "Spear(Beaker)". It was because by sandwiching and putting pressure on the pirate ship, there was the risk to damage their own ships in return. It was a technique that was possible simply because the Legnica sailors were good at maneuvering the large ships "Crossbow(Rook)".

The pirate ship which was pressed creakily emitted awful screams. Cracks ran everywhere of the hull and sea water flowed in. it did not fall apart, but it was driven into the situation where it was absolutely impossible to continue the fight.

However, even if Sasha exerted her wisdom in that way and the soldiers and sailors kept fighting hard, the disadvantage of being half the enemy number heavily weight over the Legnica army as time passed.

Even if one pirate ship was sunk, a new one would immediately fill its place, but the Legnica army could not do the same thing. A one-on-two became a one-on-three, and there were also ships which became a one-on-four.

As they were surrounded by pirate ships in all directions, pirates invaded one after another from the prow and the stern.

What was unfolded on the deck was not a fight, but a massacre. Three pirates attacked one soldier, and chopped him with hand axe and hatchet. They surrounded him with five or six people and beat him up with clubs. One certain soldier was stabbed with spears by ten pirates, skewered and hung high.

The Legnica troops were currently only seven ships, and were actually surrounded by twenty pirate ships. The Armor Fish(Dospe Ryba) which was the flagship was also taking on three pirate ships.

Torbalan's command was by no means inferior to Sasha's. If it was not Torbalan who was leading the pirates, Sasha, even though inferior in number, would not have let them surround her army. She would definitely have been able to decrease her allies' damage of two or three ships.

She did not know what happened now to the Lebus troops of the right wing.

About the fourteen ships of the left wing, the report that they were defeated was brought a little while ago.

"I see. They have done well."

Sasha said so in a quiet voice and mourned for Zaul, the Legnica soldiers and sailors of that squad.

Or Albert who won a sweeping victory against Zaul, and moreover, there was also the possibility of several ships to be added to the central main troops of the enemy. One might say that Zaul fully fulfilled his duty.

--I must fulfill my part, too.

She looked up at the sky. Most of gray clouds swept away and the sun was shining white.

Another ally ship was sunk and the movement of the enemy changed along with it.

Sasha narrowed her eyes. Within her field of vision, the "Boogeyman" which was the enemy flagship showed up. To the mast, a white flag depicting red eyes which symbolized the flagship could be seen.

However, it was not immediately nearby. Between the "Armor Fish(Dospe Ryba)" and the "Boogeyman", one pirate ship broke in a way which showed its ship's hold and blocked the way.

Even in this situation, Torbalan did not let his guard down. By no means doing something like letting the ships of the Legnica army adjoined to the flagship, he let a pirate ship cut in between without fail. If Sasha were to aim straight at the flagship, Torbalan would use that ship as a shield and took distance, with the intention of coercing exhaustion^[6].

"It's really annoying."

Matvey who walked to this place scowled at the enemy flagship. His breathing was rough. He went to fight along with soldiers against the pirates who had boarded and came back.

Seeing the figure of the former sailor, Sasha opened her eyes wide. Matvey held a bloody spear in his right hand; in his left hand, he tightly grasped a bloody hand axe, he hung a hatchet on his waist and put two daggers to his belt. He had also tied another dagger to his leg. He probably took one part of these weapons from the enemy.

The Vanadis thought that he looked like a pirate, but she did not voice it.

"What about the situation?"

"We have beaten them for the time being, but new troops will probably immediately come. I wonder what the Lebus guys are doing..."

It was not only Matvey who was injured. Even the captain Pavel and the fifty knights who followed Sasha since the Imperial Palace, everyone was injured. There were also those who were no longer of this world.

It was only Sasha standing on the deck who was not injured. The Hidden Princess of the Luminous Flame(Falpram) said to Matvey while returning her gaze to the "Boogeyman".

"Call Pavel. I have a request to ask to both of you."

Although Matvey put on a suspicious face, he ran at once and came back as he dragged along the captain dressed in scaly armor. Pavel's armor was also damaged in several places and the padded undershirt which he wore under the armor could be seen.

The former sailor and the captain who heard Sasha's talk were all together dumbfounded and then looked at each other with faces which grew pale. From each other's expressions, it was understood that they had not misheard.

"It's reckless."

Pavel strongly spat out as he forgot honorifics and Matvey sighed.

"There is no other way. It's a hand which can only be played now and which only I can do."

Sasha asserted so with a stern expression. With her pair of eyes reminiscent of obsidian, she stared at the two men who were much older than her. There was no tremor in her eyes and a strong will emphasized its existence.

"It is not something that the supreme commander should do."

Though Pavel objected with bare teeth, Sasha did not also change opinion.

"The supreme commander's duty is to do his best. He should wield his sword and shed blood when necessary."

"Do you say that gambling is doing the best?"

Matvey also let light of fury blur both his eyes and panted as if suffocating.

What was painful for the two men was that there was no way out. Both Pavel and Matvey knew that their army was reaching its limit. The experience which they accumulated in their lifetime told them. That they could still hold only a quarter koku.

It was also not easy to escape because they were surrounded and they did not think that the Lebus army would make it in time. The two men were aware that they were step by step heading towards their end.

The pirates would not probably keep them alive. There was also the possibility that the pirates would capture and sell them as slaves in Muozinel if they could afford, but given that the winter was near, they would surely avoid such a trouble.

The problem was Sasha. They did not even want to think about what kind of hardship a young girl would have.

"...Understood."

Before long, Matvey said in a voice which repressed his feelings. Pavel glared at the giant former sailor with wide eyes, but as Matvey tapped the captain's shoulder, he nodded as to admonish him.

Pavel tightly grasped his fist, shed tears and looked up at the sky just for an instant so as not to put them away. When he returned his gaze to Sasha, a preternatural determination rose on the captain's face.

"Vanadis-sama. This ship is my ship. Just in case something bad happens, please blame only me."

"You only follow my orders. I have no reason to blame."

After answering so, Sasha faintly showed a smile too out of place in a battlefield.

"Thank you. Pavel. Matvey."

Calling respectively their names, she bowed a little. The expression of Sasha who raised a face whose expression became that of a warrior. The two men once again braced themselves, too.

"Captain. I will borrow several people."

"Take as much as you want."

At Matvey's frank demand, Pavel returned these words while going to the prow. Matvey turned towards Sasha and nodded. Then, he looked up at the towering mast immediately nearby.

The mast was fixed by several ropes — the riggings^[7] which stretched respectively from the prow, the stern, the starboard and the larboard. Among them, the rigging stretching from the starboard and the larboard formed the rope ladder by vertically stretching several ropes. When the sailors climbed the mast, they used this rope ladder.

"I leave the starboard to you."

From the place where Sasha and Matvey were standing, the rigging of the starboard was slightly near.

"Please wait a little."

As Matvey said so, he ran out to the stern. Seeing off his back where a White Beluga was depicted, Sasha shifted her gaze to the prow.

About ten knights could be seen running to this place. It was those who were fighting against the pirates at the prow in accordance with Pavel's order. All of them were smeared with blood and sweat, and were heavily breathing.

Sasha told them to regain their breath while waiting for Matvey to return. The giant former sailor came back at once. He was followed by about ten knights.

"Please follow him."

Sasha said so to the knights who came from the prow; Matvey looked around the total of twenty knights. There were two things which they had in common. The first was that there were those who had followed since the Imperial Palace, and the second was that anyone had either a bow or a crossbow.

"From now, Vanadis-sama will climb the mast. Meanwhile, we will defend the rigging around the starboard."

In this situation, it was an order which was hard to suddenly understand. Doubt was pasted to some of the knights' faces, and then Sasha looked back. The Vanadis of black clothing nodded with a face which revealed an intention of asking a favor.

"Of course, I don't say it on a whim. It may be presumptuous of me who invited such a situation to say this. But, I want you to believe in me."

As the knights silently looked at each other, they quickly lined up and saluted Sasha. All of them were looking forward to fight under this black-haired Vanadis. Since their master had said so, then they shall move as such.

Matvey and the twenty knights ran to the starboard. Though there was also the presence of pirate ships on the starboard side, there was a distance of about ten Alsins (about ten meters) until paddles of each ship clashed.

However, partly because the defense here was scanty (insufficient) compared to the other sides, the pirates who threw ropes with hook, hung on the gunwale of the "Armor Fish(Dospe Ryba)" and tried to pass to along it were not few. There were also those who tried to burn the ship by shooting fire arrows.

A swarm of arrows and bolts raised a ferocious growl and attacked those pirates. Tearing up the air, it was the force which built a bridge with arrows between ship and ship. While wielding the hand axe and hatchet and cutting off the ropes with hooks one after another, Matvey issued instructions with a loud voice.

"Keep shooting without loosening the hand! Do not let the enemy draw their bowstring! Those who ran out of arrows, throw whatever is within your reach, be it barrel or wood!"

The pirates faltered. Some hid themselves behind the gunwale, some tried to use their comrades' corpses as a shield to go past the storm of arrows. Or some people fell from the ship and let resound a loud sound of water.

Not overlooking that the enemy's offensive declined, Sasha quickly jumped upon the gunwale and grabbed the rigging. She climbed the rope ladder with practiced movements. The pirates were going to aim at her who was defenseless, but they gave up as they were stopped by the rain of arrows shot by Matvey and the knights.

Sasha jumped from the rigging to the mast and reached the summit.

The strong wind tinged with cold air blew through the body of the Vanadis of black clothing. The mast became thin as she went to the top, and when it came to the summit, there was no enough area for Sasha to lower her hips. Looking up, the sky was high; looking below, at the height to the extent that the eyes also felt dizzy, a person weak in mind would probably faint.

However, Sasha did not shiver in the cold, she did not also break her posture or stagger. While taking her balance with only one leg on the top and fluttering her black hair trimmed around her shoulders, she turned a calm look towards the azure sea which spread boundlessly outside of the battlefield.

In the direction of northwest, she found what she expected. She shouted the strongest possible towards the bottom.

"Everyone, The Lebus army will be soon there! Hold out just a bit longer!"

Onboard, the voice and sound of the battle were without change jumbled together and the noise reached up to the top of the mast where Sasha was.

Even so, the black-haired Vanadis' scream reached their ears. The Legnica soldiers who gasped for breath recovered their vitality whereas unrest ran among the pirates.

Sasha shifted her gaze and stared at the flagship of the pirate ships.

Now, it was so to speak, an opportunity. She would not take the trouble to make an ally climb such a place just to look for friendly troops.

Suddenly, a shrill sound different from battle cry and blades sounds ran in the air. It was the sound from which a thick blade was driven into a large tree. Vibration was faintly transmitted from the mast.

The sailors were trying to eagerly cut down with axe and hatchet the mast which Sasha climbed.

When they encountered the storm, they were to cut down the mast in order to lighten the ship even a little. Even among the sailors, there were some who had such an experience.

However, even such sailors did not have work with this much tension. Sasha was getting on to the mast in which axes were driven. Anyway, as they finished quickly, they wielded axes with bright red faces.

Matvey used the knights and hung ropes with hook on the mast, and then he adjusted the direction so that the mast fell to the prow direction. Similarly, Pavel, while leading his subordinates and fighting, paid attention so that damage did not occur to his allies.

The mast inclined.

The rift, where blades were driven in dozens of times, spread while emitting a creaking sound.

At that time, Sasha, rather than the top of the mast, moved a little downward.

What her black pair of eyes were gazing at was the pirate ship which was floating in front of the "Armor Fish(Dospe Ryba)". Specifically, the long and narrow sail yard vertically installed at the top of the mast.

The mast inclined further. To the extent that one could raise his body.

Sasha brought down her bust (upper body) forward and ran with a crouching posture.

--The height isn't a problem. Not above, but forward...!

After a run-up of only three steps, she kicked the mast and jumped.

The black-haired Vanadis soared in the air. She unsheathed the Luminous Flames put on both sides of her waist and hung them high like a bird flapping its wings. The golden and vermillion blades reacted to their master's fighting spirit and blew up the colored flame of each blade from the sword blades.

"...Bird of fire(Phoenix)."

Matvey who looked up at Sasha's figure uttered a voice of admiration

It was the name of the sacred bird transmitted to an old kingdom which was located farther south than Muozinel. With red and gold wings, it was a large eagle which wrapped its body in flame.

Since it burnt the enemy with crimson flames, revived the dead with golden flames, and when dying, it was burnt to ash by its own flames, and revived from within, it was also called phoenix.

Matvey superimposed the figure of the black-haired Vanadis, who danced in the sky while emitting a golden flame from the sword in her right hand and a vermillion flame from the sword in her left hand, on the sacred bird whose story he had once heard.

Sasha's shoe soles stepped on the sail yard of the pirate ship. The sail yard which was firmly fixed did not even shake. When taking two steps forward, the Hidden Princess of the Luminous Flame(Falpram) adjusted her stance and ran over the thin sail yard at a breath.

In the Armor Fish(Dospe Ryba) where the black-haired Vanadis left, the mast fell down and broke the deck with a roaring sound, and several pirates were blown away by the aftermath of the impact, but she did not glanced there even once.

Both the shouts of joy of Matvey, Pavel and the others who were pleased with the fact that she got down on the sail yard of the pirate ship, and the stir of the pirates had not probably reached her consciousness even if they reached her ears.

She arrived at the yardarm^[8]. Sasha jumped again.

Under the blue sky, a phoenix of black clothing danced. While leaving trails of two-colored flame.

The mast which soared at the center of the flagship Boogeyman of the pirate ships. Sasha lightly swooped down in the sail yard which was at its (mast) upper part. In a flash, she kicked the sail yard and jumped. She kicked the rigging and the mast and jumped and finally got down on the deck.

The pirates, so much surprised that they could not even speak, stared in utter amazement at the black-haired Vanadis. It was exactly such thing which one might say that he doubt his eyes. Even more than having jumped from the mast to the sail yard of another ship, just the process of coming down to the deck from the sail yard could hardly be regarded as a human work.

This girl with a delicate body in front of them appeared to them like an extraordinary monster.

Sasha stood up and set up her twin swords after confirming that she was not injured.

"Hidden Princess of the Luminous Flame(Falfram). Alexandra Alshavin.
—I come."

The pirates were so overwhelmed by her calm fighting spirit that they had even forgotten to set up their weapons.

"Attack!"

Suddenly, a shout voice harking back to thunder roared on board. It was Torbalan's. The pirates uniformly trembled as they were startled and then pulled themselves together.

Seeing the pirates who recovered their morale, Sasha squinted with a troublesome impression. Between Torbalan and her, there was a wall of dozens of pirates.

--In case of a ship of this size, I guess there would be two hundred rowers and one hundred combatants.

Torbalan's aim was probably to wear her out. Riding on that speculation was aggravating, but it was necessary to reduce the pirates' number, even if by one.

"Let's do it."

Appealing to the twin swords in her hands, Sasha kicked the deck. The nearly ten persons who were standing at the pirates' vanguard raised their axes and hatchets, raised a war cry and rushed to the black-haired Vanadis. A swarm of violent killing intent and blades mercilessly attacked only one girl.

Clad in crimson and golden flames, the black shadow danced.

The two-colored flame each drew an arc and formed a circle. The circle of flame melted in the air and disappeared in a count of one or two, but as if waiting for it some things rolled on the deck in succession with a dull sound.

Those were humans' heads and arms. That there was little bloodshed compared to the number of things which fell on the deck was because some sections (cuts) had been burnt by the flame.

On the other hand, Sasha who silently glared at the pirates did not have even one drop of blood on her.

The pirates were about to falter, but a monster-like pressure which was emitted behind them, let alone run, did not even allow them to stand stock still. Driven by fear, a similar number of pirates like earlier aimed at Sasha.

Once again, the black shadow, which flickered two flames of different colors danced on the deck. In addition to be the "Hidden Princess of the Luminous Flame(Falfram)", Sasha had another nickname which was "Princess of the Dancing Blades", but at this time, she was the very danseuse who brought about death to those who approached her.

There was no waste in Sasha's refined movements, the twin swords which she tightly grasped drew a bright path in the void and the pirates fell down as they had their faces divided, their throats ripped and their hearts pierced.

"Oho", Torbalan who watching Sasha's fighting style behind the pirates leaked with a voice of admiration. While floating a happy smile, he raised his voice.

"If it isn't good with ten people, attack her with fifteen people. If it isn't good with fifteen people, attack her with twenty people! Seal her movements

even if you must cling on her hand or foot! Once you hold her down, you can do as you want afterwards!"

For Torbalan, the pirates were no more than disposable pawns. Even if they all died, he would not probably bat an eyelid. If they could wear out Sasha even a little, then there was no reason to spare their lives.



The pirates' blades could not even touch Sasha's black clothes, but Sasha's twin swords were burying them (consigned them to oblivion) in a flash. Heads fell, hands still holding a weapon fell from the elbow, and the pirates who lost a part of their body fell over the deck with a groan.

Even so, other pirates stepped over their comrades' corpses, pushed aside their comrades who were still alive and attacked Sasha. What was driving them to a desperate offensive was Torbalan's existence.

--Even if I cut this much, they don't falter, huh.

In the place where she cut down dozens of people, Sasha changed her tactic. She passed between the pirates and ran by the gunwale. She lightly dodged the pirates who came chasing her and kicked their asses in order to push out. Those pirates lost their balance, got over the gunwale and fell to the sea from the head.

When a loud sound of water resounded, Sasha jumped onto the gunwale. Casting a skeptical gaze at the dumbfounded pirates, she ran over the thin gunwale at a stretch and approached Torbalan.

Torbalan grinned. As he grabbed a battle axe from the hand of a pirate immediately next to him, he vigorously threw it at Sasha the moment when she kicked the gunwale and jumped.

A hard metallic sound echoed, and the battle axe was blown off as it was divided into three big pieces. Sasha's twin swords had cut it. However, Sasha was kept from jumping and landed at ten steps away from Torbalan.

"It has been a few days since then, Twin Swords. Impressive, really impressive."

"What is your purpose?"

Ignoring Torbalan's words and setting up the twin swords, the Vanadis of black clothing cut right to the chase.

"Why do you, who isn't even a pirate, lead them and head towards Zchted?"

Sasha's gaze was tinged with sharpness as if piercing what it stared at, but Torbalan not only did not flinch, but also answered with a faint smile.

"Oh, well. If I have to say it with one word, it's for joy."

"Joy...?"

At Sasha who frowned, Torbalan nodded in a big way.

"On the battlefield, rampaging as one soldier is also joy. Kidnapping young girls, violating them and eating them is also joy. Competing with the enemy General for wisdom is also joy. By one's command, making humans kill each other is also joy."

Sasha's expression increased in steepness. The person who was in front of her was unmistakably a monster. Both eyes of Torbalan gave an ominous red light.

"Even fighting against you who are our enemy is also joy. Certainly there is an old agreement or fate between you guys and us, but no life should just live only to it."

Sasha was dubious of what on earth he was talking about, but her feelings seemed to have been reflected on her face. Torbalan leaked a muffled laughter.

"Do you want to know?"

Sasha shook her head and responded with a sarcastic tone.

"You don't necessarily know what I want to know. Rather, you might deliberately speak portentous words to disturb my concentration. Besides—"

Smile vanished from the lips of the Vanadis of black clothing. Her black pupils were filled with a calm fighting spirit.

"I'm not good at holding back on the torture just enough to get you to talk."

"Good answer."

The light of Torbalan's both eyes increased its shine and the intimidating air which was emitted from his whole body swelled up.

At this time, the pirates also noticed the abnormal phenomenon and stepped away from the two without hiding their tension and anxiety. Torbalan and, of course, also Sasha paid no heed to them. They could not afford to look away from each other.

As Torbalan's round head warped, spiral-shaped horns grew from within. In his mouth, thick fangs which were not that of a human peeped out. His

medium build suddenly swelled to the point that the clothes which he wore were torn off, and the deck creaked as it could not bear his weight.

His big frame which exceeded 20 Chet (about 2 meters) was not just simply big. The swelling of his muscles was not normal, and it overflowed with sturdiness as to sharpen a rock. His skin which was illuminated by the feeble sun was eerily white.

When he fought against Sasha a few days ago, the right half of his face was hideously burned and there should have been a scar from his right shoulder to his right chest, but there was no such trace of either of them at all.

In the hand of Sasha who tightly grasped Bargren, power gathered. Although the moon can still be seen, Sasha tightly grasped Bargren in her hand as power gathered. Facing each other like this under the sun compared to the night that was almost wrapped in darkness, an instinctive fear was stimulated just by clearly knowing the opponent's figure.

While persuading herself to become used to seeing it, the Vanadis of black clothing glared at the monster.

On the other hand, the pirates could not restrain their screams. Unlike Sasha, it was presently the first time that they knew the identity of the man whom they were following. If there were those who sat down on the spot unable to stand up due to fear, there were also those who screamed and jumped into the sea. They were too preoccupied to even think to keep fighting.

The figure of Torbalan who showed his real appearance could be seen from the adjoining pirate ships. The ships which were on standby on both sides of the "Boogeyman" had been entrusted with the role of rushing there and assisting if the encirclement was about to crumble, but they forgot to check the situation and were staring in utter amazement at Torbalan.

They could not believe what was reflected in their eyes.

In addition, a similar thing was also happening to the pirate ship which was floating in front of the "Boogeyman".

This ship broke in so as not to let the "Armor Fish(Dospe Ryba)" draw near the "Boogeyman", but it also engaged in a fierce battle with the Legnica troops.

However, those who saw Torbalan's true form, regardless of the Legnica soldiers and pirates, stopped the fighting. Everyone had a perplexed look as if they set foot in an unknown world.

In the Armor Fish(Dospe Ryba), Pavel with a stunned look was staring at the "Boogeyman". He encountered countless storms and pirates in his life so far. He also happened to meet sharks and crocodiles which were much bigger than humans. However, he had never seen a monster like Torbalan.

He turned a befuddled face towards Matvey who was next to him. The captain of the "Armor Fish(Dospe Ryba)" suddenly regained his senses. Calm and sadness blurred on the face of Matvey who stared at Torbalan and Sasha and that make Pavel raise a question.

"You... Did you possibly know it?"

The voice of Pavel who asked the question was shaking with anxiety. Matvey, not removing his gaze from the monster and the Vanadis, nodded. Pavel got furious.

"You knew! So you knew and you let Vanadis-sama go! To that ship...!"

"This is because it was Vanadis-sama's will."

Matvey looked down at Pavel and gently pulled up the hand of his comrades-in-arms who flared up at him.

"I would have taken her place if I could. But, Captain. How many hundreds of soldiers do you think will be needed to slaughter that monster? No, how many soldiers do you think there are who can confront that?"

"It's not a matter of number! If the soldiers can't move, even if I cut through the vanguard..."

"Because she wants to avoid it, Vanadis-sama went alone."

Though Pavel still tried to argue, he noticed that the hand of Matvey who was holding his arm was shaking and swallowed his words. As he looked up, on the former sailor's face, fury which he could not be suppress changed to bitterness, and rose.

After Pavel turned his eyes to Torbalan and ground his teeth in vexation, he violently brushed off Matvey's hand. He turned his back to the former sailor.

"There are also many pirate ships which don't see the monster. Let's beat them."

Matvey also pulled himself together at these words. Because the pirate ships had surrounded the Legnica army, nearly half of them were largely distant from the Boogeyman. Torbalan's figure could not be seen from those ships, and the battle between soldiers and pirates still continued there.

"Understood. I leave the prow to you. I will head to the stern."

Matvey greatly exhaled and turned his back on Pavel. He calmly began to ponder.

---If the flagship of the pirate ships is so confused, then they probably will no longer be able to maintain the encirclement.

The encirclement was very powerful if successful, but it was at first difficult to surround the enemy. And it was more difficult to maintain the encirclement until annihilating the enemy. In addition, the other side should not also stay like that without putting up a fight; after all, they would try to destroy the encirclement by breaking through where the military power was weak.

As a matter of fact, the time when Sasha climbed to the top of the mast, Torbalan was perplexed at whether he should make his flagship retreat. He also knew that the Lebus army was approaching.

However, Torbalan knew that if he were to retreat the flagship, the instruction to that extent would have been late and the encirclement would have crumbled. In the end, Torbalan chose to maintain the encirclement and allowed the approach of Sasha.

--- The confusion of the pirates, even if left alone, will probably spread to other ships. I assume that while we control the agitation of soldiers on our side, they will become more confused and they will be crushed separately as they divide.

The battle was not over yet. Matvey stimulated his exhausted body, and as he tightly grasped a weapon, he walked to the stern where he would continue fighting.

From Torbalan's whole body, an invisible shockwave was released. The barrels which were rolling, the rigging and the weapons dropped by pirates were smashed into pieces and blew off.

However, there was not the figure of the Vanadis of black clothing therein. Torbalan did not do something like turning his eyes around and search for the enemy; he swung his right hand directly horizontal relying only on her presence.

The wind groaned. The wreckage of things which were smashed a little while ago danced in the air. However, there was no response.

A black shadow danced in the air. It was Sasha. She escaped the shock wave as she jumped horizontally, and then avoided the monster's stout arm by jumping. Furthermore, she twisted her body in the air and cut the monster's arm with her twin swords.

At the same time Sasha got down on the deck, black blood spilled from Torbalan's right hand. Above and below of his elbow were respectively cut.

"It can't be only this level."

Torbalan floated a happy smile and sedately turned to Sasha. The black-haired Vanadis did not respond. This was because she did not feel the need to return words, but it was not only that. She was focused on the fact that the wound of the monster's arm suddenly became thinner and disappeared.

--As expected, it's impossible with just this, huh.

It was Torbalan who with even his right arm severed, would very easily reconnect it. . By just randomly cutting, it would be impossible to defeat him.

Torbalan extended his right hand and stuck it straight out. As Sasha sensed danger and jumped to the left, a shock wave was released from the demon's palm at the same time. The shock wave passed through the space where Sasha was standing until a while ago and blew off the pirates who were over there.

A pirate's body jumped many times like a pebble which was kicked away, and was flatly slammed to the deck. The right hand and the left foot bent unnaturally. The bones and internal organs were probably damaged; he

vomited blood from the mouth and his eyes were out of focus. He twitched and soon ceased to breath.

"I also thought when we fought the other day, but..."

Torbalan furrowed his brows and talked to Sasha.

"You avoid very well things with no shape, and invisible to the human's eyes."

"Do you mean to say that it has never been avoided so far?"

Sasha returned the words in a provocative tone. But, Torbalan did not ride on it and shook his head with an attitude showing that he was earnestly curious.

"No. Leaving aside ordinary humans, among you guys, there were also several people who could avoid it."

"You guys" probably referred to the Vanadis whom the demon had fought so far.

"It looked like you have fought against many Vanadis until now, but including me how many have you fight?"

"Who knows. It's not like I bother to count. After all, unlike others, I'm frivolous and there was also a time when I loafed about. That was... Well, I would say somewhere from forty to forty-five years."

As Torbalan's reply with a tone which faked ignorance, Sasha barely held the agitation in her heart.

Probably, this monster was not lying.

On earth how many years has he lived?

"However, there was no one who keeps dodging so splendidly by a hairbreadth. Your skill and courage are the real deal, but... Have you no fear? One wrong step, no, a half-step wrong and you will die."

"There is no reason to fear something which won't hit."

With this curt answer, Sasha kicked the deck. She head straight to Torbalan. The white demon squared off. He judged that even if he was to attack in this distance, he would be dodged, so he intended to attract her until the very last minute.

In a position where she would be exposed if she took one more step, Sasha stopped. Torbalan, also expecting it, raised his thick stout arm which was also about the size Sasha's body.

"—Collision Wall of Flaming Spear(Plum Oak)"

Faster than Torbalan's stout arm swung downward, Sasha crossed the swords, which she held in both hands, in the front and swung them right and left.

The next moment, several columns of flames were born between the Vanadis and the demon. The spears of flames which formed a sequence in horizontal straight line were so high that they exceeded Torbalan's stature, and they violently blew up as if about to pierce the heaven.

"You want to obstruct my field of vision with flames, huh."

Even though his body was burnt by the heat, Torbalan's movement did not stop. He mowed down his fist with a side blow with the force to blow off each pillar of fire.

The flames flickered and sparks rapidly scattered. There was no response again.

At the same time, Sasha appeared at Torbalan's feet. The white demon was completely taken aback. He knew that these flames were used in order to obstruct his field of vision, but he did not think that Sasha would break through within the flames she had created.

The two swords clad in flame glittered. The vermillion blade and the golden blade freely raged with violence (intensity) reminiscent of a whirlwind. Torbalan's left foot was cut into shreds and the traces of the slash which was hideously burned were minced in countless number.

Torbalan leaked a groan of pain and staggered. Black blood which spilled on the deck was little, but because the cut (wound) was burnt, the wound itself was not shallow.

In addition, as Sasha inflicted a slight wound on Torbalan's abdomen, he crouched down on the spot. And then, he jumped high in the next moment. The shock wave which the white demon shot did not reach even the black clothes which the Vanadis wore as it was late for an instant, and the blazing twin blades were slammed to Torbalan's head.

A hard metallic sound echoed in the void.

