

川口士

Illustration

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王魔鬼と猫の姫
ヴァナディース 6





王魔
と
弾
獣の
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ヴァナディース

6



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Chapter 1: Emissary

Part 1

A buck was walking casually atop a mountain ridge, with arid wind whistling around it.

The creature stood head and shoulders above its brethren, and with its right horn grew in a bizarre shape. the beast looked repulsive, monstrous.

To the villagers living at the foothills it was a monster to be feared. The creature trampled their fields as it pleased in broad daylight, eating its fill of the crops before disappearing into the mountains.

They could not stop it. Those who dared to give chase, hoes at the ready, were gored by its horns, suffering grievous wounds. Teams of seasoned hunters were sent to hunt it down. But this buck had a prodigious sense of smell, and leg strength beyond the norm. It saw through every trap, and when the hunters drew close, it would leap across cliffs, jump atop the rocky crags, or simply slide down steep slopes to elude them. As a result, even after three days and nights they had not been able to take it down.

And yet one young man was now bringing his bow to bear on this creature.

He could not have seen more than twenty winters, and was of average build. But if one espied the arm that peeked out from his sleeves one could see that he did not lack for training. There was vigor under his dark red locks, and his gaze was keen as he bent his gaze to that buck.

From his hiding place in the crags below to the stag's ridge there was a distance of about 300 alsin. No distance for a mere bow. If one asked any seasoned hunter he would shake his head and advise that one closed sixty, even seventy paces. What more then for this boy, who was aiming against the grain of gravity, shooting from a low position to a higher one. A light breeze blew downhill from ridge to crag. By this his approach and attack was be masked against his prey. Yet if he missed, this good fortune would have been in vain.

All this, the young man knew well. But he did not waver. He kept his cool, notching a single arrow with an ease born of unceasing practice, following through till he had drawn the bow taut.

The wind ceased for but an instant. The young man, as though foreseeing this pass, let loose that arrow. It traced an arc through the sky, and struck the stag in the neck.

It was an unerring blow, almost as if it was sucked in by some unknown force. And yet the beast did not cry out. Rather, it turned and fled in the direction opposite to the young man.

At this, he at last showed consternation. "Looks like that huge frame wasn't just for show..."

Leaving his hiding spot, he nocked another arrow as he made his way up the slope. It was not meant for the buck - in his mind the hunt had been nigh unto ended by his first strike. This arrow was meant for any surprises that might crop up along the way.

Patata The sound of flapping wings entered his ears, as a creature the size of a large cat passed by his side.

But it was no cat. It was a dragon - its reptilian form scaled bronze with a greenish hue from head to tail, with horns, coarse sharp teeth, and wings that reminded one of a bat. Flitting about freely, as though disregarding the young man that was its companion.

And if they were on ground level he might have traveled on equal pace with it. But as it was he stood in the rough of the rocks, only able to smile bitterly at the departing form of the dragon.

Regulating his breathing carefully, he scaled the ridge-

-and was dumbfounded by what he saw.

Where he had hidden, there was naught but a barren rocky wasteland, and yet beyond the ridge there sprawled a large forest, all trees and bark and dense greenery.

"Well. It's not that I can't find it...but this is going to be a chore."

He was loath to go down. But he could not simply leave the mountain. The villagers would remain uneasy if he merely told them 'the beast has been taken care of'. He needed proof of his hunt.

"And I still need to find Lunie..."

Lunie, of course, was the dragon who had just ditched him. Thankfully, he knew that he needn't worry. It was small, but it was a dragon nonetheless. No creature in the wood would dare attack it. And though it was now nowhere to be seen, it was most likely that it had gone after the wounded buck.

Making his way down the slope, the young man took great care as he stepped into the thicket. There could be snakes about, and he didn't want to risk snagging his clothes on the branches. Once past the thicket, the cold air wrapped around him as he stepped into the verdant woods. The sunlight was greatly dimmed by the undergrowth, and some trees even snaked along slope's surface.

Indeed, there were few things worse than traversing a forest infested by overgrown weeds and roots.

As he approached cautiously, another *patata* of flapping wings could be heard. He stopped, and sure enough out from deep within the forest's gloom came Lunie. Recognizing him, the dragon whelp did an artful about-turn in mid-air and went back the way it came.

The young man gave chase, and not ten paces hence he found himself standing before the fallen buck. It had long breathed its last, having bled enough from the wound on its neck staining its fur-coat a deep crimson. Even so he did not relax - many were the tales of beasts seemingly dead using their last ounce of strength to rise up and bring their killers down with them in a rage. And judging from the distance between the ridge and the forest there was still a possibility that more wild beasts could come, having caught the scent of blood.

But Lunie seemed unwilling to humor his cautiousness, plonking itself unceremoniously onto the carcass and spitting him with a look of impatience. 'Hurry up', it seemed to say.

The young man grimaced, but made no hurried move nonetheless. Slowly he crept up to the buck, making sure that there were no other creatures about. Only when he had been absolutely certain did he return the arrow to its quiver, before taking a knee in front of the creature.

"Well done, Lunie," he said, and at last flashed a genuine smile.

The young man's name was Tigrevurmund Vorn.

Those close to him called him Tigre.

This year, he would be 17. Half a year had gone by since the day he left the land of his birth in Alsace to live in Leitmeritz, in the neighbouring country of Zhcted.

Tigre had initially thought to bring the buck down the mountain with him, but he'd happily quickly given up upon realizing that the creature was heavy. Extraordinarily so at that.

So he hung the creature by its legs to a tree using a rope he'd prepared beforehand, and prepared to dissect it.

Uncharacteristically, Lunie was curled up at his feet, but Tigre was not fooled. It was there only so it could get at the entrails that fell from the carcass at its convenience. It seemed rather eager to do so too, at that.

"Well, I guess I can only take the pelt back with me." He definitely needed to bring the oddly-shaped horn back as proof of his success, and that was no small amount of baggage to carry by itself. So, unfortunate though that was, he knew apart from that which he would eat he had to leave the rest of it behind. Bones—those would work for proof too, but no, too heavy—meat, it seems like I have to discard them all...

Suddenly he became aware of something rubbing against his trousers. As he looked down, he was chagrined to see Lunie stuffing a face full of blood and entrails into the bottom of his pants—its unique way of saying 'More, please'. Well, nothing to be done about that. With a sigh, Tigre hefted his dagger, slicing off a few more pieces of meat for the hungry whelp.

By the time he actually finished the whole process, the sun had already reached its zenith. The removal of the horn had taken a large amount of time due to their size. He tied the pelt, still ringed with residual flesh and fats, with a rope of hemp, and put it into a backpack. Afterward he washed his hands using the water in his canteen and got to starting a campfire. That done, he dug a trench, into which he dumped and buried the arbitrarily sized remains of the carcass.

While he was doing all this, Lunie, having eaten its fill, was lying asleep beside the campfire.

Half a year ago, when the breath of spring had only just begun its reign, Tigre had come to Leitmeritz. There a chill wind still blew upon the plains, as a sign of Zhcted's late-come springtime when compared to his homeland Brune.

He had waited for the mountains of Leitmeritz to thaw before trekking across them, hoping to see with his own eyes the land he now lived in, to feel with his hands and feet its depths and heights—or so he claimed; in actuality all he simply wanted was to experience to the fullest the thrills of hunting in unknown terrain.

Interestingly, for all they had interacted during his time as a captive in the court, or even later as a guest commander, he had never once enjoyed Lunie's favor. Rather, that honor was given by the dragon to his servant-girl, Teita. Yet it insisted on being by his side when he went hunting. It would even sit on the horse that Tigre rode on when he went hunting, insisting that it be brought along regardless.

And how did the silver-haired Vanadis who was the whelp's master reply when asked for her opinion on this strange turn of affairs?

"This fellow is probably bored to tears from being cooped up in a world of stone walls, so if you would be willing to bring him along..."

She even tacked a joke onto the request. "Don't go returning to the wild now..."

Though he was unwilling, it was impossible to refuse her. Not when she looked upon the dragon she petted with an expression of both affection, and regret at her inability to satisfy its desire to fly freely in the skies. She wasn't all that different from the dragon, Tigre realized. She too was a person who could not live and do as she pleased.

In any case, he had the excuse of studying the geography of Leitmeritz. Of course he wasn't just there to hunt. So he had ended up bringing Lunie along anyway. And it had exceeded all his expectations—well, at least his expectations for a companion in battle anyway, like during this buck hunt. The rest of the time it did not display any such attitude. In fact, Tigre fully expected that it would start treating him akin to a roadside pebble once they got off this mountain.

A regrettable situation. But despite his disappointment Tigre made no move to improve their working relationship. After all, this wasn't a human he was dealing with. Lunie may still be but a stripling, but it was still a dragon.

I can't even understand for the life of him why it follows me at all. Maybe for now I should keep my distance, thought Tigre as he watched the dragon snoozing by the fireside.

And as he continued to keep watch, well fed on a meal of venison, his thoughts turned to the events that led up to the present day.

He was born as the heir to Earl Vorn of Alsace in the northwest of Brune. He had inherited the title at the tender age of 14 when his father succumbed to illness, and with it the stigma of being of the lowest rank of nobles in the land.

But his life would a turn, on a battlefield at summer's end .

At Dinant the nations of Zhcted and Brune had clashed over the right to control the stream along the borders, and Brune had been defeated. Tigre had led a hundred men in that battle, and there he had encountered the commander-in-chief of Zhcted's forces—silver haired Eleanora Viltaria, whom they called Meltis and Silvfrahl, one of the Seven Vanadis.

His attempt to assassinate her did not avail him, but Ellen was taken by his skill with the bow and took him as a captive.

In the aftermath of the battle, the rivalry between Dukes Ganelon and Thenardier—the two foremost nobles of Brune—came to a head, and Alsace was swept up in by the wave of turmoil into the fires of war. Upon hearing this news from his father's loyal servant Batran, Tigre borrowed soldiers from Ellen to save the place of his birth, eventually avenging himself upon Thenardier after a great many battles to the death.

And yet even after all this, there was no happy conclusion. He had only achieved a brief time of peace, and he would have remained Ellen's captive if not for the new ruler of Brune, the king's daughter Regin, having helped to intercede on his behalf. Under the terms negotiated, he was to be returned to his homeland after spending three years as a guest commandant in Zhcted. That was the best that could be done for now. And so with the promise that he would return to them in three year's time, Tigre bid farewell to the people of Brune and crossed the border into Zhcted, with his only companion being his maid Teita.

Part 2

Half a year had passed since that day. The tardy spring had gone swiftly by, and now even the summer would soon pass. Indeed the brief nature of Zhcted's summer as compared to Brune's was enough to leave an impression in and of itself.

His life in Leitmeritz so far had not been easy—one half of that he'd expected, and the other of it he'd experienced. He had to learn how to speak, write, and to immerse himself in the local culture.

There was also no shortage of important personages from Zhcted who wished to meet with him, and though most of these chose to send emissaries rather than come in person, Tigre knew that establishing good relations with them was a necessity. In any case failure was not an option; any failing on his part would smear the name of Ellen, who had given him a place to stay, and he couldn't rightly allow that to happen.

Adding to his litany of woes were the almost daily assignments left to him by Ellen's second-in-command Limlishia. The topics were of a grand scale, ranging from governance to military affairs—indeed, under governance the subject could be anything between internal governance and multilateral relations.

She would also enlist his aid in her work often. This was cause for some complaint on his part. But he went along with it anyway. For one thing, the knowledge he gained while accompanying her would be useful in developing Alsace upon his return.

And for another, she wasn't all work and no play. Under the guise of 'inspections' or 'reviews', she would sometimes allow him some free time to roam.

At last, dawn broke.

Smothering the fire with mud, Tigre shouldered his backpack and set out. Antlers in his right hand, bow in his left, and Lunie tagging alongside him, trademark *Patata* resounding as it flew. They reached the village in the foothills by the afternoon. There they presented the antler and pelt to much rejoicing and many eased minds among the villagers. However, among those who had been counted with the hunters there were many wide eyes.

"So he really managed to bring it down, eh..." The village chief, who had been responsible for leading the hunters, had only this to say.

He had gone into the mountains three mornings ago. Alone, having turned down the offer that the villagers had made to have their hunters serve as his guides.

"For a hunt like this, I alone will be enough." He'd said that even as he gazed up at the foothills from the village. "And with more people we run a greater risk of the buck getting wind of us, whether it be by sight or sound."

It wasn't arrogance, of course. And besides, he had subsequently grilled both the chief and the hunters for detailed information concerning the mountain.

Seeing this, the village chief had mixed feelings. On one hand he thought: "As expected of a knight of the court." And yet on the other he felt that the boy was only 17. Could he really be relied upon?

But Tigre had surpassed all their expectations, setting out alone and returning triumphant, having shot the beast down brilliantly.

He had succeeded where a group of six—including the chief himself—had failed to do throughout their five day long hunt. And he did not waste his breath on swaggering or on boasts of his ability.

Rather, Tigre just asked for a bed he could borrow for the night, which the chief obliged. He turned in rather early too.

When Tigre rose the next morning, the sky was still dark. It was a tad early for 'morning'—even those whose farms were their livelihood had barely gotten out their beds.

"I'm sorry to wake you at this hour," he said as he called the village chief forth from dreamland before informing him of his decision to leave.

The chief seemed shocked, and even a little disappointed. "If it is convenient for you, sir knight, please do tarry another day in our good village. We will prepare a feast for you as much as we may with our meager means."

He asked once again. However, soon after expressing both gratitude and pushing a gentle refusal, Tigre quietly left on the village and went on his way. The horse galloped along the path under a brightening sky, though it wasn't very fast—it couldn't, what with both Tigre and Lunie sitting on it and all.

"What a waste..." Tigre mumbled to himself as he gazed heavenward.
"...It's not like I had anything urgent to do anyway."

He was, of course, bemoaning the missed opportunity in the village chief's offer. If this was Alsace, he might just have taken the proffered boon, but here he had Ellen to consider. She might have been alright with it, but she did not speak for all her subordinates. Particularly for those who already held a certain dislike for Tigre himself.

He couldn't care less if they criticized him, but he would not allow them to do the same to Ellen.

Part 3

The sun was already falling into the west when they arrived at the capitol. They rode in via a side road constructed for the exclusive use of those in official service—with Lunie around the two of them would have made a sight for sore eyes in the crowded main streets of the city.

"Master Tigre!" Just as they passed the gates, a familiar voice reached their ears, calling the youth's name. It was Teita, chestnut hair tied behind her head, running towards them. She dressed after her usual fashion, long-sleeved one-piece dress falling into black folds below her legs and a clean white apron over it. Notably she had discarded her old twin-tailed hairstyle for a single ponytail, which Tigre believed looked well on her too.

Of their immediate reactions Lunie's was the greater. It took to the air with a *Patata* and flew into her arms. Tigre merely exchanged smiles with her.

"I'm home, Teita."

Upon catching Lunie, she held it close and it snuggled in her embrace. While doing so, she walked over to the youth.

"Welcome home, Master Tigre."

"Are you alright? You don't have to carry it like that if it's too heavy, you know?"

"Thank you. But Lunie's not as heavy as it appears. I might get my clothes dirty though." So she said, but if she was distressed it did not show. Instead, like a mother beguiling a child she petted the little dragon whelp.

This sixteen-year old girl, who like him was born in Alsace, had served him in the capacity of a maid servant since she was till today, and even when he was set to live in Leitmeritz, she had insisted on following him.

This had been his wish as well, and Ellen had acquiesced. Nonetheless, he had worried at first that she, whom he treated like a sister, might not be able to adapt to the new environment. She had rendered his concerns moot, however, breaking the ice easily with the ladies of the court and their maids. Indeed, naught but a few days had passed before they all loved her.

Upon hearing this, Ellen had grimaced before saying thus.

"You're quite something yourself, but it seems Teita hasn't fallen behind. Quite the unexpected catch, isn't she?" These words relieved Tigre greatly.

"Oh, yes. Master Tigre, the Lady Eleanora and Miss Limlishia have important matters to discuss with you."

"Important matters? With me?"

"Indeed. Lady Ellen instructed me to inform you of this upon your return."

Upon hearing Teita recall her previous conversation with the Vanadis and her second, Tigre set his head askew in thought as he dismounted. It was all very odd. He had just returned, and had yet to greet anyone yet. Moreover, he was required to report to Ellen anyway.

Therefore it must have been something of extraordinary importance, for her to have left him such specific instructions.

"Are they going to remind you not to take so many detours?" Teita asked.

Naturally, she did not say this in earnest. Those mischievous words were only meant to lighten his mood, Tigre guessed as he patted the younger girl on the head.

"Hmmm. That's possible..." He did after all have a history of chatting Rurick up in the halls for too long while en route to the administration office. This habit which had earned him many a stern earful from Lim, and at times some nattering from the officials who disliked him whenever they could catch him. "In any case I'll head up there. Thank you, Teita."

After handing both horse and dragon over to her, he headed up to the administration office. In the dying light of day, the corridors were dim, lit only by the flames of pinewood torches. But Ellen would be in there at this hour, he knew. He walked up to the door and knocked lightly, calling out as he did so. Sure enough, a moment later a 'come in' could be heard.

Opening the door, Tigre's eyes were met by a familiar scenery. A modestly-sized room, a table of black sandalwood piled high with a veritable mountain of books, and two ladies attending to the paperwork.

The first of them sported waist-length silver hair and a blue-based silk dress. Her crimson eyes burned with vigor, and against a wall close within reach she laid a longsword by. She was so fair of face, it was hard to imagine her as a skilled sword maiden capable of holding any man at bay. Yet she was and more. She was the administrator of this capitol, ruler of Leitmeritz and one of the seven Vanadis of Zhcted, seventeen year-old Eleanora Viltaria.

The other was golden-haired Limlishia—Lim, as both he and Ellen would normally address her—, Ellen's second-in-command and confidante. Tall, twenty and well-endowed, her look of detached stoicism as she silently perused the documents before her was quite the opposite of Ellen's.

"Looks like you made it back safely."

After looking him up and down for a moment, Ellen's expression relaxed visibly, and Lim greeted him with an upward quirk of her lips.

"I'm back indeed," Tigre noted, before closing the door and pulling a chair over to sit on.

Ellen's eyes glittered. "And how did the deal with the buck go?"

He gave a simple explanation of what had transpired in the village and on the mountain, while Lim prepared wine for three. Naturally, the whole request had been their doing; Ellen had dispatched him to deal with the problem after the village had informed them of its plight.

Stopping the work in their hands, the three offered up a small toast in celebration of this success, and after having finished his explanation, Tigre switched topics.

"So I hear from Teita that you have important affairs to discuss with me." At this, the two ladies exchanged glances, and Ellen dipped her gaze to the cup in her hands, as though considering her reply. A moment later, she lifted her eyes once again.

"Tigre. Have you heard of Asvarre?"

The sudden question came as a surprise, but Tigre recovered quickly. "It's situated northwest of Brune, across the western sea of Zhcted, I think. It's

best known for its agriculture-based economy, but a few generations ago they had a queen who led many campaigns of expansion into the continent."

In actuality, the number of things he knew for sure about Asvarre could be counted off on one hand, and all that he had learnt from Masas. But being in the northeast, Alsace had no stake in that country. So for all he knew of Asvarre it could be a fairy tale land—only the story of the conquering queen had made any lasting impression on him.

Once again, the two women exchanged looks. But these were looks of unease.

Draining her cup, Ellen spoke. "A certain someone has requested your presence in Asvarre."

At this Tigre furrowed his brow. He did so not so much in surprise as he had in consternation. Judging from her tone, this request must be awfully hard to refuse. And there were only so many people in this world who could cause a Vanadis apprehension of this level. "And who might that be?"

"His majesty the King," Lim replied coolly.

Tigre's eyes widened.

Victor, King of Zhcted. He had met the man once, when he was living in Zhcted following the conclusion of Brune's civil strife. It was a formality that no official guest could avoid, especially not one staying for 3 years in the country, and in any case he had heard from Ellen that the king desired to see him.

But for all that was worth the audience itself was frightfully short. The king had merely saw fit to praise his talents, and assure him that he would be given full freedom in Zhcted—with that their meeting had come to an abrupt end.

Within that brief time, he had indeed felt the oppressive stateliness and authority emanating from the man on the throne. But what had struck him most profoundly had been the man's eyes. Victor's eyes were tranquil, yet cold and subdued. It made one think of the inmost depths of a dark forest, bereft of sunlight for a hundred years; like a deep bog without breath or sound of life.

But such thoughts about the monarch of a nation could not be shared with anyone, and so Tigre hid them, buried them deep in his heart.

Honestly, he didn't make a good impression, Tigre thought. 'An enigmatic old man' was the most honest summary he could give on his thoughts concerning that man.

And now this person was ordering him to go to Asvarre.

"So what does he want me to do there?"

"Essentially, he wants you to serve as a secret envoy."

At this point, Ellen put her cup down and folded her arms, a distressed look on her face.

"Tigre. What do you know about Asvarre's situation, really?"

"Well, that there's people in it, and they sing, dance and hunt all day long?"

"Indeed, and they slaughter their own people with axe and sword while they're at it too." He'd actually expected this, but still it seemed there was no chance that this would be a comfortable topic.

Lim put her still unfinished cup on the table, and then proceeded to retrieve a piece of parchment from a drawer beneath the table.

"...I suppose I've never really told you about Asvarre either, Tigre. I'll try to make this brief."

"Please do, teacher." Tigre said mischievously.

Ellen laughed. "Yes, please do, sensei."

With a sigh, Lim turned to the parchment and began to draw a simple map. "Now, until half a year ago, King Zechariah was still on the throne of Asvarre. At that time there was intelligence to suggest that he planned to invade Brune, but due to his own poor health he ultimately decided to sit back for a while and observe the situation."

Tigre's breath caught in his throat. He had underestimated till now just how much Brune had been like a sheep thrown among wolves during those times of turmoil half a year ago. True, Sachstein was repulsed by Roland, and he himself had driven Muozinel back. But if Asvarre had invaded from the west at that time...heaven only knew what would have happened then.

"A short time after the civil war in Brune ended," Lim continued, "King Zechariah breathed his last. I can't really say how exactly he died. Some say he died in an accident, others say he died of food poisoning."

Now, the King of Asvarre had six children. His eldest, Jermaine, was to ascend the throne. And that was where the madness began.

"A few days before the coronation ceremony, Jermaine called his siblings together and had them executed on counts of treason."

"Heh, or so we heard afterward," Ellen added drily, supplementing Lim's lecture with her own comments. "It seems Jermaine is quite the arrogant character, and paranoid as well. I guess he hid his true colors while his father still lived, but with the throne in sight he must have decided to take action."

This subject was repugnant to Tigre, but he nodded for Lim to continue anyway.

"However, two of the king's children escaped Jermaine's grasp—the second prince, Elliot, and the first princess, Guinevere."

The larger part of the details that Lim mentioned afterward could be summarized as such: After making his way to safety, Elliot had begun a revolt against his brother. Despite the succession having been the king's will, there were many among the nobility who had opposed Jermaine's kin-slaying, and the revolt had been a success. Jermaine was forced to abandon the palace and flee.

"So now Asvarre is split into two—" Lim broke off as she concluded, "no, perhaps you could say three parts. Jermaine has hired mercenaries from Sachstein to bolster his own forces, while Elliot has done much the same by bringing the pirates of the coast into his ranks. Asvarre is in a state of chaos."

"What about the princess Guinevere?" It was strange that she was not mentioned, so he asked.

"Rumors say that she is indifferent to either side, and has retired to a more quiet life. Most likely, she will not make any moves until the conflict between her brothers has been settled," Lim said.

"And till now Zhcted has been supporting Elliot," Ellen added.

"Oh yes. There's that," Lim said. "Okay, let's stop talking about Asvarre for now." With that, she produced another parchment, and began drawing up a map of the continent. Zhcted in the center, Asvarre west of the sea, Muozinel to the south on land and Brune to the southwest.

"Tigrevurmund." Lim's voice was scholarly and stern, like a teacher asking a question of her pupil. That meant that if he answered wrong, he was sure to be reprimanded. "Who, in your opinion, is the greatest threat to Zhcted at this time?"

"Muozinel, I suppose."

"Correct." Lim confirmed, unsmiling, as though this answer was a given.

"So you see, the situation in Asvarre is as we stated before. And in Brune, the scars left by the civil war have yet to heal. At best, it would take two or three years for it to make a full comeback."

Needless to say, the next major factor was Muozinel. Even though they had been beaten back during their assault on Brune six months ago, in reality only their navy had been dealt any significant casualties. Their land army—footsoldiers and cavalry both—had withdrawn before a decisive battle could be fought, as such minimizing their losses.

Muozinel now had an axe to grind against Zhcted as well—Tigre had the help of Zhcted troops in his rout of their advance army. Moreover, currently, Zhcted held Agnes, originally part of Brune, as their own territory, thus forming a strip of land belonging to Zhcted that Muozinel had to pass through first before it could attack. As such, Muozinel could only attack via sea, and that was impossible with their damaged navy: it could hardly even defend against an enemy attack as it was, let alone launch an invasion. So they could only sit on their hands and watch Brune recover.

"Sooner or later, we and Muozinel will surely clash. But when that will happen, no one knows. It could be three, even ten years from now."

So saying, Ellen gazed at the wall behind her and the two flags that adorned it.

A silver sword upon black, for Leitmeritz, and for Zhcted the black dragon.

"The balance of power hangs on Asvarre's decision—whether to join hands with Muozinel, or with us."

Upon hearing Ellen's words, Tigre at last understood. If Asvarre were to align itself with Zhcted, then the latter could concentrate all its energy on Muozinel. But if Asvarre were to make Muozinel its ally instead, then Zhcted would be beleaguered from both the south and the west, and it would have to divide its forces to tackle such a dire situation.

"As we were saying before, we would have preferred Elliot, but it seems he personally leans towards Muozinel. As such we shall have to support Jermaine instead."

"So, this secret envoy you speak of..." Tigre trailed off.

Ellen looked distinctly apologetic. Seeing her struggle to reply, Lim stood in for the silver-haired Vanadis. "Tigrevurmund. I believe we had said before that this is the King's request, not that of Lady Eleanora."

"I know. There is no way Ellen would ask something like this of me." He answered decisively to reassure them. It worked. Almost immediately the tension in the room decreased several fold. Both women loosed smiles, and Ellen heaved a sigh of relief while still hanging her head in apology.

"I'm sorry, Tigre."

"You needn't be, Ellen," Tigre said. "More importantly, what does King Victor hope to achieve by sending me?" He didn't know the foggiest about Asvarre. He hadn't even been there. Ever. The king's intentions were unfathomable in this regard.

"From a certain point of view you could say he wants to recruit you," Ellen noted while passing her now empty cup back to Lim. "It's basically selling favors, giving you honor and glory in exchange for your services. Isn't that practice quite common in Brune as well?"

Tigre set his head askew—he still could not accept this. "But I am not King Victor's subject, I am a citizen of Brune, a guest who will return to Brune in 3 years time, no?"

"And that's precisely why he wants you. Think about it—do you really expect to live off the fat of the land once you get back after 3 years? If it were up to me I'd make you a military advisor. That way you wouldn't ever leave the palace even after a few years."

Upon hearing Ellen speak so solemnly, Tigre could only contemplate in silence. It was true, for he was undeniably a person of meritorious deeds.

"Having received the title of 'Star Shooter' and 'Moonlight Knight' from an enemy general and your own king respectively, you are someone who will definitely be in an important position once you get home. So as far as the King of Zhcted is concerned selling you favors is the right thing to do." Lim added coolly after pouring Ellen some more wine.

For her part the Vanadis pulled open a drawer on her own desk, and from there retrieved a letter, two rings and a sleek tube.

The tube was half an arm long, and covered by a dark black cloth. On its cap the seal of the King of Zhcted was engraved and inlaid in gold.

"This contains a secret message to Prince Jermaine, and the rings will be proof of your identity as the King's envoy. But what I really want to show you is this—the king's letter." Taking the letter, Tigre read it carefully. The words of a king could not be ignored, not a single one.

It started with the normal salutations, with the King giving some praise for his gallantry in Brune and celebrating the newly forged peace between Brune and Zhcted before diving straight into the main topic.

—You are proof of the strong ties between Zhcted and Brune, and thus able to represent both nations before the Prince Jermaine. No one is more suited than you are to accomplish this task.

Written below are instructions as to how far we are willing support the prince in terms of finances and in the sending of troops, as well as the duration for which we shall do so. There are contingencies should extenuating circumstances force you to deviate from the initial plan, but you should return immediately should the situation go too far out of hand.—

So, Tigre mused. He wants to use me as a bargaining chip then.

At the end of the letter there were instructions as to how he should enter Asvarre. He would travel from Leitmeritz to Regnis, and then from there he would rendezvous with some men the King sent before setting out together for Asvarre. He was flabbergasted at the sheer amount of detail the letter went into. It even mentioned what street he should be travelling by.

Suggesting that both Zhcted and Brune were in support of Prince Jermaine—quite clever of the King, really, Tigre thought.

Still. He glanced up from the letter and gave Ellen a look of unease. "Was Brune told of this?"

Ellen shook her head. "I doubt it."

Lim nodded in agreement. "If it were so, Queen Regin would have passed the orders down to you herself, Tigrevurmund."