The delicate body of the black-haired Vanadis danced in the air. Sasha somehow changed her posture in midair and safely landed. The bosom of her black clothes was torn up and a line of blood streamed down her white skin. It was a scratch of the extent of being easily heal even if left as is, but it was the first wound she sustained since the beginning of this fight.

Sasha, not minding her wound, did not remove her gaze from the three horns which had grown on Torbalan's forehead.

Her black pupils accurately perceived it. As those horns bent like a whip, blocked the two hits of the Luminous Flame and attacked Sasha in a rollback state.

If she did not escape in the air using the momentum while defending with Bargren's blades, Sasha's body would have probably been pierced by the horn at this time.

"You dodged well. It should be the first time I show this."

Torbalan uttered with a slightly disappointed voice as he was impressed. When he twisted his thick neck around, the twisted horn returned to his original length and fit in his head. It seemed to be flexible (retractable).

"Whatever attack might come, it would not be strange. It was because I was thinking so."

While adjusting her breathing, Sasha responded. In order to let him realize the conviction she held in her heart.

---I can do it.

The wound on Torbalan's abdomen had already healed, but there were several wounds which had not yet healed on his left leg.

It was the place where Sasha intentionally slashed at many times. She thought that by concentrating the flames and the slashes of Luminous Flame in one spot, she might surpass the phenomenal regenerative ability which the monster possessed; and her reading proved right.

However, just because she knew that, it did not mean that she held the advantage. This was because the difficulty to dodge the shock waves released by Torbalan, to slip through and draw near the horn, and moreover, to drive in a slash to the extent that this white demon's regenerative ability could not catch up with it did not change.

On the other hand, considering the destructive power which the shock wave and the horns owned, Torbalan would probably win if he was to hit Sasha with one or two blows. In addition, since he would actively set attacks by his horns now that he had revealed it, his offensive should become more severe (intense).

However, Sasha was not irritated before these facts and she never happened to grieve; she just accepted them as such and set up her twin swords like a craftsman who began a practiced work.

Encouraging her, Bargren let the flame of the sword blades flicker as if stirring its fighting spirit. The master of the Luminous Flame noticed it and floated a smile on her lips only for an instant and grasped her Dragonic Tool(Viralt) again.

She adjusted her breathing while thinking. The twin swords encouraged her, too. It was time to move.

"—Heat Haze"

Sasha's figure swayed and grew dim. The flame which clad the twin swords rapidly heated up the atmosphere around her with a certain path.

Torbalan howled. He let out shock waves in rapid succession from both his hands and wielded and struck his horn which lengthened to about the same height as his stature.

However, no even one of those violent attacks hit the Vanadis of black clothing. The shock waves destroyed the gunwale, the horn, smashed not only the deck, but also the top board of the lower layer and exposed the layer where the rowers were.

At this time, the rowers witnessed for the first time the monster called Torbalan. Since the pirates who were on the deck tried to get in first and escaped, and with no one who would tell them about the situation, one could only think that the atmosphere of the uproar so far was more hectic than usual.

It was those among the rowers who were in the frontward who knew of the situation of the deck, but their confusion and agitation were transmitted in the rear in an instant. Torbalan's horn once again smashed a part of the deck, and the rowers finally fell in a state of panic. They frantically escaped to the stern.

Above them, the battle gradually increased in intensity

The gunwale and most of the barrels and shalllops became wood chips and were scattered in the sea, and there were several large holes opened on the deck. Blood and pieces of meat which were stuck all over the place were from the pirates' bodies. There were smashed up by Torbalan's horn and shock waves.

Torbalan let a roar resound all over. He swung both his hands, released shock waves and mowed down all things by rotating his horn. Their violence was to the extent of destroying the ship.

However, Sasha dodged all of them, cut the monster's bust with her blades clad in flames as she crept in it and quickly took distance. On the monster's white body, countless traces of black slashes appeared. The regeneration could not completely catch up.

No even half time of a quarter koku had passed since the rowers escaped. Nevertheless, the white demon was cornered.

--Why?

As expected, even Torbalan felt impatient. As Sasha had also been thinking, the repeated attacks released by this demon, whatever they were, if they were to directly hit her, they should certainly be able to kill the black-haired Vanadis.

They did not even graze her. Sasha slipped through his stout arm, avoided the shock waves, saw through the horn's attack and dodged it. Without showing any sign of fear and without even slowing down.

After hesitating for a moment, Torbalan decided to devote himself to the defense. He shrank his big frame, covered up from his chest to his head with both his stout arms, and moreover, substituted his horn for a shield. It was humiliation to the extent that he ground his teeth, but he came to a clean decision that it was better than losing.

Just because Torbalan devoted himself to defense didn't mean that Sasha would focus on attacking. If she was to show even a slight opening, this demon intended to promptly change to counterattacking. Of course, Sasha knew to this extent, too.

Be that as it may, the black-haired Vanadis could not afford to rest her hands. This was because Torbalan's wounds would regenerate. She had no choice but to keep attacking until the demon died.

He waited for the moment when that Sasha would wear herself out and leave an opening. If he could hit her even once, he should be able to turn the tables.

However, contrary to Torbalan's expectations, Sasha's movements did not weaken. The vermillion blade and the golden blade cut, tore, chipped off and burnt the demon's body. New wounds were inflicted on Torbalan's arms and legs, and black blood which flowed out from the burnt wounds dyed his body and his legs.

Torbalan quietly endured them. Even if his arm was to fall, even if his horn was to be crushed, as long as he escaped death, his body would regenerate with time.

Sooner or later, a flaw would stand out on Sasha's attack. Although it was not enough to say that she showed openings, attacks of big swings clearly increased.

Sasha took the distance for a moment. While adjusting her breathing, she crossed her arms in order to hide her face. It was a stance she had not showed so far. In that posture, the Vanadis of black clothing charged straight ahead. Torbalan did not move from the spot. The distance between both of them shortened.

Suddenly, Sasha's leg broke. Of course, both red eyes of Torbalan did not overlook it, but a doubt grazed his mind.

That position in which she broke her stance was too convenient for the demon. It was in the demon's range, but not in the black-haired Vanadis' range. Another two steps were insufficient. Even if Torbalan was to attack, Sasha's counterattack would not reach him. He thought that it was too good.

Torbalan shook off his hesitation, stuck out both his hands forward and released a shock wave. He swung his head at the same time and struck his horn from an angle different from that of the shock wave.

A destruction sound. The deck broke and wood chips loudly scattered, but there was not the response which Torbalan desired.

The figure of Sasha who raised the twin swords approached before his eyes. The opening she showed earlier was indeed a diversion.

However, Sasha's twin swords did not reach Torbalan.

The very moment she was going to cut him, she stopped her movement as if she was clung to something invisible. As she revealed a stunned look and painfully shook her lips, the Vanadis fell on her knees on the deck.

She did not seem to feign an opening. When Torbalan judged so in not less than half of the moment, he shot an invisible shock wave from his whole body.

Sasha was blown. Although she did not let go of Bargren, she was flung against the mast by her back and crumbled like a doll whose threads were cut.

"A disease, huh... And a fatal disease at that."

Torbalan who recovered from the surprise said. Fatal disease. It meant a deadly disease.

Sasha did not answer. An acute pain ran throughout her body, her consciousness was faint and words did not come out.

Her eyes were hollow and out of focus, and a hoarse voice spilled from her half-open mouth with blood. Her black hair was disheveled and her black clothes were also torn. Still, the fact that she was safe and sound despite being exposed to a shock wave at point-blank range was because the Luminous Flame protected her.

"So, that abandonment^[9] was something which was provided because you were standing on the brink of death due to the disease. You probably reached that mental state because you were endowed with that excellent ability and unyielding spirit."

Letting his fangs peep out of his mouth, Torbalan floated a cruel smile. He stood up and began to walk towards Sasha.

"But, it's over now. Twin Swords, I will eat you without leaving even one bone—"

A sudden roaring sound and impact struck the ship at that time. Torbalan stopped, swallowed the continuation of his words and turned his look towards the stern.

"...I was much too focused on Twin Swords, huh."

Ahead of the demon's gaze, an enemy ship was floating. It was this which struck against the ship and shook it. And, someone got down from that ship with a high sound.

It was a young girl who had not yet reached 20-year-old. The hair color was red. She wore a purple dress and had a black whip in hand. It was the Flash Princess of the Thunder Swirl(Isgrifa), Elizavetta Fomina.

The Lebus troops finally arrived at this battlefield.

While jumped to the Boogeyman which was the flagship of the pirate ships, Elizavetta could not conceal her tension.

---Is that... Is that, a demon?

She heard about it beforehand from Sasha and even if she witnessed it like this just before her eyes, there was still doubt even though she accepted it as the reality.

However, this was reality. Be it the sea breeze, the fight between Sasha and the demon, the smell of blood and sweat or the hustle and bustle of the battlefield. In that case, she should move as a Vanadis without averting her eyes from these.

Though the Boogeyman was blown off here and there due to the fierce fight between Sasha and Torbalan and the deck was also full of holes, Elizavetta lightly jumped from scaffold to scaffold and approached the demon. Torbalan who saw the Vanadis of Rainbow Eyes(Laziris) raised a voice in delight.

"It's Whip this time, huh!"

The demon's eyes were directed to Elizavetta, but to the black whip she held in her hand. This demon knew it at first sight that it was a Dragonic Tool(Viralt).

"—Iron Whip(Kusatari)."

In Elizavetta's hand, the tip rapidly shrank from the handle of the whip and changed to a rod-shaped weapon. The red-haired Vanadis struck it, which became the length of about a long sword, with a roar of great speed. The white demon received that blow on his left arm.

Torbalan's left arm was smashed in an unlikely angle with an unpleasant, dull sound. Color of pain and surprise floated on the demon's face, but he immediately shot a shock wave from his mouth.

Elizavetta escaped from the shock wave as she kicked Torbalan's left arm slightly quickly and leaped backward. She took distance from the demon.

It was not as if Elizavetta had seen the shock wave. But she was able to predict it for she had witnessed Sasha's battle from afar. Even so, it did not mean that she saw through it like the Vanadis of black clothing, she just jumped by intuition.

"After Twin Swords who makes movements which can't be regarded as human, now we have Whip who has herculean strength hard to believe from a human, huh."

Looking at his left arm which bent in a strange way, Torbalan spoke in admiration.

Elizavetta stared in wonder. Ahead of her gaze, the demon's left arm went back to his original form while emitting a sound similar to the sound of joints. Even the scars of slashes inflicted earlier by Sasha gradually faded and then disappeared.

"I see. It's indeed a monster."

The red-haired Vanadis' smile was somewhat cramped.

---Giving the strict order to the soldiers not to come was the right decision.

While blurring the sweat on the forehead, she thought. In addition to the battlefield which was full of holes and as such restricted the movements, he had invisible attacks and formidable regeneration ability. How should she fight a monster which possessed these two abilities?

---I won't be able to catch up with the Iron Whip(Kusatari).

There was no choice but to drive in a strong blow which would surpass the regeneration ability. Elizavetta also arrived at the same conclusion as Sasha. "Burn and Split Heaven and Earth" which was her Dragic skill had power enough to easily destroy even a galley ship.

---However...

Elizavetta ran her gaze to Sasha, who was sitting as she leaned on the mast. Would the ship which was damaged up to here be able to withstand her Dragonic skill?

Assuming it could defeat Torbalan, in case she was to destroy the ship, would she be able save Sasha and return to the Margarita?

There was a problem with Elizavetta herself. Unlike Sasha which did not participate in the battle until she jumped in this ship, she stood at the vanguard of the soldiers and wielded the Thunder Swirl since the beginning of the fight.

Before rushing to her, she did not relax her attention from the anxiety about the progress of the battle and her attitude as a commander even a little. Therefore, she had hardly recovered from fatigue.

---With my current stamina, I can use my Dragonic skill only once. No, twice if I overdo it. But then, let alone save Alexandra, I won't have enough stamina to even escape...

While Elizavetta was hesitating, Torbalan did not attack. As he suspiciously frowned and sniffed, he muttered.

"You smell of Jaeger-dono."

Torbalan's words rode on the sea breeze and reached Elizavetta's ears, and the Flash Princess of the Thunder Swirl(Isgrifa) unintentionally shook her shoulders. The demon sneered at that reaction.

"I see. So, you have passed a contract with Jaeger-dono. Though I don't know around when, but I'm surprised that Whip did not abandon you. It appears to really like you."

"Shut up!"

When Elizavetta raised the Thunder Swirl, the black whip immediately reverted from the rod-shaped to the whip-like form. She perfectly understood the meaning of Torbalan's words; hence she could not ignore it.

While the black whip let a white lightning gush out, it cut the wind and shot it to the demon. Torbalan, instead of his left arm in process of regeneration, protected himself with his right arm.

The whip tinged with lightning twined around the demon's right arm, and mercilessly hurt Torbalan with a thunder stroke. However, the white demon, far from raising a cry of pain, even floated a scornful laugh.

"It's shallow."

"What?"

Elizavetta furrowed her eyebrows and glared at the white demon. Power concentrated in the hand which tightly grasped Valitsaif. There was no doubt that she felt anger at Torbalan's leisurely attitude, but the red-haired Vanadis, at this time, also felt an indescribable eeriness at the same time.

She knew that Torbalan's weapons (attack means) were the shock waves and his horns. As long as she kept this distance, they would not reach Elizavetta. And, the Thunder Swirl strongly twined around so as to dig into the demon's right arm and sealed his movements.

Despite his disadvantageous situation, Torbalan showed no signs of being flustered at all. On the contrary, he said to Elizavetta in a tone like an adult who admonished a child.

"It's probably the first time that you are fighting against someone like me."

"...Have you any basis of what you say?"

"Well, something like this."

As Torbalan made a hand sword with his left hand, he vigorously swung it downward on his right arm. He cut it from just under the shoulder. Elizavetta who had strongly pulled the whip stumbled a step forward as she lost her balance. The Thunder Swirl which was still twined around the demon's right hand depicted a distorted curve in the void.

Torbalan did not overlook this chance. He stepped forward and shortened the distance at a breath, and swung his thick neck. The horn of the head attacked Elizavetta with a tremendous speed.

The Vanadis of Rainbow Eyes(Laziris) promptly wielded her black whip, but with a disadvantageous posture, protecting her body was the best she could do. An impact accompanied by a flash occurred between the horn and the whip, and countless sparkles scattered.

Elizavetta tumbled and her breathing was clogged as she severely hit her back. Her purple dress was torn in several places and her white skin was exposed.

"An inexperienced person doesn't understand that we are different from humans. The Whip which I had fought a long time ago did not do something stupid like coiling her weapon around my arm."

Elizavetta could only understand about half of what Torbalan was saying.

--- The Whip which he had fought a long time ago? What on earth is he talking about...?

However, she was not given the time to think about it. Torbalan made his horn grow and showered Elizavetta with blows. Without being even able to raise her body, Elizavetta had no choice but to endure the storm of blows.

Every single blow of Torbalan's horn was heavy, and mercilessly cut down little by little the few remaining stamina of the red-haired Vanadis who was only defending against them. Also, trying to fight back in her fallen posture was difficult. If she tried to escape by rolling on the deck, there was the danger to fall in a hole caused by the battle.

---Rather than continuing to be tormented just like this.

She did not want to lose. She could not afford to lose. Even if her opponent was a monster.

It was the time when Elizavetta made up her mind and tried to jump into a hole.

Torbalan's attacks suddenly stopped. Elizavetta braced herself first than being surprised, and carefully watched the enemy's state. And then, she chased with her eyes what the demon was looking at, and gasped in surprise.

Sasha was standing. Even though the middle of her face was dyed red with blood and her body was covered with wounds, she advanced towards the demon while trailingy dragging her feet.

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Her breathing had settled down at last.

Her body was heavy as a lead and an acute pain ran. But, Sasha thought that it looked like she could bear with it if it was this. The bones of her limbs were not broken. She felt like she was injured around the ribs, but anyway, it was not to the extent that she could not move.

With every step, blood which was dying her face streamed down her chin and made a stain on the deck. The fact that her hands which held the twin swords loosely hung down without power and that she still had not dropped her weapons was surprising even for her.

At the edge of her view, Elizavetta's figure was reflected. Sasha inwardly thanked her. It seemed that the Lebus army made it in time. Like this, they would probably win the war.

Besides, she was thankful to her for having earned time. This was because that if she had arrived a little late, then Sasha would have definitely been eaten by this demon.

She fixed her breathing which tended to be disturbed and tightly grasped the Luminous Flame.

---Please, Bargren. Lend me your power just a bit longer.

It seemed that Torbalan stopped his attacks to Elizavetta and switched his aim to Sasha. He reconnected his right arm, shook his horn, stamped his feet on the deck and headed towards her.

Even for the white demon, it was unbelievable that she was able to stand up. However much she was protected by her Dragonic Tool(Viralt), it was not possible for a person whose body was attacked by a fatal disease to stand up after receiving his shock wave at point-blank range and being flung against the mast.

The demon's horn which drew an arc and came attacking however mowed down on empty space. Sasha closed the distance to Torbalan at an amazing speed. The Vanadis of black clothing also avoided Torbalan's stout arm which began to strike in rapid succession and skillfully escaped from the shock wave.

But, she did not counterattack. Even though each blade of Luminous Flame which was in Sasha's hands was wrapped in fierce flames, they were just leaving trails of fire in the air according to their master's movements. These flames flickering in the air without disappearing might be proof of the high fighting spirit of the Dragonic Tool(Viralt).

Torbalan seemed to arrive at the conclusion that this reaction of Sasha meant that she no longer had enough power to fight. The demon's offensive increased in intensity. Without even minding that the ship might sink, he was just wielding his horn, swinging his stout arms and shooting shock waves.

Several black hairs danced in the air. The hems of her clothes were torn and scars were chopped on her skin. Although she could no longer completely dodge them, still Sasha avoided only direct hits.

Torbalan kept attacking, and stopped his movements.

The twin swords in Sasha's hands. Though the flame which wrapped their blades let a tail of fire trail in the air without change and built up a circled of two-fold flame which surrounded Torbalan before one knew.

The circle of the two flames released respectively a golden and a crimson glitter.

The flames blew up and wrapped the white demon.

Torbalan shot a shock wave in irritation and blew the flames, but the flames, which seemed to scatter away, immediately spread from another place and were restored in an instant.

--This is... my last flame!

Sasha crossed both her arms in front of her face and lowered her posture. The two-colored flames wrapped her body. Was the fact that the swaying of the flames was tinged with beauty was probably because she had a presentiment of the preternatural destructive power or was it because the determination to burn out her life force blurred?

It was a heroic (tragic?) flame which only those facing death could wear.

"—Twin Flare Spin(Fran Roth)"

Sasha who became a mass of flame fiercely charged. Although Torbalan had his field of vision obstruct by the flames, he sensed Sasha's presence.

The white demon struck his horn towards that presence. A golden flash twinkled on the other side of the flames and Torbalan's horn was broken in the middle with a blow and flew. The black shadow clad in flames, far from stopping, rather accelerated its momentum and approached Torbalan.

Next, it was the crimson flame which burnt the demon's view. The vermillion blade in Sasha's right hand vertically chopped (cut) a trail of black slash from Torbalan's forehead going by his nose, chin and chest up to his belly. If the sword blade was longer, it would have been a strong blow which would have definitely bisected the demon's big frame.

"I'm still..."

With his chin divided right in half, Torbalan was about to say something, but he could not finish.

In the circle of the two-fold flame surrounding the two people, a change occurred.

Crimson and golden. The two flames swelled respectively and attacked Torbalan with a tremendous force while depicting a spiral. They were sucked up in the wound which was just made.

Sasha's slash was not intended to defeat the demon, but to induce the flames.

From the divided mouth of the demon, a soundless cry leaked. Like an old parchment, on which fire spread in no time once ignited, Torbalan's large build was burned.

The wound which first attached fire was carbonized in no time and crumbled in big drops. The flames continued to smolder, expanded to the whole body and turned the demon's body from inside and outside into charcoal. At a speed much higher than his regeneration capacity's.

Sasha calmly told.

"Those flames will never let you go. They will never disappear until they burnt you to ashes."

The mouth and chin of the demon which was wrapped in hell fire were already carbonized, so he could not answer back.

However, Torbalan's leg stepped forward. Both his eyes, despite being burnt and exposed his hollow eye sockets, possessed a dreadful tenacity; and he made another step forward.

Sasha was about to set up her twin swords, but her arms did not rise. Her legs did not also move as if they were numb. She literally exhausted all her power using the Twin Flare Spin.

--A draw, huh.

Staring at Torbalan who approached little by little, Sasha, not being confused, accepted the result. Even if she were to die, the flames enveloping this monster would not disappear. Torbalan would be surely destroyed here. And it was good like that.

At that time, a sudden gust of side blow blew. A wind strong enough to raise the waves, shake the ships and vigorously flutter the battle flags of each ship passed over the battlefield to the west from the bundle.

It might be a mere wind, or it might be the prayer of the silver-haired girl which brought a miracle to her best friend across the sea.

The ship slightly shook first as it received the gust and then suddenly greatly inclined.

Usually, neither Sasha nor Torbalan would collapse with this much. But, the two people currently were not even able to support themselves.

Torbalan who did not reach Sasha at one step away fell on the deck.

The flames which had formed a circle of a two-fold flame were all sucked up in the demon's wound (cut), and as the pillar of fire which wrapped Torbalan greatly swelled up, he burst and flew with a blast.

The sea breeze blew about the black smoke wrapping the surroundings. Sasha who was thrown out on the deck by the shaking of earlier stared wide-eyed to see what was reflected in her view.

There, a huge charred clod which was about Torbalan's stature soared.

"...Is this?"

Because of her great surprise, Sasha leaked a groan. Do you tell me that, that is Torbalan? This lump of soil? Sasha wondered. She had once before

set the Twin Flare Spin on an Earth Dragon(Suro), but it did not become like this.

"It's indeed a demon..."

When she muttered with great horror, the clod fell in big drops. And, the twin swords in her hands made their blades shine with a weak flame and conveyed a will as if to say "it's all right now".

---In that case, I wonder if I may feel relieved for the time being.

As Sasha sheathed the twin swords on her waist, she tried to somehow stand up. But, she still had not enough power in her hands and feet; her body was heavy. Maybe because she felt relieved, her eyes had been hazy.

--- It's no use, huh.

When she thought, there was a person who lifted Sasha's body. It was Elizavetta.

Though the red-haired Vanadis was trying to say even one complaint, and she was about to open her mouth while peering in Sasha's face, but she swallowed her words with a sour face. The black-haired Vanadis was completely unconscious.

"Geez... You take the good part."

Elizavetta clicked her tongue once and looked back on the clod immediately nearby. Her Valitsaif was also telling her that this demon completely perished.

However, there was no way she was not anxious about it. Even the body of a dragon would remain when it dies. Like humans.

Why did he become a clod? Did it mean that demons are not living creatures?

However, there was no time to think about it. In addition, she did not also have time to give an order to the soldiers to carry out this clod. This was because the hull was more greatly inclined.

Because Sasha and Torbalan unfolded in mortal combat, this ship had become tattered. Some cracks were caused in both the ship's hold and the bilge.

The gust of earlier delivered the final blow there. The ship creaked, the cracks of the ship's hold spread and the sea water instantly flowed in. It was because of that the ship inclined.

Elizavetta carried Sasha with both arms and ran on the deck and rushed to the Margarita.

The battle with pirates was already over; it seemed to have moved to a sweep battle.

At the bow of the Margarita, the soldiers prepared ropes and nets, and were waiting for their master. In case she was not in time, they intended to throw ropes, cast nets and pull up Elizavetta. Even the Legnica soldiers who were in the ships away were holding their breath and watching.

Before the ship completely sank, Elizavetta safely arrived at the stern. She was pulled by the soldiers with a posture of still carrying Sasha.

When the Margarita left, the Boogeyman sank within the sea with a great number of pirate corpses and the huge clod.

Elizavetta gently lay down Sasha's body on the deck, ordered to call the doctor and asked of the situation from the captain.

The pirates who had been agitated by Torbalan showing his true color spurred confusion with the arrival of the Lebus army, and were crushed after being divided by both Legnica and Lebus army.

"There were victims among soldiers, but there is no sunk ship. Same for the Legnica side."

The captain of Margarita reported so, and then stated the number of pirate ships captured and the number of pirates who surrendered. These were the booty from this war. After Elizavetta heard it, she squinted and told to the captain.

"Don't kill pirates seriously injured. I'll allow the lynching. Do a minimum medical treatment to those with minor injury and give them a meal. Bring them back to the town and sell them over to the Muozinel merchants."

The Muozinel merchants in this case were the slave traders. The captain respectfully obeyed and bowed his head.

Before long, the doctor ran on the deck and checked Sasha's condition. The doctor who briefly finished the medical examination looked at Elizavetta with a serious look.

Then, it was shortly after that the Armor Fish(Dospe Ryba) which was the Legnica army's flagship came alongside the Margarita.

The sun which passed its zenith illuminated the azure sea and various things floating in there. The sea was filled with the wreckage of ships and corpses of friend and foe, pirate ships were burning here and there and blowing up black smoke.

Thus, ended the navel battle of Olsina.

Elizavetta and the captain of the Armor Fish(Dospe Ryba) Pavel undertook the post-processing and Sasha's body was transferred to the least damaged Legnica warship. It hurried to the port town of Lippner ahead of the other ships.

It was two days later that the ship arrived at Lippner.

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To the news that the pirates were repelled, the town of Lippner seethed.

Only in towns with many sailors, traders and craftsmen of shipyards, it became really sensitive to the word "pirate". Also at time when they had to prepare for the winter arrival, the residents were trembling in fear. All the more they were glad.

The damages in both humans and ships were considerable, but this news of victory became a consolation for some bereaved families all the more.

The fact that only a small fraction of people knew about Sasha's condition might be one of the reasons why people were able to purely celebrate victory. It was said that the ship [10] which arrived at Lippner returned in a hurry only to convey victory.

Sasha was transported to the mansion of Dmitry, the chief of Lippner so as not to let people know.

It was a half koku after Sasha was transported to the mansion that Ellen was called by Dmitry.

At that time, Ellen was looking at the people of the town getting excited by the victory from the window of the guest room with a smile. Relief and joy filled the silver-haired Vanadis' heart.

--I'm so glad. Sasha...

She, who was accustomed to war, did not doubt that her black-haired best friend would safely win. She was also thinking that the inside of the mansion was wrapped in a hectic atmosphere and suddenly got busy in response to the Legnica troops and Sasha who would probably come back tomorrow or the day after tomorrow.

Ellen thought of what she would say when she first met Sasha, while loosening her cheeks. Recalling the letter's contents of the elderly servant who worked for Sasha, she finally made a solemn face.

As expected, she should scold her first. She had no intention to severely speak because Sasha was sick, but even so as her best friend, it was not like she was not in an exasperating mood.

--Why did you do such a reckless thing? Thanks to you, I left my territory to Lim and galloped the horse to come here, you know?

Sasha would probably say "I'm sorry" with her familiar smile. And it would be after that they would celebrate her safety and victory.

Ellen who was excited about her happy imagination came to her senses as the door was knocked from the outside. The middle-aged maid's voice, with which she was completely familiar in these few days, told over the door.

"Master is calling you."

Ellen immediately replied "understood" with a cheerful voice, grabbed her long sword and lightly came out to the corridor. She was comfortably thinking that it would probably some consultation about Sasha.

It was when it was not in the drawing room that she was guided by the maid that she harbored suspicions.

"...Here?"

"It is Master's bedroom. Master is waiting inside."

As the maid politely bowed her head, she had probably been ordered to do so without opening the door; she turned her back and walked down the corridor. As Ellen saw off her back, she turned to the door.

A doubt surged. If one could not somehow leave the bed like Sasha, unless they were in a very intimate relationship, he would not invite a guest into his own bedroom.

Ellen was allowed to stay several days in this mansion, but if Dmitry had not an excessively open-minded personality, even if he was to suffer from a disease, it should not be.

The doubt changed to anxiety. She wondered whether something which could not be told publicly happened. And whether that was why she had been called here.

Ellen violently shook her head, and forcibly shook off her anxiety. As she inhaled, she knocked on the door and gave her name. Dmitry voice returned "please enter" after a short pause.

She pushed the door open. The room was small and dim. In the center of the small room, there were two adults side-by-side and a bed was placed, and there were a small shelf and chair nearby. A big lamp on the shelf illuminated the room.

A small altar was established alongside the wall and there was a stone statue of the God of Wealth Dirge. Dirge was along with the Goddess of Wind and Storm Eris, and there were Gods often seen in port towns.

Dmitry was standing by the bed. His expression was dark and she could not see it well from the entrance. Ellen's eyes was directed neither towards the statue of Dirge nor Dmitry, but towards the bed — precisely, towards the person lying on the bed.

"Sa...sha?"

Her tongue tangled and her voice got hoarse. Lying in there was unmistakably Alexandra Alshavin. The Luminous Flame Bargren was on the blanket which was put on her body.

Ellen set foot into the room with unsteady steps. Her heartbeat became intense and her breathing rough. She stood near the bed with a feeling of fear.

"...Hi!"