She was right. In the end he was still a guest commandant, and not under any obligation to obey King Victor. Even the letter itself closed with these words—

"I, the King of Zhcted, earnestly ask of you—"

—meaning that this was no order, but a request.

And yet he could no so flippantly refuse. It was a request from a king, after all.

"...Aside from me, is there no one else who can take on this task?"

"Zhcted doesn't lack for such people. But to the king, he couldn't claim to be doing you a favor without at least asking you to do this much."

Tigre tried to contemplate this for a few seconds, and then gave up, shrugging. Immediately, Lim scolded him in a low voice, and then proceeded to explain.

"You see, something like rooting out mountain bandits wouldn't be adding any additional feathers to your cap. Your role in the Brune civil war has already demonstrated your bravery, and therefore your worth, enough."

"There are other ways of winning honor, yes, but these would mostly involve you becoming a counsellor to the king. And that would put you in a precarious position—most of our nobles would oppose the idea of Brune interfering in affairs of governance, and it would undermine the king's authority. So a diplomatic assignment would be the best option." Ellen sighed.

It was true, Tigre knew. The advantages of sending him were exactly as King Victor had stated—and in those regards no one in Zhcted could compete with him.

"...And that's how it is. Assuming that the King bears you no ill-will in the first place." Ellen griped, leaning back in her chair.

Her casual posture relieved the young archer greatly, and he smiled. "I don't remember ever doing anything to incur his ill-will."

"If a country has a skilled general, do you not think that his very presence will cause the surrounding nations to be on their guard?" Lim noted coolly, remaining upright and altogether serious despite them. "In our country there are many people who are displeased by your presence, Tigrevurmund...although I am not saying the king is one of these."

"But the negotiations are important to Zhcted. Failure would be disastrous—so why would he give the task to me if he has enmity towards me?"

Ellen furrowed her brows as she spoke, her displeasure plain to see. "Well, since there is a contingency in place you will most likely be held responsible for any failure."

"Of course, success would be still be best, but if you were to fail, getting rid of you would eliminate some future concerns. Depending on the situation, the blame could also be shifted onto Brune." At this Ellen swung back upright with a *BANG*, ignoring Lim, who cocked an eyebrow at her. "Actually, don't you find it all very strange? If I were in the king's place, I would throw you a banquet with someone else as the host, and make my request while the host distracts the rest of the guests."

That was true. Tigre thought. He and the King had only met once—they weren't friends by any means. There should have at least been some sort of party thrown to improve their relationship.

"It would only take a simple check to know that you've never been to Asvarre. Sending you there is like asking a child who doesn't know left from right to go to a neighbouring village to buy something. And then there's the men the king sent. We have no details on them. The whole thing practically screams 'this is suspicious'!"

Indeed, it was getting quite hard to think that the king had given him this job for his ability.

"But King Victor has yet to reveal what he thinks of me, correct?" Tigre asked cautiously.

Both Lim and Ellen nodded.

"I can only think of 3 reasons why this was assigned to you. One would be to do you a favor by letting you take the honor of being a diplomat. The other might be to destroy you by putting you in a situation where you would be helpless. And the last would be to gauge your abilities."

"Gauging my abilities?"

Ellen held up a hand. "In short, he wants to know if you are merely a person who is skilled in warfare, or if you have other skills besides. I still can't tell if he wants you on his side, or if he wants to destroy you. But whatever it is, he definitely wants to use you."

The silver-haired young woman chuckled a little, causing Tigre to grouse silently. None of the three options was anything to be glad about.

"And if he has any other design," Ellen noted in a low, more serious tone, "it's most likely to use your actions to see how the Vanadis—myself included—and the Queen of Brune will act."

"Ellen, what should I—"

"Tigrevurmund," Lim said in a stern voice, cutting him off. "Do not ask that of us."

Ellen shook her head bitterly. "No matter what your decision is, I will respect it and do my utmost to help you. But it is you who must make the decision, Tigre."

"I'm sorry."

He could refuse. But that would lower the king's opinion of him, and it would also affect Ellen and Brune. Turning to the map, Tigre thought about what was just said. He did not like Prince Jermaine, whom Zhcted was planning to support. And yet if his rival Elliot were to ascend to the throne, his alliance with Muozinel would threaten both Zhcted and Brune, for Brune and Asvarre shared a border.

And then there was the alliance with Zhcted to think about.

For the sake of our countries, must I support a foreign tyrant?

By virtue of lending support to Jermaine, it might be possible to request that he mend his ways. But he was not the King of Zhcted, Tigre knew. His words would most likely have no significant impact.

But he had to move past that. Sighing, he asked another question. "What sort of person is Prince Elliot, then?"

"Rumor has it that he's not all that different from his brother. But at least he didn't kill his whole family."

"But previously you said that he roped pirates into his army to make up for his lack of numbers. Doesn't that mean the army is no more than a band of thieves?"

King Victor must really want me to disappear, asking me to go into such a place alone.

"Will you refuse, then?"

"Might as well go. It might be a good opportunity to visit Asvarre anyway." He meant this in earnest, but more because he did not wish to further burden the similarly-aged Vanadis. "But isn't this a rather roundabout method? Asking me to be a secret envoy, and yet openly supporting Prince Elliot at the same time?"

"Playing both sides isn't an uncommon tactic. Lyudmila was like that during the last war." Ellen said.

"What?" Tigre asked, not comprehending her intent. "I thought Mila was a more straightforward person than that."

Mila of course referred to Lyudmila Lorie, Michelia of the seven Vanadis and the governor of Olmutz, a province to the south of Leitmeritz.

"You forget that she was Duke Thenardier's ally at first, which was why she led troops to constrain us. In addition, she continued her pursuit even when we offered to retreat. In order to fulfill her obligations to the duke, she even fought a duel with me." Ellen's eyebrows arched in annoyance as she said this, but Tigre could not tell if it was his casual mention of Lyudmila's nickname, or general displeasure at his reply that caused her to act this way.

"But she protected Lady Eleanora from the assassin's blade that time, even going so far as to risk her own life." Lim pointed out stoically.

"W-Well, that was just her trying to make me owe her a favor!" Ellen blustered, her expression that of one caught off-guard. "Even if she didn't think about it that way at the time, when the need arises she will definitely find an excuse to bring it up!"

"It's only natural to do that in negotiations," Lim reminded.

Ellen ignored her, instead turning to Tigre. "And there was that battle against Muozinel. She didn't come to help you right away, did she? She held off to observe, right? That's not helping you, that was just her waiting for the moment where she could make you most indebted to her. And she only severed ties with Thenardier after that incident, don't you forget!"

With that she downed her cup of wine with much gusto.

Tigre for his part understood. This Machiavellian aspect to Lyudmila's character was probably so deeply ingrained that she did not think any worse of herself despite it. Still, given that she had been forced into a conflict due to her rival's character, it was not surprising that Ellen would be so angry.

If it was Mila, how would she respond to this request?

During his time at Leitmeritz, Lyudmila Lurie had paid three visits to the capitol, and she came for three reasons. Firstly, to inquire about the state of the mountain road in Vosyes and Brune in general; secondly, to make a show of being on excellent terms with Ellen. Lastly, she came to prevail upon Tigre to join her.

Every time Ellen received a report of her arrival, she would say 'tell her not to come again'. But who would dare say that to a Vanadis? And in any case she was half joking. They needed the information that Lyudmila regularly brought them concerning Muozinel, and a petty rivalry was no reason to hinder important exchanges of intelligence.

Following her meetings with Ellen she would go looking for Tigre. The first time, she attempted to use the promise of money to win him over, and failed. From then on, she would simply come to make small talk. She did try to invite him on a hunt, but Ellen had turned her down.

If it were her, she would hint at agreeing while avoiding giving a direct answer, all the while gathering intelligence as best she could in the background. And when the critical moment came she would refuse decisively.

Perhaps this is only the first of more difficult requests to come.

He still didn't like the given task, but he could see it for its uses. And in any case, his complaints were best kept to himself.

Part 4

After staring at the door Tigre had closed in his exit for a while, Ellen let out a sigh.

"Is this really alright?" Lim asked.

"We don't have a choice, do we?" Ellen replied brusquely.

She'd agreed to let him go to Asvarre after their meeting. It was an odd thing—actually, she had been prepared to give way should he refuse adamantly, but as it turned out he gave an unexpectedly decisive answer. She should have been glad about that, but her heart still felt heavy. Unwilling.

"I'm sorry about just now, Lim," Ellen said with an apologetic smile. 'Just now' naturally referred to the point when Lim had butted in to stop Tigre from asking for her help in deciding. "I...probably wouldn't have been able to answer him."

In her heart of hearts she wanted to say 'don't go'. But to deny the king's request, they needed a viable alternative. Another way to foster closer ties between Zhcted and Asvarre. Or even someone to replace Tigre. But there was no such option. With regards to the king's requirements there was none better than him, and she would be hard pressed to find such a substitute.

During Brune's civil war she was able to mollify the king by claiming that she had no choice but to do battle. And it had been a sweet deal overall. Brune footed much of the war bill, Zhcted had gained Agnes in the south, and Ellen had gained Tigre's services through her co-ruling of Alsace.

This time, she had no such cards to play—without such, even a Vanadis must obey her king.

So despite herself, she could not tell him to stay. Supporting him was the only thing she could do now.

Turning her face to the window, Ellen gazed out at the scenery. The slow breeze of late summer blew across a land where the descent of darkness was nigh complete, with only a little sun peeked out from beyond the western horizon. The stars too, though she could not see them, must have already come out.

"When he came, the snowdrops were still in bloom..."

Snowdrops grew everywhere in Zhcted, and they were the herald of springtime. But spring had passed them by in a hurry. She spent hers governing, and he spent his getting accustomed to the land. And now, even summer was drawing to a close.

With a sigh, Ellen shook her head vigorously. Clearing her mind, she turned back to Lim once more, with a smile on her face. "Well, since he has decided to go, we should pave the way for him. I'll be counting on you, Lim. This is the king's request, so people can't speak ill of it anyway."

"Yes." Lim flashed a rare smile, her voice ringing clearer than usual. But it seemed some anxiety came upon her, and cast a shadow over her turquoise eyes. "Yet there is still much to worry about. Becoming a secret envoy to an unknown country, with only one other person following..."

"Let us trust him," Ellen said brightly, her words and eyes brimming with confidence. "He has shown us many miracles during this year we spent together. Yes, you could call it luck, but without the skill to use such good-fortune there would have been no miracles, and he has that sort of ability."

That was exaggerating somewhat, but that was because she too felt uneasy. She could not help but worry. Indeed, perhaps she had even wished for him to refuse back then.

"He will return successful. We will send him off smiling, and we will receive him with that same smile. We can do that much, even if we can neither officially celebrate his designation as envoy due to its secret nature, nor reward him easily due to his status as a citizen of Brune."

"Indeed." Lim said, glad that her master had erased her worries.

With that they returned to their duties. But as Ellen sorted through the papers, a sudden thought came to her.

I wonder, has the distance between him and I lessened any?

Though she was busy most of the day, and Tigre was under constant scrutiny by the court officials, they still spent their free time together often. When the weather was good they would take afternoon naps on the roof, sometimes even sneaking out the palace under the noses of Lim and the other officials to roam the city streets. During official breaks, they would have tea and refreshments with Lim and Teita. These were all small, but important memories.

We even danced together in the city once.

In the tradition of Zhcted such festivals always began with everyone singing and dancing together, and only later would couples form and dance alone. Apparently, this had originally been a way for men to choose their brides, but that custom had long been phased out, leaving behind only that fragment of knowledge and the form of the dance itself.

When they had found out about the origins of the practice, they had both gone red in the face, but did not stop holding hands as they departed. (Of course, no one else knew, for both of them were too embarrassed to speak of it.)

They never crossed the line, each having understood the other's position. But the silver-haired Vanadis recalled those memories of their daily lives together, and she felt her heart grow warmer.

Part 5

Tigre's room was somewhere in the bowels of the palace. Here, unlike outside where the employees of the palace still milled about even after sunset, there was relative peace. This had been one of Ellen's considerations, for as a guest he drew significantly more attention than when he had been a captive.

It was not a particularly luxurious place, but the deep green carpet, brick fireplace and an oak table-and-chair set gave it a relaxing atmosphere. There was no lack of necessities either; in the corner there was a cabinet draped with grapevine as well as a long table.

Upon entry, Tigre lit the lamp by the doorway, and hit the bell on the table.

Before long, footsteps approached the door. Teita's footsteps.

"Master Tigre, may I enter?"

"You needn't be so uptight, I'm the only one here," Tigre replied in a gentle tone.

The door opened, the chestnut-haired maid entering with a curtsy before lifting her head and sticking her tongue out at him. "I'm used to it already. And besides, I'm away from home."

Back in Alsace they had been even less formal with one another. Tigre favored shouting across the hallway to ringing a bell anytime, and Teita for her part would inquire clearly as to his requirements before entering, sparing them a lot of hassle. But this was not Alsace, and there were many officials here who disliked him for being so close to the likes of Ellen, Lim and Rurick. In front of such people, they had to pay more attention to such formalities.

"So," Teita asked after receiving Tigre's outer coat, "have you finished speaking to Lady Eleanora on the matter?"

A dark look crept over his face. "Do you have some time, Teita? I have some things I need to tell you concerning that."

She nodded, perplexed.

Seeing that, Tigre walked over to the cabinet and took out a bottle of wine and a pair of wine glasses. This would be worrying to her, he knew, but nonetheless he wanted her to know the truth.

After having her take a seat, he poured the wine. First for her, then for himself.

He downed a mouthful.

And then made his announcement.

"I need to go out for a time. I'll be counting on you to take care of this place."

Her eyes shot open, staring into the depths of the glass before her, the crimson fluids reflected her depression.

"This isn't a hunt, is it?"

She was right. If this was a hunt or just some inspection in a nearby city he would have spoken differently. He had done his best to sound calm, but there was no way he could completely hide the anxiety of stepping into unknown territory. Not from Teita, who had been serving him for so long.

So he didn't bother playing dumb, merely lowering his gaze to meet hers.

"I know you won't say unnecessary things to others. So I need you to keep a secret for me."

After confirming her assent, he told her of the trip to Asvarre.

"I can't tell you the details, but this a very troublesome matter. While I'm gone, you will tell anyone who asks that I have gone to Silesia," Tigre said. "And...oh yes. Take care of Lunie while I'm out."

"I understand the part about Lunie. But 'to the capitol'?" Teita shook her head, uncomprehending.

"Don't worry, Lim and Ellen are the ones cooking up the cover story. You just need to tally your account to theirs," he assured her. "I did think of claiming illness to avoid meeting people, though."

"That wouldn't have been like you at all, Master Tigre. I mean, those aren't the sort of words a person who would go out during deep winter in furs to hunt would say. And I don't think I could fool everyone like that," she said, displaying her resolve in an ironic sort of way, to which he could only scratch his head, at a loss.

Seeing this, she smiled. "Master Tigre. How far away is this Asvarre?"

"I don't know. It's my first time going there too. All I know is that I need to go northwest from here, and then head there by ship."

"Ship. Sea," Teita muttered, her eyes wide. Neither of them had ever even seen anything like those. The closest they had come was in images stirred up by the songs of a wandering troubadour, or from the stories of travelling artists who had been as far as Celeste, a town in Asvarre.

She bit her lip, her fists tightening about her apron as she tried to restrain the unease welling up inside her. Reaching for her cup, she downed it all in one go—

—and with a sigh she stood, placing the cup back on table, hazel eyes locking on his.

"I don't really understand how important this task is. But you must come back safely, Master Tigre."

Tigre placed his own cup aside, and held her lightly, the fragrance of her hair wafting into his nose as he did so.

You've grown taller...

"I will come back," he repeated over again. "I'll definitely return safely."

Part 6

Tigre left the palace before the dawn of the next day. He would travel not as Tigrevurmund Vorn, but as a common soldier of Leitmeritz. He had said his farewells to Lim and Teita, but not to Ellen.

I wish I could have said goodbye to Rurick and the others as well.

These things left him quite a few regrets, but as a secret envoy his departure needed to be made known to as few people as was possible. Perhaps Rurick might figure it out on his own, though.

He also had to leave by the back gate, instead of from the front. At the side of the gate a saddled horse was already awaiting him—Lim's handiwork, most likely.

Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, Tigre placed his black bow on the saddle and secured a quiver full of arrows to his luggage—if one could call a small pack with a bear doll tied to it 'luggage'—behind.

The bear had been obtained from Lim the night before, when she had come to check on his luggage to confirm that he had brought everything.

"Well then, take everything out." She had said this rather strictly, and he had complied, laying out each item on the table. Food and water for several days, a stone flint, a dagger with a bottle of oil, and a purse full of silver and copper coins.

There was also a letter Ellen had written to her friend Alexandra Arshven, the Vanadis Sasha. She had done this in a hurry, had given instructions for him to see her friend when he passed through Legnica.

"Sasha will give you additional guidance on my behalf, so it doesn't matter if you are late by one or even two days—You must go to see her. Understood?" And with that she had given the letter to him.

Lastly there were the two rings as well as the silk-covered tube that contained a secret message in the king's own hand. The surface of the tube had been rolled over with a tanned hide painted black, rendering it completely waterproof.

After inspecting everything item by item, Lim had told him to wait, and left the room for a while.

Before long, she returned, carrying between her arms quite a few new items: a bag of herbs, a bottle of ointment, ropes of hemp and straw, needle, thread and even a hand mirror.

"Bring these along too."

She said this matter of factly even as she let him help her to arrange these additional things, much to Tigre's shock.

"Isn't this a little overdone?" Actually, all of these should have been necessities for travel as well, but he hadn't thought to bring them with him initially. When he got to the port town at Legnica, he could just purchase all of those trifling things there.

"And what will you do if something happens before you get to Legnica?"

His suggestion had been coldly rejected. He knew she meant well though, and didn't argue.

But his thoughts inadvertently spilled out into words. "It feels like you're my mother or something."

"M-Mother?!" Lim's stoic mask shattered outright, her eyes going wide as she stared at Tigre, dismayed. In the face of this unexpectedly strong response, Tigre quickly backed down.

"I'm really sorry if that made you unhappy. Teita's mother was like this too—she would inspect my luggage very scrupulously every time I headed out of town." Here he paused for a moment, barely stopping short of calling her naggy. "You reminded me of her."

"I understand. Still, you should watch how you say things," Lim said. She seemed to have regained her composure after a few moments, but Tigre still felt terrible about calling a twenty-year old woman 'mother'.

"In that case, take this with you."

At this moment, Lim put something into Tigre's hand. Into his hand, not onto the table—it was a small bear doll.

"It's a charm. Mothers always give them to their children when they go off travelling, so take it. —I don't remember having a child this old, though," she said roughly as his shocked gaze alternated between her and the doll. Perhaps if the room had been brighter lit he might have seen her blushing right up to her hair.

Honestly speaking, it was embarrassing to have to hang a bear doll onto his luggage. But when he thought of Lim's feelings, he could not bear to take it off.

Leaping into the saddle, Tigre trotted the horse forward a few steps. Then suddenly he turned, gazing atop the city walls. It was still dark, and the contours of the palace walls were silhouetted against the darkness. But he could feel someone watching him.

Straining his vision, he caught a small movement.

Who's there?

It wasn't a soldier—a soldier would be carrying a torch at this hour. But it was not an intruder either. He could not feel the person trying to conceal his or her breathing.

A gust of wind blew in.

It did not come from the left or the right. It came rushing down from above, blowing his hair every which way and forcing him to squint.

In the midst of the gale he caught sight of an object hurtling towards him, glittering faintly as it caught the light. About the size of an insect, but not as fast. He reached out and caught it.

It was a silver coin, and on closer inspection there were words written in ink on it.

'Good luck'

His eyes scanned across the walls again, but that person was gone.

Glancing at the coin once more, he put it into his waist-pocket with great care. That done, he grabbed the reins and rode out into the streets, his form enveloped by the darkness.

He knew who the one standing on the walls was. The Vanadis who commanded the winds.

She could not send him off openly, and so she had chosen this method instead.

His drowsiness was far behind him now, gone with the wind. He felt warm, and full of vigor.

I will definitely return safely.

He would give her a pleasing result with his own hands.

So decided, he spurred his horse forward, through the streets at the crack of dawn.

Chapter 2: The Blue World and the Travelling Girl

The autumn in Zchted was short, though one might also say that winter simply came early.

The deep green of vegetation as they had bathed in the midsummer sun had since faded with the autumn wind.

It wasn't all bleak, however; autumn was also the season of harvest.

Under the blue sky, golden wheat fields stretched far along the highway. As the wind blew, plump ears of wheat rustled softly in the wind. It seemed that with the abundant harvest around here, the faces of the farmers who were cropping were also smiling broadly.

Also standing out were green apple trees, whose branches hung down, heavy with plump green apples.

Looking at such peaceful scenery, Tigre felt at ease. The wind was cool to a comfortable extent, filling him with the desire to chat with the farmers in their fields. Suppressing this desire, however, he urged his horse onward.

In places with many people, he avoided riding at any great speed. Such an action was far too ostentatious. If he was seen simply riding, however, the presumption would likely be that he was just some young noble, off on a hunt. His neat clothing and bow, hung on his saddle, served to further reinforce this image.

At sunset, he'd find his way to a hamlet or small village, looking for accommodations for the night, as well as food.

Having thus traveled for a few days, Tigre exited LeitMeritz, and, passing through the King's territory, entered Legnica.

Three days after that, he arrived at the Imperial Palace where the Vanadis Sasha lived. Though an appointment was made upon handing over Ellen's letter; in truth, it was another two days before he was able to meet her.

---Two days, huh. That doesn't leave much time.

He'd heard from Ellen that Sasha was suffering from a debilitating illness. As the silver-haired Vanadis handed her letter to Tigre, she'd warned him.

"If Sasha's condition isn't too bad, you will also be able to meet on the day you hand over the letter. However, after handing over the letter, if you

cannot meet her even after waiting for three days, please continue to Asvarre."

The Imperial Palace was composed of sand-colored stones laid upon one another, with scatterings of white marble to be found all over. Though its appearance was surpassingly peculiar, there was no doubting the solidity of its construction.

Leaving his black bow, Tigre walked down the hallway of the Imperial Palace, led by an aged servitor.

---Truly a palace that gives off quite a calming presence.

Looking at the ceiling and the walls, Tigre couldn't help but be moved.

LeitMeritz aside, this was his first time setting foot in an Imperial Palace, and thus everything intrigued him. Far from a single monotone gray, the walls were inlaid with white marble. The design masterfully built upon the labors of previous architects, and one did not tire of simply gazing upon their splendor.

---And here I'd thought carved murals were the only way to decorate a wall. To think that you could do things like this...

Still awed, Tigre reached the front of Sasha's room.

The servitor made Tigre's presence known, before Tigre proceeded to open the door.

---This is somewhat of a lonely room.

The room was bright, lit both by the sunlight which shone through the window, flung wide open, as well as the candle holder near the bed. However, with regards to furniture, the furnishings were the barest of the bare, and plainly colored at that. Aster flowers by the bedside provided the room's only color.

"Nice to meet you."

An unclouded voice struck Tigre's ears.

The woman on the bed sat up as she greeted him. Her dull black hair was trimmed to shoulder length, and she wore a loose white gown. She had a thin face and skin that was shockingly white. She was abnormally slender, and the loose fit of her clothes was evidence of her wasting away.

Above her knees, wrapped in a thick blanket, were two swords. Above their white hilts and finely decorated black crossguards, the blades shone with a brilliant gold and red. The blades were rather short, and their sole distinguishing factor was their gold and vermillion colors.

From their design, Tigre realized the two swords were paired.

---So this is her Dragonic Tool(Viralt), huh.

Apparently belying her welcome, her swords rested near at hand.

Notwithstanding, Tigre found such an action neither rude nor unnatural. Ellen placed her Silverflash Arifal within reach even while working in the office, and assuming this girl to be no different, he instinctively comprehended the reasoning behind her actions.

Tigre bowed and stepped into the room. As he walked up beside the bed, he bowed again.

"I am Tigrevurmud Vorn. Nice to meet you."

"I am Alexandra Alshavin. I would have liked to have met with you much sooner than this, but because of my illness, I've made you wait. My humblest apologies."

Responding to the black-haired beauty who apologized politely, Tigre shook his head to indicate he did not mind.

"More than me, please take good care of your body, Alexandra-dono."

When he said so, Sasha sweetly smiled, and invited Tigre to sit.

"You can call me Sasha, Lord Tigrevurmud."

"Thank you. Please call me Tigre, then."

Sitting down, Tigre returned her smile. Looking up close, he thought she was a beautiful person.

That said, her beauty was quite unlike that of the energetic and lively Ellen. Like the aster flowers that swayed in the gentle breeze by the window, hers was an ethereal beauty; tranquil, like water.

---If you're not feeling well...

About to speak out, Tigre changed his mind.

Sasha's illness was nothing recent. She alone was the best judge of whether or not she was fit enough to converse. Moreover, the servitor who'd guided him until then was also checking Sasha's condition. Though it was only natural to be worried, doing too much wasn't for the best either.

"Then, Tigre. May I ask you something?"

Smiling from ear to ear, Sasha tilted her head quizzically. The adorable charm of her action made his heart skip a beat, and, hiding the disturbance in his heart, he smiled and nodded.

"Please, speak."

"If possible... I wish to speak with you candidly, as if with a close friend. I know the importance of courtesy, but I worry the tenseness of such a thing will serve me poorly."

She was already speaking more casually. Tigre, with a wry smile, answered that he understood.

---If I'm not mistaken, this person is 22 this year.

He heard so from Ellen. In other words, Sasha should be five years older than Tigre, but it did not seem that way from her earlier behavior. Though she did not seem to be the same age, it was as if she was only one or two years older.

Sasha extended her right hand. Being careful not to use excessive force, Tigre gripped her hand in turn. Her soft hand carried a faint warmth.

"So it really is true that you don't use a sword."

Staring at Tigre's hand, Sasha spoke in surprise. At those words, Tigre suddenly clenched his hand and stared widely.

---She must have determined this from the condition of my palms, by tracking calluses and blisters, even though she didn't grip my hand all that tightly.

"If possible, can you tell me about your encounter with Ellen?" Sasha asked.

At her eyes, filled with curiosity, Tigre tilted his head.

"Didn't you already hear it from Ellen?"

"I did. But that was from Ellen's perspective. I would like to hear your side of the story."

Tigre pondered inwardly. Though there was no reason to refuse, he wondered if he had time for such things. He was, after all, in a hurry to reach Asvarre.

Nonetheless, his hesitation lasted but a brief moment. Having already read Ellen's letter, she was undoubtedly aware he was pressed for time. Accordingly, there must be some deeper meaning behind her request.

"I understand. I'm not the greatest orator, so this might take some time."

"That's fine."

He did his utmost to clearly and concisely convey the events of the past year, from his captivity after the battle at Dinant to the battles in Brune following.

He tried to avoid diving into unnecessary details. Though the haste he felt within his heart was certainly a factor, the primary reason was due to the strong emotions that would arise as he recalled each event. It had been, after all, but a short half-year since these things had transpired.

Sasha nodded from time to time, following Tigre's story with great exuberance and interest.

When Tigre rested, Sasha rang the bell by her bedside and called the servitor, ordering him to prepare wine. Tigre, who'd been talking for half the day, was quite thirsty, and gratefully accepted her goodwill. The servitor placed two goblets on the table, and quietly filled them with wine.

"Thank you. It was very interesting, and I learned a lot."

"I'm happy to hear that."

"By the way, what kind of relationship do you have with Ellen?"

At this sudden question, Tigre almost dropped the silver cup which he'd just received from the attendant.

Sasha continued happily, "From what you've said, it doesn't look like you're anything more than allies, but...what you've told me is a little different from what I'd heard from Ellen."

A chill ran down Tigre's spine. What on Earth had Ellen said?

--Even if you ask me what kind of relationship we have, I'm not entirely sure myself...

It would be a lie to say that it was not a special relationship.

For example, the other day the two of them had gone to the city to play, and had danced together. When he'd placed his hands on her slender waist, Tigre had suddenly blushed. As if his blushing was contagious, Ellen had blushed as well, leading their fellow dancers to tease them mercilessly.

However, those kinds of thoughts were not to be made public. Tigre and Ellen both had their respective positions to consider, and neither could place priority on their personal feelings. Even though there were times he couldn't restrain his feelings, he would not allow them to be more than an impulse.

Buying time, he brought the silver cup to his mouth while stealthily evaluating the look on Sasha's face. Though the smiling face of the Vanadis with black hair did not change, Tigre perceived the sincerity in her eyes.

Then I'll answer honestly. Lowering the goblet from his lips, he spoke.

"Ellen is... She is an important comrade-in-arms. She has been many times my savior. Were anything to happen to her, I would do my utmost to help. That's what I think."

"...Is that so."

Though Sasha's reaction was decidedly brief, her face revealed a satisfied smile. The strained atmosphere passed, and after a short pause, Tigre carefully asked, "By the way, when you say it's a little different what you'd heard, which parts were you referring to?"

"Oh! The part where you peeked at Ellen in the bath, or when you sucked Lim's breasts..."

As Sasha replied without a hint of shyness, Tigre was caught off guard by these words, and was left speechless, his face red up to his ears.