Sasha raised her body. As Dmitry who saw it bowed respectively to Sasha and Ellen, he quietly left the bedroom and closed the door.

Words did not come out to Ellen's mouth. Sasha's face which was illuminated by the faint light of lamp was slightly haggard (worn out) and filled with serenity and transience.

It was beautiful. But, it was not the beauty of a living person.

"So you came."

Grinning at Sasha, Ellen nodded many times with a smiling face as she was about to cry at any moment.

"I-It's a given. When I hear that you went to the battlefield, there is no way I would not run here."

The things she had thought about in the guest were all blown away. To the silver-haired Vanadis who held back her tears and desperately span her words, Sasha shook her black hair and said "thank you" in a small voice.

"More importantly, you should lie down."

"It's somewhat suffocating when I lie. I feel comfortable like this."

To Ellen who was at a loss of words, Sasha continued with a serene expression.

"When I was told by Dmitry that Ellen had come, I was surprised. I'm so glad that I was able to make time."

"I-It's all right even if you postpone me. You just came back, right? You should rest first and even the post-processing of the battle..."

"The post-processing was finished before we reached this town. The other things were written in a letter, too."

Ellen unintentionally shut her eyes. She already had no choice, but to understand. Even though Sasha came back, why was it not told (publicly)? Why was she transported in this bedroom? Why didn't she tell about the other things by her own mouth, but rather made a letter?

"I wanted to speak with you for the last moment."

Big drops of tears spilled from Ellen's eyes.

Until Ellen stopped crying, Sasha talked about the fight against the pirates. Especially, she had to absolutely talk about Torbalan.

Sitting on the chair which was place near the bed, Ellen was carefully listening to her story, but when she finished listening, she regained her usual expression.

"Thank you. For having avenged Tigre."

So as to praise her victory, Ellen talked in such a way.

"About the demon, I will also check it as soon as I return to LeitMeritz. I will also talk with Sophie and Ludmira about it. I want to decide about Olga Tamm after talking to Sophie."

When she mentioned the name of Ludmira Lurie, Ellen slightly stammered. Sasha nodded with a wry smile. For Sasha, if possible, she wanted her to contact all the Vanadis including Elizavetta and Valentina, but as expected, she knew that it was impossible.

Afterwards, they began to talk of this and that. They started from the story like "there was such a thing recently in LeitMeritz" or "there was such a thing recently in Legnica", and reached old tales.

"Come to think o fit, on the way back within the ship, I remembered the first time I met you, Ellen."

Sasha said such a thing and chuckled.

"In those days, you were like a wild beast. You were tense with an atmosphere like in a battlefield, and you immediately bit an opponent who you don't like."

"I-I haven't lost yet the habit of when I was still a mercenary. If you didn't take an aggressive attitude, you would be underestimated and taken lightly. It was natural, after all. Especially in the case of women."

To Ellen who became sullen and rebutted, Sasha shrugged her shoulders.

"Besides, you slip out too often from the Imperial Palace."

"...Even Sasha would slip out very often, right?"

"I did not do something like making somebody a scapegoat, you know?"

"I did not make a scapegoat with no compensation."

Ellen stuck out her chest and answered, and the two girls looked at each other and laughed.

"I won't say that adopting an aggressive attitude is bad, but I think that it's odd that even now you still quarrel with Mira since you became a Vanadis three years ago. Being neighbors mean that traffic is easy and it also is easy to take a truculent attitude."

Ellen accurately understood what Sasha wanted to tell. What she wanted to say was not about Mira. She wanted that there the person who would become Vanadis of Legnica after Sasha might not necessarily be favorable about Ellen and LeitMeritz.

By using Mira's name like that, Ellen continued talking.

"Do you want me to concede and compromise to Ludmira?"

"I won't ask that much. Don't quarrel unless in extreme circumstances; and don't provoke the other party who has no intention even to fight. That's all I ask. And you're not in a very good relationship with His Majesty Victor. About His Majesty, it's not just your fault, but I'm a little worried."

"You don't have to be so pessimistic. Didn't I immediately sympathize with Sasha and Sophie?"

Ellen deliberately tried to laugh her best friend's needless anxiety off with a composed attitude. Sasha also calmly laughed and responded.

"You're right. I think that it was really good that I could have an opportunity to talk with you immediately. Afterwards, there were things which I was often worried about."

At the latter half of her words which were said with a very serious tone, Ellen tilted her head as surprised.

"Did something happen? (Is there something the matter?)"

"The time when you just became Vanadis, you were elated with Arifal on your waist."

At the slightly malicious indication, Ellen fell into silence with a bright red face. This was because it was the truth.

To the eyes of Ellen who had been living as a mercenary until then relying on the sword, Arifal who had a sharp blade and the power to manipulate

wind was reflected at first as a fascinating weapon. She was charmed by his overwhelming power.

If not for Sasha's words which said not to abuse of the Dragonic Tool(Viralt)'s power, Ellen's self-restraint might have become looser.

"Sometimes, you are strangely obstinate, and you also give priority to your feelings. I don't hate it. There is no doubt that it's one of your charms, and I think that there are many which also went well with it (it's thanks to it that you were able to overcome a lot of things). Please, be careful."

It was a sincere advice from her best friend. Ellen nodded that she understood. As Sasha nodded back, she changed the topic and her tone also became brighter.

"By the way, is Lunie doing well? Did she already get used to Sophie?"

"As usual, she is only eating and sleeping in my Imperial Palace. It's probably impossible for her to get used to Sophie. Their first meeting was the worst anyway."

Lunie was a young dragon which was kept (raised) in the Imperial Palace of LeitMeritz. Ellen met her at the period when she was still a mercenary and had come to keep her. It was general knowledge to the people of the Imperial Palace that it was a harmless animal which was only crawling, flying, eating or sleeping for the time being.

It was unknown whether she became emotionally attached to a human, but since she had often accompanied Tigre going out on the hunt and been near Teita who gave her food, it led to the conclusion that she seemed to be attached to humans depending on the person.

It was three years ago that Sophie met Lunie. It was when Sophie visited the Imperial Palace of LeitMeritz for the first time, she who liked Lunie at first glance and made her heart flutter, unintentionally rushed over to the young dragon and tightly hugged her.

From Lunie's perspective, she was the first human she saw which she was not able to even decide whether she was harmful or harmless for her. Sophie had suddenly approached and restrained her.

Naturally, she ran away. Since then, Lunie came to be wary of Sophie and the Brilliant Princess of the Light Flower regretted her own thoughtless action. She did not give up though.

Afterwards also, the conversation of the two girls got lively. Even conversations which they had done before, when either remembered it, they longed for those days (they became nostalgic).

The two talked about various things, but there was no even one topic which was turned towards the future. Ellen also understood. That for Sasha, there was even no future to see the moon tonight.

If she thought about the future, rather than talking about the future, but it would become a talk of regrets.

At this time, Sasha also talked to Ellen about her disease and past. Originally, she happened to have talked about it partially, but it was as a following of some talk.

About the disease, she had also explained it to King Victor and the people who served in the Imperial Palace, but it was because she judged it to be necessary as Vanadis.

As this was the first time speaking of it because she wanted someone to hear, Ellen eagerly listened carefully so as not to miss even one word.

Sasha was careful so that it did not become a long story, and actually she should have been able to summarize it quite briefly, but when she finished talking, the black-haired Vanadis felt fatigue.

She might have felt relaxed for being able to talk to Ellen until the end. Or, she might have run out of stamina as she got passionate on the talk more than she thought.

"Ellen. I have only one favor; is it okay?"

Although Ellen made a wondering face at the sudden words, she had no mind to refuse. As she nodded, Sasha removed her gaze from her best friend and said like a soliloquy.

"You know, I wanted to give birth to a child."

At the completely unexpected words, Ellen widened her eyes.

"A boy would have been good since there is the disease... Even if it was a girl, I would have raised her so as not to lose to such a disease."

Like her mother did so for her.

"However, there was no image of an ideal husband."

As she (Ellen) remained silent not knowing how she should react, Sasha looked at Ellen.

"Someday... I don't say in one year or two years. Someday, you will find a reliable partner."

The black-haired Vanadis temporarily cut her words there. She seemed to hesitate again her to put her thoughts into words. Ellen made a wry smile on her lips and purposely answered in a rude tone.

"Yeah. I will catch a good man and give birth to a child so cute that I will regret that you haven't seen him."

"...Thank you."

Sasha thanked her in a small voice. She was aware that it was not a kind of wish to entrust a best friend with. The fact that there might be the possibility that Tigrevurmud Vorn was probably dead did not cross Ellen's mind. Thinking about it, it was probably quite a selfish, annoying request.

Or the meddlesome concern and the thought to want her to hear the wish that she was not able to achieve might have entangled in distortion.

However, Ellen received it head-on and responded. She was happy about it.

Once she relieved the load on her chest, sleepiness rapid attacked her. Sasha put the twin swords which were in her hands on her knees. The heat, which the blades were tinged with, had been faintly transmitted.

--Thank you. Bargren.

She drew the blades from the tip, and caressed the guard and hilt. The vermillion blade at first. Its movement which minced the outline on her finger was the farewell to this Dragic Tool(Viralt) which was by her side until the end.

"Thank you. Ellen."

Sasha said once again. And then, she continued in a casual tone.

"It looked like I'm tired for having talked a lot for the first time in a while. I will rest a little."

Ellen only returned the words "I see". Since she said she would rest, Ellen should normally leave the room. But, she could not bring herself to get up

from the chair. Sasha quietly held out her right hand. She said with a voice as to be spoiled.

"Could you hold it until I sleep?"

"Yes, certainly."

Ellen laughed and gently held Sasha's hand. It was cold even though she should have touched the Luminous Flame until just now. Her fingers were so thin as to wonder whether her hand was like that, and her skin had rustlingly got dry.

However, Ellen kept up a smile so as not to show surprise on her face.

Was it because it became suffocating as she herself said? Not lying down even though she said she would rest, Sasha quietly closed her eyes and hung her head down. Ellen stared in silence at her profile.



Silence fell on the room.

About a quarter koku did not probably pass.

What informed that was her Dragonic Tool(Viralt). The Luminous Flame Bargren which was put on Sasha's knees rose in the air by itself.

Ahead of the gaze of Ellen who opened her eyes wide and held her breath, as the twin swords had their blades clad in flames only for a moment, they were wrapped in a pale light and soundlessly disappeared.

Ellen stared in blank amazement for a while at the space Luminous where Flame disappeared, but she suddenly came to her senses and peered in Sasha's profile. In no way different from when she said she would rest and closed her eyes, she looked as if she was sleeping quietly.

However, she would never again wake up.

"...Good night."

Ellen whispered with a trembling voice. If there was something to say aside of it, because she understood that her feelings which were welling up would burst out and overflowed, she could not say it.

As she lay down Sasha's body, she wanted to touch her shoulders, but she gave up. Though it was not probably a lie that it was suffocating, Sasha would probably hate to meet her last moments while lying as is.

When she separated her hand from Sasha's delicate shoulders, a trickle of tears streamed down Ellen's cheeks.

Alexandra Alshavin was tended by her best friend and quietly gave her last breath.

A firebird of black clothing left the ground and flew away somewhere not in this world.

Chapter 3 – Successors

The next day after Sasha's death, the ship carrying Elizavetta Fomina arrived at the port town of Lippner. Though it was a triumphant return, Elizavetta did not show up in front of the residents of Lippner.

The Vanadis whom the residents of Lippner looked up to as their master was Sasha. Nevertheless, they would probably not feel good if the Vanadis of Lebus proudly cried for victory. It was because she considered so.

By the way, Sasha's death had not yet been officially announced. The Mayor of Lippner believed that this should be announced by the Imperial Palace, so he sent a messenger there. At present, it was just said that Sasha could not make a public appearance because she was sick in bed.

Accompanied by only one close aide, Elizavetta got down to the port. Although it was the port, it was in the area where warships were lined up and therefore, the residents of the town were not allowed to approach.

Following her was a knight of about 30-years-old named Naum. He had been working in the Imperial Palace of Lebus even before Elizavetta became Vanadis. Although wrinkles which blotted his hardships were carved on his face, since he carefully shaved his beard, he somehow looked young.

The duo who came out of the port headed towards the mansion of Dmitry, the mayor of Lippner. The red-haired Vanadis who was led into the drawing room asked about Sasha immediately after the greetings.

Though she was mentally prepared since she had already heard the doctor's diagnosis a few days ago, Sasha was still alive when they parted at sea. Elizavetta wanted to ascertain the situation with her own eyes and ears. For this reason, she specially came up to here.

"Alexandra-sama has died yesterday."

Dmitry answered in an indifferent tone. Elizavetta said "is that so" with a short mutter and made a wry face. The regret of not having made it in time and the condolence to the dead blurred on her pupils of two colors, but she hid her expression so as to avoid other people noticing it.

By the way, Ellen left Lippner yesterday and hurried on her way back to LeitMeritz. It was uncertain whether it was luck or misfortune that these two girls did not meet each other.

After having advocated the name of gods including Perkūnas who was the Lord God and prayed for Sasha, Elizavetta said in a slightly blunt tone.

"If Alexandra was not there, we would have been defeated. I just wanted to say that."

Calling it gratitude would be too mild, but Dmitry nodded earnestly.

"I shall certainly convey Vanadis-sama's words to the Imperial Palace."

"No need. I will send again the message of condolence as the Vanadis Elizavetta Fomina of Lebus later."

After indignantly rejecting Dmitry's offer, Elizavetta changed the topic. After clearing up some businesslike talks, she thanked him and left the mansion. She asked Naum.

"How much time before the ship can depart?"

"About one koku and a half."

She wanted to leave quickly now that she had finished her business, but it was necessary to let the rowers and sailors rest. Though she was not in the mood to kill time in the narrow ship, she was not also in the mood to stroll in this town which still lingered with the aftertaste of victory.

"Ready the horses. I don't mind as long as they aren't draft horses."

Naum soon prepared two horses, even equipped them with saddles and pulled them over. After speaking words of gratitude "good work", Elizavetta left the town followed by him. The Vanadis who straddled the horse immediately deviated from the highway and aimlessly advanced towards the coast.

A strange sense of loss opened a hole in Elizavetta's heart. She did not think that she would like to be present at Sasha's death, nor had they a relationship which could make her desire such a thing. If she was still alive, it would not be hard to imagine that they fought as the respective masters of Legnica and Lebus.

---Even I understand such a thing.

Nevertheless, Elizavetta felt loneliness. She had thought that she might have the occasion to exchange some words with her. While feeling irritation at herself, she could not thrust away those feelings.

Since it was a pastime, she did not hasten the horse. Naum was also following silently.

The sound of hoofs mixed with the sea roars tickled her ears. Occasionally, she also heard the sea birds' chirps.

She let the horse advance about a quarter koku. As she looked back, she was considerably away from the town. The scenery of the surroundings also changed to a ragged rocky area.

"Vanadis-sama, we should return soon."

This was probably because there was no path in front of them. Naum, behind her, proposed. Elizavetta, not answering, stopped the horse in a place where the rocky area broke off.

In the place going down the slope from the rocky area where she was standing, a small sandy beach spread out. The rocky area stretched on the other side of the sandy beach with a gentle slope.

There were several villagers in that place, which was sandwiched between two rocky areas.

Most of the people were gathering shellfishes. Elizavetta also had such memories.

Originally, it was preferable to gather them from spring to summer, but in case that one was concerned about savings ahead of the upcoming winter, even in this season at least, the shellfishes could be gathered. Though the shellfishes gathered in this period were only the small ones, it was better than none at all.

Besides, there was a boat of the size which could carry five to six people on the sandy beach. They might have been fishing. Turning it upside down and pointing the ship's bottom upward must be in order to dry the ship.

Elizavetta's gaze moved. Among the villagers, there was only one youth, holding a bow. He was looking at neither the sandy beach nor the sea, but rather at the sky. As Elizavetta looked up at the sky so as to track the youth's line of sight, there were several birds in flight.

Elizavetta who understood somehow returned her gaze to the youth and stared in wonder. This was because the youth nocked an arrow to his bow and pulled the bowstring.

"Does he intend to shoot them down?"

"If so, then it's a little too high."

To the amazed Elizavetta's voice, Naum responded. The sea birds were now flying at a considerable height. There was no way that an arrow could reach there. The two people thought that the youth was waiting for the time when a sea bird descended.

But, they were off the mark. After a time of about five or six counts passed, the youth casually shot the arrow. The height at which the flock of sea birds were flying did not change so much.

However, the youth's arrow reached that height as if it was nothing and pierced a sea bird without erring its aim. Both Elizavetta and Naum stared wide-eyed.

The youth quickly nocked a second arrow and shot. He shot down a second sea bird. The second was flying at the height not that much different from the first, and what's more, it rapidly turned trying to run away when the first was struck by the arrow.

Elizavetta finally understood. What the youth was waiting for was the timing so he could shoot down two sea birds successively. The height was not a problem from the start.

Elizavetta turned her eyes of different colors to the youth and asked Naum who was behind.

"Is there a person who can accomplish such a feat in my Imperial Palace?"

"...There isn't."

Astonishment was also contained in Naum's voice as he answered. It would probably be difficult even for the bow soldiers who piled up training. It was the clearness of a skill hard to believe if he did not see it with his own eyes.

"How on earth did he...?"

Elizavetta cut her words there. This was because she heard a shrill cry.

At the rocky area on the opposite side of where the two people were standing, the figures of more than ten people appeared. They ran down the slope and surrounded the villagers. All of them were men wearing slightly

dirty clothes and holding weapons such as axe and hatchet in their hands. Elizavetta frowned unpleasantly as she overlooked them.

"This is really a nasty coincidence."

The men's appearance was the same as that of the pirates whom they defeated a few days ago. Either they sunk all the pirate ships or they did not capture them. In other words, there were probably the remnants of pirates.

For Elizavetta, she had no obligation to help the villagers under her eyes. Who she should protect were the people of Lebus which she governed, not the people of Legnica.

It might indeed be a problem if it was found out that she let them die without helping, but it looked like the villagers and pirates did not notice them. In the first place, it was unthinkable that one young girl who had not yet reached even 20-years-old and one knight would stand against more than ten pirates.

However, while Elizavetta tightly grasped the Thunder Swirl hung on her waist, she made the horse jump and run down the slope. It was not from sense of justice. It was because letting the pirates, whom she let escape, run amok before her eyes was intolerable.

To the roar of the horse's hooves, the pirates saw Elizavetta. Since the villagers were surrounded and blades were thrust at them, they could not afford to look back, but it might be lucky.

Elizavetta mercilessly swung the black whip on horseback. The whip, which wore lightning and shone white, blew away the head of the pirate, who was nearby, with a spray of blood.

The pirates' complexion visibly changed. As Elizavetta thought, they were people who ran away after being defeated by the Lebus army in the battle a few days ago.

Although they, who safely escaped from the battlefield, somehow arrived at the continent, they were completely unfamiliar with the geography of this area. In desperation, they took out their boats until the coast, found the villagers who were fishing and came until here in order to capture them.

The presence of the red-haired Vanadis in a dress figure improper in a battlefield and who amassed a mountain of corpses when she wielded her

black whip became a nightmare which remained in the pirates' memory. In addition, when Elizavetta killed the second pirate with her black whip, the remaining pirates screamed and ran away.

The Flash Princess of the Thunder Swirl(Isgrifa) had no intention to let them escape. She rode the horse and surely brought down the pirates one by one.

However, when the pirates ran up the rocky area and escaped, as expected she could not chase them. This was because what she was riding now was not a trained warhorse, but a horse which could only be used for a short trip at best.

While Elizavetta reluctantly got down from the horse and picked up the hem of her dress as not to fall, she climbed the rocky area with her own feet. Only Naum followed. The villagers saw the pirates turned into corpses and sat down on the spot in utter amazement. There were also those who were trembling with faces which grew pale.

As she went up the rocks, Elizavetta clicked her tongue. The pirates had already run down the slope on the other side. There was also a sandy beach there, and there were two small boats which about five to six people could board. The pirates carried them on their shoulders and hurriedly carried them to the sea.

"Wait!"

Though she unintentionally shouted out, there was no way they would wait. The pirates floated the boats in the sea, got on, tightly grasped paddles and began to row.

Elizavetta looked back towards the opposite side — the sandy beach where the villagers were. As she ran down the rocks with a tremendous force and scowled at the villagers, she pointed to the boat which was turned upside down with her hand holding the whip.

"I will borrow that. Then, some of you must ride as rowers."

She one-sidedly declared with an oppressive tone and suddenly shifted her gaze towards the youth holding the bow.

"Are there any arrows?"

At the youth who nodded, Elizavetta frowned. Even though the other villagers were surprised at the sudden situation, were screaming and dismayed, only this youth was calm as if he was used to it.

His age was about the same as Elizavetta. He grew a stubbly beard with his unkempt darkish red hair. Although his build was average, one could understand with his limbs which stretched from his hempen clothes that he was well trained.

"You also come."

In addition, Elizavetta chose three villagers. They took out the boat up to the sea and boarded it. Elizavetta sat at the vanguard, followed behind by Naum, the youth with the bow and the three villagers.

As they went to the sea, the two boats which the pirates boarded were immediately found. When the pirates saw Elizavetta's figure, they desperately tried to escape as they concentrated strength in their hands which rowed the paddles. The red-haired Vanadis looked back at the villagers without hiding her irritation.

"Are there only three paddles?"

One of the villagers nodded with a red face while rowing. As the pirates were also in the same situation, at this rate, the distance between both parties would not shrink.

At that time, the darkish red-haired youth got up. He knelt down, set up his bow and nocked an arrow. Elizavetta and Naum frowned.

Though an eye measurement, the boats which the pirates boarded were distant of about 200 alsins (about 200 meters). Furthermore, the boat was shaking and though there was a gentle breeze, it was a head wind. It should not reach.

The youth let the sound of the bowstring resound. And the arrow seemed to have hit one of the pirates. His silhouette which still grasped the paddle could be seen as it suddenly inclined and fell into the sea.

The youth shot arrows again. Other rowers staggered and dropped the paddles on the sea in that tempo. The advancing speed was not that great with only one paddle. The boat soon started to slow down.

The youth, not even boasting of his skill to his comrades, aimed at the other boat. Here, he also shot down two rowers into the sea.

When he finished, the youth sat down in the boat once again. He took a paddle from a villager and took the place of the rower. Elizavetta looked back at the youth in displeasure.

"Why won't you shoot anymore?"

The youth silently showed her the quiver on his back. The content was empty. He ran out of arrows. Although Elizavetta understood, she shook her shoulders to the youth's attitude. She thought that he could not talk, but since he was exchanging some conversation with a villager in a low voice, it did not seem to be so.

Elizavetta spat her irritation as to stir up the villagers' avarice.

"Row more quickly! If we completely catch up with them, I will give two pieces of silver coins per person as a reward! Even to those who are waiting in the sandy beach!"

The villagers looked at each other and changed their countenance. The man who handed over the paddle to the youth earlier snatched it back from him, and fiercely moved it while hitting up the water splash. Naum alternately looked at them and his master with amazed eyes.

Elizavetta's boat caught up with the pirates' boat before long.

The red-haired Vanadis gallantly turned her dress around on the narrow boat and knocked down most of the pirates in the sea with two swings of her whip. It is said "most" because there was only one person who escaped from the Thunder Swirl by using his comrades as a shield. He was a small man who rounded his back and was hanging two daggers on his waist.

The pirate's name was Moritz. Though he acted as the commander of the left-wing squad in the naval battle of Olsina, he was the man who abandoned his comrades and escaped as soon as he realized the disadvantageous situation.

Moritz who skillfully escaped from the black whip kicked the boat side and attacked Elizavetta. If it was possible even to jump into her bosom, the two daggers wielded by this man would mercilessly cut down his opponent. Furthermore, she should not be able to handle it with a whip.

However, Moritz's swords were flipped by a white light which suddenly appeared where he approached Elizavetta. Numbness enough to be

painful ran throughout Moritz's body, and he broke his balance and flatly fell into the sea.

Without even uttering his voice and while shaking his fingers which barely moved, Moritz's body buoyantly rose on the sea surface. To the pirates with a deep blue face, Elizavetta cold heartedly said.

"You are conscious, right? But, after half a day, you won't be able to move your hands and feet. In fact, let alone half a day, even a quarter koku may not be necessary though."

Moritz opened wide his eyes in fear. If he was to be turned upside down by the waves and took a posture in which he became unable to breath, he would die. Unless he was blessed with great luck, he would die sooner or later. Until then, he should keep being frightened.

The sea surface which reflected lightning shone white just for an instant and thunder roared. Elizavetta brandished the Thunder Swirl and smashed the two boats which the pirates who boarded them into very small pieces.

"—Phew."

Elizavetta took a small breath. Of course, it was not as if her sense of loss disappeared, but it was certain that rather than aimlessly riding the horse, it became much more recreational. Though a little, she felt like offering it to Sasha.

She looked back at the villagers, no longer caring about Moritz and company. She ordered as if it was a matter of course.

"Let's return. Row."

Though the villagers were dumbfounded by Elizavetta's frightfulness and could not even utter a word, they pulled themselves together at her voice and hurriedly moved the paddles.

Of course, they did not know that Elizavetta was a Vanadis, but they guessed that she was a noble from her attire and the knight following her. However, now for them, Elizavetta, rather than being a noble before whom they should prostrate themselves, was a person of high rank whom they should fear.

However, as expected only the darkish red-haired youth did not seem to harbor fear towards her. As he turned an absentminded look towards

Elizavetta, he sometimes returned it to the sea which depicted white waves.

Elizavetta immediately noticed that he was curious about her Rainbow Eyes(Laziris). Although she got angry, she also harbored interest in this youth.

"What is your name?"

At first, the youth was not apparently aware that it was to him that the question was asked. Being poked by a villager with the elbow, he finally looked up at Elizavetta.

"It's Urz."

One of the villagers held the back of the head of Urz who answered so and forcibly lowered it. The villager looked up at Elizavetta with a forced smile.

"I-I am sorry. This guy, he kind of hit his head, excuse his rudeness... Please, forgive him."

Still holding down Urz's head, the villager deeply bowed his head with a face covered in sweat. Elizavetta shortly said "I forgive him".

Though the villager's attitude looked servile, it was correct. If Elizavetta was a tyrant, Urz might have been pushed into the sea by now.

---At any rate, it's a strange accent, eh. A Brune accent, I wonder?

Staring at the back of head of Urz, Elizavetta held such an impression. Then, at the villager who timidly raised his face, she decided to ask a slightly nasty question.

"You. What do you think when you see my pupils? Tell me what you honestly thought."

The right golden pupil and the left blue pupil coldly overlooked the villager. Naum covered his forehead with his hand while pretending to brush his forelock upward, and had a tired face as to say "there she started again". The wrinkles which were carved on his face became deeper.

"T-That's of course, um, beautiful like jewels!"

Doing his best to float a smile, the villager answered so. Elizavetta nodded with an expression saying "all right". They were common lines which she got tired of hearing.

This subtly mixed Elizavetta's bitter inferiority complex and her bitter superiority complex; and if anything, it was a side show of an unhealthy class. No matter what kind of answer he gave, she would not have punished him. She only responded "is that so" with a radiant smile.

Rainbow Eyes(Laziris). They were irregular eyes which Elizavetta possessed since she was born. Uncertain pair of eyes considered as a good omen on some regions, and as bad omen in others.

Elizavetta had been tormented by these eyes since she was young. It was not as if her pupils had a mysterious power like in fairy tales. Those who saw these dichromatic eyes thought that she was sick, made her a laughingstock or tried to exclude her.

Though it was sad and remorseful, she did not have the courage to crush one of her eyes, and came to live with wearing an eye patch. Even so, since her Rainbow Eyes(Laziris) were already known, she kept being bullied.

When time went by and Elizavetta became Vanadis of Lebus, her Rainbow Eyes(Laziris) were rather appreciated by the people of the Imperial Palace. It was at that time that she got to know that the interpretation was different in each region.

The Vanadis of Rainbow Eyes(Laziris) afterward came to ask someone when she felt like it.

The question "What do you think when you see my pupils?"

Though like the villager who now prostrated himself before her eyes, there were a lot of people who compared them to jewels, there were also those who compared her golden pupil to the sun and her blue pupil to the sky or sea.

There were also those who compared them to gold and crystal. If there were those who compared them to flowers, there were also those who compared them to birds. There were also those who compared them to legendary armors which were not well-known. Anyway, there were a lot of people who praised them as beautiful.

If they knew that Elizavetta was Vanadis, they could do nothing but praise them. They could only compare them to something gorgeous. She understood it, but still asked the question.

"Urz. What about you?"

Urz did not immediately answer. He fixedly stared at Elizavetta's face, cocked his head in puzzlement and clapped his hands as he recalled something.

"They are similar to that of a cat. A long time ago, I have seen a cat like that."

A figure of an old man of short and stout stature who held a small cat brought a souvenir which floated in Urz's mind. The old man's face became dim and Urz was not able to remember his name.

The villager raised a wordless cry and pushed Urz into the sea. A showy water splash rose. The other two villagers' faces became bluer than the sea and they were speechless.