"It definitely seems like Ellen and Lim like you, but I don't think that's all there is to it. I've put some thought into it. Are you the type that's so adorable you're immediately forgiven or are you ridiculous to the point that others feel like their anger is wasted on you?"

"...Well, what kind of person would you say I am?"

Finally pulling himself together, Tigre straightened his posture and questioned Sasha in turn. Rather than answering immediately, Sasha let her eyes wander to the sky before turning to smile at him, her expression filled with mischief.

"Isn't it fine to leave things to your imagination? That said, there's no point in never telling you, so when you return from Asvarre, I'll tell you then."

Tigre's only response was to blink, unmoving, unable to mask his surprise in the least. So she can make that kind of expression too...

---It seems my first impression of the sickly Sasha was stronger than warranted.

Having spoken to Sasha now for the last four hours, Tigre felt that as compared to her gentle smiles earlier, her smile just now suited her far more. The similarity to Ellen was undeniable, although it was hard to say if that was merely the effects of the former's influence on the latter.

"I understand. I'll look forward to that then."

Tigre responded with a smile. He realized that their conversation had indeed digressed, but the thought of something to look forward to upon his return wasn't bad.

"Now then, let's return to the topic at hand."

Though her smile never left her face, Sasha's black pupils filled with a serious light. She handed the silver cup in her hand to the attendant and sent him off with words of gratitude. Understanding her intent, he left quietly. As the door closed, the black-haired Vanadis opened her mouth.

"According to Ellen's letter, it is her desire that I assist you. I've heard you need to visit Asvarre; would you allow me to hear the full story?"

Tigre settled himself, and began to recount the details of King Victor's request and Ellen and Lim's views on the matter; in short, the circumstances behind his appointment as envoy from beginning to end.

This time Sasha, far from interrupting as she had done before, simply sat in silence like a statue, never moving a muscle. That notwithstanding, her eyes radiated her fierce will.

As she finished hearing the story she relaxed her whole body and gave a small sigh.

"I don't envy you."

"Yeah...I don't think it's all that simple a thing to sneak across the sea and deliver a letter to a blood-soaked battlefield either."

Deliberately speaking in a joking tone, Tigre shrugged. His comments were half his real feelings, and half a followup to Sasha's joking words. Though the Vanadis with twin swords laughed delightedly, her serious aura returned immediately.

"Do you understand just what position it is you hold in Zhcted at this point?"

"It would be a guest, I think. And likely also a hostage for Brune."

Though Tigre's answer did not seem to be wrong, Sasha did not appear to be satisfied by his response. She shook her head.

"Of course, there are those who harbor goodwill toward you, like Ellen or Mira. And from what I've heard, that might also include Sophie? However, those who begrudge your existence or would otherwise seek to exploit you are not in the minority."

"It's not as if I haven't realized that there are people who are trying to use me..."

Tigre frowned. He was pretty sure this referenced those who had made an effort to visit him in his half-year in LeitMeritz. Nonetheless, he had no memory of anyone who had bore outright ill will toward him. Watching Tigre tilt his head in puzzlement, Sasha continued on in a grave tone.

"You've greatly altered the power structure of the Brune Kingdom. Resultingly, the Zhcted nobles who suffered losses, both large and small, number not a few. Such can only be expected given the two great nobles said to represent Brune have since been deposed."

A groan escaped Tigre's mouth. He was dumbfounded.

Were it the subordinates of Duke Thenardier who harbored a grudge against Tigre, that was understandable. He had, after all, personally confronted Thenardier on the battlefield and slain him with the bow.

However, after Duke Ganelon had lost to Thenardier, he'd set fire to the city and died. Tigre had not been involved at all. It was absurd to resent him for such a thing.

Perhaps guessing the thoughts that ran through the young man's mind, Sasha flashed him a look of sympathy.

"Allow me to repeat that what's most important here is the way in which the power structure has been altered. Losing influence over Brune can be seen as another kind of loss. Furthermore, since you have strong ties to both Ellen and Mira, eliminating you would be no easy task."

"But the one who made this request was King Victor?"

There was no way the lord of a small country could ignore such happenings, but King Victor ruled over a great nation, and should thus have been well accustomed to losses here and there.

"Regardless of the country in question, such suggestions being proposed to the king by court officials is a matter of fact."

A shout nearly escaped Tigre's mouth. Though he hadn't considered such an eventuality personally, he was persuaded immediately upon hearing it. Tigre himself, whether in governance of Alsace or in command of the Silver Meteor Army, had often heeded the advice of local leaders or his subordinates.

"I'm sure the question of this appointment has caused His Majesty no small amount of grief. Nonetheless, to choose you, a foreigner, is simply too risky a choice for such a cautious person as His Majesty to make."

"Is King Victor a cautious person then?"

Tigre was struck by this fresh comment. This was because both Ellen and Mira had assessed King Victor quite severely. Sasha gave a wry smile.

"Speaking more frankly, he has something of a passive personality, though he can be somewhat cunning. He doesn't intervene in the battles between Vanadis at all, prioritizing his personal safety first and foremost. With that said, in the decades he has sat on the throne, there have not been any major wars. This one thing I grant him."

Tigre didn't immediately respond. Wasn't it precisely because King Victor failed to intervene in conflicts between the Vanadis that in the winter of last

year, the Vanadis Elizavetta Fomina had advanced her troops to Legnica? As for Ellen having fought against Mira, wasn't that also his fault?

However, Tigre didn't express his thoughts, swallowing them instead.

He was, after all, a man of another country. He wasn't King Victor's vassal either. Furthermore, three years hence, he would return to Brune. In such circumstances, he could not bring himself to criticize the King of another country.

"Returning to our discussion earlier, what has been said is correct. Choosing you as the emissary is killing two birds with one stone. As His Majesty has said, your appointment represents the support of both Zhcted and Brune. Phrasing this differently, rather than sacrificing a pawn, sending a beloved hero such as yourself to a land embroiled in civil war implies-

"That's how it is. It will give Prince Jermaine the appearance that Zhcted values him greatly."

At Tigre's words, the Vanadis with black hair nodded in satisfaction.

"Yes. As such, our country can seize the initiative in negotiations with Asvarre, as long as the individual neither errs greatly nor oversteps his bounds. Such is the advantage of sending you."

"And the disadvantage?"

"If anything happens to you, the consequences will be unimaginable," Sasha replied coldly.

"First of all, there will be a crack in the relationship between Zhcted and Brune. In the worst case, Asvarre will become an enemy. Furthermore, even within the bounds of our own country, it's unlikely that either Ellen or Mira will ever forgive His Majesty. Though they would never dare openly rebel, it would nonetheless be the ruin of this nation."

Turning her gaze to the aster flowers by the window, she continued.

"I won't refute Ellen's conjecture. There is no doubt that His Majesty wants to test your mettle. I believe this was the point of the letter - to prevent you from realizing his motives during a face-to-face meeting. Nevertheless, it is my feeling that there is another's scheming at play here."

A thorny problem indeed. After ruffling his red hair vigorously, his face taut, he exhaled deeply and smiled to change the mood.

"Thank you. I'll take care."

His attitude surprised Sasha. Though the country clearly hid individuals who sought to ensnare him, she caught no hint of fear in Tigre.

"Don't tell me you have some countermeasure in mind?"

"No."

Wearing an expression that feared neither heaven nor hell, Tigre answered firmly.

"I'm not about to shirk my responsibility from just this much. Though I know neither the identity of this individual nor his or her true intent, fear is pointless. Besides, I'm already resolved."

This was not, of course, a resignation of inevitable death, but rather the resolution to survive no matter what. The resolve to see this task to completion. After being given this task in LeitMeritz, when parting with Ellen and the others, he'd determined to fulfill his duty and return safely.

If that someone was trying to deprive him of his life, he would crush him.

Though he did not express it with words, Sasha seemed to have understood Tigre's intentions through his expression. She gave a sigh of relief.

"No wonder Ellen trusts you so much."

Saying that, she turned to look once more at the aster flowers. However, rather than taking in the sight, she seemed to be considering something.

At just about ten o'clock, she returned her gaze to Tigre.

"According to Ellen's letter, after this you are supposed to go to the port city of Prepus... Could you change your destination to the port city of Lippner?"

Though Tigre frowned to this sudden request, his doubts were soon dispelled.

"Do you plan to hook that someone?"

It was King Victor's plan he go to Prepus. If Sasha's thoughts were correct, the person trying to entrap Tigre would certainly know. Therefore, she proposed to deceive that person.

She wanted him to meet with a man called Matvey who was at the beach.

"Go to the port and ask Matvey of the Goldy Belluga. Well, you will understand."

"Though it is helpful, will that be alright?"

The follower who was scheduled to meet him afterwards might have information that would be useful in negotiations with Jermaine. When Tigre asked about it, Sasha shook her head to say not to worry.

"His Majesty would not do such a thing. The negotiations would get confused, and your value would decrease. All things taught at the stage before the negotiation should have already been taught to you. Even that man would understand that he may die by unnecessarily disrupting negotiations."

"That is also true. Thank you."

After bowing with a smile, Tigre made a face that seemed to hesitate before saying something.

"By the way, what is that proud beluga you talked about?"

The Vanadis with black hair could not immediately understand the meaning of his question. Gazing at the expression of the youth full of perplexion, after saying "Eh!", Sasha with an unexpected expression asked:

"You, don't you know what a beluga is?"

Tigre nodded.

"...Have you already seen the sea?"

This time he shook his head.

Sasha opened her eyes widely, she stared at Tigre's face with a face that said she couldn't believe it. She smiled and murmured that she wonder if everything will be alright. Still she didn't certainly consider that a person who had never seen the sea had been entrusted with a secret envoy to a country on the other side of the sea.

At that time, the door was knocked on from outside. After a hoarse voice "Excuse me" was uttered, the aged servitor came in. Looking at him, disappointment appeared in Sasha's black eyes.

"It's already time, Vanadis-sama."

"...Can you give us a little more time? I feel better today."

Sasha's expression was like that of a child who wanted something even though she understood that it would be impossible. The servitor answered promptly without moving an eyebrow.

"It is exactly because you feel better that you must not push yourself."

From the conservation of those two people, Tigre realized that the time of parting came. He stood up quietly and bowed to Sasha.

"I will leave for today. Thank you very much."

"...No, I also thank you. It was fun."

Sasha extended her hand, and the two people shook hands quietly.

When Tigre was about to leave the room, the Vanadis with dark hair suddenly stopped him. Sasha, whose face was turned around, didn't know that the sunlight from the window made a backlight.

"Tigre. I leave Ellen to you. Become that child's strength."

"I will do what I can."

When he gave her a reassuring reply while smiling, Sasha seemed to smile too.

It was early in the morning of the next day that Tigre left the Imperial Palace in Legnica. Straddling the horse, he went in dash straight about the highway which led to the town of Lippner.

--In the end, I was not able to meet with Sasha after that.

He wanted to at least say good bye, but he could do nothing but leave a message to the aged servitor since it was impossible to meet her because of her disease. Also the servitor handed him a letter which contained a map describing the way to Lippner and Matvey's features.

--Will we meet again?

She was a Vanadis. There should be no such thing as a disease that could not be cured.

Though he thought so, he remembered the feeling when they shook hands. Thin flesh, skinny fingers, that was indeed the hand of a sick person.

When leaving the Imperial Palace, Tigre offered a prayer to the gods. Even if it would be no problem to pay his respects to the gods because Brune and Zchted believed in the same gods, Tigre was not so religious as to pray every time like Teita.

Tigre often advocated the name of Elis, the goddess of the wind and the storm while hunting, he sometimes went to the shrine to pray when an arrow flew well. But Elis is not a Goddess that healed disease. This sort of thing would be the jurisdiction of Moshia, the mother Earth Goddess or the God of livestock Vors.

--No, I must concentrate on the things that I should do right now.

Shaking his head, Tigre shook off his unease. If he were to fail this duty, he would spoil Sasha's kindness. However, if he succeeded and came back safely, his travels would be a good story to tell her. Holding the reins, Tigre went over the highway.

By the time Sasha woke up, it was well into the day.

Her body felt heavy, feverish. After the court physician looked at her condition, she was told to rest after drinking medicine and taking a light meal.

When she did what she was told to do and then looked blankly at the ceiling, the servitor came in.

"How is your physical condition?"

"I am a bit tired... I think. It seems that I overdid it yesterday since it was a long time since a visitor came. Though I did not have such intentions."

While lying on the bed, Sasha gave a wry smile and answered the servitor. The thing she originally wanted to speak about, she was not even able to speak about half of it.

"I have been entrusted with a message from that Earl Vorn. It says: 'I wish to express my gratitude for your kindness. Let's meet again after I return from Asvarre. I pray to the Gods for your early recovery'."

As the aged servitor reported with a wry look, Sasha chuckled and then laughed.

"What did you think of him?"

"To me, he looked like a boy of his age. Vanadis-sama seems to have a different impression."

Though likely not to mean any harm, Sasha found it amusing when he used the word "boy." To this old man's eyes, surely he might see her, who is 22 years old, as a young girl too.

"I can't say that I understand all since I only spoke with him a little... Well, I understand very well that he is a sincere person. I can also say that he possesses a strong will."

How Tigre met with Ellen, how he went through the civil war of Brune. Asking to hear all of the story that she had already heard partly from Ellen, was because of her intention to know Tigre's personality.

Whether the person himself would show off talking about his own distinguished military service, or he understated it and emphasized his good luck, it was likely to she would know the way he behaved when he talked to Ellen and the others.

Supposing he spoke frankly having noticing Sasha's intention, without dramatizing the facts, it would mean that he was a thoughtful person.

---Well, he did not seem to think deeply there.

Would that mean he had a straight personality, after all?

"Though I understood that when I met him, he is very interesting... No wonder Ellen lent him a hand."

"Does the Vanadis of LeitMeritz like such kinds of people?"

"I don't dislike him too. If that child stays by Ellen's side in LeitMeritz, I wonder if this Legnica will therefore also be safe."

The two Vanadis who had their territory near Legnica were Ellen and Elizavetta Fomina. There had been a conflict with Elizavetta last winter, and though Ellen helped and repulsed her somehow, their relationship wasn't yet restored, so it might be possible for the conflict to continue in the future.

If Leitmeritz were to become stable, Elizavetta could not interfere with Legnica anymore.

Though Ellen could not be on support whenever something happened, it would be nice if she could be a deterrent.

"Then, please rest soon."

The servitor said with a kind voice.

"You will meet Earl Vorn again. It will probably be around the winter when he comes back from Asvarre. At that moment, you will be able to finish your talk with him."

"...Yes. Thank you."

With a smile, Sasha calmly closed her eyes.

Though it was a long talk, it was still dangerous to upset her health in autumn when the cold was not yet severe. Preparing from now to spend the winter of this year was necessary.

The servitor bowed and left.

Soon, the quiet breathing of a sleeper began to leak from her thin lips.

◎

By the time he felt close to the height of the sun near the midheaven (By the time the sun was almost overhead?) and the sunlight was getting strong, the port of Lippner had come into view. Under a pure blue sky, low walls stretched from North to South and the extension beyond the shadow of a building was visible. Wiping the sweat which blurred on his forehead, Tigre loosened the horse reins and went to the castle gate.

Two days had passed since he left Sasha's Imperial Office. So far it was a smooth journey without incident.

As soon as he entered and passed through the gates in the city, Tigre opened his eyes wide in surprise. Men and women with different skin colors and facial features traversed the road, and the languages of many countries flitted about.

---There are many people, and not just people from Brune or Zchted. There are some Muozinel people with brown skin, some people of Asvarre and also some people of Sachstein.

Foreigners exchanged words to each other as a matter of course; if languages with words did not work, they would draw and show pictures. They also communicated in gestures.

Even after recovering from his surprise, Tigre walked for a while looking around restlessly in admiration. Signboards, such as those for bars and inns, which were expressed with pictures stood out immediately.

---Pictures certainly seem better than characters in such a town.

After that, he was concerned about the smell, too. From the Muozinel people who were in the traffic (crowd), there was the smell of perfumed oil and spices, (while from the people belonging to Brune and Sachstein or Asvarre, there came the scent of cheese or [seiniku] respectively.) the cheese from Brune's and Sachstein's people, and a smell similar to the smell of [seiniku] from Asvarre.

---Anyway, this is a lively town.

Similar to the castle town of LeitMeritz, but more effervescent. A merchant of Muozinel had spread a shabby carpet on the side of the street, selling jewelry on it side by side.

Next to that was a bard of Brune singing deed-of-arms poetry, furthermore next (to that), Sachstein's people were selling a number of small and large mirrors. Tigre, who was walking while enjoying the sight of such rare blending, had his shoulder suddenly struck from behind.

When he looked back, a beautiful woman who grew bright red hair to her waist was standing there. In her mid-twenties, wearing stirring clothes which emphasized her ample bosom, she suddenly came closer.

"Is it your first time in this town? I can be your guide if you want, what do you say?"

She had the accent of Sachstein's people. Though Tigre was surprised for a moment, he regained his composure at once.

"Thank you. But I have already decided where to go."

"Ara, is that so? That's a shame."

"...By the way, do you know a store that serves a good meal? Though I hope it is close to the port."

The woman looked puzzled and smiled happily when he asked so.

"Are you inviting me to dinner?"

"I don't hate speaking with someone while eating. If it tastes good, it doesn't matter if it is expensive."

To Tigre's answer, the woman shrugged with a smile.

"Well, thank you, but I finished cooking rice a little while ago, so I'll just tell you about some good shops I know of."

Tigre who was taught about three shops near the port, gave her one big copper piece as reward. When the woman received it with a smile, she disappeared into the crowd waving lightly. When Tigre saw her off, he resumed walking while carrying his luggage on his shoulder.

--Was it out of goodwill?

Those who suddenly offer guidance are not necessarily people like her. Among them, there are fellows who lure the travelers with honeyed words to the back alleys, stealing their wallet or baggage.

Tigre had also saw such persons whether in Alsace or LeitMeritz. Again, this time, he thought that he was slightly aggressive and must have appeared as if he was harassing her.

--However... Though it was unusual, maybe I am too restless.

He persuaded himself in his heart to be careful and was on the way and dropped in at one of the stalls and buy fruit.

A big barrel filled with water was cooling apples, pomegranates, and figs. Looking into the barrel, some ceramic bottles which probably contained alcohol were also sunk.

Though the summer was already over, it was fairly hot today. Tigre bought an apple, wiped it with his sleeve and bit it while walking the road.

Looking at that, he thought many people would enter this town again.

Not only race, but there was also various occupations in the town. There were some mercenaries who wore dirty leather armor, there were a sword in their kite waist, and some travelers dressed similar to their own. Sometimes, he heard the language of an unknown country, or even noticed some characters he had never seen at all.

---Is this a port city?

Tigre stopped suddenly. The man who was walking immediately behind him, passed through the side with a strange face. Twitching his nose doubtfully, he stopped. There was a strange smell. No, it was not just the smell. The blowing wind also took on some moisture.

---Was it the wind that came from the other side?...this strange smell too?

He wondered if an accident had occurred, but this smell didn't seem to concern the people of the town as far as he could observe from the circumstances.

---I wonder if I should have asked for some more information from that woman a while ago.

While thinking about such things, Tigre passed through the crowd and arrived at the port.

Tigre stopped again. But this time with surprise.

The first thing he noticed were several huge ships, each so large that one might mistake it for a shrine or a mansion. Each were either connected to a wharf, or they were about to set sail.

There were a fleet of a dozen galleys that were arranged in wedge formation [1], and there was also a sailing boat with a white sail emblazoned with the motif of some small dogs.

He had never seen a ship until now. Still, Tigre knew that a ship was something made to go across big rivers and lakes. This was the first time he saw something as huge as this.

Around the moored ships, sailors with robust bodies sunburnt from the sun were moving around busily.

There were people who had to clean the ship, those who were carrying cargo, and such as those who had to inspect the cargo. There was a

person who made a temporary grill, and grilled shellfish and fish when taking a break.

Tigre was looking up at the ship stunned, and began to walk at a brisk pace to recover from his surprise. He stood from the wharf at some distance.

"...This is the sea, huh."

After saying those words, he became speechless. Tigre was gazing at the dark blue ocean which spread throughout his field of view, fascinated. The sea surface which waved gently reflected sunlight and was dazzling, the roars of the sea were echoed continuously and sea birds were dancing in the sky. The ships which left the port gradually became smaller.

Tigre noticed that the smell he was worried about a while ago, was the smell of the sea. Wind that came blowing across the sea, was cold . The meaning of "an end of the land" became clear.

He had been told that he would encounter "an end of the land" roughly when he found the sea. Asvarre was across the sea, beyond the horizon.

Then, what was beyond Asvarre?

Not seeing yet the land, how many countries were there? Or are there dragons living in those uninhabited lands? Was there an end to this sea? Or was the sea vast and spread far and wide, forever without end?

It was the sound of the bell which made Tigre, who kept standing on that occasion and was gazing at the sea for about 1/4 koku, come to himself. Thinking about it, he had only eaten an apple since he entered this town. He spoke to the seamen, who were cooking and eating fish and shellfish nearby, and he tossed them a copper coin and got a portion of their food.

The grilled fish, skewered through from mouth to tail, was as big as a two large buns. When he dug in, the skin had a plump and crispy texture.

The shellfish soup was also delicious. Though the soup was too hot and he nearly burnt his tongue, it was seasoned with ash salt, a seasoning made from burnt seaweed, that created a saltiness which gradually permeated throughout his mouth. While enjoying the fresh taste, Tigre asked a seaman about Matvey. But he shook his head in a way to show he didn't know Matvey, then he exclaimed as he remembered.

"The [Proud Beluga(Górdyj Beluga)]'s Matvey? If it's that guy, he is usually on the wharf on the north side. You should go and look over there."

The port in Lippner drew a gradual curve near the oval, and five wharves of various sizes had been installed from the north to the south. According to the sailors' talk, it seemed that ships which entered the port anchored in the same place as long as there were no special circumstances.

Telling them thank you and farewell, Tigre headed to the wharf in the north. Having relieved his hunger, he now worried about the sea breeze that blew from the ocean. He turned his gaze to the black bow in his hand.

---I don't think that this bow will be affected by the salty air, but...

It was not just a simple bow. It was the heirloom of the Vorn House, and though he did not have more information yet, it was a thing in which gods might be involved. It had not occurred to him before that this maybe a problem as begins to journey onto the unsteady domains of seas.

---Let's take care more than usual while riding on the ship.

After some hesitation, Tigre made such a decision. Rather than fear and awe to hoof in the black bow, and thinking of it as the heirloom of his House, his consciousness as a hunter had decided otherwise.

Afterwards, Tigre caught some sailors and asked if he was able to meet Matvey.

"Do you have business with me?"

He was a man in his mid-thirties or such. Though the sailors who he had seen while coming here, were big and strong too, Matvey was even more intimidadating than them and was owner of a big physique.

His hair short and his skin burnt brown explicitly. His small eyes shined sharply. With his black silk hat, though be not seen as a rowdy person from his coat of crimson jacket wore above made with gold border, there was a feeling of coercion with his body build even if even when he stands in silence. His polite way of speaking rather felt grim.

"Nice to meet you. I am Tigrevurmud Vorn."

But never overwhelmed as he stood before the man, Tigre put his bags on the ground and took out the letter from Sasha. When Matvey received it, he looked over it quickly cutting the seal then and there.

"Oh! Does Lord Tigrevurmud know the content of this letter?"

When Tigre shook his head, Matvey gave a smile. For a tough look, it was like a smile of a pirate who had found his prey.

"It says to accompany you and help as much as possible. I cannot refuse a favor from Alexandra-sama. Please step on my ship "The [Proud Beluga(Górdyj Beluga)]"."

Bowing his head as thanks to his words, Tigre was impressed by his attitude. Even though Matvey knew the current state of Asvarre, he didn't show any fear. As expected, he felt reliable as a man whom Sasha trusted.

"I hope to get along with you. By the way, when does this ship depart?"

When the answer "after a half koku" came back, Tigre was popeyed.

"The '[Proud Beluga(Górdyj Beluga)]' was originally scheduled to head to Asvarre. You are lucky. If you had come here a little later, we would not have even been able to meet."

As if revealing a trick, Matvey laughing explained and his words continued.

"Though the '[Proud Beluga(Górdyj Beluga)]' is a merchant vessel, we often let other various customers board, so I don't think you will particularly stand out."

"I'm sorry. But I haven't seen yet that beluga thing..."

When Tigre answered so apologetically, Matvey turned away quickly. On the back of his crimson coat, there was a pretty design of a beluga^[2] jumping. Though Tigre thought that it didn't look good at all, he wisely avoided putting those thoughts into words.

"With this picture as basis, I have put on a white mantle for the title '[Proud Beluga(Górdyj Beluga)]'."

"...I understand it well."

"Though I should be here at about a quarter koku, What would you do? Will you come to my ship with me?"

"Thank you for your kindness. If it's alright with you, I would like to go on ahead to the ship. I don't want to interfere with your work."

Bowing, Tigre answered so. As Matvey nodded with a smile, he took something out of his jacket pocket and presented it to Tigre.

At first glance, it looked like a silver coin. The design differed from that of Brune's or Zchted's silver coin that Tigre knew, and a beluga, such as that was displayed on Matvey's back was carved.

"Please take that. This is like a boarding permit, if you show that to the people in the ship, they will let you through with a smile."

Saying thanks as he received the silver token, Tigre left the place. As he walked while looking at an average ship on the wharf, he was wrapped with tension and excitement at the same time. He would be finally riding on a ship for the first time.

"Excuse me."

He was suddenly called to from behind. As he looked at that place while thinking that he had been often called out today, he saw a boy-like traveler with a small bag in his hand standing.

His body, short in stature, was wrapped in a slightly soiled mantle, and only a small part of his face was visible since it was being covered with a hood cast over his eyes.

"...I'm looking for a ship called The, Proud, Beluga, Do you know it?"

His voice had an accent that Tigre didn't know. There was a little interval between the words as he uttered the ship's name.

Since he seemed to have remembered the name.

Tigre looked down at the boy with a mystified look. The boy's height was around his chest.

Supposing he was a traveler, it seemed to be the age in which one was likely to be accompanied by parents.

"Since I am also boarding the same ship, would you like to go together? And, are you alone or are there still other-"

-companions? Those words were dispelled by a sudden snarl. When he looked there with a frown, three men who probably had not yet reached 20 years old walked forward with squared shoulders.

"You bastard, you asked us to show you the way around, what are you thinking by running away from us?"

One of the three people found the boy as a result, pointing his finger he showered a roar. Whether it was his expression or his attitude, these were young people whom the word hooligan seemed to be suited for.

The boy who didn't show any sign of fear even when he was yelled at calmly responded.

"Please don't chase me. It's troublesome."

"D-Damn kid!"

The enraged man with a red face struck a fist. Tigre with the bow in his left hand as he was, while throwing his bag in his right onto the ground, came in between the boy and the man. He caught the man's fist.

"He is my companion. Could you tell me the full story?"

"Because I asked those people to guide me to the ship originally, but they tried to take me out of the port."

As Tigre tried to calm the mood for the time being, the boy answered back immediately. The man did not deny it, and moreover the two men who were watching the situation from behind clucked their tongues and began to move. He grabbed Tigre vigorously much more, and the others headed toward the boy.

Tigre's action was quick. As he thought first to release the fist of the man who had struck, he promptly twisted gripping the arm without mercy and raised it. The man screamed in pain.

Then while using the man as a shield and checking the second person, he pushed him away vigorously. The two thugs who collided collapsed together onto the ground.

---I must help that child...

When he looked back while thinking so, the battle was also already finished there. The fist of the hooligan connected with the boy's hood, on the other hand the boy had jumped into the thug's bosom, and he shot one sharp blow to his belly.

The man collapsed voiceless. Tigre with a look of surprise and admiration turned to the boy.

"Well... What do you do?"

Looking back to the thugs that had fallen on their feet, Tigre casted a cold voice.

"We are not free either. If you leave obediently, I won't do anything more."

Though the man swatted it in vexation and scowled at Tigre, he could not admit that he was no match for Tigre at all. Being challenged two against one, and despite having blocked Tigre, they were soon defeated. As the men stood up unsteadily, they lent their shoulder to their friend who held his belly and crouched down, and they turned their back on Tigre.

They disappeared into the crowd while cursing the onlookers. Thinking the uproar to be settled, the people who were looking at this situation from afar walked away.

The clamor of the port returned. As Tigre turned back at the boy, almost at the same time, the boy also looked at him.

--A girl...?

Tigre opened his eyes wide. He thought all along that it was a boy, but it was a girl.

Thirteen, or around fourteen years? With disheveled light pink-colored short hair, Black Pearl glossy kindness done to large eyes.

Her face was stained with dust storm, though the outline was roundish suitable to her age, looking well, she was beautiful enough to arouse admiration. Although she gave an impression as if she was slightly absentminded with a no table tub, she was strangely amiable.

"Thank you very much for helping me."

With a very monotone voice, the girl quickly bowed her head.

"It was not a big deal. Though I think you are ok, did you get injured?"

When Tigre asked that while picking up his luggage, the girl looked up and issued a question while tilting her head in wonder.

"I'm not hurt. Why did you help me, a total stranger? Though those people might be right."

"More or less, because there are such fellows in every town. You will understand it somehow, if you see such thing several times. Even with that, seeing three adults chasing a child, it would be a problem that they strike you without waiting any answer. After that, you did not run away when I went in between you and one those people."

At this answer, the girl narrowed her eyes while seeming to think about something. Her black pupils moving, was, this time, directed to Tigre's black bow.

"What didn't you let go of your bow? What if the opponent-"

"Even if it looks like this, this thing is my family heirloom. Though depending on the situation, I don't want to treat it rough too."

As he answered, Tigre thought that he didn't understand well this child. Although he didn't know about what she was thinking while being absent-minded, she was calm unlike a child. Her question was clear, too. When she nodded as being convinced, she saluted and gave her name.

"Sorry for the late introduction. My name is Olga. So, Proud... U-Uh, Proud... Beluga..."

She was at loss for words. Opening her eyes, which were near to half-opening, wide, Olga repeated some words desperately. Her blushing and flustered look made her seem a girl suitable of her age, Tigre gave a smile. He bent his knees, crouched and adjusted the height of his gaze.

"Proud Beluga', right? Let's go together. I'm Tigrevurmud."

It was half for a precaution not to have given his family name, the other half was for consideration to her. Giving only her name must mean that Olga was very likely to be a commoner and not a noble. He took care not to frighten her. Of course, he also considered the fact that Olga didn't give her family name for precaution.

"Tig, revurvur... Tig, vurm..."

"If it's hard for you, just call me Tigre."

Looking at Olga repeating painfully and mumbling, Tigre gave a wry smile this time.

When standing on the deck, he felt like the sea breeze became stronger.
"It shakes more than I thought."

In accordance with the waves of the sea surface, the ship had been repeating ups and downs gradually. That feeling was fresh to Tigre, it was a strange thing. He thought it will take some time until he got used to it. The 'Proud Beluga', a ship that belonged to a big class of the ships which was at anchor in the port.

Two big masts, which folded sail soared, the deck under was a three-layer barrel structure including the bottom of the ship. While the deck was narrower than he thought, Seamen were moving about busily between the barrel located in a line and the rope spread around.

Because it had a strong body with each one large wave, Olga seemed to collide with Tigre several times.

"Let's quickly go to the cabin."

As Tigre said so profusely, Olga walking beside him, nodded slightly. She put back her hood again as she gets on the ship, and Tigre found the expression she had hard to understand.

She did not speak much since then. As she was ashamed to be unable to neatly speak Tigre's name and thought that was because of her words' accent, it did not seem visible from her words or her attitude.

He did not really speak himself. Though he swore to travel alone, that said to make a companion wasn't a problem.

As he got off the ladder in the stern and entered under the deck, he walked down the aisle which was filled with the sea breeze's smell mixed with that of the wood, Tigre ducked into the room where he was told to stay for the time being while on the ship.

When he opened the door, there was a really small room. Anyway, in addition of the bed fixed to the wall and the floor, there was only about three or four steps in the room where he could stand. There was nothing to do other than put his luggage on the floor and to sleep. By the way, the key to door was a rough lock handed over at the time of the boarding.

To Tigre who was stunned, Olga said with a monotone voice.

"Well then, see you."

To her words, Tigre rethought that, unlike himself, who was accommodated by Sasha and Matvey, Olga paid the fare as a simple guest to board the ship. At the time of boarding, the boarding permit she had passed to the sailors, though was brown as the others, was made.

"If it's okay with you, may I show you to your room?"

As he asked out of curiosity, Olga approved it while nodding her head as if looking down.

While walking across a narrow passage, Tigre was observing while running his eyes to the left and to the right. This layer was for guests' and sailors' rooms, besides it seemed they were also the Armory.

When they arrived at the vicinity of the prow and got off to the nether layer, a gloomy and peculiar stench increased. The narrowness of the passages did not change. Olga stopped about ten feet in a few steps, stood in front of one door.

When she opened the door, there was nothing more than a large empty room. Compared to Tigre's room that could be called a private room of an inn, this place would be equivalent of a large room used by many people. Inside the room was 12 persons, with 3 men included.

Half of them were armed with swords and armor, they were leaning on the wall sitting on the floor. Though the others were not armed, that didn't change the fact that a dangerous atmosphere was released from their whole body. They have opened distance moderately and everyone was looking out for each other.

Those eyes mixed with hostility were of course turned to Tigre and Olga that opened the door.

--Well that is to be expected...

Though Tigre did not show that on his face and his voice, he was aware of that. The destination of this ship was Asvarre that was in the maelstrom of a civil war. Naturally, those who were going to such a place were limited. This not about persons with special circumstances such as merchants or Tigre except where mercenaries would be.

"Would you like to come to my room?"

To Olga who were standing immediately nearby, he asked quietly. On her face looking up at Tigre, there was faint surprise in her expressionless absent-minded face.

"Is it okay?"

"As you saw a while ago, it is a small room. But I'll guarantee your security. And there is also a key."

Tigre didn't know why she was heading to Asvarre. It was not like he didn't care about that, but he had no intention to ask since he was in a position in which it would be troubled if he was himself be inquired.

Therefore, though he didn't know anything about her, as expected he was reluctant to let a girl who was younger than him stay there.

Soon after that, 'The [Proud Beluga(Górdyj Beluga)]' departed from Lippner town.

A white sail gathered the winds and 'The [Proud Beluga(Górdyj Beluga)]' leisurely progressed along the azure blue sea. Tigre and Olga were standing on the deck, looking at the boundless sea and the far away silhouette of an island.

"How do you feel, riding on my boat?"

With his crimson coat flapping in the sea breeze, Matvey came walking. Turned his gaze to Olga, he made his small eyes shine keenly.

"Oh! An acquaintance of yours?"

Tigre replied "Yes" with a smile and Olga nodded silently. Tigre was impressed (without saying anything) since the fact that she was not perturbed even before Matvey's evil look was admirable.

"In about how many days will we arrive in Asvarre?"

"If the wind continues to be good like now, in seven or eight days, I guess. Since this is not a windless season, we can think that at least it won't take ten days."

Tigre was relieved to hear that. He had no other choice but let Olga lay down on the only bed there was, and he himself intended to sleep on the floor. It seems he would only have to endure it somehow for eight days.

"Matvey-san, about how old were you when you first became a sailor?"

"I was younger than you are now. Those who were born, raised in Lippner and decided to live with the sea, think that they must have their own ship first. Therefore while working and earning money in a ship of an acquaintance, they learn how to trade various things in order to handle a ship."

"Were you not scared to go out to the sea?"

To tell the truth, Tigre was a little scared. Puffing out his chest with pride, Matvey replied while laughing.

"It's something familiar around here. As for me, though I did not mind since I saw shipwrecks drifting to the outskirts of the town where I was playing in my childhood, there are, as expected, many people who still get nervous when they get into a boat for the time. Nonetheless, I overcome the fear with various experiences."

"Various experiences?"

Olga tilted her head.

"Storms, shipwrecks, pirates... In addition, by narrow ships, most fights that were like killing each other occurred and fell into a situation that it was not possible to sail. There were also things such as sharks and the sea dragon."

"Sea dragon?"

Though the last words were a little theatrical, the single criticism of dragon did not set not to attract Tigre's interest. As he asked the parrot-like speaking, Matvey gave a wry smile and answered.

"A long time ago, I saw it only once afar. Like this, his body was like a long rope, looking like that of snakes, and that body was much bigger than this ship's mast. I wondered if it was capricious or was not hungry, since it did not come to attack us, and ran away with all its might."

"Such thing is...in the sea."

"What, even among the sailors who kept going to the sea for 40 or 50 years, those who happened to see that were few so to say since it is unusual."

To Matvey's words that reassured him, Tigre sighed.

From then Tigre who asked a lot of things about the ship and the sea, suddenly asked about what was on his mind.

"Matvey-san, do you know the details about Asvarre?"

"Yes, since it's an important customer. Is there something that worries you?"

"I'm sorry if my question is not clear, but... What kind of country is Asvarre? For example, I don't know what kinds of Gods are worshipped in Asvarre."

He intended to ask Sasha and could not. He knew the Kingdom of Asvarre only of name. Also the fight between the princes. But, about other things, It might be accurate to say that Tigre didn't know almost anything.

"Alright. It seems there is no problem now with the ship, then I will have the privilege to tell you a story."

©

Asvarre is called the country of the fog and the forest. Once there was a small island floating in the North Sea.

It was the only island nation in that territory which assumed only the island of Asvarre a territory, and besides it was in a situation where five tribes were fighting with their hegemony at stake. The origin of the country name came from an island. There are few mountains and many hills, rivers and forests.

The wind-tinged heat which blew constantly from the west sea, was cooled by the time it reached the middle of the island, and hence most of the year was covered with fog.

"...So It is said, but as expected to say most of the year is exaggerated. There are also regional variations. However, for that reason the place when and where the fog also appears is not strange."

The island was under the constant threat of war. While it was a given for conflict to exist between the five tribes, the continental nations tried to invade the island aboard their ships, and pirates trolling around the coast was also a daily occurrence.

"Though it was not really a pleasant story, it is therefore something usually said that where people are, there is also conflict. There were no one who even once said that there was no stream of blood in Asvarre. However, that situation changed completely due to one hero alone. His name was Artorias. He was the king founder of Asvarre."

Artorias once said that he dreamed that he transformed into a red dragon.

The red dragon is a symbol of the king who bundles the five tribes' leaders. Artorias, who was until then a very ordinary warrior, believed in an oracle, and decided he will become King. Though most people laughed at Artorias, 12 companions followed him.

Afterwards, Artorias had always stood at the front wielding his sword, run in countless battlefields and obtained victory. Various tribes altogether followed him, the pirates were swept up, and the 12 people following Artorias who repelled the nations that had invaded the north were called the Knights of the Round Table.

"...It looked somewhat like the myths in Brune and Zchted, right?"

Tigre harbored such an impression. Regarding the myth of Brune, Charles, who became the successor of the king founder, started his battles, after receiving a revelation from a highly virtuous monk living in a holy cave shrine. And according to the myth of Zchted, those who led the fight in front of many tribes following a man referred to as the incarnation of the Black Dragon had been contested.

Without showing how offended Tigre's impression was, Matvey responded with a smile.

"Though I am not well informed about the myths of other countries, I think there are points that are in some way common."

Tigre showed consent well obediently and Matvey resumed the talk.

"Though Artorias and the 12 Knights of the Round Table are not gods in Asvarre, they have become objects of worship. Because, it is thought that all the victories of Artorias were assumed to be due to the blessing of God. It also assumed that each knight of the round table had the divine protection of angels - seemingly beings like spirits that obey God."

After Artorias' death, as the kingdom of Asvarre was spending a peaceful time without conflict, but then the peace was suddenly broken. There was

the Cadiz kingdom of the continent possessing a large fleet that crossed the sea and invaded Asvarre.

"Asvarre desperately resisted, but succumbed before the pressure of an overwhelmingly large army. It is said that it was deprived of half of the island in a short time. The king ended up sick in bed, the people who recommended the surrender and those who attempted to escape came out one after another, the fate of the kingdom was without doubt in a precarious state."

However, scolding the frightened retainers and soldiers, there was a person who showed a firm attitude. Princess Zephyria.

"While it was said that Princess Zephyria was the owner of an incomparable beauty, shall I say a lady of character, to the extent that she was not considered to be a woman, she took a sword and jumped into the battlefield. And thus, obtained victory that had the same value of what was said in the written of the founder Artorias. It was usually said: 'The armor is my husband and the battlefield is my palace'."

Afterwards, the king died without recovering from his illness, and after the conference of the court, Zephyria became the first queen of the kingdom of Asvarre. The impact, that this gave to the nations, was not small. It was because the idea of a queen in either Brune or Zchted was something absurd.

"Queen Zephyria was also excellent as ruler. The country that was shaken by the death of the king was firmly brought together by the birth of the queen, subjugated the pirates in the coast, stabilized the country both inside and outside, and later counterattacked the kingdom of Cadiz that was about to invade."

The Cadiz kingdom was defeated.

"Asvarre then took possession of the dominion of the continent. That was what the king founder Artorias had strongly desired for, and was not able to accomplish. Queen Zephyria, who accomplished it, received the laborious title of 'Supreme King', afterwards she continued to rule without even marrying, proposed a person who had the closest blood relationship with the Father king to be the successor, and died."

"The queen huh..."

Tigre gave a breath of admiration. He raised a question from the back of the hood Olga was wearing.

"I have heard stories that Queen Zephyria actually had a lover."

"I see that there are more anecdotes than usual. I know some, too. Like the vassal who secretly supported her, the wandering knight, the traveling bard and hunter of maid and such... Since there were such stories when she was a ruler, surely people might have variously swollen their imagination."

Though Tigre showed a honest agreement to the three officials of Matvey, Olga was as if she was thinking about something.

"After that, there has never been such talk until now. I think that even now Artorias and Zephyria are heroes representing Asvarre, even local farmers are proud."

"Thank you. Well then... Now, concerning the current situation of civil war?"

Tigre asked it with a careful tone.

"What I know is only the gossips that are boasted by at least 10 mouths - That there are skirmishes that happen frequently, but no big fights, and that the situation has fallen into a stalemate."

--It meant that those receiving damage (from the quarrel between the two Princes) were the people in Asvarre.

Unbearable anger blotted Tigre's expression. A stalemate meant that not to see the end line of each side. Anyhow, if the soldiers of each side did not move too much and from the beginning to the end glared at each other, then it was different from the story that he heard - that story was about the frequent occurrence of battles.

How soon before they, the soldiers, were going to involve themselves in the chaos of war without understanding anything, and without even knowing when the war would end. Even though it was not a battle they wished for.

With Tigre's feelings in turmoil, Matvey deliberately continue to speak businesslike.

"Concerning the number of soldiers, Prince Elliot seems to be superior, but on Prince Germaine's side, there is one very great general, that seems to

often overturn the numerical inferiority and to obtain victory. Therefore there is a talk that the war won't be easy to settle."

"Is there such a person? What is his name?"

"If I'm not mistaken, his name is Tallard Graham. There is rumor saying that if that man was not there, Prince Germane might have sooner been defeated."

Though Tigre was interested in the man named Tallard, for the time being he pushed aside that matter in the corner of his brain and proceeded with his thoughts. Compared to what he heard from Ellen, it seemed to be not that much different.

By the time he would meet with Prince Germane, would this situation change?

Tigre was pausing with a disappointed face, Olga whom he did not know what she was thinking about, absent-minded and expressionless gazed at him.

©

As the sun sank, the ship moored at a small island.

Tigre was in his room. Sitting on the bed, he was taking care of his bow. There was only a lamp with light that dangled down from the ceiling, swaying from side to side to match the ups and downs of the age. The door was knocked on from the outside. He put his bow on the bed, stood up and opened the door. He stood up before Olga who wore an absent-minded face and was holding a deep pot. White steam was rising from the deep pot. Before returning to the room, she bought hot water from the kitchen.

"How much was it?"

"It was two copper coins."

Only about half the deep pot was filled with hot water. Though it seemed that it would not spill even if the ship more or less shook, Tigre thought that with this amount for two copper coins was expensive.

As Olga put the deep pot on the floor, she removed her mantle. As for the clothes that she was wearing, a cuff was loose, and there was decorated

with fine embroidery on neck and sleeves. Her waist was wrapped around the band, and it was something not seen much in Brune and Zchted.

However, what further attracted Tigre's attention was the axe which she hung on her waist. It's gray edge with a pattern of very small strange engravings was short, but large enough so that even Olga with her small stature would not easily handle it. What looked out of place, was its elaborate handle.

A topaz, which was also about fist sized, was embedded at the junction of the handle and the blade, and a fine pattern was engraved on the blade as well. Seems, I guess, that most people would consent even if it said to have been built for affluent nobles to decorate their residence.

However, Tigre held a different impression. What he witnessed when he saw that axe, was...

There were the long sword that Ellen carried, Mira's spear, the bishop's staff of Sophie and Sasha's twin blades. Those that floated inside the dark and disappeared when shining like lightning. A weapon that had a paranormal power and that was allowed to enter the Battle of ownership to only the seven Vanadis.

"Are you interested in this?"

With the voice, Tigre was startled and pulled himself together. He was very likely staring too much, though he was staring at the dimly expressionless Olga, some caution had crepted into her black eyes.

"Oh! That axe has a splendid structure."

Tigre answered so while rummaging his darkish red hair. He denied the question he wanted to ask in his innermost thoughts. Certainly it was an axe with a rarely remarkable structure, but there was no way that a Vanadis would be in such a place.

"Because it is a heirloom."

Olga leaned the axe against the wall answering in a monotonous voice. She untied her obi and took off her clothes. Her upper body that became bare was slim, and the flesh was thin, and the swelling of her chest was over modestly. And with a healthy body with flexibility, though it was beautiful, it was far from maturity.

In presence of a dumbfounded Tigre, Olga sat down on the floor, took her hemp cloth from the cargo bag, soaked in the hot water and squeezed it. She wiped herself her body gently.

"...As expected, I don't think it's a good idea to expose your body in front of a man."

Tigre gently reproved the girl with pink turtle's hair with an amazed face. Olga stopped her hand that was wiping the dirt off her body and answered while returning the hemp cloth to hot water once again, when she glanced at Tigre.

"It can't be helped. There is no other place."

"Even so. You might have asked me to turn around..."

"This is a room that you borrowed, and I am here because you have let me use it."

She was very a sincere child. Tigre spilt a sigh and turned his back to Olga.

He thought that it was good that she was young.

He would have been more confused if she was about the age of Ellen and Mira. Tigre waited for a little while even after finishing the maintenance of his bow. Before long, the sound, in which the hot water was squeezed, was not heard, and the rustling of clothes reached the ear.

"It is alright now."

Looking back to the voice, Olga who was wearing cloak dressed up was sitting on the floor. Pointing at the deep pot, she continues speaking.

"Though it is lukewarm, if it is good with you, use it."

"It is so. Then, I appreciate it."

Since he had stood for a long time on the deck, even Tigre's body had been sticky by the sea breeze. It was a troublesome thing to go to the kitchen now and to buy hot water.

Changing places, Tigre wiped his body quickly. And like that when putting on a mantle similar to Olga's, Tigre pushed aside the deep pot to the corner of the room.

"Well then, let's sleep? I will sleep on the floor, so you can use the bed."

"It's impossible for me to accept your kindness to that extent."

Tigre who was going to plop himself down on the floor looked embarrassing at the refusal of Olga and raised his body. Though the girl with pink color hair was still expressionless, there was a slight anger in her voice.

"I understand that you are behaving as an elder, since I'm younger. However, I....I am independent in full-fledged."

Although she hesitated to say at first and turned down her eyes, Olga raised her face and asserted flatly. Guessing apparently that he seemed to have hurt her white esteem, Tigre scratched his head.

"I'm sorry. But, I did not intend to say with that alone. This room is considerably cold. Though you seem to be used to traveling, too..."

Probably because on top of the sea, the ship's air has become fairly cold at night. It was for that purpose that both Tigre and Olga put on a mantle.

"Let's sleep on the bed together."

Olga was said without even showing a gesture of shyness.

"There is only one blanket. As for sleeping on the floor, the shake of the ship in addition to the cold comes directly to your body. Then, it will be better to do so even if it is narrow. You look unexpectedly stubborn."

Though Tigre thought the two of them were of equal status regarding their stubbornness, he felt that talking about that would end up even worse and decided to keep that for himself. There was a request he might want further.

"I understand what you say. I understand that but... Have you no shame or perhaps should I say modesty?"

"If it seems to you like I invite you, then I put that in denial. If you do something rude, I will push you down."

"...Understood. Let's sleep together."

The reason Tigre compromised was because she was stubborn, and he thought that if that situation continued, she would not use the bed and lie down on the floor. When he saw her nude not long ago, though he thought

that it was a healthy body, he did not hold further feeling bonds. Olga was still young to think so.

He lined up and lay down on the bed. Turning the light off, both of them moved restlessly and turned their backs to each other.

Riding on a ship for the first time, he began progressively to feel sleepy since he was attacked by the excitement and the tension.

It was not long from either before breathing from sleep could be heard.

There was a Vanadis, in the port of Prepus where Tigre was scheduled to go originally.

She stayed in that town for a few days and spent those days in one room of a hotel, dressed as a noble woman who was on a trip. The hotel had a special shop with first-class dishes, was a meetinbg point for carriages and faced a thick cliff; from the word of mouth of storekeeprs, it was far more expensive than other hotels.

Prepus and it's stores prospered from the continuous arrivals of merchant ships from Brune and Asvarre, bringing with them nobles, affluent merchants and ambassadors from various foreign countries.

That Vanadis Valentina Glinka Estes, just now received a disappointing report from her subordinate.

"...Is that so. Tigrevurmud Vorn did not head to this Prepus port but to Lippner port."

In a room that existed in the deepest part of the hotel. Only the lamplight that hung from the ceiling shone in the room. With something that small, light did not reach the corners of the room, and the darkness hovered in the background. One huge sickle was leant into that darkness.

Valentina sank her body on a soft chair that used cotton and the feather in abundance, and heard the words of her subordinate. Her long black hair that seemed to melt into the darkness. Those not enchanted by her face would fall for her beautiful smile. She wore a pure-white dress and had an open book on her knee.

The subordinate was pounding his knees apart from her in front of a door and continued reporting plainly.

"Earl Vorn, who had entered Lippner without change, changed his plans, though it was thought that he had taken the wrong way because he is someone from Brune."

"Thank you very much for your efforts! I certainly already met Earl Vorn once. I wanted to greet him, but there's no helping it."

"Must I continue the pursuit?"

"That is not necessary. He must have already got into a boat for Asvarre at this time. After Earl Vorn comes back, the greeting would seem to be meaningless."

Valentina was staring at the dark and sighed softly.

---He ran away, huh.

It was Valentina that had made the proposal for King Victor to choose Tigre as a secret messenger to Asvarre, but, not directly. Another two elder statesmen had slipped in a word, and she made sure that they did not know themselves that that idea was not theirs. Though there were some reasons, this was because she wanted to meet him once at a place where there were no other Vanadis.

Regarding Tigre's treatment, he would move from LeitMeritz if there was nothing special happening.

Having said that, she must go through an official procedure if she was going to meet with him so that LeitMeritz and Ellen did not harbor any doubt.

---I wanted to avoid that. I wanted to speak with him about various things, and to know in detail his personality.

If their interests matched, there would be a possibility for them to join hands, but in case that he would be an obstacle for her ambitions, she would need to find a way to eliminate him. If it was the former, she intended to support him so that he could achieve his duty as a secret messenger safely, but things did not go her way.

---Was that Eleonora...? No it was not possible. It did not seem that she had a good knowledge of the geography of Legnica so. In that case, it would be Alexandra.

She heard that he stopped by her Imperial Palace.

What to do now? Thought Valentina.

If Tigre were to die had he been involved in the civil war of Asvarre that did not matter. At the present time, after Ellen and Mira, he had built a close relationship with Sasha. His death would be a shock to them as it was, and leaded to the deterioration of relationship between Zchted and Brune.

Even King Victor would crack in the question as for the responsibility. Nevertheless, if he came back safely, he would come to the Royal Palace. It would be necessary to report the results, King Victor will also thank Tigre for his services, and would give a reward depending on those results.

---At that time, if I visited the Royal Palace, I am likely able to meet him.

Depending on his attitude and his personality, she would reveal that it was herself that made the proposal to send him as an emissary, and might conversely let him criticize King Victor and make him believe that she is a friend.

She examined Tigre's schedule to know when he might come back and must think about a reason to visit the Royal Palace on that day. Since she was supposed to be sick and lacked physical strength.

---For example, I cannot go frequently the royal palace like Sophia Obertas.

Though it was troublesome, Valentina did not hate to think about such thing. Instead she was more of a character that seemed to enjoy that. Besides, it was convenient for her to pretend that she had a weak body.

---for example, even if I am ordered to dispatch my troops, I would delay it by the reason of disease to the very limit and retreat as soon as I fought a little, and I can thoroughly control the damage to my soldiers. Also, I report that I am sick when I am called out to the Royal Palace, collecting information as much as possible so that I can be at the Palace at the time when he would be called out there.

She came so far by doing so.

In order to let you think herself to be a human being without anything great, and getting all to pity her. While shaking off the thoughts forming in her head, Valentina turned her gaze to the inspect the book was expanded across her knees. On the front of the book "Record of the war of Zephyria", the title was carved in gold.

Queen Zephyria who expanded the territory of Asvarre greatly. In the record that detailed the battles, a uplifting introduction was provided together with the biography of Arturius in the kingdom of Asvarre. After discovering it by chance in her residence and reading it when she was young, that became Valentina's favorite book.

However, she did not limited herself only at enjoying it, that book gave her the notion of no attachment in either dream or ambition.

--Someday I will become a queen, too.

That she would show that she would become an existence that reigned in Zchted kingdom. Her blood of her House seemed to stream down as far as she examined it.

However, it was slender so as to be able to hardly insist on succession to the throne called the minority of predecessors in the family line or future charges. Therefore, she did not intend to rely on such a thing.

With her own wits, in addition to be born and raised in the Estes House, and by using the good luck to be chosen as a Vanadis, she intended to reign on the throne. Though she did not know when that will be, but she was convinced that day will come.

As she already read many times and knew the contents of the book, she would not stop once she turned a page.

The light of the room did not disappear till late.

◎

Tigre was exposed to a severe line of sight.

Five girls were standing before his eyes. There were Teita with Ellen, Lim, and Princess Regin of Brune with Mira. Ellen and Lim, and Mira were familiar with combat uniforms, and Teita did the usual maid figure. Regin's formal dress as a princess was based on white and decorated with gold and silver everywhere.

Somehow they were uniformly angry.

Ellen sharply glared here with her arms folded. Lim looked amazed and seemed to heave a deep sigh even now. Teita withheld her anger and

frowned. Mira seemed to measure the timing to put her hands on her waist, and looked ready to pour out an angry tirade.

Regin did not hide her dissatisfaction, but it looked like she was either angry or was at loss.

"What's wrong?" Being driven by impatience and anxiety, Tigre asked so, and like vomiting Ellen answered.

"Try to ask that once more after looking at your chest."

Tigre, being upset to receive such verbatim, hurriedly looked at his chest. Olga was there. She stuck her body to Tigre, suddenly naked from the waist up. In a voice without the intonation, she said.

"Please take your responsibility..."

Thereupon, he woke up. There was a wall stained slightly spreading through his view.

His body felt a slight shake.

---A dream, huh...

With a small breath, he soliloquize "that's right, isn't?" in his innermost thoughts. It was only once that those 5 girls gathered in one place. It was only that day when Tigre defeated Duke Thenardier and returned in triumph to the Royal Palace of Brune. After that time, it never happened that those five lined up all together.

---Fatigue might be accumulating. It was a trip that I hurried all the time until I got on the ship.

"If you have already woken up, I want you to release me."

He heard a monotone voice in side right away. At that time he noticed, his right hand was touching something soft and there was also a feel like hair in his left hand. He felt a small amount of heat on his body above all.

When he moved his gaze, there were Olga's eyes. Tigre's left hand held her head, and his right hand gripped her butt. Before he became aware, he was embracing her while sleeping.

"And ...it is hitting me."

Tigre took his hands away from her in a hurry, and jumped up vigorously. Everything seemed as if it was not a dream. Olga was wearing clothes unlike the dream though.

"No, that's what ..., I'm sorry."

While taking a rough breath, Tigre shamefully covered his face with his hand and bowed his head. Speaking of Olga, she woke up her body and arose in an arc without even moving her expressionless face that was hazy. Lowering her gaze from Tigre's face, she looked at around her waist.

"I was told by my mother and my older sister that it can't be helped that a man is so in the morning."

That being said, it was a shameful even in this case. All Tigre could do was to nod without speaking. Olga indifferently continued.

"Because I understand that you did not hug me intentionally, since I confirmed that you were sleeping. Your body requested the heat by getting cold at night, right?"

Though Olga did not blame the young man at all, there was a reason. The girl with pink color hair was also clinging to him as she woke up.

What Olga was surprised at, that she was about to tear off Tigre, but her foot which protruded from a hair from under the blanket felt the cold streaming from the door precisely on this occasion, and she felt the physical warmth of Tigre at the same time. That warm comfort would not be provided only with the blanket which she put on.

It was because of that, that Olga compromised quickly. Of course, she did not intend to say that to Tigre.

"I'm thankful that you said that, but...Be careful."

Tigre bowed once more with a guilty face. Nonetheless, he might be helpless only with sincerity.

After all until he arrived at Asvarre, there was no morning when Tigre was able to wake up without finding himself hugging her.

Chapter 3: A Foreign Land

When Gerard Augre visited LeitMeritz, Tigre was still at sea.

The young man, who was about 25 years old, had curled brown hair and bronze eyes, was wearing an official uniform of red and black. That official uniform showed his status as registrar of the Kingdom of Brune, and the chest seam symbolized the Red Horse embroidery of Brune.

"Though as expected, I certainly become used to seeing it since this is the third time..."

Waiting at the main gate to meet with Ellen, Gerard while looking up at the towering Imperial Palace sighed slightly.