Even Naum, not knowing what to say because of too much consternation, let his gaze busily make a round trip between the villager, Urz who fell into the sea and Elizavetta.

Elizavetta, with a dumbfounded face, looked down at Urz who came to the sea surface. There was no malice in the youth's words, but it was also hard to call it praise. The villagers' reaction also proved it.

There were also number of people who compared her eyes to birds or flowers in the past, but those were to the bitter end praises based on the premise "beautiful". Even if Elizavetta did not really neither like nor dislike cats, she had also not thought that they were particularly beautiful.

After a silence of about ten seconds, Elizavetta held her mouth with her hand, bent her body and happily laughed. She was literally taken aback.

When she settled her laughter, Elizavetta ordered the villagers to pull Urz up. And then, she bluntly asked.

"Urz. Do you have relatives?"

Urz who squeezed his wet clothes hesitated and looked at each villager. The villagers timidly answered on Urz's behalf.

"Urz has no relatives. No, it's uncertain whether or not he has."

"Urz... This guy isn't from our village. We found him lying at that place where you helped us."

It was about twelve or thirteen days ago that Urz had fallen on that sandy beach. It was not a complete coincidence that the villagers had found Urz. This was because their village was near the sandy beach, and the villagers were going to the beach like every day in order to collect shellfishes.

The clothes of Urz who was lying down were ragged and his body was cold; although one wondered whether or not he was dead, he was still breathing when they approached and examined him. Hesitating about leaving him as is, the villagers carried Urz to the village and treated him.

"The village chief had wondered whether he hasn't fallen from a ship which was passing by this neighborhood and was washed ashore."

The youth regained consciousness after three days and furthermore, he was able to talk and walk after another two days, but even if he was asked about his identity by the people of the village, he could not remember at all.

When he was asked this and that about whether he could remember anything, the word "Urz" finally came out from the youth's mouth. Thus, the villagers came to call him Urz.

Since he had no memory, Urz had nowhere to go. He did not also have money.

"In the royal capital Silesia, it's said that various people and things overflow. For the time being, you can help with the work of everyone here and save money expecting the day when your memory will return. How's that?"

Even if he was asked "how's that" by the chief, Urz could not do something other than that. He owed them for having saved his life and nursed him. Bowing his head and saying "please take care of me", Urz's new life began.

When the villager ended his story, the sandy beach where they took out the boat could be seen. The villagers who were waiting noticed them and waved their hands with pleasure.

However, Elizavetta fixedly overlooked Urz.

"It is convenient."

If Urz was a person from Legnica, it might have become slightly troublesome. But, in case of memory loss, there was no problem, either. Elizavetta judged so and told to Urz.

"I'll take you with me. Urz, serve me from today on."

The villagers shouted, their jaws dropped down and Naum stared in wonder.

As for Urz, with an absentminded expression and a tepid voice, he answered "yes".

The taking over of Urz proceeded with no stagnation, either.

Though just a few days, Urz worked properly, but it did not change the fact that he was a troublesome person. There was no reason whatsoever to

restrain him. Rather, the Brune accent of Urz's language was making them feel anxious and wary. If a curious noble was to take him over, it would be just what they wanted.

"I'm glad for you, Urz."

The villager chief said so and tapped Urz's shoulder.

"It might be a whim of a noble, but she doesn't seem to be such a bad person. If you diligently serve her, then someday you will be able to return to Brune."

"You're right. Thank you."

Urz also thanked the village chief with a smile.

Then Urz visited each acquaintance of the village, told them thanks for having taken care of him and farewell. Although the village girl who found Urz in the sandy beach had a reluctant expression, she saw the youth off with a smile while saying "take care".

This village girl was not able to say it after all. About the black bow which he was grasping in his hand when she found Urz lying down. And, that she had unintentionally thrown it away to the sea when she somewhat felt that that black bow was something very creepy. And moreover, about the faint longing which was born in her heart in these few days.

Anyway, like this Urz came to serve Elizavetta.

◎

When Ellen tended Sasha's death in Legnica, Limlisha, in the absence of her lord at the Imperial Palace of LeitMeritz, was processing the mountain of documents piled at the office.

She was three years older than her lord, that's 20-year-old; she wrapped her slender tall figure in thick clothes and tied her dull golden hair on the left side of her head. A little teddy bear hung on the belt of her waist in an angle not visible from other people.

She was Ellen's aide and also one of her best friends. She was called by her nickname "Lim" by those close to her. There was no hint of sociability on her well-featured face, but if it did not mean that she was ill-humored or

she lacked feelings. This was because it was half her nature, and as for the other half, she tried to be composed.

A sudden visitor came in LeitMeritz the evening of that day.

"Eugene-dono— Earl Pardu?"

Eugene Shevarin was the feudal lord of Pardu which was in the east of LeitMeritz. Unlike Brune which attached the title to the family name, in Zchted, the title was attached to the territory's name.

"Please lead him to the reception room. I will also go at once."

As Lim gave such instructions while showing a light surprise, she stopped her work and stood up from the chair. Even if she kept him waiting, he was not someone who would feel offended, but she could not make him wait.

As she walked down the corridor by quick steps towards the reception room, Teita rushed over. With a maid figure which attached a white apron on a black skirt with long sleeves and which reached up to her feet; her chestnut hair was tied on the back of her head.

She was a girl from Brune who had served as a maid from the time when Tigre was in Alsace, and she also bravely and eagerly worked even after moving the place of work to this Imperial Palace. Now more than half a year after coming to work here, she was trusted not only by Ellen and Lim, but also by many people.

"Fire was put in the fireplace of the reception room, but a little time is required so that the room gets warm. I intend to warm the wine and send it."

"Please do so. And how many people have come with His Excellency the Earl?"

"There is one attendant. I have him rest in another room."

LeitMeritz was in a climate which should still be called autumn, but as expected, it was cold when the sky darkened. Glancing at the evening sky which could be seen from the corridor, Lim said to Teita.

"I think that there won't be a problem if it's His Excellency the Earl, but please prepare also a fur to put on. If you say it to the chief maid, she will put it out at once."

As she bowed and said "understood", Teita ran to the corridor.

Lim who arrived before the reception room slowly opened the door after calling the inside. The indoor warmth flowed and stroked her cheeks. Within the room, one man was sitting down on the sofa and resting his body, but he stood up with a smile when he saw Lim's figure.

"Long time no see, Limlisha. Are you doing well?"

"Yes. It's good above all that Eugene-dono also seems to be healthy."

Lim also loosened her expression and saluted. For her, Eugene was a man whom she could call "teacher". About three years ago when Ellen became Vanadis, Eugene was asked to serve as civil officer of LeitMeritz, and he had been visiting the Imperial Palace to teach courtesy and etiquette as a Zchted noble.

He was now 44-years-old. His long hair was darkish gray, and he also had a long gray beard under his chin. Though he seemed to be a quiet person judging from his calm demeanor and gaunt physique, but Lim, as well as Ellen, who was taught many things by him also knew that it was not the case.

"By the way, where is Viltaria-dono?"

It was about Ellen. As Lim could not suddenly answer, Eugene openheartedly laughed.

"Hmm. Has she secretly slipped out the Imperial Palace again and gone out to the town?"

Lim unintentionally blushed and looked downward. Such behavior of Ellen was since the time when she was taught various things by Eugene.

Just at that time, Teita came in carrying silver cups filled with wine on a tray. Lim pulled herself together and recommended the sofa to Eugene.

"I am glad that you came."

Waiting for Eugene to sit down on the sofa again, Lim also sat across the table on the sofa placed on the opposite side. Then, Teita put the silver cups on the table. As the chestnut-haired maid bowed, she went out in the corridor and closed the door. Eugene asked Lim with a face full of interest.

"I think that the girl just now was not there three years ago."

"She is called Teita. She is from Brune, and due to various circumstances, we look after her."

"Brune, huh. I have heard rumors, but it looked like many things have changed. —To think that you would have such a lovely hobby."

Lim, who became speechless at these words, she tracked Eugene's line of sight with her eyes. There, there was a doll which was still hung on the belt of her waist. She had in mind to take it off when she came out of the office, but since she was in hurry to deal with Eugene, she ended up forgetting about it.

"N-No, this is, um, a charm, I mean..."

"You do not need to feel shy. The bear is called the incarnation of Vors, the God of Livestock, and dolls are also things girls like. Have you already found yourself a lover?"

Though Lim panicked, she regained her presence of mind at the question of Eugene who was joking, and briefly denied "no" with a lonely expression. She changed the topic with a smile.

"I ask for the hot water and meal to be prepared. For you to visit today, is there anything the matter?"

As far as Lim knew, Eugene was a man who would send a messenger beforehand. She thought that an incident occurred and asked, but the courtesy's teacher laughed and shook his head.

"You do not need to be so anxious. It was on my way, so I only stopped to greet you."

"On your way?"

At Lim who was puzzled, Eugene nodded and picked the silver cup on the table. The surface of the silver cup was illuminated by the flame which brightly burned in the fireplace and it was shining dully.

"I was summoned by His Majesty the King and was heading to the royal capital."

Lim agreed. To go from Pardu governed by Eugene to the royal capital Silesia, it was certainly fast to pass by the highway of LeitMeritz.

"It's already got dark. Please stay here tonight. I said it a little while ago, but I ask for the hot water and meal to be prepared."

"However..."

Eugene seemed to hesitate. While Lim was careful not to become pushy, she added again.

"If I send off Eugene-dono with only one cup of wine, I will be scolded by Eleonora-sama. The shame of the retainer is the shame of the master. I have not forgotten."

Eugene floated a smile at Lim's words. This was because Eugene, who had taught the etiquette to Ellen and Lim three years ago, told them those words many times over. More exactly, it was something like "Our shame is the shame of our master, and the shame of the master is the shame of the country".

"What, given her usual behavior, Viltaria-dono cannot do something like scolding you."

Eugene who said so gulped down the wine, he changed his wry smile to a warm one and continued.

"That said, it is rather rude to decline an offer made up to there. I shall accept your kindness."

She first had Eugene gotten over with the bath, and then Teita guided him to a guest room. The guest room, like the reception room, was made warm by lighting a fire in the fireplace, and Lim and Eugene sat down on both sides of the table.

The supper which Lim had prepare for Eugene was rather simple.

Wheat rice porridge with fully sprinkled warm milk, an omelet mixed with walnut and spicy grass, roasted until melting strong salty cheese on thinly sliced potatoes, and a soup of beans and fish were lined up on the table and drifted a fragrant smell which aroused the appetite, and let steam rise up.

These dishes were instructed by Lim who remembered Eugene's tastes. Sure enough, as she saw Eugene's reaction, fortunately his tastes seemed to not have changed from those of three years ago.

"Are madam and the child doing well?"

"Yes. My daughter grew up to be quite a naughty kid. Upon hearing the activity of Viltaria-dono on the battlefield, although every day she doesn't seem to run out of fresh bruises, as she took an interest in sword and horse. Though she was brought up quite opposite to my wife, it seems to be rather fun. We are constantly watching over her."

Eugene had a wife and a daughter. The thin earl's voice, though mixed with a sigh, was full of affection for his daughter and his wife.

As she checked that, Lim once again felt a sense of respect towards Eugene.

This was because his wife was not a girl of towns, but from the royal family. She was King Victor's niece.

At one time, Eugene had served as King Victor's close aide, but as his upright temper of advising the King without being daunted was appreciated, his marriage to the King's niece was recommended. It was 15 years ago.

By the law of Zchted, when a woman of the royal family got married, the rights to the throne which she possessed moved to her husband. If you married King Victor's niece, you would obtain the eighth place of the rights to the throne. In the eyes of the King, it might have been a sign of utmost kindness.

Eugene was thankful to the King and married her. Then, he was given Pardu in the southern part of the kingdom as territory and moved to there with his wife. Afterwards, except for events to celebrate the New Year, he rarely went to the royal capital. It was an expression of his loyalty.

By the way, when Ellen was told about this by Eugene, became speechless after saying "He~e", and fixedly stared at this thin Earl. It was that much of a shock for the silver-haired Vanadis that he had such an episode with King Victor.

Because of their reunion for the first time in three years, Lim and Eugene were talking about each other's current status, but when Eugene touched the subject about Brune's civil war of last year, a shadow of melancholy rose on Lim's face.

Eugene who noticed it was going to change the topic, but Lim put on a resolved face and stared straight at the gray-haired Earl.

"No, you do not need to be considerate. Besides, it might be better that I tell Eugene-dono about it."

Her blue eyes were filled with seriousness and acuteness, and Eugene renewed his expression.

"...Let me hear it."

"Well then, I will tell you about the civil war of Brune."

Lim explained as concisely as possible the events from the battle of Dinant which made Tigrevurmud Vorn a prisoner of war, the cooperation of LeitMeritz with Alsace, the intervention in the civil war to Princess Regin's rescue and Duke Thenardier's defeat.

"Afterwards, Lord Tigrevurmud spent his every day in this Imperial Palace as a guest General. He showed an attitude in which he assertively studied the culture of our country and I also helped him despite my poor ability."

Ellen also joined occasionally, Lim taught Tigre various things. The language required in etiquette and the royal court of Zchted, the customs as well as the fairy-tales transmitted from a long time. Occasionally, Tigre also taught the customs and proverbs of Brune to Ellen and Lim.

To a difficult problem which rose from a local village, the three people had also racked their brains about how to solve it.

Lim was surprised and came to respect Tigre because of his seriousness and sense of balance. Even about things profitable to LeitMeritz and Zchted, Tigre seriously considered.

But, for example, when the interests of LeitMeritz and Alsace conflicted, even if the youth made some concessions, he had never completely compromised. Lim rather held trust and a favorable impression at that attitude.

They prepared a light meal, let Teita eat with them; if there were times when they were just chatting the whole time, there were also times when the four people disguised themselves and went out of the castle with the pretext of social study.

"While it might be presumptuous for me to say this, I think that Lord Tigrevurmud was not just a foreign guest, but also a precious friend for Eleanora-sama."

Lim cut her words for a moment. If she was to keep talking like this without resting, she felt like she would not be able to suppress her highly strung feelings.

Though Eugene was silently and carefully listening to Lim's story so far, he calmly opened his mouth probably due to her words talking interrupted.

"That guest seems that to have currently gone out somewhere."

"...How do you know that?"

"If he was in the Imperial Palace now, there is no way you would not have introduced him to me. You said that he is a friend of Viltaria-dono, but you also seem to be quite concerned about him."

Lim unintentionally looked downward. She intended to talk calmly, but she had apparently been seen through. Or, was it because she was eagerly talking that she was noticed?

"Lord Tigrevurmud..."

It's not good, thought Lim. Even though she just persuaded herself to calm down, her voice had already sunk. However, the calm she had lost did no longer return.

"Lord Tigrevurmud went to the Asvarre Kingdom for a certain task, but his ship was attacked by someone on his way back and he fell into the sea..."

Her words became intermittent. Eugene's face strained with tension. This noble of slim figure immediately understood the seriousness of the situation.

There was no way that a guest General whom they were entrusted with by Brune would have willfully gone to a foreign country of his own will. It should be right to think that the intentions of Zchted were closely involved there.

If so, then even if the fact that Tigre fell into the sea was an accident, Zchted would be at fault. Brune would probably not forgive Zchted.

And if a confrontation between Brune and Zchted resulted from it, the neighboring countries such as Muozinel and Sachstein would definitely involve themselves in it.

In the past, Eugene had been in charge of the diplomacy with Brune for nearly ten years. Depending on the future circumstances, he was more likely to be ordered a difficult mission. No, the reason why he was now summoned in the royal capital like this was perhaps in regard of this topic.

Precisely because Lim thought so, she talked about it even though she knew she would become sad.

"Limlisha."

Eugene softly laughed and said.

"I think that I said it before, but it is by no means shameful to cry. And if you yearn for someone, then all the more."

Before Eugene finished speaking, Tears overflowed from Lim's eyes and streamed down her cheeks.

Once she realized it, she could not stop. The girl who acted the substitute of the Vanadis cast her eyes down, shook her shoulders and leaked sobbing. This was the first time that Lim shed tears before someone since the time she heard about the youth of Brune's disappearance.

After about half of a quarter koku, Lim stopped crying.

"You should not overdo it."

Eugene kindly called out to the golden-haired girl, who was wiping around her eyes which became red.

"You would better rest for one or two days. The Imperial Palace will not fall into confusion for that much."

"Thank you for concern. But I am all right."

While gently touching the teddy bear still attached to the belt of her waist in the end, Lim continued her words.

"It may be laughed at with regret when I say it like this, but I want to believe that Lord Tigrevurmud is still alive. That that person would not lose his life in a place like that."

Though her blue pupils were slightly wet, her tone was steady. Seeing that she seemed to have regained her composure, Eugene nodded with a relieved face.

And then, Lim spoke about the reason of Ellen's absence. Eugene who finished listening to her revealed a stern countenance.

"Alexandra Alshavin-dono... It was only once that we met."

"Eugene-dono. Was what I did wrong?"

Lim expressed anxiety. It was precisely because it was Eugene whom she looked up to at a teacher that she could ask. The gray-haired Earl shook his head with a calm smile.

"I will not say that it was right, but I do not think that it was wrong. I hear that Alshavin-dono was also a good person as the ruler of Legnica. The people of Legnica will not forget that Viltaria-dono cherished her friendship with her. Besides—"

As Eugene put on a serious expression, he continued in a low voice.

"Actually, I do not think that the Muozinel troops will invade before long."

"I feel the same, too."

As Lim replied so, pleasant feelings floated on Eugene's eyes.

"Can you explain?"

He had returned to the attitude and tone of when he was teaching various things to Ellen and Lim three years ago. Lim also hung on it and floated a smile. Probably because she was taking an attitude of teacher towards Tigre, she, who returned to the position of student, felt nostalgic.

"It is because I cannot think of a meaning for them to attack now."

"I wonder about that. Brune is exhausted by the civil war from last year. I have also heard that the internal situation in Sachstein is not very good. Muozinel as well as the east countries seems to be currently doing well, and if so, then they may not want to needlessly meddle in the affairs of our country?"

"If it is to the degree of skirmishes, I think that they have frequently occurred at the border. If they move a large army of 100,000, then there should definitely be some kind of purpose there."

"The southern part of our country is a very fertile land. Besides, the current Muozinel King seems to have a personality which likes to assertively extend his borders outside."

"Yes. There, the means which Muozinel took was to join forces with Asvarre. They are trying to repress our country from the south and west in that way. It seemed to have failed though."

After Lim prefaced by saying "not a word to anyone", she talked about the fact Asvarre's civil war ended and that Zchted formed an alliance with Princess Guinevere. As this seemed to indeed be the first time he heard about this, Eugene opened wide his eyes in admiration.

"Then, Muozinel's purpose will be to attract our attention to the army of 100,000. Meanwhile, they surely intend to make those concerned with Asvarre and those probably hiding in our country pull up (withdraw)."

"Yes. However, they may do a more showy provocation if we show an opening."

Though Eugene contentedly nodded hearing Lim's answer, he soon tightened his face.

After finishing some serious topics like that, the two people amused themselves with a pleasant talk as if driving away the mood which was likely to become depressing. There was so much to talk about.

Early in the morning of the next day, Eugene, as he said himself, left LeitMeritz with his attendant. Lim saw off his back figure, which went further and further away, from the rampart of the Imperial Palace.

◎

Elizavetta Fomina who returned to Lebus in the far north from LeitMeritz first had to settle the state affairs which had piled up during her absence.

Although the bureaucrats, who had taken charge during her absence, had processed a percentage, there were naturally a lot of matters which needed the approval of Elizavetta who was the lord of this dukedom. Even while walking down the corridor and heading towards the office, she was hearing several reports and issuing instructions.

Once she entered the office, there was a mountain of documents piled up on the desk. She gave priority on the urgent government matters, and then waited to deal with the waiting matter concerning this naval battle.

"Although there were some booties^[11], honestly it was a battle where there was nothing to gain."

As she issued the instructions of the remuneration to the soldiers and sailors, the arrangements for solatium to the families of the deceased, the repairing of warships and the supplement of various equipment and the like, Elizavetta sighed.

The numerous booties including the nearly twenty ships which they took away from the pirates were equally shared with Legnica, but there was no doubt that the war expenditures and the loss suffered from this pirate subjugation were great.

Though the pirates who were captured were sold off as slaves to the Muozinel merchants who were in the port, they ended up selling them at considerably lower prices on the pretext that they were pirates. They were probably seen through about the fact that they wanted to get it over with quickly.

--Speaking of the biggest loss...

The scene of the fight between Sasha and Torbalan flashed across Elizavetta's mind. Seeing as a whole, her death was definitely the biggest loss.

--I wonder if Alexandra told someone about her fighting against the demon.

Speaking of Vanadis close to Sasha, there were Ellen, Mira and Sophie. Since Sophie and Olga had been attacked by Torbalan on their way back from Asvarre, they definitely knew of the demon's existence itself.

Ellen's face came to her mind. Should she speak about how Sasha fought to at least her?

--Why should I do something like that? Someone of Legnica will tell her, right?

Elizavetta who shook her head on both sides shook off idle thoughts. And then, she scrutinized and scowled at the mountain of documents piled up on the work desk. Though she did not intend to neglect her duty as a lord, was it luxurious to want to be absentminded without thinking about anything for about a quarter koku?

The door was suddenly knocked from outside and a servant's voice was heard.

"Vanadis-sama. His Excellency the Duke of Bydgauche came."

Elizavetta's reaction was late for about one second. It was not just due to fatigue. The visitor was someone enough to surprise her.

"—Ilda-sama, no, His Excellency the Duke?"

As Elizavetta abruptly stood up from the chair, she went to the door at a quick pace. When she opened the door, the servant was standing there.

"Guide him. How many attendants have His Excellency the Duke brought with him? You should prepare the guest rooms, cooking and hot water for the number of people."

"He came with three attendants. The other people were led to the drawing room."

To the servant's answer, Elizavetta breathed a sigh of relief. If there were four including Ilda, then she seemed to be able to cope with them without being rude.

"Thank you for your efforts. You have done well."

As Elizavetta praised so and thanked the servant for his efforts, she made him prepare a white silk mantle, put it on her and kept her appearance for now. If possible, she would have wanted to change into a formal dress, tidy up her hair and put on make-up, but she would keep the guest wait. She could only come to terms with it.

Elizavetta who finally arrived at the drawing room knocked the door, gave her name, waited for the other party's reply and pushed the door open.

"Long time no see, Your Excellency the Duke."

Elizavetta bowed with a radiant smile. The man who was called His Excellency the Duke was relaxing sitting on the sofa, but he stood up and bowed towards Elizavetta with a fearless face.

"I do not mind you calling me Ilda in such a place. It's good that you also look fine above all. Vanadis-dono."

The Duke of Bydgauche, Ilda Krutis was 34-year-old. With a tall figure, his body which was forged with training and war was tanned by the sun and was keenly tightened. There were dignity and ambition on his finely chiseled face.

He was King Victor's nephew. The son of the King's younger brother. He was seventh in line of the succession to the throne, and was given the rank of Duke from the Kingdom. He governed Bydgauche near Lebus, and it would be fair to say that the relations between the two territories were currently good. They mutually helped each other when necessary.

Though Ilda possessed excellent ability as a ruler, he was solely known as a man of valor. Even the person in question seemed to think that his own essence was bravery.

Actually, his sword skills, horsemanship and ability to command on a battlefield were high, and it was to the extent that one wondered whether there was anyone in the northern part of Zchted who could rival him in those areas.

"I hear that you ended the barbarian subjugation of this time safely above all."

"You also had an outstanding performance in the pirate subjugation."

"Because of my incompetence, I have lost a comrade in arms."

Elizavetta dropped her voice. But, she did not speak of her remorse of having suffered many damages and lost many soldiers. This was because she had heard that Ilda had also suffered great sacrifices.

About a month ago, Ilda was ordered by King Victor and went with three thousand soldiers for the subjugation of barbarians who were wreaking havoc in the north of the Kingdom.

Though in the original plan, it should have been over within 20 days including the post-processing, the barbarians' number was far greater than what was reported, and moreover, they resisted more than expected; Ilda was forced to a hard fight. It was about a few days ago that he was able to sweep away the barbarians and the damage reached nearly 20%.

Although he succeeded in the subjugation, what remained for Ilda was a result of a great dissatisfaction.

In order to drive away the heavy atmosphere, Elizavetta deliberately asked in a cheerful voice.

"By the way, for what kind of business did you come here today?"

"No, I only stopped by here. I think it would be impolite for me to just pass by without greeting you. I will leave immediately."

"Do not say that, how about resting for a while? Though Your Excellency the Duke, no Ilda-sama can afford it, your attendants seemed to be tired. If you have a pressing business, I cannot afford to retain you though."

"Hmm. If you say so there, then I shall gladly accept your kindness."

Ilda laughed and showed his feelings of gratitude to Elizavetta's offer.

Since Ilda's visit was sudden, the meal which Elizavetta prepared was, so to speak, a makeshift one, but still it was quite extravagant.

Something which put sturgeon eggs to a thinly burnt bread, an omelet which mixed finely cut salmon, Spit-roasted beef and edible wild plants, a rainbow trout grilled with salt, shrimps and shellfish, stew fully seasoned with spices put on mushroom and the soup made using seaweed filled the table.

Since Lebus faced the sea, many things caught in the sea could be used for the soup and stew. Any dish was heated up as much as possible, and steam was rising to the extent that the face of Ilda who was sitting across the table could not be seen.

Besides, the bottles of wine and vodka were placed. Elizavetta knew that Ilda usually drank vodka. By the way, Ilda's servants were having meal in another room.

"If it suits Ilda-sama's taste, then it's fine."

"Vanadis-dono is a prone to worrying. Even though I suddenly visited, you make such a hearty banquet. There is no way it would not be delicious. Besides, I was on the battlefield until the other day."

Laughing, Ilda ate up one after another, the meals displayed on the table. While feeling admiration for the first time in the hearty eater who can be rather said to be brilliant, Elizavetta asked him where he was going in a casual tone.

"To the royal capital. I was summoned by His Majesty."

Ilda answered while applying the cup filled with vodka to his mouth. The sharp taste of the sake brewed in the north of Zchted was stronger than

those made in other districts, but Ilda spat a satisfactory breath when he gulped it down with a composed face.

"By the way, do you continue the training of sword?"

For a certain period of time, Ilda had taught the basics of the sword to Elizavetta. He was asked by Elizavetta.

Though her Dragonic Tool Valitsaif was a black whip which wore lightning, it could also become a rod-shaped weapon by the will of Elizavetta who was his owner. Even if she was skilled in using Valitsaif as a whip, as for Elizavetta, it was incomplete with that alone.

"To think that a Vanadis using a whip would have an interest in the sword."

Although Ilda who said so amused himself, he taught Elizavetta how to use a long sword and also a short sword in general.

It was then that Ilda said that he did not mind even if she was to call him by his name at a private place. Elizavetta thought that she was being courted, but after understanding that it was certain candidness which Ilda possessed, she began to call him so.

"Yes. Compared to those days, even I think that I considerably improved."

"It's good. It might sound like a sermon, but do not neglect the training in the future."

Then, the next morning, Ilda left the Imperial Palace and headed to the royal capital as planned.

Elizavetta who saw off the King's nephew and his attendants indifferently handled the work in her office. It was when daytime just came that one of the civil officers visited Elizavetta.

Being 53 years old in this year, he was in a considerable advanced age among the civil officers working for the Imperial Palace. He was a man who had served since the time of the previous Vanadis, and his ability was the reliable.

"That man named Urz, who on earth is he?"

At the question with a solemn face, Elizavetta stared blankly. About Urz, she intended to carefully think and decided of his treatment once she had settled the state affairs which piled up; so she gave him one of the guest

rooms for the time being, and she should have ordered to one of her servants to take care of him including meals.

"Did he pull a prank or something?"

"No, no."

The elderly civil officer shook his head. It was a habit of this man to repeat "no" when denying.

"He is very docile, but we have not heard anything from Vanadis-sama."

Now that he mentioned it, she felt like she did not explain anything in particular.

There were so many things for Elizavetta to do when she came back to the Imperial Palace, and in addition, since there was also Ilda's visit, she ended up forgetting.

While being a little tense, Elizavetta said in a tone as natural as possible.

"I decided to make Urz my servant."

"...Who is that man really?"

When she frankly answered that she did not know as he had lost his memory, the civil officer suddenly frowned.

"It is not so different from wanting to keep a stray cat."

"Yes. He is much more useful than a stray cat."

Although Elizavetta pretended to be serene, anxiety and strain swirled in her mind.

For the red-haired Vanadis, it was a kind of adventure.

In the first place, Elizavetta was not that close with the civil officers. This was because there was no one among them whom she had personally chosen.

Though it was four years ago that Elizavetta became Vanadis of this Lebus, at that time, both the government official engaged in the state affairs, the general and knights leading the soldiers had been gathered without excess or deficiency. They were trained elites whom the previous Vanadis racked her brain, searched and gathered.

Thanks to them, Elizavetta did not have the need to look for talented people herself. She was very thankful for it, but the red-haired Vanadis were also distant to them.

They compared Elizavetta with the previous Vanadis. Their speech, demeanor, political ability and command in the battlefield.

Regarding the Generals and the knights, Elizavetta soon took an aggressive attitude.

She showed an extraordinary talent on the battlefield, as a warrior she was brave, and it was enough to make them admire her. The red-haired Vanadis thoroughly knew about the hesitation, weakness, and danger on the battlefield, and at times, she was also able to hold down her subordinates with a coercive attitude.

However, Elizavetta was not yet confident regarding the state affairs. Although there was no conspicuous failure yet, no matter what she did she looked inferior compared to the previous Vanadis. And the civil officers did not overlook it; while Elizavetta relied on them, she had trouble dealing with them.

"Urz's bow skills are amazing. Selecting superior talented persons is also the duty of a ruler. It's something you taught me."

Though Elizavetta said so and tried to prevent his rebuttal, the elderly civil officer did not fall silent with only that.

"Vanadis-sama. I have certainly said something like that. However, even if there is one thing you are proud of, you cannot turn a blind eye to other things. There is no way that such a method of selection is good. For example, at the time of the previous Vanadis..."

"I am not the previous Vanadis."

As she returned such words, the civil officer suddenly shut his mouth and respectfully bowed.

"I am sorry. However, even if I incur Vanadis-sama's displeasure, I will daringly express it. However much impressive his skills are, making a person whom you do not know the identity your servant is not a sage's deed. By all means, desist from doing it."

"No matter what?"

Elizavetta furrowed her eyebrows and said with an entreating tone. In this case, she had another reason which she could not loudly say to the civil officers.

What decided for her to want to make Urz into her servant was because he was the owner of outstanding bow skills as she said earlier to the civil officer, and also she was pleased with the answer he gave to her question. Aside from the former, it would be difficult to persuade others with the latter reason.

Speaking of the civil officer, he looked with a greatly perplexed face at Elizavetta who had not yet given up.

"...Do you want to make that youth your servant no matter what? Is there even any dissatisfaction among the people serving you now?"

"There is no dissatisfaction. You are doing your best for the peace of Lebus after all. Regardless of it, I want to make Urz my servant."

Declaring so, Elizavetta fixedly stared at the civil officer. The civil officer also shut his mouth.

They silently stared at each other.

And after a time of about 1000 counted passed like that, the civil officer finally compromised.

"Well then, can you allow me to observe the situation?"

"The situation?"

"First of all, I will make him serve as a stable boy for about two to three years. Then, if he works seriously, I will once again consider his treatment."

A stable boy, if one had to say, was the work to take care of horses.

"I told you, right? That Urz is good at archery. Should he not rather be assigned to work made use of his special skill, like a hunter attached to the Imperial Palace?"

"There is already one hunter attached to the Imperial Palace. It will be useless to have two."

Currently, it was an old man called Anton who served as the hunter belonging to the Imperial Palace. As expected, he had also served since

the time of the previous Vanadis, and Elizavetta did not dislike this man of calm temper. It seemed that she could do nothing but look for a different work for Urz.

"Then, how about a clown attached to the Imperial Palace?"

"Does Urz possess the talent to make laugh and entertain?"

"He made me laugh from the bottom of my heart for the first time in a while though."

Though Elizavetta seriously answered, the civil officer did not break his expression that he could not consent.

"Vanadis-sama. All of those who served in this Imperial Palace, be it the soldiers, the civil officers or the maids, are carefully selected persons who overcame a strict standard and issues. If you disregard those people and bring someone, whose identity is not even known and who has no track record, close to you, they will have harbored dissatisfaction."

---So that's it.

Elizavetta understood that he seemed to be opposed no matter what if it had anything to do with what was attached to the Imperial Palace. Even the fact that this civil officer recommended him as a stable boy, this was because unless he became the groom head he would not enter the Imperial Place.

Although Elizavetta was disappointed, she thought that this area probably hit the limit.

She was conscious that what she was saying was her childish selfishness, and she had no reason not to admit the rightness of the civil officer's claim.

At such times, if it was Ellen for example, she would carry through with "It's all right, if it's just one person. After all, it's not as if I say that I will reduce your pay". However, Elizavetta could not do it.

---Should I be satisfied with this?

"Understood. Then, let's get him work as a stable boy. It's also necessary that he get used to this Imperial Palace."

Thus, Urz became a stable boy. More precisely, he had been made to do it.

On the outskirts of the Imperial Palace, there were a ranch and stable to make the horses exercise. The lodgings where the stablemen stayed at were also built near it. Twenty stablemen were taking care of one hundred horses.

Such stables and ranches were located in several places not so far from the Imperial Palace. They were scattered because it was more efficient like that.

It was in the nearest stable from the Imperial Palace where Urz was taken. As the ranch was spacious, stone-made lodgings were built in the corner. In a place at about dozens of steps away from the lodgings, big stables which were twice the circumference of the lodgings were massively set up. These were wooden.

The stableman head who managed this stable was an unsociable man in his forties. Even though Urz said "I look forward to working with you" and bowed his head, he did not even reply.

"Come with me."

After saying so, he turned his back and began to walk. As Urz followed him with perplexed face, the place where they arrived was a stable. Urz unintentionally frowned.

The air that filled the stable was a mixture of the smell of horse dung, the smell of a beast and dry straw causing one to groan.

"First of all, you will deal with the horse dung and urine."

The stableman head said without changing his complexion.

"Afterward, you clean within the stable. Since the exchange of water and the dealing with the bait are done by other guys, observe it well. Also the grooming of the horses' body. Since you are an apprentice, don't touch the horses until I say it's fine. When you get it over with, take care of the stirrups and harness. When it's over, you once again deal with the horse dung and urine."

---I was brought to an awful place, eh.

Urz inwardly complained as he pinched his nose and endured the stench.

It was several days later after Ellen returned from Lippner that Sophia Obertas visited LeitMeritz.

She was at the royal capital to report to the King about the matter of Asvarre, but as King Victor's condition worsened due to the cold, she stayed at the capital for several days. As a result, it was only now that she came to LeitMeritz.

"Sophie. I am glad you came. I knew of the matter in Asvarre by hearsay, but anyway, it's good that you're safe above all."

For Ellen, it was their reunion after a long time. Greeting the Brilliant Princess of the Light Flower(Presuvet) who was her friend with a smile, she herself led her until the drawing room without leaving it to the maid. Sophie responded "thank you" with a smile.

However, both of them could not dispel gloom from their expressions and tones. After all, they had lost important people who were Tigre and Sasha in succession. Especially, ten days had not yet passed since Sasha died.

Immediately after returning to LeitMeritz, Ellen sent a mourning letter in Legnica.

『In having reached such a day, I cannot help but feel sad and angry. I express my condolences to the people of Legnica. Please, let me share your deep sadness. Despite the fact that my relationship with her is an age of only a little less than three years, she was a friend whose trust exceeded the social status, and she was also a comrade in arms. She was also the way how a Vanadis should be. She taught it to me, and she herself had not done anything which ran counter to it. I was saved on countless occasions by her nature, and I prayed from the bottom of my heart that she could recover from her illness. The day when I met her for the last time, she was bright, calm and brave as usual. Even the time when she gave her last breath, I believe that it should have been so. She did not succumb to the illness, but ran through a colorful life exactly like a flame which pierces the heaven and intensely blazes as the Hidden Princess of the Luminous Flame. Though I cannot deny it was a short time, I do not think that she left regrets. Now, I once again pray to the gods. Give what true peace to the soul of Alexandra. Bring peace and tranquility to the land which she loved and the people living there.』

And, this was only about one-fifth of the whole letter. The position of tending to Sasha's death which she could not write about, she ran the brush there with an unusual passion.

Her placid expression, as if she was sleeping, was still clearly floating in Ellen's mind.

And, the greatest reason why Sophie visited this Imperial Palace was to hand over Tigre's presents. With this, there was no way the talk would get lively.

Though Sophie handed in turn the presents to Ellen, Lim and Teita, who was called over, it could not be helped that the gloomy atmosphere increased its deepness whenever one received it.

Especially, Teita on the spot spilled large drops of tears like rain, and Lim made her withdraw while hurriedly calming her.

"By the way, Ellen. I am really sorry, but, there is something I would like to ask..."

Sophie asked whether she could send to Mira the present which Tigre bought for her.

Sophie intended to personally hand it over at first, but the fact that she wasted more time than expected in the capital Silesia derailed her schedule. If she was to go from here to the south in Olmutz which Mira governed, Sophie's return to Polesia which was her dukedom would be further late.

In addition, the Muozinel army of 100,000 was still threatening the southern border.

"Understood. I will take the responsibility and deliver it to her."

Ellen answered so with a smile, and Sophie put on a face which said that it was unexpected.

Ellen was reluctant to speak her mind, but since Sophie carried the present up to here, she could not refuse. There was also what Sasha said, and she thought that if she did not do it properly, she could not apologize enough to Tigre.

Afterwards, they finished some businesslike talks. Even about the demon called Torbalan, she settled it until the part she would talk about once she

met with all the Vanadis, but the two girls lacked the willpower just to put it into action. They put it off by saying "we'll talk about it again when spring comes".

And soon after, Sophie said that she would leave LeitMeritz. It was hard for her to be here any longer.

"Do you not want to meet Lunie?"

Though Ellen asked in a joking tone, Sophie shook her head.

"I will pass this time. Hey, Ellen. You know, when I meet Lunie-chan, I only look at Lunie-chan and I want to think only about Lunie-chan. But... Now, I don't think I will be able to do it."

At her friend who concealed her sorrow and laughed, Ellen could only return the words "I see".

"Sophie. It will take some time until we will become able to laugh again from the bottom of our heart; see you again. Since you seem to be busy for the time being."

"Yes. Ellen, you too, take care."

Thus, the Brilliant Princess of the Light Flower(Presuvet) left LeitMeritz.

It was when Sophie had just left that Rurick, who was the man in this LeitMeritz who respected Tigre's bow skill the most, was called by Ellen.

After he received Tigre's present, he was also left the presents to other people such as Aram.

"For this case, I will allow you to refuse."

Though Ellen said so, Rurick carefully held on to the presents of others while letting his bald head without one hair shine. And, he strolled in the Imperial Palace and indifferently handed the presents.

Except Rurick, there was only another man Aram with whom Tigre was especially intimate, but after this, Aram gambled with companions and lost silver coins equivalent to one month's salary in about one koku. This man who was usually awfully strong to gambling entirely lost his intuition.

Though his comrades who knew of the circumstances said to invalidate the bet, Aram silently put on the spot the amount of silver coins he lost,

returned to his room despite being in duty, and slept. His attractive face, which was often said to resemble that of a beaver, grew awfully wild that day.

The next day, he was removed a meal as punishment of leaving his duty halfway.

Rurick was in contrast to Aram. He worked hard for his duties as usual, and as he finished his work at the sunset, he began his daily training of archery in the courtyard.

However, the training of that day ended with just one arrow mark. The bowstring drawn to the limit cut with a sharp sound. Rurick suffered a light injury in a finger.

"It looks like I put too much force..."

Staring at the bow which lost its curve because the bowstring was cut, Rurick feebly laughed. It was the first time in three years that he did such a mistake.

When Rurick finished treating his finger, he returned to his room without continuing any longer his training on that day.

That night, there were people who heard a sobbing-like voice leaking from his room, but they pretended they did not hear anything and left in silence.

◎

Under the cold sky, humans, horses and cattle, and white barracks filled a deathly pale wasteland which only grew even weeds sparsely. It was near the border between the Zchted Kingdom and the Muozinel Kingdom. The signs of winter had crept up to here.

The number of people was indeed 100,000. Their skin was uniformly brown and there were a lot of slender men. Wearing leather armor on thick clothes, they were hanging curve swords to their waist. The soldiers wrapped a black cloth around their head, and the chiefs of squads wore an iron helmet over their head as proof. The helmet reflected the sunlight and shone dully.

The horses were for the cavalry and oxen for the pack (logistic) squads. The barracks had a peculiar round shape and the ceiling was also roundish. Each could accommodate five to ten men.

The flag fluttering to the barracks was crimson. A golden helmet which grew horns and a sword were drawn in the middle. It was the symbol of the Muozinel war God Vahram. The red and gold battle flag received the dry wind of the end of autumn which ran in the wasteland and fluttered.

They were the Muozinel troops. The supreme commander was Kreshu Shaheen Baramir. He was a man with the nickname "Red Beard(Barbaros)" who was the younger brother of the Muozinel King.

30 days had passed since they encamped here. Advancing towards the north from this wasteland for about two days, there was the border of Zchted. Of course, Kreshu knew that the Olmutz troops led by the Vanadis Ludmira Lurie were encamped and watching out there.

The supreme commander was receiving a report in his own barrack. By the way, Kreshu's barrack, unlike the others, had been dyed red.

There was neither some belief nor intention behind this, he just felt like doing it. By the way, yesterday it was in green and the day before yesterday in blue. There was also a day where it mixed multiple colors.

Anyway, Kreshu was within the red barrack today. On the bed which piled up many silk cushions, he was listening to the report of a soldier.

Though he had a firm body of medium build, the hems of the cloth he was wearing were so big that those who saw them would not understand why he wore it. A huge rainbow-colored feather was placed on the cloth wrapped on his head.

His eyes were greatly sunken, his nose and ears were long, and his red beard which was the origin of his nickname was made in three braids. He also felt like making this beard's shape.

The close aide revealed a sour face at each report, after all the other party was not only the supreme commander, but also the King's younger brother. Above all, Kreshu possessed an overwhelming talent and many achievements. Also, his eccentric behavior did not date from today, and he could not give candid advice.

Finishing hearing the report of the young soldier, Kreshu lift his body.

"Then, the plan of Asvarre was a complete failure, huh."

"Yes. The Asvarre Kingdom is currently ruled by Princess Guinevere and a man named Tallard Graham."

The soldier answered with a disappointed face. It was not the attitude which a mere soldier should show in front of the supreme commander, but he was trusted by Kreshu, so he was forgiven.

"Both Prince Jermaine and Prince Elliot died. Even among the people we made creep in, only five were able to come back alive."

"I suppose it's good since five were able to come back alive. After all, I have heard some interesting things."

While Kreshu played with his red beard knitted in three braids, he said so in a tone which did not seem very disappointed.

Until about two months ago, because the two princes Jermaine and Elliot were fighting over the throne, the Asvarre Kingdom was almost divided into two.

While the Muozinel Kingdom was backing Prince Elliot, they were also waiting for the opportunity to approach Jermaine. No matter which Prince won, Muozinel was going to interfere in Asvarre afterwards.

One of the reasons why Kreshu organized an army of 100,000 soldiers and advanced up to here was, while concerning themselves with Zchted, was to know the movement of the spies sent in Asvarre even one koku early, and had them return depending on the situation.

As for Kreshu, one could say that he achieved his purpose.

"However, interfering with this and that in a distant country is troublesome as expected. The orders do not catch up with the turn of events at all. On the other hand, even if I assume about ten ways of change (of the situation) beforehand and take a countermeasure, in return there is no one who will be able to execute it."

"Speaking of coping with changes, was he called Tigrevurmud Vorn? That man was amazing. He fell into the sea on the way back and died though."

To the soldier who said so, Kreshu grinned with a complacent smile.

"Damad. Why can you assert that he died?"

"Even if you ask me why..."

The soldier named Damad panicked. His age was 19. He was tall, and his nose and chin were thin. Though thin, he did not give any weak impression and his fearless gaze was reminiscent of a tiger or leopard.

"He fell from the ship in the sea at midnight, you know? Even after searching for him half a day, even his body was not found. He would not be human if he were still alive."

"There is the possibility of rigged."

At Kreshu's words, Damad tilted his head in puzzlement so as to say he did not understand.

"Let's assume he died. If you think that I have put that man at hand, then I will do so."

While messing around with his braided beard, Kreshu happily explained.

"The youth was probably entrusted to them by Brune. He will have to return sooner or later, but wouldn't it be a waste if we regard him as dead? We could assume him taking an appropriate alias, birth date, on top of that a mansion, money and even women, so as to start his second life."

"...If we assume that he died, it can't be helped if the relations with Brune will take a turn for the worse."

"Such a thing, they can settle it if they send two or three heads of incompetent nobles and generals."

To Kreshu who casually said, cold sweat could not stop flowing on Damad. What was frightening was if Kreshu felt like it, he could carry it out as he said.

"In other words, does your Excellency mean to say that Tigrevurmud Vorn may still be alive?"

"From here on, it's your job to check it, Damad."

At Kreshu who said in a tone without hesitation as if he had thought since before, Damad frowned. Two years had passed since he, who was a mere soldier was selected by this King's younger brother with a red beard to become his aide. But, if he just moved as he was said, it would not be that very big a deal.

"We will withdraw from here on. However, you will creep in (infiltrate) Zchted and check whether or not Tigrevurmud Vorn is really dead. Look for the people who saw him where he died and thoroughly hear them out. If you find his grave, divulge it. If you come across a suspicious man, inquire his identity thoroughly."

"...Is he a man that worth it to go so far?"

At Damad who asked in a skeptical tone, Kreshu nodded using his entire body.

"Didn't you also say it? That he was responsible of the changes."

Indeed. Although Damad made a bitter expression, he immediately changed his thinking.

"Understood. By the way, In case I found that he is really alive?"

"Get rid of him. You also want to test his skills, right?"

To Kreshu's words, Damad floated a smile filled with fighting spirit.

"One could look over The record of the battle of Agnes just like reciting. To think there was a human who can fly an arrow at 300 alsins. And in a confused battlefield at that. —Really, I started shivering."

"Thanks to that, we lost Kashim. He was a useful man."

Last year, The Muozinel army advanced its soldiers to Brune which was in the midst of the civil war. Within the chaos, they intended to snatch the territory of Brune and take away its people as slaves.

However, their plan was splendidly stopped.

The troops which attacked from the sea were defeated by Duke Thenardier, and the march of the troops which attacked from the land was stopped by the "Silver Meteor army" led by Tigre and the Olmutz soldiers led by Ludmira. At that time, the supreme commander of the land troops was Kreshu, and Kashim was the commander of the advance party.

Although the advance party was defeated and Kreshu cornered Tigre and the others, he judged that there was nothing to gain even if he won and withdrew his soldiers. Furthermore on that occasion, he had one-sidedly sent the nickname "Star Shooter(Silvrash)" to Tigre.

"However, will you really withdraw without even having one battle? After leading 100,000 soldiers up to here."

Damad asked to Kreshu with a face showing disbelief.

"I told you, right? I have achieved my goal."

Kreshu casually grasped a bunch of papers put near the bed. All were reports.

"The reaction of the Vanadis and feudal lords of the south border. The approximate number of soldiers whom they sent. Their deployment. The road from this wasteland to Agnes to the west. The topography. The road which could enter the Brune country without going by the highway of Agnes. Hahaha. It has indeed taken 30 days, but I grasp them all."

Squashing the report, Kreshu let his sunken eyes shine and merrily laughed. This was his true purpose of leading these 100,000 soldiers.

"When I return, I will report that 100,000 were not enough. After adding another 50,000 soldiers, I will move with 150,000 soldiers the next year at the earliest or within three years at the latest. My aim will be, of course, Brune."

Even those 100,000 soldiers was just a preparation for a bigger strategy. And Kreshu's aim was not Zchted.

"I have also heard the southern part of Zchted is quite rich."

"Even though there is a rich, green and warm ground immediately near Brune, they probably won't move to aim at it. As long as the people from Zchted are surrounded by the snow and gnaw potatoes and salmons, then it's fine."

Though it might be what he really thought, he was merciless. Damad inwardly sympathized with the people of Zchted just a little.

"Read this report, Damad. The people in the vicinity of the border secluded themselves in the fort or castle, close the door and prepare for defense. Those who were going to strike did not finally show up. In that case, even if I show up with 150,000 soldiers two years later for example, they will probably react the same way."

"...Then, disregarding the people who shut themselves away and don't come out, we will aim at Agnes in the west at once, huh."

"That's right. Besides in these 30 days, I also found a lot of people who could be useful."

Among the reports which he had squashed, Kreshu chose one sheet and pulled it out.

"They are those who splendidly commanded the soldiers, or obtained brilliant results by scouting out in a boring situation without even one battle. I will make them my subordinates once I return. I look forward to the next battle."

Though Damad was staring with a face, which seemed to want to say something, at Kreshu who floated an ominous smile, he resolutely opened his mouth.

"Your Excellency. Will you really not do even one battle? If you could give me 1000 soldiers—"

"...If I give you, what will you do?"

At Kreshu's reaction, Damad vehemently spoke with enthusiasm.

"It will be difficult to capture a fort, but it is possible to burn down and plunder villages and towns. I could also give a blow to the enemy, and you will not have to say that you have done nothing even though you led 100,000 soldiers."

Kreshu said "Ohou" with an amazed voice as if he felt admiration. His sunken eyes emitted a whitish light.

"If you have confidence that you will not lose even one soldier, you may do it. However, if even one soldier dies, your head will become the food of wolf. And that, even if a soldier fell down during a march, hit his head and died."

Feeling his master's seriousness in his indifferent tone, Damad held his breath. He got down on both his knees on the spot.

"I said too much. I am sorry."

"It's all right if you understand. Do not disappoint me, Damad."

It was not as if Kreshu disliked plunder. He disliked the fact that a rip could arise in his command as a result.

If he were to allow fight and plunder here to a specific squad, other squads would harbor dissatisfaction. In addition to that, they had spent 30 days of boredom. There was the fear of acting selfishly with a large number.

On the other hand, when thinking about dividing the booties equally, the number of 100,000 would become a problem. Just to satisfy that number of soldiers, one had to face a very large-scale battle.

Therefore, Kreshu never intended to fight from the beginning.

The next day, Kreshu withdrew the soldiers as planned. Only Damad headed towards the north contrary to the army, crossed the border and succeed in sneaking into Zchted.

During these 30 days, a messenger was dispatched to Muozinel from Zchted many times and asked why they moved their army, but Muozinel kept answering that it was for the training of soldiers.

And the Muozinel army had really ended it just as the training of soldiers.

Chapter 4 - Behind the Scenes

It was the evening of the day when the signs of winter also crept in the Brune Kingdom, that a messenger of the Zchted Kingdom visited Brune and had an audience with Princess Regin.

Tigrevurmud Vorn fell into the sea and is missing.

When she heard this, Regin became speechless, and she asked the messenger again due to too much shock. If she was not sitting on the throne, she might have fainted. The Prime Minister Bodwin who was by her side was troubled for a moment as to whether he should stop the audience.

"What do you mean?"

While letting her graceful face turn pale in anger, it was a short time after the messenger expressed the Zchted King's words that she inquired, holding down the shaking of her voice. Her light golden hair trimmed around her shoulders faintly shook. The messenger, no showing signs of faltering to Regin's attitude, answered back.

"It is just as I said. His Excellency Earl Vorn was attacked by a sea dragon(Badva) on his way back from Asvarre and fell into the sea. I cry more than I express the truly regrettable course of events..."

"It is actually the first time that I hear about the fact that he went to Asvarre."

"Since it was something which had to be carried secretly and immediately, His Majesty Victor and also Lord Tigrevurmud had said that they are very sorry for being unable to report it to Her Highness Princess Regin beforehand."

Although the latter half of the words was completely falsehood, the messenger, without changing his complexion, really spoke as though he personally heard it. If he did not do so, he would not be fit for a messenger bearing such a duty.

Regin thrust her fingernails in the armrest of the throne and held back the anger welling up within by strongly grasping it. If she did not do so, she might have shouted at the messenger. Since the day was about to end, the surroundings of the throne were dark, and such a reaction by Regin was not seen by the messenger.

"Mr. Messenger. Did you know?"

As expected, it was impossible for her to smile right away, but Regin said under the guise of calm.

"Lord Tigrevurmud was not only the hero who saves this Brune from the hands of the villains, but he is also the man who saved my life."

"I am aware of that."

The messenger was still undaunted. This man understood the importance of his duty.

After all, he was directly ordered by King Victor, and what's more, he was told the life of his family who was in the Capital would also be secured. When he left the royal palace, he was already prepared for death.

That's why he was able to take Regin's strong gaze head on without taking a servile attitude. Even so, the messenger's back had already gotten soaking wet with a lot of sweat.

Brune and Zchted were in a relationship of equality. Although it borrowed Zchted's power for the settlement of the civil war, Brune did not become a vassal country (dependency) of Zchted as compensation.

Even Tigre was only entrusted to them as a guest General with a time limit. In case of such a situation, even excluding Regin's personal feelings, it was more than enough to fly into a rage.

--He seems to have been prepared.

Regin's blue pupils wore a cruel coloring only for an instant. Nearly one year had passed since she came to live as a princess. While borrowing the strength of the Prime Minister Bodwin and Massas who acted as an aide, she was also learning various things.

"For the friendship between our country and Zchted, I have to give my thanks to King Victor who tried to use Lord Tigrevurmud."

Regin who sweetly smiled continued.

"However, it will be rude to King Victor with just conventional words of thanks, right? Until we return the favor, I would like you to stay to the royal palace. All right?"

Though Regin's voice was bright, the messenger felt a strange fear. While unconsciously stroking around his stomach with his hand, he deeply bowed his head.

"I will gratefully receive Her Highness the Princess's consideration. By the way, about when may I receive your words?"

"Since such things require time, I will call you when I will be able to do it."

"...When you will be able to do it?"

"Yes. When I will be able to do it. Please, rest at ease. I will nominate a messenger and send him to King Victor after all."

If she would send a messenger, then shouldn't she let this person convey the words of thanks?

As he could not, of course, speak his mind, the messenger was caught left and right by the imperial guards who stepped up. He was forced into leaving.

When the messenger's figure could not be seen, Regin turned her gaze to Bodwin.

"—I will rest for about a quarter koku. The continuation of the audience will be after. Meanwhile, please let the others take a rest, too."

As Bodwin bowed, he ordered the bureaucrats and imperial guards who were there to take a rest. Regin who confirmed it stood up from the throne. She headed towards the balcony opened from behind the throne.

Under the vermillion sky, only the ramparts surrounding the Capital and the meadows which spread to the other side could be seen from the balcony. Looking up at the sky, Regin who shook her shoulders desperately endured the urge to burst into tears. Bodwin appeared there.

"You were able to endure it well."

He briefly said so. This old Prime Minister with a cat face had noticed Regin's feelings towards Tigre. In fact, it was most recently that he noticed them though.

Letting her pale golden hair rustle in the wind, Regin looked back at Bodwin. At that time, she was even floating a smile.

"Thank you. Prime Minister."

Although the other party was an experienced elderly, taking a polite attitude towards a retainer was probably Regin's virtue. Bodwin thought of some words of comfort and encouragement, but the old Prime Minister confined them in the depths of his heart.

It was not his duty. It was the duty of the one who could step deeper into Regin's innermost thoughts; what Bodwin should do now was to confront this young Princess with a more realistic problem.

"As for the answer to the Zchted's messenger of earlier, I give you a passing mark. After all, we must ask him in detail about what really happened. There are definitely still some hidden parts."

Regin nodded to Bodwin's words and put on a serious expression.

"What do you think we should do from now on?"

"We should grasp the situation as accurately as possible. We shall send messengers respectively to Zchted and Asvarre and gather more detailed information. I would especially like to find out those who happened to be present at the scene where Lord Tigrevurmud fell."

Even in case that Zchted did tell lies, it might hide the inconvenient truth. They need to gather information themselves.

"And then, we must keep a close watch within the country."

Regin looked puzzled at Bodwin's words.

"Do you mean to say that there are people who would see this as an opportunity and begin to move?"

"There might be those who would interpret that Zchted's support will be lost due to Lord Tigrevurmud's disappearance. In addition, whatever will be Her Highness the Princess's reaction regarding this matter, there would surely also be those who will use materials which blamed Her Highness."

"Understood. I will leave it to you. And, how shall we explain it to Earl Rodant?"

Regin who was carefully listening to Bodwin's words until then suddenly showed a timid side.

Massas Rodant was a man who was the best friend of Tigre's late father Urz. He also took care of Tigre in various ways, and he had also kindly

cooperated when Tigre suppressed the Brune's civil war in the past year. After the civil war, he began to serve as an aide due to Regin's request.

He was currently 56 years old. Although he still stood up on the scene, it would not be strange even if he was to think about retirement. When Regin invited him to the Imperial Court it was probably also because of that, Massas did not seem to be enthusiastic about it.

Regin visited Massas, who was staying at his mansion in the Capital, persuaded him by saying "then, you shall serve while thinking of it as your last duty".

"I will tell him myself. After all, I intend to have him cooperate, too."

Massas surely loved Tigre like his own son. He would probably investigate about this matter more eagerly than anyone else. Even Bodwin thought that he was trustworthy.

As she nodded at Bodwin's words, Regin waved her mantle with a smile.

"It is still a quarter koku early, but we shall return soon."

At the Prime Minister who answered "understood!", Regin chuckled.

"Prime Minister. I was certainly surprised, but I do not think that that person died."

Though Bodwin frowned at these words, Regin's expression seemed to have settled down.