A year ago he did not even imagine that he would become the registrar of Brune and would visit Zchted on such a regular basis. He originally thought he would inherit from his father the vineyard around Territoire land, and uneventfully spend a nice and quiet life, but missed the chance of a lifetime.

All changed after he met Tigrevurmud Vorn.

In Brune's civil war, Gerard, under Tigre's command, was responsible for managing material showing excellent ability to adjust the distribution of food, fuel, and weapons work. That ability was highly rated, and after the civil war ended, he began to work in the Imperial Court of the Kingdom of Brune.

Every two months, he would visit LeitMeritz. And he would report to Ellen the progress of the work on the Vosyes Mountains was one of his works. It was the third time now, and since the gatekeeper also remembered his name and face, he was able to enter the Imperial Palace without being kept waiting too much.

He was taken to the office after his luggage and clothes were inspected. His luggage was only a linen backpack filled with notes, props and a bundle of letters.

He was already checked at the main gate, but since he was with luggage this time, there was a need to check it again. After the inspection, Gerard sounded the door.

"Long time no see, Mr. Secretary."

Ellen, who wore a formal dress based on blue, was sitting on the office desk. Lim standing beside her.

"It's good to see that both Vanadis-sama and also Limlisha-dono seem to be healthy above all."

Gerard hung up a smile used for social etiquette and bowed in an exaggerated gesture. Ellen nodded generously, but Lim wordlessly returned the courtesy.

Though Gerard's smile was basically stemming from interpersonal politeness, it was also somewhat sincere. In front of Ellen, attitudes needed not be so rigid. However if facing a big aristocrat or high-ranking official of the court of Brune, he must pay attention to his words and behavior.

"Without delay, let me first report on the Vosyes Mountains Road."

This was the agreement that was established in accordance with the mutual non-aggression pact between Brune and Zchted which was signed half a year ago. As long as the mountain path was upgraded, the shortest highway linking the King Capital of both countries would be born. The merchants and travelers would surely take this new road, and LeitMeritz which was situated halfway would therefore also profit.

The reason this matter had yet to be resolved was because this mountain range was on the border between Zchted and Brune. If large-scale construction was performed near the border, it would surely be admonished by the others, and the highway being made also meant that aggression actions could be more convenient.

Originally it was not a talk that would be swallowed no matter what, even if a non-aggression pact was concluded. But Brune was indebted to Zchted, and moreover the contract was exchanged partly because of various circumstances and speculations.

While he read aloud the report he had prepared in advance, while fluently answering the questions raised by Ellen from time to time. Gerard was familiar with the status-quo of this road, he has a clear understanding since he just passed there from Brune on the way here. He answered without hesitation.

After listening to Gerard's report, Ellen smiled contentedly.

"Yeah. It seems to be going smoothly. Good work, Mr. Secretary."

"To hear such words from Vanadis-sama, make me feel relieved. I would also convey as such to our lord."

Gerard bowed in an exaggerated gesture in the same way as the time when he entered the office. Afterward the topic then changed over to casual conversation.

Even if it is said small talk, the main topic was about the situation in their respective countries. Most of the content was that a noble said something in the country, where there have been disputes about Muozinel and Asvarre and so on.

"What position does Brune hold concerning the civil war in Asvarre?"

"For our part, as sparks of the war do not affect us, we intend to watch it calmly. Fortunately, Sachstein's attention seems to go to Asvarre, so we are thankful for there not being a threat temporarily on the west side of Brune."

"Currently, there are three main forces in Asvarre. Prince Jermaine, Prince Eliot and Princess Guinevere... If one among those sought assistance of Brune, what does Her Highness Princess Regin plan to do?"

"Obtaining desirable result by thrusting one's neck into a quarrel of others is probably something possible only in the world of heroic tales or dramas. Not to mention that our country has yet to recover from the turmoil of half a year ago."

Gerard lifting the corner of his mouth ironically shrugged his shoulders. Though Lim frowned at his behavior which lacked in etiquette, he was soothed by Ellen's gaze and remained silence to some extent.

"That's right, isn't it? Please tell Her Highness Regin to take care of herself."

"Thank you for your concern. I won't fail to convey those words."

Then, just before finishing the chat and leaving, Gerard expressed one wish.

"After this, could I greet Lord Tigrevurmud?"

This was what he applied for whenever he visited LeitMeritz. Tigre was currently a guest here. Though just a little bit, it would relatively be easy with Ellen's permission. Gerard thought that he would obtain Ellen's agreement like before, but this time it was different. As Ellen's face looked glum, she shook her head with an apologetic expression.

"I'm sorry. Lord Tigrevurmud is not here now. He was summoned by His Majesty the King about ten days ago, and went to the King at the Capital Silesia."

"By King Viktor? For exactly what kind of business?"

Speaking with a very troubled voice, Gerard frowned plainly. However, Ellen again shook her head.

"I was not told, either. However Lord Tigrevurmud is an important guest, even for His Majesty. So there is no need for Lord Gerard to worry."

"...Is that so. It's regrettable that I'm not able meet Lord Tigrevurmud."

Though Gerard made an expression of disappointment, he backed down quietly without further questioning. He did not know what else he could ask from Ellen there.

"By the way, there is something I want to hand over when Lord Tigrevurmud returns, may I request it to Vanadis-sama?"

"No problem. What is it?"

As Ellen asked, Gerard took out a bundle of letters from his backpack, filled up the letters with both hands and put them on the desk. Ellen and Lim could not help but stare in wonder. There were nearly twenty letters.

"...What...is this?"

"There are 17 letters. Three of them are applications for marriage meeting. The remaining 14 are applications from Feudal Lords hoping to leave their daughter or niece at his side as trainee maids."

"Marriage meeting? Applications?"

Making a face as if she swallowed a bitter medicine, Ellen stared at the pile of letters. Lim's poker face collapsed instantly, and asked Gerard with a confused look.

"Excuse me, but... Are Her Highness Princess Regin and Lord Massas aware of this?"

Massas was Tigre's father Urz's best friend, and the man who took care of Tigre all the time even after Urz died. He helped Tigre in the civil war of Brune, and Lim which acted as his assistant trusted his character.

After the end of the civil war he let his son inherit his title and his territory, and accepted the request of Regin and Prime Minister Bodwin to serve the royal court. Lim could not think at all that he would overlook it.

"Of course. Since I brought it simply because I was able to get the approval of those two."

As Gerard answered as if it was a matter of course. After hearing that Ellen and Lim looked at each other.

Ellen knew that Regin harbored feelings of love for Tigre beyond status or position. Even Lim was vaguely aware of that fact.

Despite that, she let the Feudal Lords send such letters. What was the meaning behind it? Didn't they notice Regin's feelings, or were they aware of that and deliberately ignoring it?

"...Mr. Secretary."

With a cough Ellen somehow regained her composure, and asked with a cautious tone while poking the letters with her fingertip.

"What do these people think of Princess Regin and Lord Tigrevurmud?"

"They naturally swear allegiance to Her Highness the Princess. The assessment of Lord Tigrevurmud should not be low, either. After all, he was the hero in the previous war, Her Highness the Princess, Lord Massas, and even the knight squadron have deep trust in him. And he had good relationship with Zchted, so they would naturally want to have good relations with him."

With his barefaced smile, the secretary with brown hair gave a model answer as a bureaucrat of Brune. Ellen realized that she got the wrong way of questioning. It seemed that she should say it more bluntly.

"Didn't Princess Regin feel upset after seeing such a thing? Mr. Secretary, It seems the Feudal Lords thought of your country is a little different."

"...Indeed, thanks to the efforts of Lord Tigrevurmud, the life of Her Highness the Princess was saved, and she became the leader of our country as the successor of the late King Faron. Suppose that kindness becomes love, and Her Highness becomes a maiden in love and continues to yearn earnestly for Lord Tigrevurmud."

At this point, Gerard's face became serious.

"...There cannot be such a thing. Those people think so. Lord Tigrevurmud is a person born from an Earl House in the frontier, and he doesn't have anything to be proud other than his archery. Such figure cannot be suitable as the King of the next generation. Her Highness should feel the same way."

Ellen did not answer back to that, and sullenly looked at the pile of letters.

It would not be a lie, that Tigre's assessment was not low. If only a good relationship could compromise, but putting him on the throne would be out. And they believed that Regin also thought in the same way.

--It can't be helped.

Since Ellen, Lim, and also Gerard were in the "Silver Meteor Army", they knew that Regin trusts Tigre. However, almost no Feudal Lords knew about it. Even listening to the rumors of the triumph in the King Capital Nice, it would be indeed impossible to imagine so far.

Therefore, Lim asked Gerard whether anything might have occurred.

"Has Princess Regin said anything about Lord Tigrevurmud?"

"Her Highness is very concerned about Lord Tigrevurmud's situation. In presence of the minister, she once said that she cannot use goods, Territory, or wealth to express her gratitude, and that upon his return to Brune she will reward him accordingly."

"W-Well, it is natural. It is thanks to Tigre... Lord Tigrevurmud that she is currently there."

Ellen's face became stiff, though she was about to return to her usual tone, the Vanadis with silver white hair somehow corrected her track and nodded. Not be able to express her gratitude with only goods or territory.

So what on earth was she up to?

"Then, speaking about the fact that even though Lord Tigrevurmud was bestowed the title of "Knight of the moonlight" by His Highness King Faron, the land of Alsace which he inherited from his father is requisitioned and in the co-management of Her Highness the Princess and Vanadis-sama. In addition Lord Tigrevurmud himself was forced to leave his homeland, where he was born and raised, and came to Zchted..."

After saying this, Gerard deliberately stopped his mouth. And then he bowed with an exaggerated gesture when saying sorry for complaining about it. Able to say such a criticism though Ellen doesn't care, it seemed that his cynic daring did not change so far.

Gerard, saying things like that, should probably have heard about the story from Tigre. Ellen immediately understood that he deliberately intended to say such things. Probably, this had also led to the firm belief of the Feudal Lords that there was no way Regin would love Tigre.

--We decided so, and Tigre has also consented...

Ellen crossed her arms once again look to the pile of letters, and then sighed.

Limited by her status, Ellen could not read their thoughts, and even if she knew the attempt of the Feudal Lords, she also had no reason to prevent it. She felt sympathy for Regin who could only confirm these letters with a depressed face. Lim also bore a wry smile, imagining Massas ruefully sorting these letters.

"...I understand. When Lord Tigrevurmud returns, I will give him these. I promise you, I will take good care of these letters until he comes back."

"Thank you very much."

Gerard's face seemed relieved, and he left the Office this time for sure. After closing the door, in a relaxed mood, Ellen and Lim looked at the pile of letters by contrast with a trouble face.

Gerard who left the work office made a request to the soldiers who were going to send him off to the main gate.

"Sorry to bother you, but can I stay for a while? There is someone that I want to greet. Of course I got the approval of Vanadis-sama."

The latter half of the sentence was a lie. He knew that the soldiers would be unable to judge the truth from the lie immediately. The soldiers

uneventfully complied. When he said the name of the person he wanted to greet, the soldiers had no doubt agreeing.

---Though I was not able to ask neither Vanadis-sama nor Limlisha-dono...

Gerard wanted to know by all means what kind of life Tigre was leading nowadays. Though it was not as if he was personally interested by it, there was a reason behind it.

Regin and Massas would be very glad if he talked to them about Tigre. Especially Regin who brightened her blue eyes shining like a child, and even the change of her expression was very interesting to see.

As Gerard had greed for success in life like everyone else, in order to please his boss, he had to bring some information about Tigre back.

Walking the corridor of the Imperial Palace led by the soldiers, Gerard soon spotted the target. In the figure of a maid with white apron on top of the black long sleeves skirt, It was a girl who was in a twin tail chestnut hair. Gerard called out to her with a radiant smile.

"Long time no see, Teita-san."

The girl, Teita also noticed Gerard and politely saluted him with a smile.

"Ah! Gerard-san, you came."

"Yeah. I was just talking earlier with Vanadis-sama."

And then, Gerard and Teita chatted for a while. There were many topics that she was interested in, like Alsace's situation or matters about Massas who was fed up with the royal court duty. Teita also again, happily talked about the events of Tigre's life recently in the Imperial Palace.

"Massas-sama is doing well as usual, huh?"

"His Excellency the Prime Minister Bodwin-sama and him often bickered."

"Like Gerard-san and Rurick-san?"

To the innocent words of Teita, the secretary of Brune was at loss for words. Though he would just think of it as irony or provocation if it was another person who said it, and because he knew that this girl would not have this meaning, he was troubled about how to respond.

Suddenly looking away, Gerard saw the soldiers who were standing silently nearby. Because they bore the duty to guide Gerard to the main gate, they made a smile as hard as possible and were waiting faithfully for the talk to finish.

"Excuse me, but I want to talk with her a little more. Since I will feel bad for making you wait any longer, I think that I will ask her to guide me to the main gate."

Though the soldiers looked perplexed, Teita was the maid of the guest of honor Tigre, and also trusted by Ellen and Lim. Living here for half a year was also not short at all. The soldiers briefly explained the situation to Teita, and asked if it was okay.

"I understand. If it is something like that, I will bear the task to see off Gerard-san properly to the main gate."

Like that Teita watched the soldiers leave. Gerard gloated secretly at the moment. Up till now it went as planned.

"By the way, Teita-san. About Lord Tigrevurmud."

With his radiant smile intact, Gerard changed the topic of discussion. Teita looked at Gerard with a puzzled face.

"...Is there something wrong with Tigre-sama?"

"Vanadis-sama said that he went to the King capital Silesia, but... Has Teita-san not heard anything from Lord Tigrevurmud?"

"... No, he didn't say anything special."

Teita denied shaking her head, but her eyes swam for an instant, and her wavering voice lowered. Gerard did not overlook the subtle change on her face. Instinctively, he believed that something must have happened. He boldly stepped forward closing the distance between them, and strongly stared at Teita's face.

"...Really?"

Teita flinched from Gerard's abrupt action, her shoulders shivered and retreated one step. Gerard took another step forward promptly and shortened the distance to her again.

"Th-That..."

Teita looking helpless, continuing to shake her head in denial, even Gerard could not bear to mind. However, this was unavoidable in order to find out what she was hiding.

"Stop that."

A voice suddenly came from behind. A shock and a pain ran to his head, and Gerard staggered. When he looked back while holding down his head, a young man wearing armor was standing there.

With a well-featured face and a slippery head without even one hair, he had a sheathed sword in his hand. It seemed that he clubbed Gerard's head with it.

"Even if it was just for one moment, what intention do you have to threaten the maid of the person whom I serve, you malicious person of Brune? Depending of your answer, I might club you again."

"When I wondered who it was, it was just you... "

Gerard groaned annoyingly. The man's name was Rurick. Despite his short fellowship with Gerard, they had (what we might call) a close bond relationship.

"It is bad for my reputation for you to say I threatened her. I could not possibly do something like that to her."

"Even the eyes of five-year-old child would see that you are scaring her. You bastard, what are you trying to do?"

As if to protect Teita, Rurick standing in between two people stabbed Gerard with sharp eyes. The secretary of Brune sighed.

"You may not understand even if I explained it to you who had dull eyes and a cloudy brain, but I was only talking with Teita-san about Lord Tigrevurmud. Since I was a little interested, I leaned forward carelessly."

"...This insidious damp man says so. Teita-dono?"

Looking back at Teita, Rurick asked with a very earnest face and tone. Teita, with a troubled expression, looked back and forth at Rurick and Gerard's faces.

"E-Err... What Gerard-san says is true. While talking about Tigre-sama, we became very keen on that."

Tough Gerard was inwardly relieved to the brave words of the maid with fox-tail millet colored hair, but her words did not seem to dispel Rurick's suspicion.

"Teita-dono. You don't need to force yourself to cover up for this man. Even if you are afraid of a reprisal, in place of Lord Tigrevurmud, I won't let him lift even one finger on you."

"Do you put on air of a knight?"

"I'm originally a knight. That's why."

Replying immediately to Gerard's misnomer, Rurick stared at Teita. As Teita unintentionally laughed, she slightly bowed to show her gratitude.

"Thank you Rurick-san. But he really did not threaten me."

"..... I understand, since Teita-dono says so."

Though he could not consent, if she said it like that, even Rurick could not hold on any further. However, seeming to feel the need to give a warning to Gerard, the bald head knight turned towards the secretary with brown hair.

"I must report about what I saw just now to Limlisha-dono just in case."

"Wait a minute. Why do you have to do something like that?"

Anxiety was mixed with Gerard's voice. As for what was bad for him, Lim was friendly with Massas. In the worst case, she might convey this matter to Massas in a letter or something.

"It will be only natural to report to the top if something unusual happened within the castle."

Folding his arms, Rurick proudly replied. Gerard was not able to just retort to this sound argument. Though he requested help to Teita with a gaze, only an apologetic smile was returned.

--It seems here that I have no choice, but to withdraw...

It was certain that Rurick would become a hindrance if he kept up any further with this conversation. Besides, He was able to obtain something of that small talk about Tigre's life nowadays. As tales of his travel to Regin and Massas, even if it was not complete, that portion could certainly be satisfying.

---And if I tried to find about the rest myself? First of all, I must dispatch someone to the King Capital Silesia and then examine what kind of business Lord Tigrevurmud was called for by the King of Zchted.

"Well then, I will leave first since I will apparently be haunted by an unpleasant gaze if I stay here."

"Ah, then let me see you off to the main gate."

As Teita remembered and said so, Gerard was accompanied to the main gate by both Rurick and her. Despite of repeated misnomer exchanges with Rurick while walking down the corridor, it did not reach extreme disparagement, and would end with an incomplete burning feeling since Teita was near.

"May the blessing of the gods be with you, Gerard-san."

Teita waved. Gerard waved in return to say goodbye to her while deliberately ignoring Rurick's presence. And then left the Palace.

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It was seven days later that Tigre reached Asvarre across the Breton Peninsula at the northwest edge of the kingdom of Brune since he got on the '[Proud Beluga(Górdyj Beluga)]'.

When looking at the port town of destination from afar, Matvey relaxed, a color of relief spread through the passengers' faces. Two days later, the tense atmosphere that covered the ship finally defused.

"It seems we end our travel without incident somehow or other."

On the deck, Matvey looking back at Tigre and Olga smiled brightly. Just the smile in the face of this man looked like he was up to no good in general, a little seepage. However, Tigre, who had become accustomed to that in this sea trip nodded with a smile.

After passing the peninsula two days ago, the sailors became laconic, their behavior were somewhere frenzied and they seemed to put their body in the battlefield. Even passengers also took in such a mood, and kept their weapons beside whenever and wherever they were inboard.

Tigre, Olga and Matvey were the only people calm.

"It's because the pirates may appear."

To Tigre who asked about the strange mood, Matvey replied dishearteningly.

"Though I think Lord Tigrevurmud is aware of that matter, among the two princes who are currently fighting in Asvarre, Prince Eliot employs pirates as subordinates. Prince Eliot's base is in Asvarre island, in the neighborhood's backyard just like those guys."

Matvei frowned and explained while drawing a map on space by a fingertip.

"Aren't they prohibited to aim at the merchant ship of Zchted?"

It was Olga who asked so. She wrapped herself in a mantle, when coming out of the deck, and she was being covered with the hood over her eyes.

"Sadly, in this world there are words very convenient to use such as 'made a mistake'."

As Matvey shrugged, he said that he would look at the state of the surroundings and left from there. Tigre was looking at the scenery of the small port town that gradually approached, when Olga tugged at his sleeve.

"Tigre. Can you shoot that down?"

Extending her arm straight, what Olga pointed to what were seabirds flying gracefully under the cloudy sky. After observing the seabirds for a while, Tigre shook his head.

"It is meaningless, even if I shoot it."

Seeming not to understand Tigre's answer, Olga tilted her head.

"It will only fall into the sea even if I shoot it down. Though this ship is loaded with a shallop, I may not possibly borrow it to collect only seabirds."

He explained so while looking at the seabirds, but Olga seemed to interpret it as making excuses. She narrowed her eyes at the back of the turban and said with a bored voice.

"You travel only with a bow and handled it with great care, I thought that you would be very confident... or do you think I deliberately make things difficult for you?"

"I do not think you deliberately make things difficult for me, but it is a difficult target."

Tigre with an indifferent look replied softly to Olga. This was because he knew that she didn't say it just on a whim.

On board in addition to sleeping without other things to do, Tigre talked to her a lot. She was heartily surprised that Tigre held a weapon in only not more than a dagger with a bow.

"Is it so rare?"

Instead of being curious Tigre asked again. Olga was surprised, or amazed.

"Most people have a sword and a hatchet as weapons. And after that many have spear and ax. Even if there are people who use the bow in addition to such weapons, I have never seen people using only a bow."

"A hatchet is good. I will prepare that from the next time."

Tigre also carried a hatchet when hunting. It was because it was convenient to cut away highly spreading weeds, obstructive branches and leaves. However, he never thought of carrying it in a trip. To Tigre who was impressed, Olga asked.

"Are you confident with the bow that much?"

"More than with a sword or a spear."

Though he stated the fact, Olga having difficulty to say anything turned her gaze at Tigre.

While recalling such a conversation several days ago, Tigre observed the seabirds again.

Though they were not so fast, they were flying pretty high. The wind was blowing, and since there were on a ship, the scaffold was also unstable. It would probably be difficult for someone with ordinary skills to make an arrow hit the mark.

---To begin with, Can that stuff be eaten? Since I see such a bird for first the time...

Tigre returned his eyes to the port town while intending to ask Matvey later. There was a small hill in the immediate place from the shore, and

cityscape spread along gentle ups and downs. He saw a building that seemed like a mansion on the hill. One might overlook the sea from there.

The captain yelled out a roar like instruction, 'The [Proud Beluga(Górdyj Beluga)]' folded the sails and began slowing down little by little. The ship's power converted to wood-pulp went forward to the port town under the leadership of the pilot vessel.

Maria was one of the very common port cities in the kingdom of Asvarre.

The harbor was crowded with people handling the goods. Booths were located in both sides of the street, the merchants, the travelers and the housewives who came out for shopping, all sorts of people coming and going, were wrapped in a chaotic buzz of the atmosphere.

A certain big fish was chopped into chunks on the spot sale. The basket was filled of small fish caught just now, still alive and kicking. The sea water dripped from the shellfish piled in heaps in the barrels. Moreover, mushrooms, cabbage and wild grass were also placed on the mat for sale.

"It is lively, but not as much as in Lippner. I wonder if it is because of the civil war."

As Tigre said his honest impression, Olga beside him also nodded.

"The number of ships is different, though the port size is about the same."

To those words, Tigre looked at her with a surprised face. Even when talking about the bow, this girl's calm was completely at odds with her age, as if she was accustomed to traveling in general. The only thing that surprised Tigre when leaving Lippner was that he did not observed well both the port and the ship.

'The [Proud Beluga(Górdyj Beluga)]' anchored on the wharf, disembarking passengers in succession.

Tigre and Olga waiting for Matvey got down last.

Though Tigre applied his foot on the hard ground after a long time, he felt a sense of incongruity to his body and stamped several times on the spot. Olga asked him with a wondering face.

"What are you doing?"

"I may only be tired, but I feel like my body is still shaking."

"...I also feel that, too. What is it?"

The two looked at each other tilting their head. It was Matvey that gave them a clear answer.

"We are calling it wave motion sickness (drunkenness), since the body got used to the state of vibration. It will be mostly settled if you leave it."

"How long will it be if we leave it be?"

Olga asked with an uncanny voice. Matvey frowned and answered.

"If you walk just for a moment, your body will get used to the hard ground. Although there are rare cases where the person turns worse like illness, you will probably be alright since you did not get seasick. Shall we go eating for the time being?"

Matvey led the way out of the port walking down the street.

---As expected, it is different from Brune or Zchted after all.

The fence surrounding houses, wood materials and assembly methods, the pattern of the walls, as well as the structure of the roof. The differences of these details, as well as the conversations of people, that leaked to the ear strengthened the feeling of having come to a foreign land. The writing were occasionally saw without fully understand what its meaning.

Before long, Matvey chose one shop and entered. Tigre and Olga also followed. A fragrant smell assailed their nose at the moment they passed through the door, and the noise struck the earlobe.

In this snug store, more than half seats was already filled. The guests were not just the residents of the town, they were also passengers and sailors. Deep in the store, the three people sat around a round-topped table, and Matvey ordered sake and dish to the daughter of the waiter who pushed visitors aside.

Tigre were looking around the store. Such places did not change wherever he went.

"After this we are going to meet with someone."

Tigre looked at Olga who was covered with the turban over her eyes also in the store. Although it showed itself to be suspicious, other guests were also far from being decent. He decided not to mention it.

"We plan to leave this town today at the earliest. What will you do?"

Olga to whom he asked, cast down her eyes, seeming to think. She paused, and opened her mouth about a count of three.

"May I accompany you until midway? Concerning meals and lodging, I will pay my share myself. I won't do something like causing you trouble."

"If you tell us the purpose of your trip."

As Tigre replied so, Olga remained silent once again. Perhaps wanting to ease the atmosphere, Matvey was about to say something. Tigre held him back and continued.

"I won't ask you to explain in detail. Like I say just now, I will see a person, it will be good if you tell to a certain extent. I won't even ask your identity. However, I want you to speak about that at least."

During the sea trip, when he was sometimes free, Tigre had thought about Olga, but did not reach a conclusion.

Anyhow, she did not just fit that age. She also seemed to be accustomed to traveling, and she also had a splendid ax hung to her waist. Even when she was in front of him or Matvey, she was not perturbed or scared, and she also put a dignified attitude.

If she was an itinerant entertainer or a bard, then it was strange that she did not have tools for work. If she was a fugitive guilty of some crime, her behavior was rather sloppy (her words and deeds are extremely rather free). Even if he did not ask her anything, she said that he did not also talked too much about himself. It was like saying simply that she suspected him.

He considered in some way the possibility of spy to be an extreme conception, but, as expected, she was too young and it would be rather conspicuous.

This silence lasted a long time. As the waiter carried the bier with which the big glasses of ceramic was filled to the brim, and put them on the table, Olga finally spoke.

"...Is it no good if I say that there is something that I want to see?"

She looked at Matvey and Tigre. They showed neither approval nor disapproval.

"Does that mean there is a place where you want to go?"

To Tigre's question, Olga shook her head.

"I just want to walk around this country properly, and hear various stories in towns and villages at which we will drop in. I want to go those towns and villages, meaning there isn't particularly any place where I want to go."

It became more and more incomprehensible. Leaving aside Brune and Zchted currently with no sign of war, here was Asvarre.

Tigre violently rummaged his darkish red hair and sighed. As he pegged Matvey.

"My orders were to assist you."

It seemed that he entrusted him the decision. Thus as Tigre asked him whether it was fine with his gaze, the scary-looking sailor said with a happy smile.

"Sailors always encounter various mishap situations on the sea. If I let a girl all alone to loaf, the beluga on my back will look down on me."

Tigre thanked him again and said sorry. Rather than being Tigre's subordinate, he was only cooperating because it was Sasha's request. But he was willing to respect the will of youngster who probably did not have half of his age.

"I would like to hear from that man looking good with the white dolphin, our future plans?"

"We will leave the town as soon as we can supply horses. We will arrive at the destination city after two or three days. Though it is a camping-out tonight, we will stay at a small village along the highway tomorrow."

Matvey which would expect a question answered smoothly without settlement. Tigre especially made a severe expression and looked at Olga again.

"We don't mean to stay long in Asvarre. We will return to Zchted quickly after we finish our business. So if you do not mind, our trip together will be until that town."

Having Olga accompanying the both of them were not without its benefits. Since it would be very difficult others to imagine them to be secret agents if they took a child along.

"...I understand. Then, until that town."

Olga moved her small body and bowed to Tigre and Matvey respectively.

"Well, I wish us a happy journey in this country, cheers!"

The trio picked up each cup, and bumped them lightly. Tigre gulped down the beer vigorously. When resting after drinking the half, he frowned.

"It is very bitter, this wine."

Though he also drank beer in both Brune and Zchted, he had not seen so far any kind of beer that left such a bitter taste on the tongue. Distorting her facial expression in the back of her turban, Olga seemed to think so too. Only Matvey's smile remained.

"There is also a way of drinking it while diluting with water, wine or herb. Or, would you drink another liquor?"

While being lost, the dish had been carried. There were oatmeal and beef stewed with liquor which were Asvarre's peculiar dishes. And moreover, since it was situated at the seashore, there were also salmon and cabbage soup, eviscerated stomach stuffed with herbs and mushrooms grilled cod fish and shellfish cooking a lot.

On the table, painted crushed potato bread and mutton fried soybean were also lined up. All this was filled with fragrant smells in the steam, and just by looking at it, saliva accumulated in the mouth. They were at loss of where to start.

The oatmeal had a unique smell and texture, and since the sake of beef stew had a strong flavor, it was just right eating it with bread. The chum salmon that cooked the soup used pickling ahead of time, salt taste entered in the soup just right.

As Tigre and the others smacked their lips over those many dishes, though they were talking about their cruise until today and their impression of this town, they were also listening to conversations from other tables.

"...It seems that before we leave Zchted the situation here had not changed."

It was about the fight between Prince Jermaine and Prince Eliot. Although small-scale battles occurred frequently, it seemed that both sides failed to account for the advantage.

"It is likely going to move from now on. Because it seems that Prince Eliot left the Asvarre island that is his base, and came to the continent."