"Although he became Zchted's prisoner, he borrowed soldiers and came back. He repelled the Muozinel army which had an overwhelming number. Even after being caught in the collapse of the Sacred Caverns of the Palace(Sangroel), he survived. It might be exaggerated for me to say this, but that person has the power to create a miracle. It's what I think."

"A miracle, huh."

Bodwin could only say that. A miracle. Bodwin wondered since when he had stopped believing in miracles. He had not believed in miracles when he accumulated achievements and became the chief vassal of the Kingdom. It was natural. There was no way a person engaged in political affairs would believe in such things.

However, Bodwin did not reprove Regin. If it became this princess' support, then it was fine. Besides, Tigre's activities were certainly something which could only be regarded as miracles.

"Let's do what we should do for now."

Saying so, Regin suddenly turned her gaze to the sun which went down in the end of the west. Without voicing it, she prayed to the gods.

---Please, protect Lord Tigrevurmud.

The Princess and the Prime Minister returned for the audience.

◎

It was about ten days later from the day he received Elizavetta's hospitality that Ilda Kurtis crossed the large river Valta and arrived at Silesia, the Capital of the Zchted Kingdom.

"Even though it's already winter, it is really lively."

While wrapping his well-trained tall figure in a thick overcoat and walking down the street at a quick pace, Ilda leaked a mutter of admiration.

Highways extended innumerabley from this Capital where more than one million people lived; in other cities, in winter when the traffic of merchants would normally sharply decrease, many merchants and craftsmen showed their figures in the street and the people's enthusiasm was not lost.



When the carts which piled up with various articles passed through the Capital's gate, black tea, spices, wine, vodka and furs of animals were lined up in front of people, the merchants raised their voices.

To gather income in order to get through the winter, minstrels played harps and clowns fluttered colorful clothes in midair.

Taking a side glance at such hustle and bustle, Ilda headed straight to the royal palace. When looking up, the sky color was transparent blue and the position of the sun was in a place where it was still slightly early to call daytime.

When he entered the royal palace and gave his name, the concierges immediately called the one who was on standby inside. And then, the Grand Chamberlain showed up before long. With the official position of managing the state affairs overall, he was the chief of all the civil officials.

"You came well, Your Excellency Duke Bydgauche."

The Grand Chamberlain in his mid-fifties deeply bowed his head. Ilda also straightened himself and returned a bow. Guided by the Grand Chamberlain, he set foot in the royal palace.

"It has been quite a long time since His Excellency the Duke has come to the palace."

"It is because I had been bustling about the lands of the north. Speaking of which, I heard this name several times by the time I arrived here, but Grand Chamberlain, do you know the man called Tigrevurmud Vorn?"

While looking at the walls and pillars on which magnificent ornaments were applied, Ilda asked.

"You do know that last year, a civil war occurred in the Brune Kingdom, right? At that time, it is Lord Tigrevurmud who saved the princess and defeated Duke Thenardier's army. He seemed to have been a prisoner of Vanadis-sama of LeitMeritz, but is an interesting man who borrowed soldiers from her and returned to his native land."

And then, after the Grand Chamberlain told him "not a word to anyone", he made a quick rundown about the fact that the King made Tigre head to the Asvarre Kingdom by a secret order, and that his ship was attacked by a sea dragon(Badva) on his way back, and that he fell into the sea.

Regarding that, Ilda could only keep nodding and avoided to comment. This was because if he were to say something uncalled-for, it might be interpreted as judgment and dissatisfaction towards the King.

As they walked for a while, Ilda noticed that they were not heading to the audience room.

---Are we heading to His Majesty's office?

Ilda who had many times visited the palace immediately understood. As expected, the King's office came into view, but one man was standing there. With a slim figure, he was probably older than Ilda. His face which turned to look back towards Ilda was slim and grew a gray beard under his chin.

Ilda knew him. He was Earl Pardu Eugene Shevarin. For Ilda, he was the husband of his younger sister and an older brother-in-law somewhat hard to deal with.

"If it isn't Earl Pardu. I think the last time we met each other was during the last year's Sun Festival(Maslenitsa), and I see you are as healthy as always."

When Ilda bowed, Eugene also bowed with a surprised look.

"You also seem to be healthy, Duke Bydgauche. I have also heard about your activity in the north."

"It was not that much, though. By the way, is my younger sister well?"

For Ilda, this was a question attached to the social etiquette. He had not met his younger sister for already more than 15 years. Partly because his father took good care of Ilda who was the heir and did not give much interest to his daughter; even if it could not be said that they did not get along with each other, it was not also a relationship in which they were particularly close.

"Yes. She is loved by the territories people, and I was also helped by her in various ways. Upon my return, I shall ask her to send you a letter."

And then, the two men threw a questioning gaze at the Grand Chamberlain. However, the Grand Chamberlain pretended not to notice their gazes and exaggeratedly bowed his head.

"Both of you, please wait a little."

The Grand Chamberlain turned around at the door of the office. He lightly knocked on the door and told the person who was inside that Ilda and Eugene had come.

After confirming the reply in a low voice, the Grand Chamberlain once again looked back at Ilda and Eugene.

"His Majesty is waiting for you."

Saying so, the Grand Chamberlain moved to the side of the door. Ilda knocked on the door, waited for the reply of the King who seemed to be inside and opened the door.

As might be expected from the King's office, it was a big room. Though the ornament of carpet and curtains looked simple, Ilda knew that even just one silk embroidery cost an amount of money enough to buy a mansion.

On the walls of both sides, there were shelves where letters and scrolls were put away and the Black Dragon Flag(Zirnitra) which was Zchted's symbol was hung on the front wall.

The documents were hardly piled up on the office desk, and two chairs were put on the front. Not only were they sturdily made, but cushions were also laid out. Ilda thought that they were apparently prepared for them.

And, King Victor Arthur Volk Estes Tsar Zchted was on the opposite side of the office desk.

He was 61 years old this year. His hair and beard were dull gray. His skin turned dark and his blue eyes lacked vitality. His silk clothes which used gold and silver threads abundantly were relaxed, but his arms which extended from there were so thin as to hark back to dry wood.

Both Ilda and Eugene went down onto their knees and bowed their heads.

"Raise your heads, both of you. We are not in the audience room here."

As King Victor said so, he recommended the two men sit on the chairs. Ilda and Eugene deeply bowed to the King once again and sat down on the chairs. They waited for the King to speak.

When about ten counts passed, the King slowly opened his mouth.

"I caught a cold the other day."

Though the two men were facing him across the office desk, those were words which they did not expect at all.

"Has your condition improved now?"

Eugene timidly asked. The King nodded.

"I slept for about a few days though. Now, it is as you see."

"It's good to hear, but please take good care of yourself."

Though Ilda said after recovering from surprise, Victor shook his head.

"It is not for that that I have called you. It's to speak about the future."

The aged King's voice was tinged with cold. The two men straightened their posture. About the future — in other words, it must be about whom to make King of the next era.

The throne of Zchted was not particularly different from that of other countries. It was hereditary and gave priority to the eldest son. In addition, the nomination by the King gave priority to inheritance. Though women were also given the rights to the throne, even thinking about the fact that there was no queen so far, it could be said that the hope^[12] was very small.

First in the line of succession to the throne. Prince Ruslan who was the King's son suffered from heart disease a few years ago. He set fire to the royal villa which was on the outskirts of the royal palace. What the palace guards who noticed smoke and rushed saw was the prince's figure holding a torch in the background of the royal villa wrapped in fire.

Several days later, the prince was confined to a certain shrine under the pretext of medical treatment of his disease. He was not deprived of the rights of succession to the throne because his father clung to the hope that he might recover some day.

About the cause of his heart disease, nothing was yet clarified. It was said that it was because he lost the woman who loved him by illness, but there were also up to rumors such as he encountered a case to the extent of suffering from heart disease in state affairs, or he was poisoned by someone, or when he did something bad, he was possessed by an evil spirit, and the like.

The prince, even before suffering from heart disease, was knowledgeable about both political and military affairs, and even the chief vassals were relieved with the thought "if this person becomes the King of the next area".

The second in line of succession to the throne was Prince Ruslan's son, who was also King Victor's grandchild. Though he was still nine, there was no doubt that he was King Victor's direct descendant.

This boy was living in one room of the royal palace, and it was said that he was leading a life close to confinement. Because of Prince Ruslan's matter, this boy had not come out in public.

The third in line of succession to the throne was the husband of King Victor's eldest daughter. The eldest daughter's rights to the throne were given to her husband by marriage. However, this husband became blind due to an accident several years ago. Though he could lead a daily life thanks to the devoted support of his wife and daughter, it was probably impossible for him to rule a country.

The fourth in line of succession to the throne was the daughter of the King's daughter and her husband. However, she was 11 years old this year, thus too young to be thought as the next King.

The fifth in line of succession to the throne was King Victor's younger brother. It was Ilda's father and also Eugene's father-in-law. He was six years younger than his older brother, that's 55 years old. He suffered an injury to the waist and he spent around half of the day in bed. Other than that, he was healthy in general, but it would be tough for him to stand at the front line of political affairs.

The sixth in line of succession to the throne was King Victor's younger sister. She had married twice so far, but because she was bereaved those two times, the rights to the throne returned to her. She has no child.

King Victor who sympathized with his younger sister recommended her a remarriage several times, but she declined them all and calmly lived in Osterode where her second husband was born and raised. Osterode is the land located in northeast and governed by the Vanadis Valentina Glinka Estes.

Both Ilda and Eugene knew of the aforementioned circumstances.

Then, Ilda was seventh in the line of succession. And Eugene eighth.

It would be fair to say that those two were currently the closest to the throne.

"Earl Pardu."

Victor called the name of the thin man in his mid-forties.

"I nominate you as the next King."

A shock soundlessly ran within the room. King Victor did not choose Ilda, but Eugene as the next King.

"...Your Majesty. With all due respect, please can you explain your decision?"

Breaking the silence after little less than ten seconds, Eugene opened his mouth. Even for him, who would not be perturbed by ordinary things, it was not easy to regain his presence of mind for the sudden change of fate which suddenly came.

"Why me?"

King Victor shortly asked back with a speed as he anticipated his question.

"Do you have any objection?"

"Far from it. It is just that I do not have the blood of the royal family."

"Your wife is my niece. And her daughter has inherited the royal family's blood."

"Your Majesty. Please, could you allow me to hear only a part of what made you arrive at this decision? Because this body is incompetent, I am just confused about how I should answer."

While Eugene stated repeatedly, Ilda who was next to him remained silent without the slightest movement. After an interval of about two breaths, Victor said.

"Earl Pardu. You have enacted the duty of negotiations with Brune for nearly ten years, right? I made my decision based on it."

It was the time when Eugene worked as King Victor's close aide.

Though he was still 20 at that time, he was a man who was not daunted even before the King. That attitude did not change even when the other

party was from another country; his quiet, yet pushy behavior and his stance, which was resolute and would not back down if necessary, were also highly evaluated by Brune.

Due to the tenacious and steady diplomatic negotiations of Eugene, Zchted was able to conclude some contracts including a non-aggression treaty with Brune.

Afterwards, even if small confrontations and quarrels occurred with Brune, the messengers of both countries kept in touch and they were finally able to settle them through negotiations.

Until the battle of Dinant where Tigre and Ellen met for the first time, both countries substantially gathered soldiers and battles of scale on which they crossed swords did not occur.

The fact that King Victor nominated Eugene as the next King meant that he sought friendship with Brune, and it was also to show Zchted's policy in the future. Though Ilda was a man who had influence in the northern part of Zchted, he had never gone to Brune.

Eugene was making a face showing that he could not yet understand, but as expected even he could not inquire any further to the King. It was a talk different from advice.

"I do not say that you should wear the crown and sit on the throne tomorrow or the day after tomorrow. It is for when I will no longer be of this world. Though it is not so far, I guess."

"So, that day does not come quickly, I shall exert myself much more."

And then, King Victor finally looked at Ilda.

"Lord Bydgauche, I ask for your assistance. On the occasion when Earl Pardu will become King, please support him."

"I understand."

Ilda calmly bowed his head.

However, his fists were strongly grasped at an angle not visible to the King, and he was faintly trembling.

Why, he was repeatedly shouting so many times in his mind.

It would be a lie if one was to say that Ilda had not thought about the throne until now. He was the child of the King's younger brother, young in his thirties; he excelled in military arts and was also blessed with the ability as a ruler. He also knew of the tragedy which attacked Prince Ruslan.

And, he had never once thought of Eugene as a rival.

It was not that he was looking down on him. He heard about the fact that Eugene gave advice without flinching even if the other party was the King, and he had even thought that he should follow his example.

However, Ilda was seventh in line to the throne. And Eugene was eighth.

Even if there was no difference in the ability as ruler, compared to Eugene who was 40, Ilda was 30. In addition, a lot of people acknowledged that Ilda excelled in bravery. As for Eugene's achievements from nearly twenty years ago, there was only the non-aggression pact conclusion with Brune.

Ilda's position in succession to the throne was above, he had a future and he also had ability in military arts and had a lot of achievements. Above all, although favored by the King, it was public knowledge that Eugene had no ambition.

Ilda had no reason to have a competitive spirit towards him, and he also had no reason to be wary of him.

It was that great a shock.

It was as if he was struck by thunder. He would have still been able to suppress his surprise if another person's name such as one of the King's grandchildren arose.

Why, the inner voice which asked so did not disappear within Ilda, and rather increased in size. Why was it not him? Why was it Eugene?

Between Ilda and Eugene, there was no discord whatsoever.

Since there was a kinfolk's relation, he naturally knew the other party's face and name. However, Ilda was estranged with his little sister, and did not even try to assertively have an interaction with her.

Each other's sphere of influence did not also overlap at all. Bydgauche which was governed by Ilda was in the northern part of Zchted, and his activities also centered on the north.

In contrast to this, Pardu governed by Eugene was in the southern part of Zchted. And, Eugene even rarely visited the Capital in consideration for the King.

If their spheres of influence were different, there would also be rarely interest conflicts. And thus, no discord could be born.

However, now Ilda was strongly conscious of Eugene for the first time.

"I think that both of you understand, but this is confidential. I will look for an occasion to announce it. Right, it can even be at the next Sun Festival(Maslenitsa)."

The Sun Festival(Maslenitsa) was celebrated from the end of winter to the coming of spring, and it was a festival held in Zchted since ancient times.

Coming with the spring arrival, the Capital was crowded with many people.

Local feudal lords and nobles of the surrounding countries who came to greet the King, those who came over all the way from towns and villages to enjoy the festival, mercenaries in search of contracts on which they could earn monry, trade merchants and minstrels who set their eyes on them, the clowns and the like showed up, and it was said that during the festival, even the night became as bright as the daytime.

If the King were to announce the next King at such a place, the effects would be immeasurable. Eugene's name would instantly be known to the surroundings countries. And, the King's words also meant that the necessary preparations, also including the mental attitude by the Sun Festival(Maslenitsa), would be finished.

When that time came, Eugene would part from the mansion and the territory in which he was used to living and would move to the Capital. He would have to pack up his loads and look for a person to whom he would leave the territory to after leaving.

Ilda, similarly to Eugene, would also live in the Capital depending on the situation.

Like that, the audience in the office ended.

As he left from the office, sweat suddenly trickled from Ilda's face. He was stifling and his body was hot. Blood was also rushing to his head. Like when one gulped down strong vodka in one go.

"Duke Bydgauche?"

Probably because he noticed that Ilda was strange, Eugene called out to him as he was worried. When Ilda turned towards Eugene in slow movement, while wiping the sweat on his face with his hand, he said with a smile.

"Earl Pardu. My sincere congratulations. I was surprised when His Majesty nominated you, but the throne would certainly be suitable to you."

"Thank you, Duke Bydgauche."

Eugene deeply bowed his head without destroying his placid expression.

"Because I have been away from the royal palace for a long time, I hope that you will help me as much as possible."

"Yes. It's also an order from His Majesty. I will support you with all my power" While answering, Ilda could not help but feel the hypocrisy in his own words.

The strange feeling which was not there before entering the office was lurking between the two men.

Ilda who parted with Eugene before the office was silently walking down the corridor.

He understood that he was irritated. He wanted to leave this palace as soon as possible.

From the unusual atmosphere, even those who knew him seemed hesitant to readily call out to him. If King Victor saw this scene, he might evaluate it was no use since he put out such attitude.

Why was it Eugene? And not him?

--- Earl Pardu is His Majesty's favorite. However, His Majesty would never choose him only based on it, either. Although he highly evaluated his negotiations with Brune, that was twenty years ago...

He suddenly recalled the existence of the youth named Tigrevurmud Vorn whom he heard about from the Grand Chamberlain. Due to the fact that the hero, who ended Brune's civil war, died by a blunder of Zchted, let alone their relationship growing worse, it would not be strange even if they were warring.

---However, Brune is exhausted from the previous civil war, and I have heard that the influential feudal lords also fell. Is there a need to consider up to there?

In fact, Ilda had not have much knowledge regarding Brune. He immediately came to a dead end.

---About Brune and Earl Vorn, it would be better to ask someone well-informed in the near future. Besides, the reason may not necessarily be limited to Brune.

Ilda worked out his thoughts. For example, might he not have some faults?

What immediately came to his mind was the matter with the barbarian subjugation of this time. Ilda who was proud of his military prowess had been forced into a hard fight; not only had he spent more days than expected, he also took substantial damage. It might be thought that a shadow arose to his military prowess.

He came out of the corridor. The walls in which ornaments were given continued on the left side, but there was no walls on the right side; the pillars stood in a row at equal intervals and one could enjoy the outside scenery.

At the time that he entered the royal palace, the sun should not have yet reached its zenith; but now it was passing it zenith. The clear blue sky was irritating.

"Ara, if is not the Duke."

Suddenly, a cheerful woman's voice sounded from behind, and Ilda stopped. When he looked back, a beautiful woman around 20 years old was standing. Ilda knew her.

"Vanadis-dono, huh. To think we would meet in such a place."

The woman called Vanadis-dono bowed with a smile. Her bluish black hair which reached her waist and her pure white dress which treated red and purple roses everywhere gave off a neat and clean impression.

Those who looked at her would first leak a sigh of admiration before her beauty and graceful appearance, and then shift their attention to her long-handled scythe carried on her delicate shoulder.

It was because this jet back and deep crimson scythe seemed to mysteriously adapt itself without discomfort that their attention did not face there at the very beginning.

However, it might also be natural. After all, this scythe was a Dragonic Tool(Viralt) for Vanadis.

Her name was Valentina Glinka Estes. She was the Vanadis with the nickname "Illusory Princess of the Hollow Shadow(Shervid)".

Though there were seven Vanadis in Zchted, Ilda was only close to her, who governed Osterode in the northeast and Elizavetta.

"It has been a long time. I did not think that I would see the Duke in the royal palace."

"I do think that I come to the royal palace much more than you though. How is condition of your body, good?"

Ilda had heard that Valentina had a weak body and thus rarely went out from Osterode which she governed. Actually, it had been a while that he met Valentina in the royal palace.

"I like Osterode, but the Capital is warmer at this time."

As Valentina replied with a carefree smile, she knitted her brows as she noticed something. Stepping about a half step forward, she looked up at Ilda with a worried face.

"You, too, Duke, you do not seem to feel well, but... did something happen?"

The innocent girl who knew nothing was purely worried about the person in front of her. In Valentina's gesture and expression at this time, there was something which made the other party think so.

Ilda was embarrassed to give an immediate reply. He understood that it was confidential. However, there was definitely the conflict of wanting someone to hear him out.

"No, it's not a big deal."

However, Ilda hid his inner thoughts and shook his head with a smile.

"After going to greet His Majesty, I hear that he caught a cold. He said that his condition has improved now, but as one who was told, as expected the liver got cold."

Valentina stared in wonder and raised a small voice saying "oh my".

"When I also gave my greetings to His Majesty, I was surprised to observe the same thing."

"It was hard for both of us."

At the black-haired Vanadis' reaction, Ilda unintentionally burst into laughter. And then, he remembered that she also had the rights of succession to the throne. By having laughed, a part of his thinking which was curdling might have been untied.

"Vanadis-dono. Have you not heard anything from His Majesty?"

Was it because that question was too abstract? Valentina bent her head slightly to the side as to say that she did not understand. Was she not told because her rights of succession to the throne were too low? Or was that after all only told only to Eugene and him?

"For example—"

Valentina suddenly muttered. In a voice small enough to be called a whisper.

"Was it about something along the line... \who will succeed the 'wolf'?"

Ilda was startled, and unintentionally ran his gaze around. Other than them, there were only imperial guards in the grand corridor of the royal palace. They were also carrying through standing at attention without leaving their posts.

Partly because Valentina lowered her voice, there was probably no one who heard what she said.

The "Volk" in the name of Victor Arthur Volk Estes Tsar Zchted was a word meaning "wolf" and was a nickname which the late King gave to his son.

It was due to a certain old custom of Zchted that the King gave the name of a beast as the Prince's nickname. By the way, in case of the princess, there were many cases where the name of a flower was given to her.

The one who would succeed the wolf. In other words, the one who would succeed Victor. It was about the next King. Judging from her tone hesitating about the surroundings, there was no doubt that Valentina knew.

"...I will ask just to be sure, but from whom did you hear it?"

"From His Majesty. He said that it was confidential, but it looked like he told it to some other people after all."

Ilda agreed by saying "that is also right". If he had really spoken only to Eugene and him, then the government would not just get confused. He should have told this to those near the center of the Kingdom.

He could only think of something of that level, and he himself had probably not yet recovered from the shock.

"By the way, Duke. I will change the topic, but..."

As she withdrew half a step which widened the distance, Valentina broadly smiled.

"I received vodka from an acquaintance of mine. How about it? Why do you not come to my mansion tonight? I hope to talk with you after such a long time."

Even excluding talks about the throne, it was a happy invitation for Ilda. This was because strong drinks were his favorites, and several months had passed since he met Valentina.

"Then, after a half koku, may I visit you before the day sets?"

Thinking from each other's position, Ilda suggested so. The day had just slightly passed. Even if she sent a messenger to the mansion now to make preparation to welcome Ilda, There was enough time.

Besides, if a single young man visited a single woman at night^[13], who knows what kind of backbiting gossipy people would be engaged in.

"Understood. I will wait for you, Duke."

As he parted with Valentina, Ilda once again walked down the corridor. His face became a bit brighter.

In an area where the residences of nobles gathered, there was Valentina's mansion.

The mortar plastered to the walls was brand-new white, the brown roof tinged with black did not get dirty; one could understand that it was carefully maintained. But the mansion itself was small and the decoration was also old-fashioned. The garden was also snugly made and it even looked like it was hidden by other towering mansions in the surroundings.

In fact, since the place where Valentina should originally be was Osterode, this was enough.

Besides, there was not many Vanadis who had a mansion in the Capital. When Ellen and Mira stayed in the Capital for a long time, either they would borrow a room in the royal palace or they would use hotels available for royalty, titled nobility, and wealthy merchants.

As Ilda said himself, he visited when the blue of the sky darkened. Valentina personally came out to receive him. She guided him to the drawing room.

The fire was already lit in the fireplace of the room, and the room was sufficiently warm. There were two big sofas and a small round table put between them.

Though the curtains were two layers with white and black, Ilda quietly split a smile at the fact that embroidery of roses was applied on either of them.

A bottle of vodka, silver cups and two plates were put on the table. Fruit was served on one side, and on the other side, there were cheese and thinly sliced bread.

Waiting for Ilda to sit down on the sofa, Valentina poured the vodka into the silver cups with her own hands. And then, she herself sat down on the sofa, too.

"Speaking of which, I heard that you safely ended the barbarian subjugation. Congratulations."

Valentina said so and raised her silver cup. While Ilda smiled wryly, he also raised his silver cup with the same timing as her. He did not think to be not proud of his military gains, but he was not so tactless as to voice it out in a place like this.

Ilda who put the silver cup on his mouth opened his eyes wide. He'd drank various things so far, but this was quite a first-class drink.

Transparent (clear) like a clear stream, it went through his throat with almost no bitterness. His body was warmed from within and his mood rose.

Fatigue of the journey to the Capital seemed to disappear with the heat emitted.

"I am glad that it is to your liking."

Valentina broadly smiled. She had already put her silver cup on the table and picked up an apple.

"Please, drink without reservation."

As he was told so, Ilda drank one cup after another. While occasionally gnawing cheese, he amused himself with friendly chat with Valentina.

Ilda talked about the barbarian subjugation, the events which occurred in his territory and the gossip which he heard from the minstrels, and Valentina, while also talking about what she experienced in the Capital and her territory Osterode, basically took the listener's role. Ilda thought that she was a good listener as usual.

Duke Bydgauche did not feel boredom. The black-haired Vanadis asked questions such as "Duke, how did you do afterwards?" at the key points of the talk, and kept drawing out words from Ilda. Valentina devoted herself to the listener's role before one knew and was hardly talking.

As he would be thirsty when he talked too much, he piled up more wine cups. Ilda was slowly drinking the vodka in order to savor it, but after about a half koku had passed, the vodka in the bottle had decreased to less than half.

"—Speaking of which."



In the place where Ilda's talk was interrupted, Valentina asked as if she recalled.

"What do you think about the royal palace, Duke?"

At the term "royal palace", Ilda recalled earlier in the daytime. If he was composed, he might have asked her to be clear regarding her vague question.

However, his thinking which was muddled by the vodka immediately ended up bringing about words and memory. Although his consciousness as a vassal immediately recalled the words "this is confidential", he reconsidered that Valentina also knew. He answered with a slightly violent tone.

"It is an order of His Majesty. That I shall support Earl Pardu... No, King Eugene as his first retainer. Right, I must get used to that way of calling him from now on."

Anyone who worked in the royal palace knew the order of rights to the throne. When Eugene would sit on the throne, Ilda who was once above him (in rank to the succession) would rather have to take the initiative and go down on his knee.

"So, the Duke will serve as the next King's "uncle"^[14]. Speaking of the King's uncle, I remember "Efram and Ivan"."

With an air as if not noticing at all Ilda's distress, Valentina spoke of the title of a fairy tale. "Efram and Ivan" was a fairy tale retold in Zchted since ancient times.

The wise Prince Efram who was driven out of the royal palace by the hateful Grand Chamberlain Ivan defeated him (Ivan) with the cooperation of an uncle secluded in the depths of the forest and made a triumphant return to the royal palace. Afterwards, the uncle became the Grand Chamberlain and devoted himself to Efram's reign.

It was said that there were more than 50 ways of narrating "Efram and Ivan" in Zchted. Probably because the plot line was very simple, the minstrels added dramatizations and exaggerations on a whim, and thus each region had its own version of "Efram and Ivan".

In a certain region, it was something like: Efram was not driven out, but he rather left for a journey looking for a woman who would become his wife. In

another region, it was a plotline where all was the uncle's scheme and the Grand Chamberlain Ivan was in reality a good person.

It was also said that Efram's story was a dream of one night of a villager named Efram.

"—"Efram and Ivan", huh. How nostalgic."

Though Ilda laughed, he could not be quite calm inwardly.

---It was probably out of kindness that Vanadis-dono mentioned "Efram and Ivan".

Ilda also knew about "Efram and Ivan" since the tale was also transmitted in Bydgauche which he governed. In the so-called Bydgauche version, Efram's brother-in-law appeared instead of the uncle. He was the older brother of Efram's wife.

Efram and his brother-in-law opposed each other whenever there was something and sometimes crossed swords, but every time Efram's wife remonstrated both of them, they reconciled and reluctantly re-sheathed their swords.

"It can't be helped since it's you who asked it. Even such a man is important to you, I guess."

Both Efram and his brother-in-law spoke word by word exactly the identical lines.

The conclusion was the same as other stories. The two men joined forces and won, and the brother-in-law became the Grand Chamberlain.

Ilda had heard that Valentina had a weak body since she was child, so she was confined in her mansion and was absorbed in reading various stories. She must have daringly given that name surely because she knew the contents of the Bydgauche version.

---But, my younger sister and I haven't the same relations as the uncle and the younger sister in that story.

Valentina did not probably know up to that extent. No wonder. Unless they were very close or he did not say very dangerous things, he would not tell her about their relations between siblings.

"—Why?"

He unintentionally spoke his inner thoughts. Why did he have to go down on his knee before Eugene?

Even though he should be the one to sit on the throne. Where on Earth was he inferior to Eugene?

"Duke."

A very kind voice struck Ilda's earlobe. It was Valentina's voice.

"Why don't you try to trust Earl Pardu for the time being?"

Within the dim light, the black-haired Vanadis smiled.

"I understand your feelings, Duke. His Majesty would not hand over the throne to Earl Pardu with only the reason being that he was his close aide before. Disregarding the order of rights to the throne, the individual achievements, anything and everything."

"...I also considered such a thing."

"There are only the Duke and I in this room. Neither His Majesty nor Earl Pardu are there."

Ilda's weak rebuttal disappeared in the warmed atmosphere.

"But, maybe, there is a thought which does not depend on His Majesty himself and he hands over the throne to Earl Pardu."

Valentina's words were accurately expressing word for word Ilda's innermost thoughts.

Ilda, as a retainer of the King, wanted to consent.

If there was such a reason, he would also understand why not him, but Eugene was chosen as King. Although it was possible to think so, he wanted it.

"I think there might be that. I also do not understand though."

Discouragement and disappointment spread through Ilda's heart. Valentina continued.

"So, how about trusting him?"

The consciousness of Ilda who was absentminded due to the vodka took about three seconds and somehow recalled Valentina's words from a little while ago.

"...Hmm. You are right."

Although a relation between brother-in-law and younger brother-in-law, there was no interchange which seemed like interchange until now. Ilda knew both Eugene's face and name. He also knew about the fact that he had served as the King's close aide, and that he was not hesitant when giving advice.

However, He only knew that.

If he were to trust him and interacted more with him, he might find the reason which could make him content.

"It is as Vanadis-dono said. Aside from strong drinks, it seems that I have a precious thing."

Exhaling a hot breath mixed with alcohol, Ilda muttered so.

Then after a half koku, Ilda left Valentina's mansion when the sky was covered with a very dim light. With his attendant, he headed towards his mansion. Though the ill feeling did not naturally disappear, he had felt inclined to consider her words positively.

◎

It was at noon of the next day when she treated Ilda to vodka that Valentina sent a messenger to Eugene's mansion in the Capital. The messenger of the black-haired Vanadis, though brief, conveyed his lord's words after expressing his greetings according to the etiquette.

"I have heard that it is extremely rare that His Excellency Earl Pardu shows up in the Capital. I assume that you are busy, but can you allow me at least to greet you?"

Though Eugene was acquainted with Valentina, they had almost never spoken. This was because there was no opportunities of which to interact with her, who governed Osterode to the northeast. That said, since there was no discord between them, he had no reason to decline. Besides, he thought that it might be recreational.

Actually, Eugene intended to return to his territory Pardu as soon as he finished the audience to the King. He had also gathered up the baggage on the day when he arrived at the Capital.

However, the words conveyed by the King were far beyond his expectations.

Therefore, he changed his schedule and had thought to stay another several days in the Capital and put his thoughts in order. He gave several silver coins to the only attendant who accompanied him and told him that he could even do some Capital sightseeing.

The attendant also guessed that his master was given a mission which he could not tell him. As he obediently received the silver coins, he said that he would be back before the day got dark and left the mansion.

As such, with no plan to meet someone, he thought to walk along the Capital's main street. Valentina's visit was right after he left.

"Understood. If it is fine with you, let's meet today when the day has gotten dark."

Then, when the evening came, Valentina Glinka Estes wearing a pure white dress decorated with roses visited Eugene's mansion. She left her Dragonic Tool(Viralt) Ezendeis to an attendant as she went through the mansion's gate.

"It has been a while. Earl Pardu."

"Likewise."

Exchanging simple greetings, Eugene led Valentina to the drawing room.

They began to discuss the King's condition, and then followed with talks about the territories which each of them governed. As the atmosphere became friendly, Valentina suddenly changed the topic.

"By the way, I am worried whether or not I may say it in such a place, but... since pretending not to know would be rather rude, I wish to congratulate you. Really, congratulations on the matter of succession to the throne."

The gray-haired Earl openly frowned. Because his usual expression was calm, when he made such a face, there was enough strength to make those who saw it flinch. To Valentina which returned a wink as surprised, Eugene asked in an unusually harsh voice.

"Where did you hear about that?"

Though Valentina held her tongue with a startled face, she soon broke the silence and answered.

"...From Duke Bydgauche."

Eugene's expression grew in severity. He inwardly resented him.

--Didn't His Majesty say that this was confidential?

"Valentina-dono. This is said to be confidential. I should assume that you did not talk about it with other people such as the attendants and maids who serve you."

Valentina nodded her head with a depressed expression.

"I am sorry."

"...No, if it is only you knowing, then I do not mind."

Eugene consented by saying "I see". As for Valentina, since she got to know, it was natural to think that she should give her greetings. Otherwise, as she said, it might rather be taken as disrespect.

"You knew that I would become King, but did not come for greetings even though you were in the Capital at this time, huh."

If it was cross-examined so by Eugene later, an excuse would no longer stand. Though unreasonable, it was frightening since it was acceptable.

--Throne. Power. His Majesty held it well so far...

While massaging his own forehead with a finger, Eugene sighed. He, who had been King Victor's close aide, had seen the power of a King immediately nearby. But at the same time, he had also seen the hardships, troubles and despair of a King.

He had no intention to pity Victor. However, he only decided at least to say what needed to be said and served him. At that time, Victor was not married, and he had also lost his parents.

Though King Victor was slightly quick-tempered and irascible on that subject, Eugene sincerely took the trouble to deal with it when he judged that he should lend him an ear.

He thought that it was worth serving him. He kept advising him.

Afterwards, he was really appreciated. When he was recommended the marriage, he was very surprised. Although he gladly accepted it, he thought that he could no longer serve as an aide. This was because it might be thought that the existence of his wife who was from the royal family would give influence to Eugene's advices.

Eugene was afraid of becoming 'a maternal relative who wielded power'. As King Victor surmised that thought of Eugene, he gave him a title and a territory.

And, now. King Victor was going to give something enough to overshadow what he once gave to Eugene.

The crown, the throne and the whole land of the country called Zchted.

Eugene thought that he could not refuse it. This was not because it was the King's order.

Victor thought that if it was Eugene, he would value these; and thus he handed it over to him. Like when he gave him a wife, a title and a territory before. He could not ignore those feelings.

---But, Duke Bydgauche does not seem to appreciate.

While looking at Valentina who looked apologetic, Eugene felt bitter.

However, those feelings of Eugene stopped in an unexpected form (way). Valentina opened her mouth with a resolved face.

"Um, Earl. With all due respect, there is something I want to say."

Eugene nodded.

What Valentina asserted was that Ilda did not say it clearly. That she had just guessed when he spoke ambiguously.

"Duke Bydgauche-sama did not disobey His Majesty's order which said it was confidential."

Speaking of which, Eugene remembered. Valentina, as her name and family name showed, was from a branch family to the royal family. Which meant that her knowledge was more abundant than other people.

If so, then it could be not helped even if she noticed it.

Valentina vehemently argued more.

"Besides, the Duke was awfully disappointed... I thought to comfort him by at least hearing his story."

Now that she mentioned it, even Eugene could not remain angry at him. After all, Eugene himself repeatedly tried to find out why it was not Ilda, but him who was chosen as the next King. Since it was even so for him, the degree of disappointment and indignation was probably stronger for Ilda.

"Earl. If possible, would you talk at once with the Duke?"

"With Duke Bydgauche?"

Even without Valentina saying it, Eugene planned to arrange an opportunity to talk with only the two of them, but he was urged ahead before her sincere look.

"At the same time that the Duke was disappointed, he felt uneasy about the danger of his position. About the fact that he would become the King's brother-in-law."

Eugene was not disgusted by Ilda, but rather he could not help but feel sympathy towards him. The King's maternal relative who could wield power if things went well, but one wrong move and you would be regarded as dangerous and immediately judged. That was the position in which he was put in the future.

"Thank you, Vanadis-dono. By the way, do you know what Lord Bydgauche likes?"

"If we speak about the Duke's tastes, I would say strong drinks (vodka)."

Valentina explained as much as possible about Ilda's tastes, and proposed Eugene about how he should send a strong drink before they met and spoke. She said that it was better for Eugene to meet Ilda after his anxiety and wariness had decreased to some extent.

Eugene also nodded to this and said that he would do so.

Afterwards, the two talked about various things, and Valentina left Eugene's mansion before the night came.

Ten days had passed since Urz became a stable boy in the Imperial Palace of Lebus.

From the early morning before even the sun had risen, Urz got up and left the bed while shaking his body in the drifting cold air within the lodgings. His breath was white. However, he woke up thanks to that.

Until his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, he desperately rubbed his body to warm it up, and he came out of the lodgings almost fumbling. This was because there was almost no light.

When he went out, the sky was still dark. After washing his face in a well near the lodgings, he headed to the stable. He met other stablemen there.

"Good morning."

As he said so, a short answer "yeah" came. On the first day, they were only looking at him with suspicious eyes and could not even greet him, but recently, they finally began to reply to his greetings.

He even headed to the stable with a companion. It was stinking as usual early in the morning, but as getting used to it was awful, Urz hardly worried about it.

As usual, he began to deal with the horse dung and urine. He scooped them with a special plow and carried them to a specified place. Then, he cleaned the stable, replaced the water and carried out food.

Urz had adapted on his daily life as a stable boy.

In fact, it did not happen just by getting used to it. For example, it was about the time when he fed the horses for the first time, being asked by the stableman head. As if his body remembered, he was able to do it with natural hand movements. He also knew how to handle the stirrups and saddles before being taught.

---It seemed that the me before losing my memory was taking care of horses.

In the fishing village where he was found, it was also like so the first time when he touched a bow. Urz recalled a nostalgic feeling by various works in the stable.

---Though I don't know why I was made a stable boy...

Both the lodging and the meals were guaranteed. He even got paid. Though even now, Urz thought that all of that was great, he came to think that he would work here for a while.

Found in that fishing village, even when he understood that he could remember nothing, Urz not feeling that much anxious, optimistically took the stance "I will somehow manage it". The villagers were very amazed when he said so.

As that stance did not change even when he became a stable boy, he even came to think that either the him before losing his memory probably had quite a carefree character, or his instinct might have realized that it was dangerous to move randomly.

As he finished all his work, Urz returned to the lodging with his companion stablemen. It was to have breakfast.

When he passed through the door of the lodging, he passed by one of the stablemen. It was a man two or three years older than Urz. As he saw Urz's face, he floated a nasty smile.

"Hey, Urz. I heard that you were taken over by Vanadis-sama, is it true?"

"Yes. That's right."

Not even thinking to hide it, Urz honestly answered. The next moment, the smile disappeared from the stableman's expression and his face was dyed with surprise. After the man glanced at Urz with unpleasant eyes, he snorted and walked away. Urz saw off the stableman's back with an absentminded face.

"What was that...?"

Although Urz was dubious about the stableman's sudden change of attitude, he was very hungry due to the fact that he woke up early in the morning and worked. Rather than running after him and hearing him out, he gave priority to breakfast.

As he finished the breakfast of hard bread of rye and soup which cooked together potato and cabbage, he had to start his next assignment immediately.

Then, it was about when the day would soon grow dark that Urz returned to the lodging. He dragged his body tired from work and headed to his room.

Although his room, of course it was not a private room. It was a room used by four people. Each bed was put in one of the four corners of the room which was not that much wide, and there was a little space in the center. Each person had all his personal belongings put on his bed and it had been decided that one must not use another person's bed selfishly (without his permission?).

Urz had no personal belongings. If one had to say, when it was decided that he would work as stable boy, he was provided two clothes, two pieces of thick blankets and one stiff pillow. Of course, all of those were put on his bed.

When he opened the door and entered the room, Urz opened his eyes wide in surprise.

In the empty room, his bed was turned upside down. His clothes and blankets were thrown out on the floor, and the clothes were torn to shreds. The pillow as well.

"What, is this...?"

Only those words came out as he thought that that was too much. It was too mean to call it a prank. Nothing was done to the beds of the other three people, so it was obvious that the one who did it aimed at Urz.

As he remained standing in utter amazement, footsteps were approaching. Mark, a stable boy who used the same room came back as he finished his work.

Though Mark was 17 years old, he was so short that one would think he was two years younger, he had a pale skin and his limbs were also thin. More than physical works, he was good at works which asked for the dexterity of hands such as the mending of harness; among the people using this shared room, he was the friendliest to Urz.

Though Mark put on a wondering face when he saw Urz's attitude, he looked into the room and understood immediately.

"Do you know who did this?"

Urz who recovered from stupor, asked Mark without being able to hide his irritation. But, Mark looked at Urz with a sidelong glance and shook his head.

"You should give up on searching the culprit."

"Why?"

"Because you won't find him."

As Mark entered the room, he put his hand on Urz's bed.

"Hold there."

Being said so, Urz approached his bed with slow steps. The two returned the bed which was turned upside down. To Urz who fixedly stared at the clothes and blankets which he picked up, the stable boy of small stature turned a sympathetic look.

"It seems that you were picked up by the current Vanadis. It had been secretly talked about between everyone."

Urz raised his flipped bed and looked at Mark. There was a small window in the room, and the vermillion evening sun came in from there. Its light made a mysterious shadow on his face.

"In short, it's something like that. Because there had never been a precedent where the current Vanadis made someone directly work in the Imperial Palace. And, I don't know whether or not you noticed yourself, but you have good skills at work. You have never been called by the head, right?"

The head here referred to that unsociable stableman head. As the puzzled Urz nodded, Mark shrugged his shoulders and smiled wryly.

"That person doesn't scold anyone in presence of others. After the work of the day is over, he would call him to his room and make a short sermon. Among the stablemen who are in this stable, there is no one who wasn't yet called since the beginning of work within a few days. Except you." <

Now that he said it, certainly Urz had never seen a scene where the stableman head scolded someone. He selfishly thought that he was a person who did not get that much angry, but it seemed that he was wrong.

In other words, this meant that this treatment^[15] was out of jealousy. Urz strongly chewed his molars and tightly grasped the blankets and clothes which he held. It was too much irrational. To Mark who sat down on his bed, Urz asked in an unbearable thought.

"What should I do?"

"Consult with the stableman head. I'm sorry, but I can't be of help."

What was returned was a clearly and very distant answer of someone apparently wanting to avoid getting involved. He even thought that the ten days after he became a stable boy were denied.

--I guess there's no helping it.

Urz inwardly sighed. As he once again confirmed the damage which he received, it was natural to think of not wanting to be involved. Besides, putting it another way, after Urz began to work as stable boy, only ten days had passed.

--However, I don't think that I can let it be.

Urz calmly began to think about a method of counterattack.

◎

Several days passed since the day when he first received harassment. It continued as usual.

This morning, an insect was put in his soup. He finished the early morning work and was called by the stableman head in as he was on his way to take his meal, and it was a mistake to have left the dining room in such a short amount of time.

Because he was annoyed, he drank up the soup after throwing away the insect.

He had already consulted with the stableman head. Although the latter apologized that his management was not thorough, even he did not seem to come up with a solution. He called each stableman and interrogated, but the culprit was not yet found.

While Urz held down his anger within, outwardly, he was indifferently handling his work. He did not know whether or not he could say that it was fortunate, but there was no harassment related to his work at all.

--It's probably because they would easily be caught by the stableman head.

About this work, the stableman head exactly grasped when and where everyone was. If one were to get away from where he worked, it was more likely to be found.

Urz finished the unpleasant breakfast and returned to the stable, but he was shortly called by the stableman head. He hurried to the lodging while thinking "what may it be?". When he arrived at the lodging, the stableman head and Mark were standing there.

"Go shopping with Mark today."

They went to buy necessary things in the town. Mark went with him because if Urz was to go alone, he knew neither the way nor the location of the shops.

Like that, as he confirmed the contents of the shopping to Mark, the stableman head walked away to the stable. Only Urz and Mark were left after.

"Then, shall we go?"

Mark timidly said. After the harassment to Urz started, he did not talk very much with Mark. Thus, Mark was feeling guilty and Urz, on the other hand, was thinking that it would be better that if he was not getting him involved.

"Hey, Mark."

Probably for that reason, Mark shook his shoulders startled as Urz called out to him. While Urz smile wryly, he continued his words.

"Can I ask you a favor?"

Three stablemen set foot in the room, which Urz used, in the afternoon. They hurriedly came back at the break of the interval of work.

"That guy went shopping, right?"

"Yes. I confirmed that he left the ranch. What do we do today? Do we throw away the bed?"

One person asked his friend with a nasty smile.

"We will use this today."

While another one pinched his nose with his left hand, he raised the bag which he held in his right hand. The other two understood what the contents of the bag were with the smell. It was the horse dung. He probably prepared it during his work.

"I will rub this. So that the smell won't go even if he washes."

After looking around just in case and checking whether or not there was anyone watching, the three people entered the room used by Urz. They immediately knew which Urz's bed was. Though there were personal belongings on the other stablemen's beds, there were none on Urz's.

When they threw out the horse dung onto his bed and blanket, they came out to the corridor with satisfied faces.

However, it was only so far that they could exult.

"—Have you already finished?"

Urz was standing in front of them. The three people's faces completely changed to fright, and they remained standing stock still.

"Y-You didn't go shopping..."

One of the three spoke up to there while his voice was shaking, but he swallowed his words as he noticed something. Urz calmly answered.

"Yeah. I dropped it."

During the day before yesterday, Urz asked the stableman head. To make him do something which would make him go outside in a very natural way, several days later.

The reason why he daringly put it during the day was to catch the culprit(s) red handed. Since he was harassed, Urz thought that there was the possibility that he was watched.

Even if he went shopping for today, he would go outside the ranch with Mark, and when he confirmed that there were no people following them, he left the shopping to Mark and hurriedly returned to the lodging. And, he ambushed them in the shade of the corridor.

Although the stable boys also checked up to the fact that Urz left the ranch, they could do no more than that. This was because they would definitely be found if they were too far away from their workplace.

"Did you also hide there more than two koku?"

One of the stable boys panted. It was not that it was difficult to hide, but hiding oneself without moving for two koku was not something one could easily do.

However, Urz also responded to this as if it was nothing.

"It's far easier compared to an ambush when hunting. There is also neither obstructive grass, nor insects and snakes..."

Stopping there, Urz suddenly cocked his head in puzzlement.

Just now, the word 'hunting' popped out very naturally from his mouth. When thinking about the fact that he was good with the bow, he wondered whether the him before losing his memory wasn't a hunter after all. From the scars remaining on his boy, he also thought that he might have been an archer.

One person cursed Urz and threw a fist at him. As if getting hooked by his movement, the other two also attacked him from right and left.

However, Urz did not flinch at all, calmly saw through their movements and dodged their fists, or blocked them. As he judged that the stable boys were not that familiar with fighting, he quickly sneaked around the back of one of them and twisted his arm. A groan of pain leaked out from the stable boy's mouth.

"I will report on everything to the stableman head so that he deals with you. Okay?"

When Urz said and released the man's arm as he thrust him away, he kicked him. The man who was pushed forward rolled up the other two and fell down flashily.

The harassment to Urz ended on this day.

◎

It was the evening on the day when Elizavetta ordered her close aide Naum to report about how Urz's work was going.

"About 15 to 16 days passed, right? If possible, I would like to hear about the report tomorrow."

Elizavetta, who let her golden and blue pupils brighten with expectation, said so and Naum was perplexed.

"Isn't the work of stable boy the repetition of the same thing no matter how much time passed?" Naum thought.

That said, having witnessed Urz's ability with the bow, for Naum who knew that he seemed to have lost his memory, he was interested about how Urz would live in a new environment. As there was also Elizavetta's order, Naum asked the stableman head and heard him out on the night of that day.

The next day, Naum visited the office a little before daytime came and reported to Elizavetta.

"He caused brawling."

Though Elizavetta put on a surprised face, her expression got cloudy as she heard Naum's report.

--I should have asked for the report much earlier.

She breathed a sigh of regret. She did not do so because first, she wanted to avoid the sarcasm of civil officials, and second, she thought that she should accumulate the reports to some extent.

Though not as much as Naum, Elizavetta did not also think that the stableman's work would be rich in daily change.

"Naum. Do I still have to let Urz continue working as stable boy?"

"Excuse me, but... Will it not be instead more difficult to make him work other than as a stable boy?"

While stroking the wrinkles carved on his face by hardship, Naum answered as if admonishing her.

"Whatever the reason, Urz has caused a fight. A man who has not even yet worked one month as stable boy. It could not be helped even if he was driven out—"

Saying up to there, Naum shut his mouth. He noticed that flames of anger were burning in Elizavetta's pupils.

"Urz should have silently endured whatever was done to him. Do you want to say that?"

"I am sorry for incurring Vanadis-sama's anger, but it's what I mean."

Naum took heed of the red-haired Vanadis' gaze and continued his words.

"It has already been widely known in the Imperial Palace that it was Vanadis-sama who personally called out to Urz and brought him along. Most of the people will probably see in it that Vanadis-sama took a liking to him. It is also a situation where Vanadis-sama's honor will be affected."

Elizavetta dropped her shoulders as she could not return words at all. While painfully seeing his master depressed, Naum continued.

"Even if you were to change Urz's work to something else, as long as he works in the Imperial Palace, jealousy will probably follow him around."

It was not just the stablemen who harbored jealousy and prejudice.

"In that case, it would be preferable to let him continue working as stable boy. At least, he proved to the stablemen that he was a man who did not yield to harassment."

"But, won't he be isolated?"

Elizavetta's expression did not clear up. The red-haired Vanadis softly closed her left eye.

As she soon opened her left eye, she closed her right eyes this time. She had a habit to watch something only with one eye in some rhythm.

When she was small, Elizavetta was bullied by the villagers due to her Rainbow Eyes(Laziris). She encountered Ellen when she was 10 and came to have the will to confront the bullying, but her dark past up to there was even now recessed in the depth of her memory.

"I would say that isolation is also better though."

Though Naum said so, Elizavetta could not immediately draw a conclusion. She put it on hold for the time being and continued to hear the report about Urz's work.

To the report that he seemed to have experience of taking care of horses, Elizavetta tilted her head to the side. Not only that, it was said that he was also used to tending the harness.

"I wonder if he can ride a horse."

After a little thought, Elizavetta asked. Whether or not he could ride a horse was an important clue to learn Urz's identity. This was because unless one

was either a knight class or a noble, he would not do training for horsemanship.

She thought that it was a good thought. After all, even Urz himself did not know what he could do. If she were to know his ability, she could give him a more suitable post.

"If Vanadis-sama wants, shall I make him do a trial?"

Naum said. Just now, he just said that it would be better to let him keep working as stable boy, so this could be considered as a passive suggestion to his saying of earlier. Naum was also thinking that there would be nothing better if Urz could do some other works, and that led to the breakthrough of the status quo.

Above all else, if it could improve his master's mood, then it was worth doing that much.

"You're right. I also want to let him try various other things. Despite the fight, he won in a three-to-one, right? We shall also let him try weapons. And then, I wonder if he can read and write. We will first let him try these three, and change his treatment depending on the results."

"Understood."

Though Naum respectfully bowed with a smile, he did not forget to add a few words.

"However, Vanadis-sama. Urz is a, to the bitter end, a newcomer. In case that you change his treatment, please take that into account."

He meant that if she were to give him too good a treatment, he would stir more jealousy and antipathy than now. Though Naum was taking interest in Urz's existence, he knew that it was not so for the other close aides.

In addition, Naum had a different concern. Elizavetta was young, as well as Urz.

If she was too concerned with Urz, he could not help feeling uneasy about the fact that those looking from witty viewpoints would appear.

Elizavetta halted Naum who finished the report and was about to leave.

"I really hate that kind of bullying."

To Naum who made a dubious face, the red-haired Vanadis said with a tone which especially emphasized the word "hate".

"Can I have you convey that within the Imperial Palace? I understand the human's way of the world, but it will be effective temporarily."

As Naum deeply bowed once again to show respect to his master, he quietly left.

◎

It was about three days later after Naum had visited to report to Elizavetta. To this, the red-haired Vanadis was half surprised, half amazed; and she said to her close aide who had a face harking back to a pessimistic nature.

"It's quite early, eh."

"It's because I tested him yesterday and the day before yesterday and very interesting results came out."

Naum answered with a really happy face.

"I will move from the conclusion. I was also present myself at the scene and confirmed it, but I can only say that he was admirable at handling horses. On the other hand, he handles sword and spear like an amateur to the extent that you wonder if it is the same person. I also let him try using the battleaxe and the mace, but he's really bad at handling them. However, only his archery is exceptional."

"Specifically?"

"I test him in form of a game, but he held down all the skillful bow users of this Imperial Palace."

The game which Naum planned was as followed.

They would shot and hit distant targets. He let them freely decide how far away they would be from the targets.

They would shoot the arrows while riding a horse, hit five targets lined up in a row.

They would compete on how high they could fly an arrow by aiming at the top of the rampart.

"I didn't know that."

To Naum's report, Elizavetta pouted as she was sulking. If she knew it, even if she was in the middle of state affairs, she would have probably come to see under the pretense of taking a break. Of course, Naum had expected it, so he did not tell her. But, when he was asked why he did not tell, he answered like this.

"It was good above all that Vanadis-sama did not show. If you had come to watch, some of the soldiers of the Imperial Palace would have never again touched a bow."

"...Was it that overwhelming?"

Urz's bow skill was to the extent that if Elizavetta had witnessed that scene, the honor of the bow users would have been soaked.

Thus, Naum nodded with a deadly serious countenance.

"I let him shoot and aim an arrow from a distance of 300 Alsins, and he hit all the targets when he shot the arrows while riding a horse, and so shot an arrow which reached to the top of the rampart. If such a person suddenly appeared and comes forth, it will become so^[16]."

Elizavetta was also dumbfounded by his words.

From the fact that he had shot down seabirds flying high in the sky, shot arrows from a shaking boat and killed pirates, she understood that he was an owner of exceptional ability.

However, this far exceeded Elizavetta's expectations. Even looking around the whole Zchted let alone Lebus, there was probably no bow user like Urz.

At that time as if he recalled, Naum, with a deeply move face, tightly grasped his fist and emphasized.

"The civil officials do not seem to know yet, but Urz's bow skill is more than a bargain. With that, any noble would spend a large sum of money and try to employ him."

"—Naum. Have you heard rumors about an owner of such bow skill?"

Elizavetta also thought that what Naum said was not wrong.

But then, it might have been talked more.

Urz encountered Elizavetta ten days after he was saved by the people of a fishing village. About twenty days had passed since he came to this Lebus and began to live here as stable boy. Adding the number of days taken to move from the fishing village to this Imperial Palace, it exceeded forty days.

Or, it had probably made a great uproar in Brune which was probably the land where Urz was born and raised, but did it mean that it had not reached here?

Naum cocked his head in puzzlement at Elizavetta's question and answered while stroking the wrinkles on his face.

"Speaking of which, I have heard that a person named Tigrevurmud Vorn, who suppressed the civil war in Brune Kingdom, is an unmatched bow user."

"—If it is that man, he died."

Elizavetta swayed her red hair and shook her head.

"It seemed that he was attacked by a monster and a sea dragon(Badva) and fell into the sea. Even that Sophia Obertas has searched, but has not found him, so there is no mistake."

Now, Elizavetta also knew the existence of the Demon called Torbalan. The story of the sea dragon(Badva) that Sophie had told was probably not wrong. If so, Tigrevurmud Vorn must have died.

"Anyway, I understood about the bow and the horse. Is there something else?"

When Elizavetta asked, Naum straightened himself as he remembered.

"He is quite cultivated. He can read and write both Brune's and Zchted's languages and he also knows how to count (calculate). About the reading and writing, as expected he's more adept with Brune language. Maybe Urz is a noble from Brune."

"But, Brune despises the bow, right? Is there any noble from Brune skilled in archery? Would it not be at least Tigrevurmud Vorn whom you just spoke earlier?"

At Elizavetta's pointing out, Naum made a startled face.

"It is certainly just as Vanadis-sama says."

Although Naum answered so, he made an expression showing that he was not completely convinced. Excluding the point about the "bow", Urz was without a doubt from Brune, and it was also more than certain that he received training.

"Is there anything other than that? Was Urz able to remember something?"

"About his memory, he seems to have the feeling to fragmentary remember something..."

Naum shrugged his shoulders.

"He said that it seems that things such as the scenery of hunting, scenery of a battlefield and a certain mansion floated into his head, but he cannot remember his name at all, the details also became blurred, and he does not properly recall anyone's face, too. Rather, how about we take Urz to Brune and search for his home?"

"...Even if you say "Brune", it is very large. I will think about it if Urz remembers at least something which can serve as reference. There will be a personnel selection of those to attend and there is also the expense (to take into consideration)."

Though Elizavetta took a liking to Urz, as expected, she could not become that soft-hearted a person to make preparations that far.

"But for the time being, I have decided."

Elizavetta said with a smile and told with a proud look and attitude to Naum who made a wondering face.

"Take Urz under you. I will add him as one of my close aides."

Naum became speechless. It was more than a great promotion. He wondered what was the use of the exchanges they had a few days ago?

"Vanadis-sama, you must not. Even I object to this."

"You said that any noble would spend a large sum to employ him, right? Won't I be a laughing stock if it is known that I let a user with that much bow skill work as stable boy?"

"It is as you say, but it does not change the fact that Urz is still a person with uncertain identity..."

"Don't make the identity's matter a reason to reconsider!"

Elizavetta openly glared at Naum with indignation. Although she, who was abandoned by her father who was a noble and have lived in a poor village when she was young, understood that it was natural to be wary of someone with unknown identity, she hated to be wary more than necessary.

In addition, Urz was the first person whom Elizavetta chose as her subordinate. It was by coincidence that the two met, it was not human. She also knew the feeling of wanting to be accepted.

Naum frowned. The wrinkles on his face increased in depth. But even so, he did not say "understood". The factor of "unknown identity" was that much of a danger^[17].

Waiting until the red-haired Vanadis calmed down, Naum opened his mouth.