Similarly overhearing the nearby conversation, Matvey said.

"It is probably to encourage the soldiers of his army."

"There is also the possibility that he gives directives himself. As for the number of soldiers, the fact that Prince Eliot's side is superior didn't change."

After answering so, Matvey picked up the whitening fish to his mouth. Olga put her glass down, asked.

"I hear Prince Eliot's troops had pirates accounting for great numbers, but are they so many?"

"You know that half a year ago, a civil war occurred in Brune. I heard that just thousand of the pirates were indeed remnants of the defeated army who fled to the North at that time."

After listening these word to Matvey, Tigre almost the menu card to his throat.

"Others are Sachstein's mercenaries, as well as a group of people known as sea people, it's quite a mixed bag. And if this fucking situation dragged on longer, those who fail to get a job and become penniless will appear, Zchted will be affected. For example..."

Stopping his hand that was eating, Matvey suddenly put on a serious expression.

"As there are those who are making a living in the trade with Asvarre merchants, what will happen when they are no longer be able to trade if those merchants were killed due to the civil war? You may say that they should look for new trading partners, but, if such a thing was easily found, they would not have a hard time."

Listening to the conversation of the two people, Tigre tore the bread roughly and threw it into his mouth.

Even if it was to escape from starvation, becoming a pirate was not something allowed. The misfortune could never become a reason to dispossess (to deprive) an innocent person. So, instead of becoming a pirate, was it better to starve and die? No. What should be done was...

"Lord Tigrevurmud."

Unwittingly, Tigre fell into silence with a serious face. Matvey said with a soothing tone and a fearful expression.

"Are you tired from the sea trip? Food will cool down, you know?"

"Ah, no, I was just thinking about the upcoming thing."

"For us here is a foreign land. Although it may not help, but I hope you will not be so depressed."

"...That's right. Thank you."

It was for consideration towards Matvey that Tigre expressed his gratitude. Matvey understood about what the young man was getting angry about and worry, so he persuaded him gently.

Tigre fiercely stretched out his hand to the remaining food on the table. To face Jermaine in an adequate condition with stamina and energy, He convinced himself that he must properly eat from now.

◎

Along the road flanked by a small hill, a small village came into view when they exited the forest. It was two days later since they left the port town of Maria.

The three people were on horseback and had tied their luggage to the saddle. Matvey led the way, followed by Tigre and behind could be seen Olga's shape.

Though Tigre thought Olga to be used to traveling, she was proving it by action. When they camped out yesterday, she hunted hares of two wings only over the past half-time (in only a half koku).

Although Tigre also shot down two wild birds, and the supper of that day became very much gorgeous, Olga pulled off (did a good job indeed) really well when handling the birds and hares. She continued the work without

faltering (fluently) drawing out blood, tearing off the skin and pulling off wings for instance, Tigre was impressed.

"Though it is still daylight, we will rest in this village for today."

While looking up at the bright sunshine in the cloudless sky, Matvey that was at the vanguard said those words.

"If we leave on the early morning of tomorrow, we may arrive at Valverde which is the destination at afternoon."

After finishing the harvest, straw color of dried grass were scattered sparsely in the field, and farmers were resting in a position of their own way. Made beyond the field on the roof which piled up the flat stone stucco walls, the houses made of structure were lined up. Remembering the villages of his hometown, nostalgia crossed Tigre's eyes.

Suddenly one farmer turned around their way and noticed Tigre and the others. His calm face changed radically into that mixed with fear and suspicion, and he called out to other farmers and run hurriedly.

"...What's going on?"

For villagers to be wary of strangers was not a rare sight. However, Tigre sensed a different atmosphere from there.

"Isn't it because Matvey-san's face scared them?"

Olga muttered so, and Matvey showed an exaggeratedly sorrowful face. Even Tiger could not refrain from laughing. It was unusual for this girl to speak of a joke, and thank to that the strain mood softened.

"In any case, I do not want to scare them too much. Let's go down from the horses."

Since talking on horseback would wither the other party. Getting off the horse, the three people went to the village by pulling the reins. One man walked their way. His linen clothes were stained with soil, and his face had the trace of wiped sweat. It was an understandable figure in a day when considering they was working on the farms until just a while ago.

"Mrs. Travelers, what kind of business do you have with this village?"

"We would like to ask for food and overnight accommodation. Also for horses."

It was Matvey which could speak Asvarre's language fluently that answered, and he took out several pieces of silver coins from his breast pocket and handed them to the man. After looking at the silver coins, the man glanced at Tigre and Olga. Tigre said with a smile to reassure him.

"There were also such villages in my home. I do not intend to loiter and to interfere with your work."

Matvey conveyed it again in Asvarre's language. The man let out a breath of relief, and seemed to loosen some wariness.

Tigre and the other two were guided in the man's house. The man seemed to be the village mayor and he was living in (it was) the only 2-story building in this village. There were a hovel and the cereals storehouse near the house, too and he had his family help move the horses there. Tigre and the others were provided with the spare chamber on the second floor of the house.

Though there was nothing in the room, if there was something they desired, it would be said to prepare that as long it was possible. Tigre left negotiations to Matvey and walked to the window.

He could overlook the aspect of the village from the window. He saw the entrance of the village where they came. Because children were looking up at Tigre standing at the window with great interest, and when he waved his hand, some would hide quickly or run to escape, but there were also several people who waved their hand awkwardly back.

"Lord Tigrevurmud. The talk was settled."

At Matvey's voice, Tigre turned toward him.

"It is impossible to sleep on bed, but it seems that they have prepared three thick blankets, so one per person. The meal will be a moment later. He said that we will have one smashed chicken with soup and bread. After that, three cups of hot water in a bucket."

After saying to there and suddenly lowering his voice, Matvey added happily whether or not he would be sticky about one part of the chicken. Tigre shook his head with a bitter smile.

Rather than having to withhold from the village, he avoided stimulating be worried about how scared he was when he first saw, it was correct.

Laying the blanket which had been carried on the floor, Tigre lied down on it. As the relaxation of stretching at ease his limbs, Olga displayed an astonished expression. When the person of the village left the room, she removed the turban that she was wearing.

"It is untidy..."

"Because they didn't use this place for a while."

"Certainly. I wonder if I can also taste the freedom throughout the whole body for a while."

Matvey agreed, as he also laid on the blanket in the same way. As the dimly expressionless Olga looked down at the two men, she laid her body on the blanket.

Over a period of time, the trio did not do anything, lying down in silence.

Then, the time that passed was only about a half koku. Tigre frowned suddenly. He had a feeling that he heard something like a scream in the distance.

Tigre and Olga woke up almost simultaneously. One breath minutes later Matvey got up rather slowly. Tigre grabbed his black bow kept in his hand hauling the quiver with arrows and compromised to the window. He inquired the situation outside carefully.

--Who are those guys?...

There were thirty, no around forty men in the village. They wore a discernibly rough atmosphere, and despite being armed there was no uniformity in their equipment. If there were some people who were wearing leather armor which struck the rivet, there were also those wearing chain mail. The weapons were also swords or spears, the ax with a pike mallet was not uniform.

And each house of the village shut the door firmly. As if waiting for the storm to pass while holding their breath. Only several people who had come out to the field were keeping standing on that occasion together with their horses or cows.

When the men had their eyes on one house, their flung spears and pike mallets against the door while booing aloud. Stepping over the wrecked door, several people went into the house, and many screams broke out.

"Are they... Brigands?"

"It is possible that those bandits have their stronghold in the neighborhood."

Matvey which was looking at the situation across the window from the side opposite of Tigre, replied in a calm tone.

--But considering they are brigands, it's strange.

Tigre frowned. For an attack the attitude of those men was too laid-back. The villagers also, rather than running away, were just only shutting their door firmly.

Even while thinking, and those who attacked the houses were different men, or those who went towards the field surrounded and beat the farmers. Even those who bludgeon livestock to death seemed to be laughing happily.

It was certain that they would tremble violently if they were people weak in mind. It was a terrible spectacle that could get Tigre sick just by looking. When the right hand of Tigre which could not bear anger lengthened to the quiver, the door of the room was knocked on. Matvey moved quickly and went for the reception.

A woman of about 45 years old was there. She was from the village chief's family. Though her face was paled, since she was safe when she was here, she said that she wanted to close the sliding shutter and would like us to remain still.

"What are those guys? Brigands?"

To Tigre's question, the woman shook her head with a look.

"Those people are the soldiers of His Highness Jermaine."

Not only Tigre, even Matvey and Olga stares wide-eyed at that answer.

" Prince Jermaine's Soldiers...? Those guys?"

It was suddenly an unbelievable story, but there was no reason for this woman to tell them such a lie. Above all, their behavior also and even their correspondence of village entrance was understandable, in such a situation.

At that time, the woman's look turned to Tigre's hand. To the left hand which grasped the black bow tightly, and the right hand which was extracting the arrow.

"W-What do you plan to do?"

The woman's voice was shaking in fear. Tigre did not answer. She trotted over and clung to hold down the hands of the youngster. She appealed in a face and a voice that seemed to burst into tears at any moment.

"Please. Don't do anything strange. Please..."

"But... But, you should not let those fellows run loose."

When Tigre painfully spit out those words, She blotted tears to the edges of her eyes and twisted her expression.

"You will leave here tomorrow, right? We will live in this village not only tomorrow, but also the next day and the day after that."

Feeling bitterness spreading within his mouth, Tigre was not able to answer to her mournful voice.

Even if Tigre sent away those soldiers here, the situation would not improve. They will revenge themselves on this village soon after. In the worst case, they might burn the village saying the villagers defied Prince Jermaine.

He must endure it until their tyranny passed. Even if they made sacrifices.

It was the way that this village chose.

Although the woman tried to continue her words further, the scream which had been heard scratched it out.

When only moving his head, Tigre looked outside from the window, as several girls were pressed down by many soldiers, they were dragged in the center of the village. Villagers who apparently tried to stop it, were beaten and crouched down before the Jizo (statue).

"Matvey."

Tigre suddenly called the name of the sailor of white dolphin. To the dreadfulness with which the voice was tinged, Matvey's shoulders shook with a startle.

"Tie up this person. No, tie up all those present in this house and roll them on the first floor. And then, block up the first floor with whatever you can use. Even doors and windows, everything."

Two persons, the woman and Olga made an expression of astonishment. Matvey understood immediately Tigre's intention, he bound the woman's arms from behind.

"What are you trying to achieve?"

Tigre did not answer back to Matvey's question. Carrying an arrow piece to his waist he applied his foot to the window frame. In the next moment he clung to the wall on the outside with a light motion and quickly climbed up on the roof. No one among the soldiers on the ground noticed.

Tigre set up the bow when settling down on the roof and nocked an arrow. He aimed at the soldier who was going to cover the girl. The distance was approximately 100 alsins. A piece of cake.

The shot arrow cut the wind, flew and went through the head of a man so that it was inhaled. The body of the man who ceased to breathe inclined and fell down beside the daughter. Several persons doubtfully turned their eyes to their friend, and as they found fault with the arrow in his head, two flat knots were already released.

The arrow which stuck in the scruff went through the throat, and the second let a bloodstained sickle peep out. The man fell down to the place and writhed painfully without being able to utter voice.

The men finally noticed the existence of an enemy. On the other hand, Tigre not changing his cold expression in not even one bit, shot the third arrow and killed the third person. Flashing in his mind was the memory of one year ago.

Alsace central city Celesta that is his hometown. Zaian, the son of the Duke Thenardier, invaded with his soldiers, many private houses were crushed and baked, and many people lost their life.

The state of the girls held down by soldiers just reminded the young man the account of hundred million (many times) when Teita was being once attacked by Zaian at that time.

When he thought of the scene that he saw then. It was not within Tigre to be able to overlook it in silence.

Tigre shot and killed the third person, while Matvey was tying up the woman skillfully at the back in the second floor under the roof. He did it carefully with a gag, and pushed a dagger against her scruff. Although he would not do something like hurting her, he made a scary face to stir up respect by fear.

"Even Lord Tigrevurmud gave a cruel order. It might be a little painful, but please forgive me."

"...Please, explain."

It was Olga, who watched the course of things in silence until then, that asked Matvey. Doubt and suspicion were swirling in her black pupils.

"Don't you understand? No, excuse me. Let me explain it later since my hands are busy now. It will be faster if you help me."

To the answer of the Matvey who seemed happy, the dimly expressionless Olga slightly changed, and wrinkles appeared in the middle of her forehead. Being lost in her thoughts, her eyes went around the inside room and then were directed to the outside of the window.

"Will it also counted as help if I cut down those guys?"

Matvey which was going to leave the room with the woman whom he restricted stopped.

Although he was also surprised that Olga's tone lost the usual politeness, and became even more colder, the scary-looking sailor couldn't help turning around. He tried to open his mouth to ask what she meant, but was forestalled.

"Yes or no? Answer only that. Your Hands are busy, right?"

"...It would be convenient that you could do so that even one person doesn't die."

Having answered so was utmost, and when he finished saying, Olga was moving. She kicked the floor, slipped through the side of Matvey and the others and ran in the hallway.

After Matvey opened his mouth as if having grown senile and saw her off, he finally came to his senses at the gaze of the woman.

At this time outside the house, Tigre just shot and killed the sixth man.

--That was a terrible miscalculation...

As for the soldiers, though half was running about in confusion still reeling from the surprise attack, the remaining half was trying to counter attack following the directives of a man who seemed to be the adjutant.

Tigre had already shot and killed the commander who led them.

At first he took down the commander to confuse them, and furthermore reduced their number and retreated.

Though Tigre planned so and it went smoothly until the first half, the adjutant who fled quickly into the shade of the building desperately scolded soldiers and restored their morale.

When the commander fell down, it was natural for the adjutant to act as a substitute, but the fact that this adjutant splendidly took the reins of troops could be seen as miraculous. Even a decent army, rarely bounced back early this much.

--Well, how do I pull it off?

While nocking an arrow to the black bow, Tigre thought calmly about the next development. It was looking as if he was predominantly advantageous, and, in fact, Tigre knew that it was not the case.

Tigre could not help but surrender if the soldiers of Jermaine held a villager hostage while hiding themselves to the shades of the buildings. Even if Tigre forsook the hostage, they would use the village as a shield to the arrows as it was. In that way the fight would become difficult if he surrounded this house while protecting himself.

"The enemy is only one person, you know? You, 'Ranra', What are you afraid of?"

"I didn't think I could do something like this alone! How about you step forward without letting only your underlings do it and hiding on the sly."

Covering the jeers of the man, Tigre also reverberating inside the village just shouted at him. He had already shot down 8 people. Since they were sniped in a high place, Jermaine's soldiers backed away (got cold feet). They wanted to overcome the resistance (to face down the opposition) like that.

At this point, however, one of soldiers threw an adze (hand ax). Although Tigre avoided it at once by twisting his body, he destroyed his posture and slipped. He avoided falling down from the roof, but the adjutant cried out without overlooking the chance.

"RUSH!"

In response to the instruction, four soldiers ran. Went to the house in which Tigre was standing.

"Oh no-!"

Though Tigre shot an arrow quickly and took down one soldier, the three remainders rushed quickly at the door.

It was at that time. The door was opened with sufficient vigor from the inner side, and a girl who wrapped her body short in stature in a mantle ran out. It was Olga.

when the soldiers of Jermaine understood that the opponent was a child though she stood reflectively, they were merciless and swung down their weapon which they had in their hands.

A dull sound was chained and blood splash danced suddenly. Tigre was about to appeal for her name in surprise, but it was Jermaine's soldiers who screamed the next moment and fell down.

Olga as always with the turban covering her eyes, was silently standing inside the puddle of blood which was spreading In her hand, there was now a dark red ax stained with blood.

--In one blow? No two blows...

It was not only Tigre, even the village girls who had late run away and the soldiers of Jermaine who hid themselves in the shade as well failed to get out in time and stared at the girl with an stunned face.

It was a dreadful skill. Among the three soldiers that attacked her, two wore chain mail and one was in leather armor reinforced in metal piece. The girl's ax cut and tore their belly. A girl of only 13, no 14 years old who wielded an ax.

Olga, as if unmindful of the surrounding in dismay, was observing the state of the men. The soldiers of Jermaine shuddered to the enemy who appeared newly and was not ordinary. Some turned their eyes to the

adjutant for instructions. Olga was waiting for their reaction. She started running towards the adjutant fiercely was she was thinking whether she was easy and stepped over the body of the step. The adjutant got impatient and cried.

"B-Bring her down."

Receiving that order, two men attacked Olga. However. One of them was pierced to the neck with an arrow that Tigre shot and fainted in the ground. Even the remaining one jumped an arm off from the hit of his elbow with Olga's ax, and crouched down on the spot while shrieking.

Realizing he could not escape, the adjutant lie in wait, lowering his posture. The weapon which he had in his hand had been a spear. In terms of reach, it was very advantageous than the ax.

The adjutant thrusted out the spear. With only one slash, Olga blew away The dark gray tip of the spear that was approaching her.

The action of the girl with pinked colored hair did not end yet. She ran over the edge of the spear which was no longer than just a stick at one go (breath), and shortened the distance. The adjutant's head flew in the sky leaving a trail of blood.

Olga, without taking notice of the body, thrusted her ax at the man who ran in order to support the adjutant.

"Throw away your weapon."

The man realized instantly, that he would lose his life if he took action otherwise. Fearing the girl who was only half about his age from the bottom of his heart, he discarded his weapon crossed his hands behind his head and surrendered.

The other soldiers discarded their weapons, suddenly cried and turned their back and escaped. As the adjutant fainted, there was not the person who was able to command them now.

◎

Tigre immediately released the soldiers that Olga arrested caught. And gave them a short order.

"Go back and tell. That People of a foreign land wanted to see Prince Jermaine."

Afterwards, Tigre sat down on the doorway of the village facing the highway. It was at that direction that the soldiers of Jermaine escaped. If they waited here, Their comrades would show up sooner or later.

Soon after, Olga and Matvey accompanied by horses were walking.

As Tigre looked at the two, though somewhat tinged with gloom, he asked with a quiet expression.

"How is the state of the village?"

"Since one of the village headmen came over to that house, we explained the circumstances while having a look at the inside."

The village though poor, in order to prevent fox or wild boars from entering, was surrounded with the fence of a tall tree. While tying the horses there, Matvey explained in a cheerful voice.

"Were you able to tie up all the people of the house?"

"Yes. Since the village headman seems to come here later, they would appreciate an explanation from Lord Tigrevurmud once again. And then, they will likely do the burial of hooligans."

"You saved us. Thank you very much."

When Tigre bowed, Matvey smiled wryly and waved his hand.

"Don't mind it. Because I was also on the point to turn a blind eye primarily since I forsook easily while seeing such a scene. One more thing, Lord Tigrevurmud. I would like you to quit soon the polite way of talking. It will also be easy for you, won't it?"

"...Oh! If you say so."

When he seemed to be at loss and scratched his head, Tigre changed his expression and turned toward Olga.

"I must also give you my gratitude. Thank you. Honestly, you saved me."

Without this girl's involvement, though it could not be said that he would be defeated, there was no doubt that he would be force to put on a hard fight. However, Olga shook her head to say that such a thing did not matter.

"Leaving that aside, I want you to explain. Why did you tie up the people of that house?"

Tigre stared steadily at her involuntarily. Though she was still expressionless. He felt a strong core (the wick) in her quiet voice. This might be Olga's true nature.

Thinking a little, Tigre instead of talking as if talking to children, said it while considering the other party as equal.

"While receiving such treatment, the people of this village didn't resist. As far I have seen the soldiers' attitude and the village's reaction, I conclude such a thing won't happen once or twice. Perhaps, they may have also smashed the village as a warning to others."

The expressionless Olga got fogged. Tigre continued in a serious tone.

"It is the policy of the village not to defy the soldiers. If it opposes, it will rouse the anger of those guys and they will retaliate. Not only that, it will make another flipped through the involvement of other villagers. Much more if it caused the confusion between the people in position like the village mayor and the village headmen when doing so. However... if I tied them up so that we weren't be disturbed, it would save face to the village."

Tigre remembered the words of the woman who clung to him. They must live tomorrow and also the day after tomorrow in this village.

Olga looked down and muttered, as if very dissatisfied.

"Isn't there the option of escaping, abandoning this village? To a place without outrage and tyranny..."

"Have you ever plowed a field?"

Giving a mild smile, Tigre kindly asked After blinking several times, Olga shook her head. Plotting a look, Tigre gazed at the long distance field.

"It's hard, you know. Tough. I've grasped a hoe only once. At first, I remove pebbles, weeds and chip of wood as much as possible. It's hard work. Next, I dig up the soil, but it is still hard labor because I must dig the hoe in quite deeply."

The field of his hometown came into Tigre's mind. The scenery which he just watched along with his late father.

"While using the hoe, if it hits the stones mixed among the soil, and the edge bends or is broken, you must repair it. In case there is no smith mentor and only wooden hoes can be used, it will take a great amount of both time and effort."

"... If there is a way of making a cow or a horse pull a plow."

"It doesn't mean that chicks also keeps cattle's and horses. That is expensive."

To Tigre's answer, Olga fell in silence without a word. Matvey opened his mouth to brush the atmosphere that was about to be sunk heavily.

"Well then, Lord Tigrevurmud, what do we do from now on?"

"I will wait for a subordinate of Prince Jermaine here. If early, he will come over even tomorrow. Though it was somewhat strange, it was done as planned."

"Did you come to this country to meet with Prince Jermaine?" Olga black eyes infected with the touch of unexpected look.

"Yeah, so our travel together will end here."

He did not think they would part in this manner. But Tigre believed that this child would certainly have no problem. Whether it was riding the horse, or the level of hunting, as well as excellent combat skills, Olga's strength should not be underestimated. Speaking of her equestrianism, her skill in hunting, and now that admirable fight style, Olga's ability was the real deal.

But the girl with light pink hair spoke some unexpected words that Tigre never anticipated.

"Tigre. If good, would you not let me accompany you as your attendant?"

"..... The reason?"

Asking this, Tigre took a few breaths to.

"I want to personally meet the man called Jermaine. - Can't I?"

Just also thinking that she would give a categorical answer, and not actually expecting her expression to change, she put on a child-like weak expression. Tigre folding his arms muttered. He did not think Olga was unaware of how dangerous it was to see Jermaine now. He do not really understand her thoughts.

"Who are you exactly?"

After wavering, Tigre asked bluntly.

"Until now, we did not ask each other's identity because we planned to say goodbye with you here, we decided no longer to ask. But since you must come with us, it is another matter. Tell me."

Olga momentarily turned her gaze, shook the head, seemingly to reconsider it. Subsequently, she went straight on Tigre's eyes.

"You may not believe me."

On her dignified expression, In a calm tone to let you feel her intention, the image of the traveling girl from the two that got used to seeing did not remain at all.

"I am one of the seven Vanadis of Zchted. The Moon Princess of the Roaring Demon(Bardiche) Olga Tamm bestowed with the land of Brest and the Curse of Reversal(Houju no Genbu), the Dragonic Tool(Viralt) named Muma is me."

Tigre and Matvey stared wide-eyed and were at a loss for words.

Standing before the two people now was not the girl without sociability who was in some way absentminded. She was an ikkitousen (match for a thousand) warrior accepted by a Dragonic Tool. She was a Vanadis whom he couldn't help but be terrified if he looked close.

Chapter 4: Tallard Graham

The moon rose higher and the village was almost wrapped in the darkness of the night. Only in the face of the street entrance was there illumination, where a campfire was constructed in that corner of the village.

Around the campfire were three people: Tigre, Olga, and Matvey. They alternated guard duty, and now Olga, wearing a cloak, rolled in a thick blanket and lied down.

Several village girls secretly brought blankets a little while ago. In addition to that, they prepared portions of bread and cheese and left hastily as they put them in a place slightly away from Tigre. It was as likely as not an expression of their gratitude for saving them.

While throwing kindling into the fire pit to fuel the campfire, Matvey opened his mouth.

"What should we do?"

It was the matter concerning Olga. Tigre shook his head while tearing the bread which the village girls left.

"Do you know anything about the Vanadis Olga Tamm?"

"I don't know," said Matvey, shrugging his shoulders.

"I swear allegiance to Alexandra-sama, and I also admire Eleanora-sama who is intimate with Alexandra-sama, but I am not interested in the other vanadis. Just like how a mere villager does not care for the great lords of far-off lands."

"I see. Thank you."

Looking up at the night sky of stars twinkling, Tigre sighed.

He did not think Olga's statement to be a lie. He did not think she was the kind of girl to say such ludicrousness in light of the situation, and it was also much too erratic considering it not to be true.

Moreover, he could be convinced having already seen her strength and that axe.

---If I remember correctly, she became a vanadis at the age of 12 and left the country soon after...

When living in LeitMeritz, he had the opportunity to hear from Ellen about other vanadis.

However, she too did not know much regarding Olga. Rather, she did not seem to harbor much interest since they had only met each other once. In addition, there was the fact that the territories they both govern were quite far from each other. Ellen also said that she did not know the reason for her trip.

Even when asking Olga herself why she came to this country, she only answered that it was for personal reasons.

---Really, what should I do...?

At that time, what Tigre saw at the distance immediately shut his thoughts. Small red lights could be seen in the darkness. There were three of them.

"Considering the size, it should be torch fire."

Aware of Tigre's gaze, Matvey also looked to the side. The light that seemed to be a torch had been heading their way.

"If those are Jermaine's soldiers, then they responded quite fast."

"There were those guys' peers in the vicinity, they serve as retaliation and warning, and moreover as concealment... Aren't there too few torches for that?"

Hearing Matvey's speculation, Tigre nodded and checked his black bow. If they were planning a night raid, they would not have prepared torches and they would boast their prowess in large quantities if they threatened them.

Olga, supposedly asleep, abruptly stood up. Though expressionless as usual, she did not seem to be half asleep.

"...Enemies?"

"I pray to the gods that they are not."

Then soon after, two of the three torches stopped while only one flickering in the darkness approached. Tigre nocked an arrow and then he cried towards the torch.

"Stop!"

The torch halted. In the darkness, came the voice of the young men accosted.

"May we come there? We are only two here. We will put down our weapons."

'He sure has guts', was the impression that Tigre held for the owner of the voice. There was a campfire at Tigre's feet, so they should be able to see that he set up a bow and an arrow. Nevertheless, the other party's voice was still very calm.

After confirming that Olga and Matvey held their weapons, Tigre answered them to come. The sound of armor clattering approached, and as they had said, there were two men who appeared. One of them was a short blond haired and transparent blue-eyed young man of about 25 years old. His suntanned face was sharply and severely tightened, and mixed in his look were ambition and curiosity. He was a young man with a medium build who looked grand in armor.

The other was a thin man who seemed to be somewhat older than the young man. With gray long hair casually tied up with a string, he was wearing armor that seemed heavy. His long face and thin sharp eyes were reminiscent of a fox.

"We would like to know who among you the messenger of a foreign land is."

The young man rotated his neck in inspection with a smile in his whole face. Tigre withdrew his bow after confirming that the two men were unarmed. However his right hand was still holding an arrow and the bowstring.

"That is I. My name... You may call me Tigre."

"Tigre, eh?. I am Tallard Graham. This thin man here is my subordinate Kress Dill. Are those two people your followers?"

"Did you say Tallard Graham?"

Before Tigre could answer, Matvey, surprised, openly gazed at the young man.

"Don't tell me that the Lord Tallard, the invincible man under Prince Jermaine who accumulated victories in succession is you?"

Incidentally, Tigre recalled that he was told such a story on the ship. As for Tallard, he joyfully brightened his eyes, turned toward Kress Dill standing behind him and said with a smile.

"Did you hear that, Kress Dill? Even foreigners already know my name."

"There are currently people who still come to our country. It would not be strange for them to know it."

Kress Dill sullenly answered in contrast and turned his thin eyes to Tigre.

"Tigre-dono. You say you came to meet with His Highness Jermaine, but can you tell us, here, for what kind of business?"

"Before that, I want to confirm one thing."

Tigre carefully asked. There were several points that he was very concerned about.

"What is your rank?"

It was in the early afternoon that Tigre and Olga drove away Prince Jermaine's soldiers from the village. The time passed had, at most, been only half a day. Even if Prince Jermaine's stronghold, Valverde was close, the response was too fast.

Moreover, from Tallard's face no feelings of anger or hostility could be seen from his face. Even though there was a reason to be, as more than ten soldiers were murdered here.

"I am a commander of a hundred cavalrymen. To put it plainly, I am not that great."

Putting a hand on his waist and stretching his chest, Tallard answered quite indifferently. A commander of a hundred cavalrymen, as the literal meaning says, refers to the command post of one hundred cavalry. Tigre frowned, Matvey was dumbfounded and Olga curiously tilted her head. Rumors about his invincibility did not match at all with his status.

"Though I say it myself, I'm very confident with my connections, you know? If it's proper business, I can negotiate with Prince Jermaine so that you can meet after two or three days."

Tigre did not say anything and just pondered. Tallard was bright and merry, and his words and deeds were indeed very attractive. However, Tigre could not rely only on these to trust him.

--Do I try and be honest here first?

"Before that, I want to make something clear. Your friends who attacked this village were killed by me with this bow. On this point, what do you think?"

"Speaking of that, I did not thank you yet."