"Can you give me at least one more reason?"

At Elizavetta who made a suspicious face, Naum continued as to add.

"I understand Vanadis-sama's feelings. With all due respect, I also think in the same way on a certain degree. However, if you rashly make an exception, you will definitely cause unnecessary confusion in the future."

As he explained up to there, Elizavetta seemed to have guessed Naum's thought.

"...You want me to prepare one more strong point for the fact that it can only be Urz, and assume it an exception as it is not applicable to anyone other than him. Is it what you mean?"

Naum deeply bowed as to show that that was exactly what he thought. To give Urz special treatment, impressive archery skill alone was not enough. Another push was necessary.

"As long as it is approvable, I will persuade those who oppose."

Opposition was especially expected from the civil officials. So that their negative feelings did not turn towards Elizavetta, she must carefully proceed.

As Elizavetta crossed her shapely leg, she removed her gaze from Naum, turned her eyes of different colors towards the ceiling and lost herself in thoughts for a while. Naum, while waiting the words of his master, was himself also thinking, but in the end he could not come up with something which could persuade the civil officials.

"—Brune."

Suddenly, the red-haired Vanadis muttered as if something came into her mind. Crossing the other leg, Elizavetta returned her gaze to Naum.

"I am seeing that the friendship between our country and Brune, even if short, will continue from three to five other years. Eleonora of LeitMeritz will probably intend it to continue for a longer time."

Her voice sounded with mixed feelings when she voiced out Ellen's name, but it was a change small enough that even Naum did not notice.

The number "three to five years" was something she estimated considering the time that it would take for Zchted in order to completely stabilize the land of Agnes, which was cut out from Brune, as theirs and the time necessary until Brune recovered their exhausted power

"This Lebus also wants to extend the association with Brune from now. Duke Thenardier who had interactions from the time of the previous Vanadis was defeated in the civil war, and Duke Ganelon is missing. Tigrevurmud Vorn also fell into the sea and died."

Regarding Tigre, Elizavetta kind of showed friendship by sending goods. It was at the time when he repelled the Muozinel troops.

In doing so, Elizavetta who stepped on the stage intended to deepen interchanges with Tigre, but he had become useless.

The current Elizavetta did not have a partner who had an effective connection in diplomacy with Brune. Therefore, it was necessary to hurry up and make a new connection, but it could be said that Urz who could speak the Zchted's and Brune's languages was just the ideal talented person.

But, Naum who heard it put on a difficult face.

"An outstanding bow skill. Reading and writing the words of the Brune language. — Slightly unreliable, but I will live on it for the time being."

And several days later, Naum visited Elizavetta. His expression was exhausted and moreover, it was not bright. The red-haired Vanadis was seized with uneasiness.

---Was it impossible after all?

These several days, Elizavetta had met face to face with the civil officials. This was because their cooperation was indispensable in order to handle the daily state affairs

But beside the state affairs, even though Elizavetta asked about this matter, the civil officials only unanimously said as followed.

"We are conferring with Naum-dono. Please, wait for the answer."

The civil officials probably wanted to prevent a situation which would be intervened midway by Elizavetta. Since she left it to Naum, even Elizavetta was not to interfere until the answer came out.

--- If it was impossible, I will have to think about the next move...

However, Naum said this.

"There is apparently posed only one condition."

Elizavetta brightened her pupils of different colors and urged him to continue by nodding.

"If he really is so skilled with the bow, they would like him to present one clear achievement he has with that bow. It is the condition that they gave. They said that as long as it is achieved, they will have no objection to let you make Urz a close aide. —Any other than this is unacceptable."

Spitting out a sigh filled with the feeling of fatigue at the end, Naum finished his report. Elizavetta swayed her red hair and tilted her head to the side.

"By achievements in this case, is it something like bandits subjugation?"

"I think that it is. But, if it is not on a certain scale, it will be impossible for them to acknowledge him."

"I think that Duke Bydgauche just accomplished large-scale barbarian subjugation the other day though."

Thanks to that, recently there was no petition that bandits came out in the field. There was just a report that winter would probably be spent safely this year the other day. Naum indignantly nodded.

"They probably knew and thus give such a condition."

Even pirates would not appear in winter. This was because there were hardly any merchant ships which would become spoils of war^[18].

Elizavetta spontaneously stood up and slammed her palm on the office desk before her. Valitsaif which was hung on her waist was tinged with a slightly white light as if responding to its master's anger. While nervously staring at it with a sidelong glance, Naum said as to cheer her up.

"Bandits will definitely appear in the early spring. It is the person's way of the world after all."

"So, must Urz keep working as stable boy until then?"

"If we think about his identity, it is necessary to let him work as stable boy for two or three years. And it would be shrunk to less than half a year."

Elizavetta indignantly reseated herself on her chair. She thought that it couldn't be helped. It was also not as if she did not know about the civil officials' opposition. The compromise was probably around there.

Suddenly, Elizavetta thought of a certain thing. She thought that coming from her, it was a very good idea and floated a smile, but Naum who saw it bedaubed a color of anxiety on his whole face, and timidly asked as if probing into the mood of a wild beast.

"...Is there something?"

"If I remember correctly, Urz had no personal belongings."

Naum nodded. It was soon the day when salary would be paid, but Urz did not have even one piece of copper coin until then. In the report of the stableman head, the person himself did seem to feel that much inconvenienced about it though.

"Give a bow and arrows to Urz. I won't hear complaints this time."

Though Naum inwardly thought that it somewhat became like a child's quarrel, of course even if it showed on his face, he did not put it into words, and respectfully bowed.

A silver bracelet, on which a hunter was carved, decorated a corner of the office desk of the Imperial Palace of LeitMeritz.

It was the souvenir that Tigre bought in the Asvarre Kingdom for Ellen. When this was given to her by Sophie, Ellen was honestly greatly perplexed about how she should treat it.

Though she also thought about putting it on every day, she reconsidered because she would look like a widow wearing a mourning badge. On the other hand, she also felt awkward to close it within a shelf of her private room.

After being troubled, she ended up putting it here. When she suddenly moved her gaze to the side the state affairs, she remembered Tigre's face.

By the way, Lim who received a porcelain doll(Sera Doll) bear as souvenir displayed it in her private room.

Dozens of days had passed since Tigre went missing. The trees in the courtyard let their leaves fall and winter was also arriving in LeitMeritz.

"There is nothing at all recently."

The afternoon of one day, Ellen said as she stopped her hands processing the documents. She leaned against the back of the chair and stretched herself with all her might. Lim who was helping with the state affairs at her side also went along with her lord. This was because the matter which must be dealt with within the day was almost over.

"It can't be helped since it's winter. The construction of the mountain road also stopped after all."

It was about the construction of the mountain road connecting LeitMeritz and Alsace. The ground was frozen and became hard during winter, and it was interrupted in order to stop the progress from other seasons. Even if one was to force, it would be ineffective, and moreover, because it involved wood materials, the increase of burden was intense.

"It seems that the 100,000 of Muozinel also ran back without even having one battle. Ludmira said that they ran away in fear of her military power, but perhaps ,the army of Muozinel were in fear with looks of disbelief on their faces that it was her(Ludmila) people.

"Avoid quarrel as much as possible. I remember you said so."

Lim reproved her in a light tone. Ellen shut her mouth with an awkward face. It was the day when she came back from Legnica. Lim talked about the fact that Ellen tended for Sasha's death and the last conversation she exchanged with her.

"I will be careful."

Saying so curtly, Ellen suddenly shifted her attention to Lim as if she remembered something.

"Speaking of which, Eugene-dono came here when I wasn't there, right?"

Lim seemed to remember now she mentioned it. She wonderingly tilted her head to the side. Afterwards, Eugene did not visit LeitMeritz.

"Since he went to the Capital, I thought that he would also drop here on his way back."

"Maybe he is still staying in the Capital."

"No way" Ellen laughed and shook her head.

"Eugene-dono does not seem to dislike the Capital, but he also seemed to be careful as much as possible not to stay too long. He had probably returned to Pardu in a great hurry. It is already winter after all."

Ellen suddenly shifted her attention to the window. The sky was white and the sun was feeble.

"Teita said that she was troubled that the laundry was hard to dry, so I already taught her how to dry them in the room. It is her first winter in Zchted after all."

"Its already been one year, eh."

Lim, similarly to Ellen, turned her blue eyes towards the outside of the window. It was the early spring which put an end to the traces of winter everywhere that Tigre, as a guest General, and Teita, as his maid, came to this Imperial Palace.

Silence fell in the room. As they thought about the depth of what they lost, the leisure to enjoy the change of season disappeared. Neither of them returned to the state affairs.

---Winter just ends.

While putting the documents in order, Ellen thought such a thing in a corner of her mind.

Just this year, she lost her best friend and an important man. At the very least, she wanted to spend her daily life peacefully until spring.

But, such a wish Ellen quickly dispelled.

Early morning of the next day, a messenger from the Capital showed up. As he seemed to have ridden the horse desperately to come here, though the piercing wind of winter was blowing, he was sweaty all over his face.

"Since recently, every last one of the messengers from the Capital don't say anything good, I don't want to meet him."

Ellen, who was told by Lim about the messenger's visit, said so without even hiding her tiresome expression. Of course, she knew that such a thing was not suitable.

"If it's urgent, I don't mind seeing him even dressed like this. Please tell Teita to prepare sake and hot water."

As she said so, Ellen headed to the drawing room with her blue military clothes as is.

The messenger from the Capital hurriedly asked Ellen after greetings.

"Vanadis-dono. Do you know Earl Pardu Eugene Shevarin-dono?"

Ellen nodded. The messenger asked once more.

"Then, what about Duke Bydgauche Ilda Kurtis-dono?"

"The name at least."

Ellen answered so while wondering about the question of the other party. He was a famous man on the northern part of Zchted. Excellent in military arts, he was also good at commanding the soldiers. The messenger said while fixing his breathing.

"It is said that that Duke Bydgauche has moved his soldiers. In order to kill Earl Pardu."

Ellen opened her eyes wide. She unintentionally leaned forward. Honestly, she couldn't care less about Duke Bydgauche, but if danger was approaching Eugene who had taught her etiquette, then it was another story.

"What do you mean?"

"I will explain only what I know..."

Though both Eugene and Ilda had stayed in the Capital until about ten days ago, it was said that Eugene gave a present to Ilda at a certain time.

"The present was apparently a strong drink. Duke Bydgauche is someone who likes strong drinks. It was said that he gladly drank it with his attendant."

On that occasion, his attendant offered to taste for poison just to be sure, and Ilda, while smiling wryly, let that attendant drink first.

However, the attendant could only drink about half of a cup. He dropped the silver cup with the remaining contents, fell down to the floor and died as he went into convulsions. There was poison.

"Impossible..."

Ellen muttered so unconsciously. The Eugene Shevarin, who she knew, was not the kind of man who would think of poisoning someone even if he awfully hated him no matter what the reason.

To Ellen who became speechless, the messenger continued.

"Naturally, Duke Bydgauche flew into rage. According to those who saw the Duke, it was in a terrifying state to the extent that one was horrified to make eye contacts with him. The Duke left the Capital on that day and returned to Bydgauche. And then, he appealed for revenge and began to gather soldiers..."

"Isn't it some kind of mistake? If it is Earl Pardu, I know him well."

"Vanadis-dono." Interrupting Ellen's words, the messenger said.

"It is no longer at the level of asking whether it is a mistake. 'I want you to protect Earl Pardu'. His Majesty the King said. And he added 'please'."

Ellen narrowed her eyes and looked back at the messenger.

"Does it mean that he don't care even if I have to cut down Duke Bydgauche?"

Saying so, Ellen stood up. She looked down at the messenger and continued.

"Messenger. Depending on your answer, I will pretend that I didn't hear the talk just now and I intend to wield my sword only to protect a benefactor."

While floating sweat on his face, the messenger greatly panted.

Ellen's eyes of ruby fixedly stared at the messenger.

"Your answer?"

"He said that if possible, it would be preferable to capture him alive."

"Definitely as the words literally say?"

She asked to confirm. The messenger nodded as if he succumbed to the drive. On the other hand, Ellen floated a smile filled with fighting spirit.

It was a feeling she had not tasted for a long time. While walking towards the door, Ellen called the messenger with an unusually cheerful voice.

"Time is precious! I will hear the remaining details while walking!"

Then, after 2 koku, Ellen finished the formation of 1,000 soldiers.

In the limited time of two koku, this number was the limit due to the lack of equipment, food and fuel. As for the breakdown, there were 200 cavalrymen. Which meant that there were 800 infantrymen. The adjutant was not Lim, but the knight with a bald head Rurick.

She had Lim remain in the Imperial Palace, and she entrusted two tasks to her. One was the organization of the reinforcements. This was because depending on the forces led by Lord Bydgauche, Ellen would devote herself to buying time.

The other was to dispatch someone to Pardu, and hear about the details from Eugene.

If possible, Ellen wanted to first go herself to Pardu, but as far as she heard the story of the messenger, it seemed that Ilda was going south at a considerable speed.

I did not want to make the ground of Pardu into the battlefield. In that case, she could do nothing but hold back Ilda in the north, so there was no composure to stop by in Pardu.

"First of all, to the east. Send reconnaissance over again, also ask the towns and cities in the vicinity and locate Duke Bydgauche's army. I don't know how much military power he has, but if they see us, they will probably stop their march for the time being."

When the sun of that day set halfway in the western sky, Eleonora Viltaria and the one thousand soldiers whom she led left the Imperial Palace. The air was already cold and the humans firmly matched the neck (collar) of a thick overcoat put on their armor.

◎

King Victor did not ask only Ellen for the duty to stop this clash.

Around the same time, a messenger from the Capital had also visited the Imperial Palace of Lebus.

"...Duke Bydgauche (did that)?"

Elizavetta, who heard the circumstances, blurred suspicion and doubt in her pupils of different colors.

As far as she heard the story, it was no wonder that Ilda got angry. After all, Earl Pardu completely intended to kill Ilda. And, one of his attendants died. Instead of Ilda.

"So, do you tell me to stop His Excellency the Duke? Not to cooperate with His Excellency and kill the unscrupulous unjust Earl Pardu."

Facing the messenger of the Capital in the drawing room, Elizavetta floated a provocative smile. The messenger who had a round face and body like a snowman made by a child, while wiping cold sweat, but still kept his calm and answered.

"His Majesty Victor does not wish for the country's powerful nobles to lead the soldiers, shed blood, and devastate the country. Should you not first talk in His Majesty's presence once?"

"He tried to kill. He was about to be killed. Is there anything to say other than that? Honestly speaking, I have no confidence to stop him. Have you heard about Duke Bydgauche's fame?"

"Precisely for this reason, the task has been given not to anybody, but Vanadis-dono. Another messenger has also been sent to ask Vanadis-dono of LeitMeritz, but I have not yet received a good answer..."

---Eleonora?

It was not certain whether or not the messenger intended it, but these lines strongly stimulated one point in Elizavetta's heart. Even so, she did not immediately agree; after making him promise to let the Kingdom bear the reward, food and fuel by letter, Elizavetta finally accepted.

"I also have my hands tied here, but I am in His Excellency the Duke's debt. I cannot become a robber who betrayed a royal order."

As she saw off the messenger who hurriedly left the Imperial Palace, Elizavetta called her aides. She talked about what was told a moment ago.

"We go to the front. How many soldiers can we prepare by two koku?"

"I would say about 1000 soldiers" one of the aides answered.

Elizavetta nodded and ordered the organization. Because they had served from the time of the previous Vanadis, they will do it well even if they were just given instructions. And then she hailed Naum and told him to call Urz.

"Do you intend to take Urz along?"

To Naum who opened his eyes wide, Elizavetta nodded as if it was a matter of course.

"You remember the calm attitude of Urz at the time when we chased the pirates, right? He should not be confused."

"I am not that much worried about that, but..."

Elizavetta looked puzzled at Naum who frowned.

"If you have something to say, say it clearly. I highly evaluate that part of you, too."

As the Vanadis of Rainbow Eyes(Laziris) urged him, Naum opened his mouth while hesitating.

"About the matter of this time, it is not sure that we will definitely fight, if it's something which will be solved if we can persuade Duke Bydgauche. I understand Vanadis-sama's feelings, but is it not a little hasty? Being seen that you are favoring, would be bad for Both Urz and Vanadis-sama..."

"Precisely for this reason, it is necessary to show results as soon as possible."

In the tone which believed her rightness, Elizavetta answered.

"Depending on the situation, we may also have to fight against Earl Pardu's army, leaving the north aside, they may also be bandits from the center to the south. After seeing Urz's bow skill, nobody should think that I favor him (I am partial)."

"...If you say up to there."

Naum respectfully bowed.

And, after two koku, Elizavetta left the Imperial Palace with 1000 soldiers. Near her carrying a bow on the shoulder and hanging a quiver of arrows on the waist was Urz's figure.

The youth was staring at Elizavetta's back with a somewhat troubled face.

Although it was naturally grateful towards her who took him in while she did not even know his identity, Urz was harboring the feeling that he was picked up by an extraordinary person^[19]

--Her first subordinate, huh...

He remembered the words of the knight called Naum who taught him various things. He said that, of course, Elizavetta set her eyes on Urz because she highly evaluated his bow skills, but it was only that; it was also because he was the first subordinate that she chose by herself.

Suddenly, the figure of an old man with a small stature vaguely floated in Urz's mind. He felt like he was said by that old man "don't you remember of having done something similar?" Strangely, Urz was able to easily accept that indication. The ill feeling^[20] towards Elizavetta also faded.

Though a troubled person, he was in her debt. It did not mean that he dislike her.

Urz decided to follow her and do his best for now.

The LeitMeritz forces led by Ellen were carefully advancing to the north while repeating reconnaissance as planned. Three days had passed since they left the Imperial Palace. They went along the highway, and partly because they could buy food and fuel in cities and towns, there was no problem with the march at present.

The sky was white, the sun was hidden by the clouds and the wind was cold. After leaving the Imperial Palace, such weather had continued all long.

"It may finally snow around today."

Rurick who was by Ellen's side said so. Ellen responded without even smiling.

"It would be troublesome if it get colder. I want to clear it up before it snows."

That Ellen was making a sullen face was not only because she hated snow as a commander, there was also another reason.

Last night, the soldier who heard the story from Eugene galloped his horse and came up to Ellen. Although they advanced without deviating from the highway and she precisely showed their location, Ellen did not think that he would come this early, and she gladly met the soldier.

But, what she heard from that soldier was not something pleasant.

"According to what Earl Pardu says, he has certainly bought a strong drink in order to deepen his friendship with Duke Bydgauche and sent an attendant to give it to the Duke's mansion, but even he does not know why this happened."

"...Is it the truth so far?"

"I keep the letter addressed to Vanadis-sama by His Excellency."

The soldier handed the leather package which he was holding in his hand to Rurick who was at Ellen's side. Rurick who received it removed the leather package and handed over the letter inside to Ellen.

The silver-haired Vanadis broke the seal and quickly took a look at the contents, but the sentences of the content that was almost the same as what the soldier reported was written with Eugene's handwriting.

While being a letter addressed to Ellen, she felt Eugene's nature^[21] around beginning from one sentence mourning over the death of Ilda's attendant, but from Ilda's perspective, it was very obviously that he flew into rage.

"I know that Eugene-dono isn't the kind of man to do something like that. Leave it to us the territory of Pardu and the people living there."

Ellen also wrote such a letter, handed it to the soldier and made him go to Pardu, but the situation was clearly against Eugene. She was irritated because of that.

In addition, there was one more thing; there was an element which put Ellen in a bad mood.

"—What is hidden behind this?"

It was about one thing that Ellen wanted to know in the letter from Eugene; it was not written why he suddenly intended to have friendly relations with Ilda.

Eugene and Ilda were brothers-in-law. Thinking about it, it was not strange to try to have interactions. But, why did it come now?

"Besides, according to what Lim said, Eugene-dono was summoned by King Victor and should have gone to the Capital."

Ellen thought about it all night, but like that without her finding any clues in the end, the day dawned and they resumed their march as they were searching for Duke Bydgauche's troops. But, somehow her mind was distracted and she was not able to concentrate.

It was about the time when the sun, hidden by white clouds slightly covering the sky, was about to reach the zenith that one of the cavalry squads, which were sent for reconnaissance, returned with an unexpected report.

"We have discovered a group which is fluttering the banner of Lebus."

Ellen was stunned. She knew that Elizavetta was going south from Lebus with also 1000 soldiers. So, it was not strange in itself that they met them.

--Then, where is Duke Bydgauche's army?

As Ellen stopped the march and ordered the soldiers to rest, she asked Rurick to prepare a map.

Seemingly, Duke Bydgauche's army was not going south straight somehow.

"I wonder if they made a detour."

Ellen asked for Rurick's opinion. But, Rurick did not agree.

"Maybe, they are unexpectedly lying hidden near here."

"Why do you think so?"

"As far as I hear the story, it seemed that the man called Duke Bydgauche is not that much familiar with the geography, south of the Capital. Make a detour would take much more time, right? Would they not somehow try to let us and the Lebus army go past?"

"I see."

Ellen nodded as she was impressed. Though he was not a man who would think like this about the enemy movement before, he seemed to have unwittingly grown.

"What do we do?"

As Ellen snorted at Rurick's question, she flipped at a point of the map with her fingertip.

"I'm reluctant, but we will join with the party of Lebus. They might have grasped the enemy movement."

Afterwards, as Ellen and Elizavetta mutually advanced their soldiers, they agreed to join before the day went down. The place was a small meadow called Radom, and there was an intermediate distance from each other's position.

When she decided to head to Radom, Ellen released the cavalrymen as a scouting party. Just to be sure, she made one party head to Pardu. Moreover, she resumed the march leading only the infantry.

When they entered in less than one koku, the silhouette of the Lebus army and its banner could already be seen. Under the white sky, a golden band, which described an arc reminiscent of her Valitsaif, was shining in the purple flag. At the vanguard, there was the figure of Elizavetta straddling on horse.

Ellen stopped her troops, and she approached Elizavetta accompanied only by Rurick. Elizavetta likewise headed towards her along with a youth who seemed to be an attendant.

Cold wind blew and something flickered within the field of vision. It was the snow. It was snow which seemed to melt in the atmosphere before touching the ground, but it certainly fell from the sky.

When each side approached until a distance of about dozens of step, Ellen noticed.

"...Tigre?"

Seeing the youth on horseback following near Elizavetta, Ellen opened her eyes wide.

Though he was wearing a padded undershirt in fur of the Lebus style, the darkish red hair, black eyes, features which mixed calm and gallantry, the medium stature and the figure which carried a bow on his shoulder and hung a quiver on the waist was unmistakably that of Tigrevurmud Vorn who she knew.

Rurick who heard Ellen's murmur and doubted it also turned his gaze there, and glared in surprise. Words did not seem to come out right away.

"Tigre!"

While being moved to tears and shouting the youth's name, Ellen rushed her horse. However, she immediately harbored suspicion. Even though their eyes met, Tigre only stared back at himself with a wondering face. Then, Ellen finally arrived at a basic question.

Why was Tigre riding a horse next to Elizavetta? Like a servant.

"What's the matter? Suddenly shouting."

In the place where they approached until a distance of about ten steps, Elizavetta said with an amazed face. But, Ellen paid no heed to it.

"Elizavetta. I would like to hear the man's name."

Without even greeting her, she frankly demanded. Elizavetta frowned.

"He is Urz. My subordinate."

The youth called Urz bowed to Ellen with an expression like that one which met someone for the first time.

Ellen held her breath. Her shoulders shook; she was about to burst into tears at any time, but endured it desperately. As she made her voice calm as much as possible, she said.

"Where did you hire him?"

"...Why are you curious about such a thing?"

Elizavetta's expression and tone was tinged with wariness. Ellen who glared at her answered.

"From interest. I don't mind even if you don't tell me."

"...I don't see the need to answer."

There was a pause until the refusal. It was obvious that she was apparently hiding something.

"More importantly, let's begin the war council quickly."

Elizavetta said so, but Ellen ignored it and turned her gaze to the youth.

"Tigre! Tigrevurmud Vorn!"

Urz was staring at Ellen with a blank face. Ellen still kept appealing to him.

"What's wrong? We do not meet each other for about 100 days, and you have already forgotten about me? Did you forget Eleonora Viltaria? I, who allowed you to call me Ellen!"

"...Ellen."

A change occurred on Urz's expression. The youth removed his gaze from Ellen as if pondering on something.

"Ellen. Ellen...? No... Where have I..."

"Stop it!"

Elizavetta shouted, and advanced her horse so as to break in between Urz and Ellen and the others.

"Urz has lost his memory! Do not confuse him!"

"Hou, lost his memory, you say?"

A sneer floated in Ellen's lips.

"Then, shouldn't you help him regain his memory?"

"It's up to me to decide. I want you to stop throwing strange words and confusing Urz."

"What do you mean by strange words? I have only said my name and Tigre's name."

At Ellen's words, Elizavetta flinched. Her hand stretched to the black whip to her waist.

Ellen likewise put her hand on the long sword to her waist. The wind arose from the long sword and gently brushed her silver hair.

The Wind Princess of the Silver Flash(Silvfrau) lightly chuckled.

"Even Arifal said it. That person isn't Urz. It's Tigre."

"...Stop your false accusations. Tigrevurmud Vorn fell into the sea and should have died. I have heard that even though Sophia Obertas desperately searched, even his body was not found."

Elizavetta glared at Ellen with her eyes of different colors, and pattered. However, Ellen, not even showing a slight sign of hesitation, eluded it with a composed attitude.

"I was told so, too. I believed that. I will ask once again, Elizavetta. That man you are calling Urz, where did you find him?"

"It doesn't matter where I found him!"

Elizavetta flew into a rage. She cried like a child and vigorously shook her head.

"Urz is my subordinate. I don't know anyone called Tigrevurmud Vorn!"

"I don't know anyone called Urz either. No, speaking of which, I just remembered. Urz was the name of Tigre's father."

Elizavetta's face turned pale. At this time, the red-haired Vanadis understood the situation almost exactly. What Ellen was saying was probably correct.

Urz was definitely Tigrevurmud Vorn. There was no way that two people with such bow skills to that extent would exist.

"Lord Tigrevurmud!"

Rurick who finally came to his senses advanced his horse and raised a sad cry.

"If you are really Tigrevurmud Vorn, then we would like you to respond to the voice of our lord! There's no helping it even if you have forgotten about me. However, there are a lot of people around you whom there is no way you would ever forget!"

To Rurick's angry look, Urz just merely opened his eyes wide in wonder. Rurick spoke further vehemently.

"Teita-dono was always at your side! Don't tell me you also forgot the name of Batran-dono who died! Earl Rodant!? Viscount Augres and his hateful son!? It was us who saved Princess Regin from Muozinel, right?"



Not giving even one name of a person from Zchted, Rurick gave only the names of the people from Brune.

"Enough, already!"

With her pupils of different colors, Elizavetta stared at Rurick. The bald knight was being overawed by her terrifying gaze, but he put power into his stomach and looked straight again. As he painfully exhaled, he opened his mouth in order to call him (Tigre) again.

But, Ellen stretched out her hand before him and stopped him.

"Step back. You've done enough."

"It would be meaningless even if you say any more than this", Ellen judged. There were also Eugene and Ilda. It was necessary to end it quickly.

She unsheathed the long sword and thrust the point at Elizavetta. Feeling her preternatural fighting spirit with her skin, Elizavetta likewise put on a serious look, and tightly grasped her black whip.

"I will have you return Tigre, Elizavetta."

"Don't make me say it so many times. It's not Tigre. It's my Urz."

The wind swirled and white sparks scattered. The silver-haired Vanadis, in order to take back her important thing, and the red-haired Vanadis, in order to protect her important thing to the end were going to cross weapons.

Under a white sky tinged with loneliness, snow and wind began to increase strength.

References

1. ↑ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jasper>
2. ↑ this ship is the pirate ship where Elizavetta jumped
3. ↑ here means the left side of the ship
4. ↑ the two blue here are for the sea and the sky
5. ↑ I think here she says that because the two most important persons for me were in danger in the sea
6. ↑ wearying the soldiers of the flagship, including Sasha, I think
7. ↑ en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rigging
8. ↑ the outermost tips of the yard: outboard from the attachments for the lifts
9. ↑ here, it's meant the fact that she was attacking him with no fear of death
10. ↑ here is about the ship which arrived first and in a hurry at the port because of Sasha's condition
11. ↑ spoilers of war
12. ↑ hope for a woman to become King, that is
13. ↑ single here as in celibate, unmarried
14. ↑ sorry if it's a little difficult to understand, but I just translated how he should be
15. ↑ the fact that his bed was turned upside down, well in short, bullied
16. ↑ here to mean that if someone come out of nowhere with such bow skill, it would not be strange that some bow users would think of giving up on archery
17. ↑ for him, at least
18. ↑ I understand this as such: in winter, merchant ships hardly traveled, thus pirates also hardly had prey to attack
19. ↑ extraordinary here in the sense that she was unpredictable
20. ↑ feeling of antagonism
21. ↑ which means, it was the proof that the letter is from Eugene (that it wasn't a faked letter)

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