Tallard suddenly put on a serious face, after straightening his posture, he bowed with Kress Dill. Tigre was surprised and confused by his behavior and his words. Olga and Matvey were also not able to hide their surprise.

"For having saved this village. Also I thank you for eradicating the scoundrels."

And thus, as he raised his face, the blond haired commander of hundred cavalrymen made a deep sigh.

"I was also trying to eradicate them myself. Due to the fact that Prince Jermaine lets them run loose, it happens from time to time."

While scratching his head at the remark that sounded more like a complaint, Tigre and Matvey exchanged looks filled with admiration. That statement he just made, clearly criticized Prince Jermaine. His subordinate Kress Dill was just standing there silently, not even trying to blame Tallard.

"As for trying to eradicate them... How concretely?"

"First of all, we would try to persuade them, and if they don't listen, we label them as bandits and crush them."

Tallard made a fearless smile, and answered as if it was a matter of course leaving Tigre dumbfounded. After laughing for a while, he put on a serious face again.

"Let me say one thing, I don't speak like this with just anyone. It's simply because I show respect for the actions you took in protecting a foreign village that I also told you what I really think here."

"We did not save the villagers, we only protected ourselves, you know?"

Tigre said so because he hadn't yet discarded his doubts about Tallard. He intended to come to a conclusion based on his reaction to these words. Tallard made an impudent smile and answered as followed.

"If that is true, then you should have run away from here long ago. But this way, you waited at the village entrance in order to protect them from possible retaliation... Isn't that so?"

For some time, Tigre silently stared at Tallard. If the behavior and speech of this commander of a hundred cavalrymen was an act to entrap them, this way was too unexpected.

"Please tell me just one last thing. It was at noon today that we drove away the soldiers that attacked this village. How did you come so fast?"

"It can be said to be a lucky coincidence. I was patrolling around the outskirts of Valverde for the maintenance of public order, and then I met the party who escaped when I happened to pass by this neighborhood and heard the story. Though it can be said that it was rather unfortunate for those fellows."

"What did you do to them?"

"If the commander or adjutant were still alive, they would be punished. I asked them to group up to five or six and act as serfs for the border village. I will forgive their crime if they are honest for one year."

"Indeed." Tigre consented. There was no doubt that it was their misfortune.

"I understand. I will trust you."

To Matvey who asked confirmation with a look wondering if it's alright, Tigre slightly nodded. He took out two rings from his bag and handed them to Tallard.

"I'm a messenger from the Kingdom of Zchted. However, I can't stand a public statement."

Tallard who received the rings showed them to Kress Dill standing behind. Kress Dill's thin eyes reminiscent of fox furthermore narrowed.

"... There is no mistake. It's the seal of the Kingdom of Zchted."

"Understood. Well then, I will have you come to Valverde with the pretext of hearing the story regarding the matter of this village. Is Tigre-dono fine with that?"

Tigre did not immediately answer to Tallard's words and looked to Olga. The pink-haired girl silently nodded.

"Then, please."

After waiting until dawn, Tallard met the village chiefs and the murdered villagers. He heard from them the circumstances in detail and promised compensation to the village. His attitude didn't have a bit of pressure, his words were very clear, and the villagers looked relieved.

Afterwards, the trio left the village with Tallard at noon, and it took a long time to reach Valverde.

◎

A group of eight, led by Tallard, walked through Valverde's main street. Tigre and the other two were therein. The destination was of course Jermaine's Castle.

As for the impression on Valverde, it was, in a word, ordinary.

The walls were high and thick, the large walkways paved with no crevices, and the town has a water supply and sewage systems. In terms of urban functions, it can be said to be fully equipped, but it was not luxurious.

"It gives the impression of a gray town."

Overlooking the street scenery, Matvey couldn't help but express such a feeling. The walls of the buildings standing in a row were gray and used dark brown brick for the roofs. The stalls dotted along the street were similarly colored. There might be a slightly drab image of this city in such a place.

"This is better. His Highness Jermaine would be restless if it was too busy."

Seeming to hear Matvey's words, Tallard came their way. There was a bow in his hand. His left waist was girded with a sword and his right with a quiver.

"Anyway, I have always wanted to ask... Tigre-dono."

Tallard stood next to Tigre and ,with his blue eyes, looked at the black bow and asked out of great interest.

"Of what is it made? It has been bothered me since I saw it in that village. It doesn't seem to be made of yew or elm."

Both are trees often used as bow materials. Tigre shook his head.

"Actually, I don't know, either. It is an heirloom passed down from generation to generation."

He didn't mean to show off about the incredible power of this bow. Since, above all, even Tigre himself didn't yet fully understand it.

"I see. However, seeing the fact that you only have a bow, you must be very confident. If anything, I am better at this than a sword, too"

Saying so, Tallard flipped lightly the bowstring of his bow, and showed it.

"As you are a messenger of Zchted, it would be inconvenient, but I do want to have a match if there is an opportunity."

"That's true. If there is an opportunity."

Thinking it to be a little regrettable, Tigre answered with a smile. It has been a long time since he met a man good at archery. Perhaps since Rurick.

After engaging in a heated talk about the bow for a while, of the greatest prey shot down thus far, and who shoot an arrow the furthest, Tallard suddenly changed the topic.

"Tigre-dono. What do you think about this city?"

"Just looking at it from the road, I cannot say anything, but it is good to be surrounded by a forest and the hills."

From Valverde's north to east stood slightly elevated hills in a row with, with a deep, black forest opening to the west and a river flowing through the south.

When Tigre answered so casually, Kress Dill, who strode in front with Tallard sharply glittered his eyes.

"Oh! So you already saw through the difficulty in sieging and the ease of protecting of this city?"

Tallard inwardly admired such a statement for Tigre who looked puzzled, and at the same time realized that the other party misunderstood his intentions as it was understood immediately. To the battlefield, it is indeed just like he said.

"No, actually that was just my opinion as a hunter..."

"Don't be so modest. As expected, it is worthwhile that you were chosen as a messenger."

Lowering his voice to the latter half of his speech, Tallard friendly patted Tigre's shoulder. Tigre, a bit confused, scratched his darkish red hair and finally decided to just forget it. It was probably nothing serious.

"Anyway, why would Prince Jermaine choose this city as a stronghold?"

While engaging in small talk with Tallard, Tigre straightforward suddenly asked this question. The structure was indeed very strong, but judging from the distance to the coast, it was hard to say it was safe. If Prince Elliot led his troops and marched to the mainland, it would immediately become a battlefield.

"Well, that's simple. It's because he advanced toward the interior of the continent after having moved away from the center of Asvarre."

Tallard answered in a natural tone. Olga, walking behind, tugged on Tigre's sleeve, whose person had tilted his head not understanding the meaning of this sentence. She was still wearing the turban over her head, covering her face. While whispering, the vanadis user of the axe said.

"...To summarize, the center of Asvarre is the island."

"That small one understands well. In other words, it's like that."

As Tallard laughed in admiration, Tigre finally understood.

"Prince Jermaine couldn't bear leaving the center of Asvarre."

Prince Jermaine himself believed that he was the King suitable for the next generation of Asvarre. Probably, his pride would not allow setting up his base too deep into the continent after being driven from the island.

"There are two more reasons. One is that Fort Lux is about two days from here to the northwest. General Leicester who serves the Prince is protecting that area with three thousand soldiers."

"Even if Prince Elliot's troops want to cross over, they must break through the port city of Mariajo, as well as Fort Lux."

While drawing a map in his head, Tigre nodded.

"In the same vein, the second reason is because this Valverde is the first city that was made into a base when Queen Zephyria invaded the mainland. It is within reason to share good fortune in the "Supreme King"'s achievements."

When Tallard spoke of "Supreme King", Tigre couldn't help but stared wide-eyed. Because in the blond hair young man's eyes seemed to shine a light of strong emotion.

"...But this place is also near the border of the kingdom of Sachstein."

To Tallard's reply, Olga raised such a question. When Tigre came to his senses after hearing her voice, the drive that appeared in Tallard's eyes disappeared without trace.

"That's right. But, for these last few decades, there's been no conflict with Sachstein in the vicinity of Valverde. If you ask why, it is because they have no reason to attack us."

Tallard gladly explained so, while drawing a map in the void. Seeing his behavior, Tigre re-thought thereupon if it was just his imagination (of seeing the drive in Tallard's eyes). Tallard continued.

"The main highways which connect Sachstein and Asvarre pass along the south by far rather than this Valverde. The advocacy of war for the border was always there. Besides, trying to capture this city shall be quite time-consuming. Therefore, as a base, it is quite good."

In that instance, a shout came from the street calling for Tallard. Tallard cheerfully answered back and walked over with a smile. Matvey quietly whispered to Tigre.

"He's a really popular man."

Tigre, thinking the same thing, slightly nodded.

Tallard has been already accosted several times since they entered this city. It was either a bar girl, or middle-aged male artisans, or even soldiers on patrol in the town and so on, and they got some good wine, and talked

about daily topics such as "the taste of that dish of that restaurant is very good" in a certain shop.

--I understand that he is sociable, but... It is a strange feeling.

Judging from his brightly dignified behavior, let alone the fact that he is a commander of hundred cavalrymen, this could even make people think that Tallard was the lord of this city.

While fiddling with such concerns, Tigre saw the castle. Though modest, it looked like it was of a sturdy structure, with the Asvarre Red Dragon flag fluttering on the spire.

"We've finally arrived..."

Tigre took a deep breath and then immediately tightened his face. From now on, things would become difficult.

After being kept waiting in front of the castle gate for a half koku, the trio entered the audience hall where Prince Jermaine resided. The hall with the depth was also simple and sturdily made. The decoration lining the walls and the floor was likewise very modest.

Inside, only both the luxurious chandelier installed on the ceiling as well as the deepest seat decorated with jade items gave off a magnificent brightness.

The chandelier had two folds of silver rings inside decorated with gems, and the silver rings, lined up with the candle light reflecting off jewels, cast a fantastic light to the floor. The throne also used plenty of raw silk, and beginning with pearl and coral, it was gorgeously decorated with a variety of jewels.

The man sitting down on that throne was Jermaine. He was 27 years old this year.

The first impression that Tigre held of him was something round. Either the outline of his face or his protruding belly.

Though one could say that his face was beautiful. However, probably because the meat stuck too much, it felt like it has left glimpses of the time it had a beautiful shape. His physique was the proper size, that's why his belly size seemed more unnatural.

The elderly man standing quietly next to Jermaine should be the chamberlain, and beside him holding two guns in both underarms, were five knights in armor standing side by side. Though Tigre's black bow and Olga's axe were entrusted to the guards at the castle gate, should they do something suspicious, they would immediately be surrounded.

"I hear you are a messenger from the Kingdom of Zchted."

A hoarse voice emitted from Jermaine's mouth. Tigre bent down on one knee on the spot while pushing forward to give the letter which he prepared. Olga and Matvey followed suit.

"In response to a request by the King of Zchted, His Majesty Victor Arthur Volk Estes Tsar Zchted, I have come. I am Tigrevurmud Vorn. As I am still unfamiliar with Asvarre's language, please allow me the use of a translator."

Matvey fluently conveyed Tigre's words in a careful tone. The chamberlain stepped forward, received the letter, and trotted back to the Prince of Asvarre's side.

Jermaine seemed to be more interested in Tigre than the letter, and while pulling a slightly sarcastic smile to the edge of his mouth, he asked.

"Raise your head. Now, I have indeed received the request... Is what I would like to say, but was this 'request' not a 'command' from your monarch?"

"It is to the Kingdom of Brune and Her Highness Queen Regin that I pledge my allegiance. There is reason for my residency in the Kingdom of Zchted."

And then Jermaine finally took a look at the letter in the chamberlain's hand.

"How specific would be the support? It is fine to mention "support", but those words alone are not enough."

"If you agree to establish friendly relations with us, you will see warships of Zchted Kingdom lined up in the east sea a month later. Brune will also take advantage of the point of sharing the border with Asvarre, and support his Highness for victory."

The latter half of his lines seemed to be concrete, but in fact was not. Tigre also had to use rhetoric of this level.

"I see. But, the Kingdom of Zchted is backing that bastard Elliot. One of the seven vanadis of that country visited him as an official messenger and should be staying there."

Probably not able to suppress his anger, the face of the prince of Asvarre, as he said his younger brother's name, was distorted with rage, and his voice full of malice, couldn't mask his irritation. However, Tigre did not panic or get anxious. Not that he could boast about it, but he was accustomed to this level of animosity.

"That's why we came here not as official messengers, but as secret messengers."

"Is that so? So in order to secretly come, you had to kill my soldiers!?"

A spiteful sarcastic remark was thrown from the throne. After an interval of a breathing time, Tigre calmly answered.

"We only merely protected ourselves."

In Jermaine's round face, nobody noticed his eyes emitting a violent light. Regardless, Tigre and the two others (Olga and Matvey) lowered their head, because the chamberlain was also near. However, only Tigre and Olga for an instant felt to their skin that a strong hostility was released from the throne.

"If it is about the vanadis... Here we also have a vanadis."

At Tigre's words, Olga immediately stood up and saluted.

"I'm the Vanadis Olga Tamm who is granted the Land of Brest by His Majesty Victor. Pleased to make your acquaintance."

As Olga expressed her greetings, Tigre on the bow posture thanked her. Seemingly unable to hide his tension. Her expression was not comprehensible, but her statement was careful, and her intonation solid, too. So, it should be okay.

It was Olga herself who proposed to reveal that she is a vanadis. "Why would you do something like that?" asked Tigre. "I want to see Prince Jermaine closely" she answered.

"Oh! You were a vanadis, huh. I thought you were a pet child."

After Jermaine expressed derision, he scenically mended these words.

"No, that was rude for me. However, aren't you a little too young? To think that you are fit for the battlefield is..."

"Then, could you return only my axe that is in custody at the castle gate now?"

"What are you going to do after we return your axe?"

To Jermaine who lied on his back with legs outstretched on the throne, Olga answered while looking left and right.

"Whether anyone here among the knights here can beat me or not. Let's have a competition in martial arts - Rather, I don't mind even if it is 10 vs. 1."

Tigre, also surprised at this utterance, raised his head, and the knights who were standing in a row right and left also expressed excitement If it was only the first half of her challenge, they might have laughed at the brave provocation of the girl pretending to be tough and called it off, but they could not overlook it when she said "10 vs. 1".

One of the knights handed his guns to his nearest comrade and stepped forward. He was a particularly well-built man even among the knights. Olga understood that he had a sturdy body even from the armor.

"Your Highness. Please excuse my rudeness, but I would like to show here to those foreigners our military might, by all means..."

The knight didn't take his eyes off Olga while appealing to Jermaine. His face turning pale in anger under his helmet and he tightly grasped his fists firmly.

"Well, Vanadis-dono, if you can boast that you can deal with ten people, then you won't have any troubles fighting only one opponent barehanded, right?"

"Please, wait. About her rude words, let-"

Tigre was trying to break in between in a hurry, but he was stopped by Olga's hands and pushed aside. In front of a man who had nearly twice her height and moreover had a sturdy body with armor, she was so calm that Tigre and Matvey were surprised.

"Your Highness Jermaine. Is that alright?"

She even had the composure to ask permission towards the Prince of Asvarre on the throne. Olga was expressionless as usual and did not seem to be frightened in the slightest. But all the people who were in this place except Tigre and Matvey took it as bluff.

Jermaine also had his deduction. This was a great opportunity to cheaply buy Zchted's proposal. Although she said herself to be unreliable, it was Olga who provoked the knights.

Each knight who was standing in a row here were those whom Jermaine trusted, and who had considerable amount of skill. Because of this, he prepared the site to greet foreign emissaries. Moreover, they were generally very irritable. Even if having a child as an opponent, they would not go easy on him, and would batter him without mercy.

Jermaine, revealing a cunning smile, called the knight's name.

"Even Vanadis-dono said so. As a knight's courtesy, don't do something like going easy on her."

He decreed as such, while thinking the knight would end it in only one blow. He should stop if he did more, but intended to observe the situation at first.

Tigre and Matvey, as Olga said, distanced themselves from both of them (Olga and the knight). Tigre decided to break in if anything happened to her.

"Anytime, please."

The knight moved before Olga finished talking. He clenched his fist with metal gauntlets and brought it down with full force. Olga, not only had she easily seen through to escape, she also caught the man's arm and pulled it back.

An earsplitting shrill sound echoed in the audience hall. Jermaine and the knights became befuddled, and Tigre and Matvey revealed a relieved sigh.

At the Olga's feet, who was calmly standing, the knight was on the ground.

Olga broke down his posture by pulling the man's arm, and furthermore used his weight to throw him out. She lightly poked with her fingertip the forehead of the knight, who had a stunned look.

"With this, it has ended - Do you still want to continue?"

"Of course!"

The knight angrily stood up and again struck at Olga. This time she did not avoid his fist. She caught it with one hand.

They were a man at a prime of his life and a 14-year-old girl. Moreover the man was wearing armor. Jermaine and the knights of course, but even Tigre and Matvey who thought to have understood her prowess stared in wonder.

The knight gritted his teeth and loaded his right arm with power from both legs. But Olga's body did not budge an inch, as if it was strengthened with a stone.

Suddenly, Olga twisted her hand. A metallic sound again echoed in the audience hall, and the man was flung against the floor. The pink haired girl without a single drop of sweat coldly overlooked the knight.

"Do you still want to continue?"

While she said the same lines as before, it sounded like it increased with a bit of coldness for the people who heard it. The knight was trembling in humiliation, but he also understood he would just become more miserable from what she said.

"-Oh, that was brilliant skill. As expected of a proud vanadis from the Kingdom of Zchted."

Clapping his hands, Jermaine praised Olga. However, his smile was forced, and there was also no strength in his voice. The prince of Asvarre didn't still completely believe the scene unfolded before his eyes. But, he had to continue the negotiation based on this reality.

When Olga came back to her original position, she got down on one knee before Jermaine as if nothing happened. Tigre and Matvey also followed. When the knight stood up, he shrank his shoulders as he was ashamed and went back to his friend's row. The knights received him with sympathetic looks.

"...Well then, let's return to the negotiations, but there is something I want to hear. Why did you choose me and not Elliot? You were siding with him just till recently, no?"

Dispelling immediately the awkward atmosphere, Jermaine asked. Tigre calmly answered.

"Half of the soldiers which Prince Elliot commands are pirates."

Pirates' damage wasn't only limited to Asvarre. Since they rampaged across the entire area of the North Sea, even Brune and Zchted suffered the damage. In the autumn of last year, Sasha and Elizavetta, who are vanadis, had jointly subjugated the pirates.

Jermaine snuffled and folded his arms. As a Prince of Asvarre, he knew that pirates were a troublesome existence.

"It is a reason easy to understand. No, I am not blaming you. Rather, I admire you. If you had started talking about legitimacy, I would have just sent you away."

While loosely touching his chin, Jermaine thoughtfully continued.

"In return to Zchted's and Brune's support, there are the friendly relations with both countries when I become king, the non-aggression pact, the pirate extermination in cooperation, and furthermore the support against Muozinel, huh... Of course, I want to deepen the relations with both countries, unlike Elliot who is the boss of the pirates. For that, I have to defeat that man as soon as possible, return to the Capital, and hold the coronation ceremony."

Afterwards, Jermaine cut his words for a moment and shook his head.

"I want you to wait two... no, three days. I understand that the situation presses, but I must consult with some people for such a major matter. Relieve your fatigue from the trip for the time being until then, since I have already prepared a certain mansion near this castle."

Hearing Jermaine's words, Tigre slightly inhaled. Although most of the business for which he was asked was now settled, there was something he absolutely wanted to ask.

"We express our deep gratitude to His Highness. Anyway, there is one thing I'd like to add."

Matvey slightly moved his head and gazed, and turned a dubious face toward Tigre. Jermaine, on the throne, also looked puzzled.

"What is it? State it."

"It is about His Highness' soldiers committing acts of violence against civilians."

Silence descended. But Tigre pretended not to notice the tense atmosphere. This of course was not among King Victor's instructions. It was the emissary's dogma. Aware of that, Tigre continued.

"Assuming that both armies of Zchted and Brune may come to this land to help His Highness later, it would be somewhat troubling if the resentment and anger of the civilians were directed to us... I'm aware that the people of this land are His Highness's subjects, but would the soldiers' distinction be set to them?"

In order to give forth the latter half of his lines, Tigre had to bear the bitterness. However, it was because he thought of this reasoning, that he was about to shoot the arrows to the soldiers in that village. He had to say it, also in order to protect the people of this land.

"...Your complaint is justifiable. Here also, we do not want foreign soldiers to harm civilians and villages."

While saying that they came to help unrelated towns or villages which plundered because of war, and injured people, raising it under the pretense of military gains with the presence of the "friendly troops" wasn't something unusual now and then.

There is the stratagem, with which the enemy who burnt a town spread rumors that it was an act of friendly forces, and if there was no clear evidence, it was also difficult to protest. Considering it, Tigre's request wasn't so unreasonable. However, there was also no doubt that these words would provoke Jermaine's wrath.

"I understand. I will send notification that such actions will be carried out in due time."

"I deeply appreciate His Highness's consideration."

And that was how the audience with Jermaine ended.

◎

The mansion where the trio was guided was of firm structure, though it was small.

There were many rooms in the two-story building, and every room was finely cleaned and had a feeling of purity. It matched Tigre's preference

that interior decorations and furnitures be not flashy. Thankfully, Jermaine's castle is also close.

If there was one dissatisfaction, it was that it was leaving the premises is prohibited.

"The peace and order of the town are perfect, still it is just in case. In addition, you are not official messengers. Please, kindly wait for His Highness's answer in the mansion."

The servant who acted as the caretaker of the trio said so respectfully. It was reasonable, so Tigre could do nothing but withdraw obediently.

He put his baggage in the back room of the second floor and Matvey and Olga looked around in the mansion. When they looked at the outside from the window of the corridor or the room, the soldiers in armor who guarded the mansion were noticeable. Now just at sunset, their shadows on the ground gradually stretched.

"...Under house arrest."

"It's understandable. As we are unofficial messengers, they want to limit out contact with people as much as possible."

Olga narrowed her eyes unpleasantly while Matvey, also frowning his strong face, groaned. To these two, Tigre, with a slightly mischievous smile, said.

"Will it be bad if we sneak out?"

"It's not that it's not bad, but can you do it?"

At the surprised look of the translator sailor, Tigre nodded happily. When small, he often escaped his father's eyes and ears and slipped out from the mansion where he was born and raised. Even recently, he sometimes slipped out of LeitMeritz's Imperial Palace secretly several times with Ellen.

"Roughly four weeks in this situation when I looked around briefly, as long as there is a rope, it's possible to go out from the window of the second floor. Besides, there are likely to be other escape routes. It is already late today, so I will try it tomorrow."

"I will go, too. If it is about a rope, I have one in my luggage."

Olga immediately requested the peer. After Matvey looked down on his body, the man twisted his tough look with a rare lonely visage. Even if he took off the seam of the white dolphin in the crimson coat back, let alone his face, his large build and tanned colored skin would still stand out.

"I will stay here during your absence, since it's necessary that someone be here to perplex the servants."

Tigre expressed his gratitude and gently patted his shoulder to cheer him up.

"Sorry, but we will count on you for tomorrow. If we successfully slip out, we'll search for a path where even you can sneak out."

The next day. Tigre and Olga began the operation at noon. They managed to bypass the eyes of soldiers who guarded the mansion, and successfully slipped out. They both wrapped themselves in slightly soiled overcoats, and pretended to be travelers. However, they did not lay down their black bow and Dragonic Tool(Viralt)"For the time being, let's go eat."

Tigre chose a random shop and walked over there. Since grilled eel and boiled potatoes were sold, he bought two servings of each and gave half to Olga.

"...They have also eel and potatoes in Asvarre, huh."

Staring steadily at the skewers, Olga leaked such an impression. They were foods also common in both Zchted and Brune.

"Since we have a meal, it wouldn't be good if the first thing we eat does not suit us."

So answered Tigre to Olga with a smile while nibbling the potatoes. The inside was hollowed and cheese was put in. The heat melted just enough of the cheese over the potatoes giving a wonderful taste and flavor.

On the other side, Olga nibbling eel, after stopping for a while, uttered a regretful voice while still expressionless.

"I only taste eel."

"Are you travelers?"

While putting new potatoes in the cauldron of boiling hot water, the potato seller asked. Tigre nodded.

"We are brother and sister. We have an acquaintance in this town, so we came to visit him."

"So, you don't know yet, huh. The food seasoning of each town, except for the bread, is different. As such, everyone here makes their own seasoning."

The potato seller shackled his jaw. There were mats spread on the ground with several pint bottles. When they told the characters that they could not read, the potato seller would carefully explain.

"Starting from the left are salt, vinegar, fish sauce, cheese, pepper, animal tallow and honey. Please select your favorite."

Tigre and Olga bought a handful of salt, and left there. Apart from their carefree trip along the way, they didn't have the guts to try other flavors in their present situation.

After meeting their dietary needs, the two people finally revealed a happy face. They were not walking into the main street, but went into the alley, and experienced about all kinds of things or ate. At the street corner, they listened to a bard singing songs of heroic battles, and watching Sachstein's clown puppet performances.

Other notable things were armed soldiers and mercenaries in heavy armor. Among them, though it was still early afternoon, there were also those who were walking and released smell of beer from their whole body.

--It would be better not to head too far from the main street...

They might hit a land filled with mercenaries. Unless they were outstanding opponents, they have confidence to repel them, but there was no need to go to dangerous places from themselves.

Tigre found a shop, and went there with Olga. It was the so-called second hand shop, the kind of junk shop that sells things mainly needed for traveling.

Coats and tailoring props, ointments, tinderbox, daggers, and so on, there were all kinds of things, but Tigre's aim was a quiver and arrows. After leaving the port town of Mariajo, hunting, as well as the fight in the village consumed a lot of arrows. Olga, seeing this, also purchased a tube quiver.

"Can you use the bow, too?"

"Though not as good as you."

Olga coldly replied to Tigre who turned a gaze full of interest. Feeling a childish side in her lines containing traces of frustration, Tigre couldn't help but smile.

"How was your journey? I think it should be safe up to this neighborhood."

While receiving the payment for arrows, the shopkeeper asked in a flat tone. Tigre decided not to speak about the soldiers' violence.

"Fortunately, it was safe. But what do you mean when you said "up to this neighborhood"? Is it, after all, because the security became stricter since His Highness the Prince came?"

"No, not because of that."

To the question that Tigre raised, the shopkeeper shook his head with a wry smile.

"It's because of General Tallard... Though now he somehow managed to become a captain, that person patrols around the city. I don't know when you will go back, but be careful on your way back. Since by leaving two or three days later from this Valverde, neither the army nor bandits will change."

"Thank you. We'll be careful. However, is that man Tallard so great?"

"Yeah. Even with a fewer number than the enemy, as long as General Tallard leads the soldiers, he will certainly win. But, it's not only that. Unlike the others Generals, he doesn't do things like looting or violence."

As he happily said so while showing his teeth, the shopkeeper suddenly shrugged and whispered.

"I cannot say it loudly, but... due to his complaints to His Highness the Prince to stop the looting, there are rumors that spot his demotion. So, it's better not to go around asking people."

They thanked the shopkeeper and left the shop. After walking down the street for a while, the two people found an uncrowded bar and entered. Though it was a small shop, the customers were not people such as mercenaries or soldiers, but instead mostly residents of the town.

They selected a table on the corner and sat facing each other. As they heard there was fruit wine among the kinds of liquor, they ordered it for two people. After that, they also ordered pickled cabbage and herb-baked cod.

The shop was very lively and , judging that other customers couldn't hear their voices, Tigre asked Olga a question.

"What's your impression after seeing His Highness Jermaine?"

"Judging with that audience alone is a bit difficult... But for me, he wasn't a very good reference."

"Reference, huh..."

As the girl lightly answered without any change of expression, Tigre scratched his darkish red hair. In a sense, one could say that she was a very straightforward child. Rather, she just didn't speak because she wasn't asked anything and there was no point hiding anything of her own.

"What about you, Tigre?"

As Olga started to speak, fruit wine was carried over. It was poured into rustic cylindrical mugs to the brim.

Tigre gave priority to the toast, and expressed words of gratitude for her service in a gentle tone. The vanadis with light pink-colored hair ,after overlapping the glasses, blankly looked at the reflection of her face in the fruit wine.

"Just now, when you asked me about Prince Jermaine, I had the feeling that it was the first time you've asked me anything."

"Yesterday at noon, didn't I inquire about your identity?"

And thus he learned that Olga was a vanadis.

"After revealing I am a vanadis, I thought you would be more inquisitive."

Tigre did not immediately reply, and as he was drinking the fruit wine and settling his words, he said.

"There is a saying that "A hen won't lay eggs early even if urged"."

It was something he once learned from his attendant Batran. Olga slightly moved her expressionless face, and curled her lips like an upset child.

"Even if the hen someday lays eggs, there's no guarantee that it will speak someday, right?"

"But I believe you will talk to a certain extent."

After soaking his mouth with wine and moistening his lips, Tigre continued.

"Whatever the contents, regardless, the initial negotiations have ended. I should report to King Victor in Zchted and I will also give your name. I'm not doing so because I'm not good at hiding secrets, but rather because you were of a very great help."

The psychological impact given to Jermaine by the existence called "Vanadis" was not small. Although the excessive provocation was also a problem, the strong effect that a delicate girl of such short stature was able to fling a big man to the floor twice should dispel whatever worries may arise.

"As far as I see, you are a reliable child. I think you should know what I just said meant, and you won't leave without saying anything. In that case, I intend to wait until you feel like speaking. In due time, anyway, but I still have time."

"...You overestimate me too much."

Olga shook her head. A lonely smile appeared on her mouth.

"I'm just a coward. Anyway, how much do you know about me?"

"Well, was it called 'Brest'? You are the vanadis who governs that place. And you left the country about one year ago. This is all that I know."

The Vanadis Olga Tamm left behind only a note saying that she left for a trip and disappeared with her Dragonic Tool(Viralt). He heard so from Ellen. Olga laughed in self-derision.

"Almost two years, huh. Though I didn't check the specifics, such a Vanadis is probably unheard of."

A dish was carried. The steam of baked herbs instantly blew away the smell of the vinegar which assailed the nose.

Watching the waiter leave, Olga opened her mouth.

"I know a little more about you. You are the noble who rules Alsace in the northeast of Brune Kingdom, and your title is Earl. You borrowed the army

of the Vanadis Miss Eleonora of LeitMeritz and splendidly suppressed the civil war in your homeland, and are currently living underneath Lord Eleonora as a guest General. Moreover, you are close to Miss Ludmira of Olmutz and Miss Alexandra of Legnica."

"You really know a lot."

Tigre stared in wonder, Olga smiling happily confessed after.

"I heard it from Matvey. Knowing that I am a vanadis, he willingly told me."

Tigre inwardly cursed the translator who was looking after their home in the mansion. He did not mind that Matvey told her, but he wanted to convey it to her himself. Though he probably thought he forgot it since he was him, and while he didn't do it intentionally, he was likely to talk about it tonight.

"And while I was on my trip, I heard many rumors about you. The Star Shooter(Silvrash) who drove away the overwhelming Muozinel army. The Knight of the Moonlight(Lumiere) that helped the Princess and led her to the throne. A modern hero. I should have noticed the name

"Tigrevurmud"..."

"Though that hero's image is very much real."

Tigre revealed a troubled smile while removing the bone from the cod. It was indeed embarrassing when someone said to him face-to-face that he was a hero.

"In this, adding my personal impression of our trip, you are quite a nice person, and your skill with the bow is more than what the rumors say. Though late, let me apologize for the reckless remark on board the ship."

Though Olga slightly bowed, for a moment Tigre did not remember what reckless remark that she was talking about. Seeing Tigre's expression, the Vanadis followed up with a comment "about the seabirds" afterwards, and Tigre finally remembered.

When she vigorously emptied the porcelain cup filled with fruit wine, Olga wiped her mouth and continued.

"I did not intend to hide it. Even though I know this much about you, it's not fair that you only know so little about me... Although it is questionable, such a dull story, whether or not it will become the alcohol's side dish, will you listen?"

Tigre thought it was quite a circuitous expression, but she was also upset and confused. A 12-year-old girl wandering for two years. Tigre smiled and slowly nodded.

Still, Olga did not immediately talk. Seeming to think about something, she was staring at the empty ceramic cup. Maybe, she was trouble on how to begin her story.

After Tigre emptied his ceramic cup, he ordered two refills of fruit wine. The waiter came holding a big bottle of fruit wine and poured the contents into Tigre's and Olga's cups, respectively. He quickly turned his back and walked away. Olga finally spoke under cover of the noise in the shop as the sign.

"Tigre... Have you ever thought of becoming King?"

Tigre was not able to reply at once to the unexpected question. He frowned and stared at the vanadis of light pink-colored hair with his mouth wide open. To that reaction, Olga displayed the same lonely smile that she showed earlier.

"Neither have I"

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Olga was born in the Eastern part of Zchted. In the vast grasslands in the easternmost end of Brest.

"Tigre, do you know the tribe of Horse Riders?"

"Do you refer to those who live by hunting and nomadism? They seem to keep a large number of breeding sheep, horses, and camels ..."

Olga nodded.

"I come from the tribe of Horse Riders. I'm the current patriarch's granddaughter."

A century ago, the Kingdom of Zchted fought with the tribe of Horse Riders in the east, and subjugated them. The Kingdom gave them a pastoral land, and charged them to pay a certain amount of sheep and silks every year as a tax.

"Sooner or later, either I will be the next-generation patriarch adjuvant or I will become the head of the next generation... Everyone around me and even I were thinking so, and for that I had to learn a lot of things."

The idea collapsed when she was 12 years old.

"It was the end of a summer night. As I was asleep, when it suddenly became bright, I opened my eyes."

Olga turned her eyes to the axe wrapped in the cloth which she leaned to the side.

"This fellow appeared. I took it up, knowing that I was chosen as a vanadis"

Olga explained to her family and, led by the Dragonic Tool(Viralt) Muma, left the meadows where she was born and raised for the first time. The tribe of Horse Riders celebrated that Olga was chosen as a Vanadis and saw her off.

And just like that, Olga visited the Capital Silesia and after formally being recognized as a Vanadis by King Victor, she went to Brest that was her territory.

"It seems that the previous vanadis passed away two months before the Dragonic Tool(Viralt) appeared before me. I thought that there might be trouble for a girl of only 12 years old, and moreover a 'person of the tribe of Horse Riders' becoming a monarch, but that was nothing but groundless apprehensions. I was warmly welcomed by many civilians and military officers, and thus I became the vanadis of [Curse of Reversal(Houju no Genbu)] Muma and the Lord of the dukedom Brest."

Though she was anxious, there were many people supporting her there. The tribe of Horse Riders have to learn to unite the ideas and methods, and along with their assistance, it would definitely be smooth sailing.

Remembering the celebration of her becoming a vanadis, and the face of her family who saw her off, Olga tried to step forward as a ruler.

"I first looked at the maps. The map of Brest that I govern and the map of the whole Kingdom of Zchted. And then, I came to understand my arrogance."

At the sight of the two map sheets, the girl who just became a vanadis was stunned.

"The meadows where I lived for 12 years... were very, very small."

While looking at her face reflected in the fruit wine in the ceramic cup, Olga self-deprecatingly laughed.

"The thought and the ideal image about Kings and rules are things I built up in that small world called meadows. Besides, as I said earlier, even jokingly have I never thought of becoming King. It is impossible for such child's dreams to work in that big world called Brest. Thinking so, I helplessly became afraid and fled."

Leaving a note behind, she went for a trip with only her Dragonic Tool(Viralt) for the sake of becoming a suitable vanadis.

"So that's how it was." Tigre understood. This girl was much too eager.

Tigre vaguely remembered the time when he took over after his father.

He was at 14 years old. His father's death was something sudden, but he had Teita and Batran close to him. Massas also often took care of him.

Adding to the fact that Olga was 12 years old, she parted with the family which she was living with till then, and would spend her new daily in an Imperial Palace where she had never before set foot. Even if the government officials warmly welcomed her, the pressure might have been considerable.

"To be frank, I don't even understand well myself why I took Muma. It is a shameful story, but I also have regrets of what I abandoned. On the other hand, if Muma parted with me by its own will..... I thought it would be a lot easier. Regardless of which are my true feelings."

The young girl's voice trembled with bitterness.

"Besides, even if the vanadis is absent, Brest can somehow manage on its own."

--- As expected, Brest also has such a system, huh.

Without speaking his thoughts, Tigre pondered. In the half year that he lived in LeitMeritz, he heard from Ellen and Lim about the flaws in the vanadis' system.

--- 1. Though currently vanadis, even the vanadis herself doesn't know when she will no longer be a vanadis. 2. Since the Dragonic Tool(Viralt)

chose the vanadis, she cannot appoint a successor. 3. It may take time, before a new vanadis appears.... That's about it.

The fact that it's a vanadis who succeed another vanadis can't continue forever. When the Dragonic Tool(Viralt) judges so, it will leave the vanadis's side. But for example, Twin Blades of Demonic Force(Toki no Sojin) Bargren which selected Sasha as a vanadis has not so far left her side.

In addition, Ellen's predecessor who was a vanadis and Ellen do not have any relationship. They never even met. Just the fact that people of a same family like Mira, her mother and her grandmother continued being chosen as masters of the Spear of Evil Death(Hajya no Zenkaku) was rather exceptional.

To solve such a problem in the vanadis' system, the vanadis who ruled each dukedom got the line stem in governmental bureaucracy, so to speak. There was also the idea of dispatching magistrates from the kingdom during the vanadis's absence, but the idea encountered resistance in various aspects, and up to now there was no dukedom which required such a precedent.

"I don't know what it is to be king. How should a king be, how should a government be..... My journey takes that into account and it became something for which I search."

"Didn't you visit the other vanadis? For example, Ellen."

As Tigre casually asked, Olga made a wry smile and shook her head.

"Then, it will become a talk of vanadis to vanadis. Since it's not a friendly relationship with them, I cannot let other Vanadis grasp a handle on me. Still, they also want to hide their identity and it's very difficult to see them."

After saying so to Tigre, the girl of light pink-colored hair added.

"I have great respect for Miss Eleanora. She became Vanadis at the age of 14, and despite her origins of a former mercenary, she admirably governed LeitMeritz. There are many places where I can learn."

"You should say that directly to the person herself. I'm sure she will be glad. After, she would be shy and embarrassed."

Folding his arms and thinking about the vanadis with silver-white hair blushing while averted her gaze, Tigre suddenly came up with an idea.

"Do you want to try to meet Ellen by disguising yourself as a traveler? I can help you, if you don't mind."

Olga, surprised very much by this proposal which seemed like a joke, the 14-year-old Vanadis steadily stared at Tigre with her eyes wide opened.

"This is a rare... But is it alright?"

"It should be okay. Since you will hide your identity and meet her, of course you don't have to talk about anything. But regarding Ellen's ideas over political affairs, I think you can ask about points like what she thinks of doing with LeitMeritz."

Olga ,noosing her mouth with a comb expression, was seriously thinking. Tigre continued.

"Ellen's rule cannot be said to be perfect. Even in the scope of my knowledge, she also made errors and failed. But she doesn't ignore this, she corrects her mistakes and thrives in her failures. And she thinks to make it better. That's why a lot of people help and support her."

"... Are you one of those persons?"

Olga happily smiled and Tigre, startled, pulled himself together. Looking at Tigre scratching his head to gloss over his embarrassment, Olga, while raising the sake cup up her mouth, muttered that she was envious (of Ellen, of course). Her voice was too small and it did not reach Tigre's ears.

"Okay. Let's do that, when this matter ends."

While moving her gaze to the Dragonic Tool(Viralt) beside her, Olga said so in a voice tinged with expectation.

The next day, Tigre and Olga stayed in the mansion and Matvey alone slipped out into the town for inspection. Even though Tigre and Olga found a byroad yesterday and the intimidating translator sailor managed to escape, the two people were still half amazed and half impressed.

Since a half koku, the servants of the mansion knocked on the door of the room of the trio every one koku to ask whether or not there was anything they need.

Tigre and Olga, answered them "there is no problem" outside of the room without letting the servants step into the room, even when standing on the

door, They devised it so that the inside of the room may not be visible to them, and they pretended that Matvey spent the whole day sleeping on the bed.

Matvey came back at sunset when darkness fell over the grounds. He was in a good mood when he slipped out, but now his face was full of tension.

"How to say this... I heard a lot of bad news out there."

Just to make sure, after confirming that there was no one outside the room, Matvey told Tigre and Olga the information he obtained. A fragment of afterglow was strongly illuminating the indoor corner.

"There are rumors outside that General Leicester defending the Fort Lux joined Prince Elliot's camp. If this is true, then the situation we're in is quite dire."

Matvey drew a simple map with a finger on the table.

"If the port town of Mariajo is sacked, it is only two days from Valverde. Stopping the enemy would be Fort Lux's task, but if the rumors are true, then the enemy will be able to march straight at once. There are also rumors that the fleet led by Prince Elliot showed up in the offing near the port town."

The three people looked at each other. Olga asked a question.

"Prince Jermaine should also know the importance of the Fort Lux. I don't think that he would let a person who would easily betray him take up that defensive position."

"I feel the same way, but it's also hard to say that Prince Jermaine's army is united. It was Lord Tallard who guided us to the Prince, but it seems that he was a general who lead five thousand soldiers before."

"I have also heard about that. It seems that he was demoted because he tried to persuade the Prince to stop the looting and the violence of the soldiers employed."

As Tigre butted in and said so, Matvey heavily nodded.

"It appears to be a fact. Lord Tallard seems to be skillful on the battlefield to the extent that he is called "the undefeated strategist", and the faith and hope of the soldiers are also high. These are also the reasons for such demotion..."

Tigre felt a chill run down his spine. If these two rumors were true, then it was a situation where Prince Jermaine's army would not be at fault to the end. Now there was no margin of error for the negotiations taking a long time.

"Though I should get an answer tomorrow... Can we wait until dawn to leave the city?"

"Yes. But the north is dangerous. We don't know when Prince Elliot's army will appear. To the east - Even though we will deviate from the highway, we will arrive at Brune if we go straight to the east."

Deviating from the highway, they wouldn't just lose sight of the way to follow, but it also meant that the chance of encountering a horde of beasts or bandits drastically rose. But if they stayed in this city, they might encounter an even greater danger than that of the beasts or bandits.

"Is there other news? If it's the good sort, I'd appreciate it."

Tigre briskly asked Matvey in attempt to change the mood. The sailor of the White Illuna similarly showed a heinous beast-like smile.

"There is, if you say it like that. Prince Elliot and Muozinel joined forces."

"...Is that supposed to be good news?"

"If this rumor reached Prince Jermaine's ears, won't he be more willing to collaborate with our country?"

Tigre inwardly sighed. Matvey revealed a smile that seemed to be a wry smile. If it was a fact, isn't it likely to be already too late?

"These rumors might not necessarily be true. In fact, after asking around here and there, I heard a completely different story. That Prince Elliot, due to his careful character, did not yet move, that the defense of the Fort Lux is perfect, and that General Tallard was demoted, because of his ambitions and so on..."

After speaking up to there, Matvey sank into silence. Olga silently stared at Tigre, too. It seemed to be to his judgment.

Looking over the darkness which lurked indoors, Tigre started meditating.

--In this case, what is the worst scenario?

Finally, after putting his thoughts in order Tigre told the two.

"Pack our luggage so that we could move at any time. And then..."

©

Jermaine, when in the Castle, hardly came out from the audience hall.

To be precise, he rarely left the throne.

He dealt with the political affairs and listened to petitions here on the throne. Not to mention meals, even concerning his bath, he would let people carry a bathtub filled with hot water in. Apart from relieving himself and going to sleep to bed, he wouldn't leave the audience hall.

"He may be too stubborn on the throne."

"When His Highness made this Valverde into his stronghold, it seems that the first things prepared were the throne and the chandeliers."

His vassals were saying such things, but it was only the old chamberlain who knew the truth. The chamberlain, dragging his body like a dead tree, was walking busily around the Castle in the young lord's stead.

Shortly before the nightfall, the chamberlain came in the audience hall for a report to Jermaine. When he finished reporting briefly the political affairs and news he judged important, he bluntly asked the question that suddenly arose.

"Your Highness. Regarding the reply to the messengers of the Kingdom of Zchted, tomorrow will be the deadline."

"Is that so." from the throne only such a statement was returned. Outside nearly sunset, the vermillion sunlight came in through the high windows here densely. However, the throne was enveloped by darkness and Jermaine's face could not be seen.

As the chamberlain just stood silently, Jermaine called for the old man's name in a low voice.

"Prepare about fifty soldiers and arrest those three. Tonight - Attack at midnight. Until you catch them, don't let other people know."

As expected, the chamberlain was at loss for words. That Jermaine did not like Tigre, he dimly perceived from the murderous look of his lord shortly

after the end of the audience. But, even so, that measure was quite unusual. This would antagonize both the countries Zchted and Brune.

"Afterwards, call a messenger from Muozinel and hand them over. The conditions are that they cut all ties with Elliot and ally with me."

"...Will Muozinel comply?"

"That bastard Elliot has one vanadis, but here we have one vanadis and the hero of Brune called Knight of the Moonlight(Lumiere). In the first place, what Muozinel wants is not Elliot. What Muozinel wants is to go to war with Zchted, to threaten the existence known as Zchted from behind."

"It does not matter even if that person is myself," said the Prince of Asvarre in a careless tone. The chamberlain's face to which wrinkles was visible grandly frowned and thought.

Even assuming that he did as Jermaine said, and they arrived at a situation where they obtained Muozinel's cooperation, they would immediately lose their support after the fight with Elliot. There was no doubt that they would be in advantage.

"But, making Zchted and Brune our enemies is..."

"Brune barely came out of a civil war half a year ago. They cannot take action yet. Before Zchted deals with our country, we must first obtain Muozinel's partnership at all cost. It can't move, after all."

"But, Your Highness. If we make Zchted and Brune our allies, it is certain that we will become more advantageous than Prince Elliot who only has Muozinel as ally. Besides, there is no problem geographically."

Between Muozinel and Asvarre, there are Zchted and Brune. If Muozinel was to support Jermaine, the interference of either one or both was unavoidable.

That aside, the chamberlain proposed that it was more certain that they could quickly receive the cooperation of Zchted and Brune.

"...In that case, the soldiers of the three countries will loiter in the ground of this Asvarre."

Jermaine to answer only some time later, the chamberlain was surprised.

"That Mr. Knight of the Moonlight(Lumiere) doesn't intend to let the soldiers of his own country and Zchted loot or cause violence. No, he might have pretended to do so as a messenger..."

"As if it could be possible!" spat out the Prince of Asvarre in a tone filled with spite.

"Do you know from which country the pirates of Elliot's army come? Of course there are those who come from Asvarre, but there are also those from Zchted, Brune, Sachstein, and Muozinel... Furthermore, there are people coming from the far south and east!"

While being surprised at his master's anger who got excited, the chamberlain silently waited for Jermaine to calm down. It would probably take a time of about ten counts. The chamberlain calmly asked.

"Are there any other reasons?"

"I hate that brat."

"Humans cannot erase likes and dislikes, but yet they cannot again be persuaded to consent with the other party, either."

The chamberlain gently reproved Jermaine's outburst. Such was this old man's duty since the time when the prince was young. Therefore, he has still acted as chamberlain, and he also had his trust.

"Seeing that man makes me remember Father and it makes me angry."

This time, the chamberlain did not immediately reply. After a while he said.

"His Majesty the late king was a more tolerant person. I think that he was a person deserving to be called the "ruler of virtue."""

"I don't mean to deny your evaluation. ...I already gave you an order."

Not even trying to hide his crankiness in the violent protest against the decision, the chamberlain respectfully bowed and left. "I will be busy," He thought.

First of all, he had to prepare fifty soldiers so that it may not be known by the other ministers (high-ranking officials).

On the other hand, In the audience hall where there was nobody else as the chamberlain himself left, Jermaine was looking up at the chandeliers on the ceiling unpleasantly.

"Father was tolerant, huh. Yeah, certainly."

As he said to the chamberlain, he did not intend to deny that fact. "But, that tolerance is not suitable for Asvarre," thought Jermaine.

Several years ago when King Zacharias was still alive, Jermaine assisted his father and handled various political affairs. As a Prince who will someday become King succeeding his Father, he thought that he must be familiar with the state affairs from now, and he also had the ability to do so.

At that time, Jermaine investigated taxes sent from certain noble's territory as the noble claimed that the harvest was poor.

Despite the severe punishment issued from the prince, King Zechariah, apart from requiring the noble to pay the original amount they owed, ordered him to pay an additional ten percent as a light fine.

Two years later, that noble did the same thing. Not only that, as Jermaine investigated further, he found that there were several nobles who were also conducting similar grievances.

Jermaine went on his own to the nobles' places, and after restraining the perpetrator, disposed of their families by killing them all and put their residence to the torch.

"I will allow you to form a new family. I will allow you to build a new mansion. However, if even in the future you bastards commit a crime of any sort, remember that you lose all that you value like today. Understood? I will not forgive you, even if it is the embezzlement of a single copper coin."

In the backdrop of the residence that was burned to the ground in flames, Jermaine coldly said thus. After returning to the Royal Palace, he grieved at first, and apologized to his father the King angry for his dogmatism (his own decision), however he calmly said.

"With this, such evil deeds will decrease for a while."

Then in less than a month, other nobles hurriedly prepared the tax which they had not supply and visited the Capital. As if supporting the young Prince's words.

It was at that time that it was thought that Jermaine ought to control the others by fear. As for letting the soldiers' cruelty run loose, he had the idea

of giving people fear to abide by his decisions... Though it is a little unbearable for the civilians.

Therefore, Jermaine realized that he would never be on the same wavelength as Tigre, who displayed a more protective attitude towards the civilians.

---On this point, letting Elliot escape was really a shame.

It was the day when he slaughtered his young siblings. After King Zacharias died, shunning Jermaine, there were a lot of nobles who tried to recommend the princess.

Even if they were his siblings, Jermaine was just not able to allow their existence. Though he lost his father, and he was aware that a lottery of his own mind went off, he himself didn't believe he was doing it only to protect the throne.

For the other person, Guinevere, who escaped, he had no intention of doing anything to her. As long as she kept quiet, he intended to leave her be.

--- If the matter of this night goes well... If I put Muozinel on my side, I can defeat Elliot.

He calmly closed his eyes looking up at the chandelier and decided to rest for a while.

As the stout crescent moon rose high in the sky, the fifty soldiers as Jermaine ordered went to the mansion where the trio resided. All the soldiers were wearing armor and hung a sword at their waist. They prepared a torch for every five people, so ten torches were flickering in the background of the darkness.

"We were ordered to capture them alive, but if we weren't told we couldn't injure them. If they resist, you can even cut one arm."

The captain in command of the fifty soldiers ordered so to his men with a cold-blooded smile. In a jokingly tone, he added.

"The young girl who flung that fully armed knight is there. Be careful."

The captain first sent ten soldiers to the rear side of the building and then strengthened the front with twenty soldiers. Though he thought that it was more than needed, the remaining 20 were sent into the mansion.

They knew from the servants that the trio was in the back room of the second floor. The twenty soldiers whipped out their sword and ascended the stairs in high spirits. They ran down the hall and launched a body blow from the shoulder to the front door to their rooms. Tearing the door down, and they stormed the room.

However, the soldiers in front tripped on something before advancing even three steps and then tumbled down loudly. What they last saw in the darkness was the figure of a girl swinging an axe.

When a dull sound echoed in succession, and two lives were lost, the soldiers noticed that nobody was in the other two rooms. Their prey was already gathered in one room.

Two soldiers held a sword, and one stood at the doorway holding up a torch. Immediately after the sound which sharply cut through the night wind echoes, an arrow pierced the soldiers' face.

Even though three arrows were shot, there was only one sound of the bowstring.

One fell down, and two screamed in acute pain and surprise. A small-sized black shadow flew over there.

Even though it was such a situation, there was no change of expression in the vanadis's face. She was the Moon Princess of the Roaring Demon(Bardiche) Olga. By reflecting the fire of the torch, the axe which she had in her hands gives off radiance reminiscent of a half moon.

More than ten soldiers piled in the narrow corridor, unable to move freely and moreover about half of them lost their composure with the death and earsplitting scream of their friends.

Almost like a wolf attacking a flock of sheep, Olga wielded her Dragonic Tool(Viralt) and descended onto them down without mercy. She smashed the soldiers' head along with their helmet, and ripped their belly open along with their armor.

During the flurry of blood splashing and screaming over and over again, Olga let her axe soak up blood and life with dance-like movements. The

ghastliness and cuteness were present at the same time in her delicate body.

Not all the soldiers were in dismay, there were also several soldiers that timidly tried to cut Olga. They were, however, shot in the eyes or the throat by the arrows which came flying from somewhere, collapsed on the floor, at the place where their movement to cut Olga stopped.

Tigre was hiding near the door shooting the arrows. The young man judging that he would only hinder Olga if he came out in the corridor, shot the arrows inside the room in order to support the girl.

--- Ellen and Mira were also amazing, but...

While nocking a new arrow to the bow, Tigre let out a sigh of admiration while seeing Olga's battle.

One could only say that she deserves to be called vanadis. That strength was not normal.

"Oh my god! This is a worst situation."

Matvey standing beside the window side complained with an innocent tone. He was holding a chair with both hands. Since he had no other weapons. Tigre asked him while watching Olga's fighting.

"How are you over there?"

"I don't know whether the sound comes from here or not, but it is very chaotic right now. No ladder or rope sighted here, I am afraid that they have entered from the backdoor."

'Isn't it Jermaine who wants to capture us?' It was the worst case scenario that Tigre considered. For example, he could disclose their existence to Prince Elliot and check it, there were various ways to do so. He mostly did not expect that he could use them for dealings with Muozinel.

The trio gathered in one room from such a thought. They got up immediately when they noticed Jermaine's soldiers from the sounds and atmosphere, moved the chairs and the bed near the door while preparing their weapons, and waited.

While exchanging a short conversation, the fight that ushered in the corridor came to an end.

Looking at their companions collapsing one after another, covered with blood and entrails, Olga thrusts the axe at a soldier who lost his will to fight and was unable to stand up due to fear.

"Whose order was it?"

The soldier frankly answered that it was due to Jermaine's orders while shedding tears and begging for his life. As Olga narrowed her eyes, with the handle of the axe, she hit the soldier who fell down unconscious. And looked back at Tigre. Her black pupils were asking what they would do from now on.

Tigre could not suddenly decide. There were walls surrounding this city. There should also have directives to the soldiers protecting those places to not let them go out. Where would they go even if they run away?

"I have a suggestion."

Wiping off the blood on her Dragonic Tool(Viralt), Olga said in a calm tone.

"We attack Jermaine from this place and make him a hostage."

"Are you serious?"

Although Matvey was surprised and glared, Tigre had somewhat settled down.

"It is not a bad idea. Even Jermaine would not think that only the three of us could counterattack, either. Moreover, the castle is just around the corner. There is also no canal. The problem is how to cross over the walls surrounding the Castle."

He deliberately mentioned the problem expecting a reaction from Olga. This girl should also understand that. The vanadis of light pink-colored hair immediately answered as expected.

"I will somehow manage."

Tigre made up his mind. He checked the contents of his quiver. He did not expect to use it in that form, but buying it was the correct choice. He could somehow manage.

Escaping the mansion was easier than they had thought. Though there were ten soldiers under the window, Tigre shot them with the help of their torches which showed their position. He shrouded the rope through the window in that instance and Olga quickly descended down to the ground. After that, she unilaterally defeated the soldiers.

With Olga on alert of the surroundings, Matvey went down the rope first followed by Tigre.

Matvey went first, because they thought that with his large body, he would take a lot of time, but it was only groundless apprehension. The sailor skillfully glided down along the rope faster than Tigre did.

"Hmm, it reminds me of the old days. It was a daily occurrence on the ship."

Seeming to be prepared for it, Matvey made an inauspicious smile. He hung on his waist a sword he took from a soldier.

When Tigre landed on the ground, the second floor suddenly became noisy. The soldiers who strengthened the front of the mansion should have entered. It was a close call.

Only relying on the moonlight, the trio ran just wrapped in the darkness of the night. They could take the torch which the soldiers had, but it would be rather conspicuous if they had a light in this situation.

"... Anyway, it is really noisy."

Matvey glancing at the darkness muttered. They only had to advance straight to the castle, and there was nobody to intercept them either. They only need to do so in small steps. The trio soon arrived at the walls.

"Step back."

Looking at the towering walls, Olga regulated her breathing and swung her large axe. The blade with the shape of half moon exhibited a pale light phosphorescence.

The ground around Olga emitted a muffled roar and vibrated. The sound bursting from the bottom of the earth like a thorn out of the treble uplifted countless stones. Many pillars of the ground with sharp tips rose high, and the 14-year-old Vanadis stood firmly at the center.

Fine gravel floated in the air, and a vortex of light particles circled around the axe - the absorption of the Roaring Demon. The radiance that the Dragonic Tool(Viralt) released thereby looked a lot stronger than earlier.

Matvey was speechless at the scene unfolding before his eyes. Although Tigre still had enough sense to be aware of their surroundings, even so he couldn't take his eyes off Olga as well. Tension, excitement, and expectation made Tigre smile. He looked at his black bow in hand.

---Originally I thought to depend on this at a critical moment but it seems unnecessary.

Olga's axe changed the shape. The handle extended to almost double the length, and the blade grew larger by more than twice its original size. It may, perhaps, be even larger than his owner.

"The Second Horn of Piercing(Dvarog)"

Olga grasped the huge axe with both hands and powerfully flung it towards the castle wall.

A tremendous roar resounded in the night sky, as flashes of light burst forth and flowed out the earth like an illusion. A myriad of differently-sized debris exploded in all directions, and the air and ground conveyed intense rumbling.

And, on the castle wall with a thickness of five arsine (about 5 meters), a hole huge enough that even Matvey would easily get through was hollowed out. After letting the cloud of dust settle, the countless cracks generated around and the scenery of the other side was visible. It had to have been hammered a multitude of times to display such an appearance, even if one was using a mallet to breakdown a city like a battering ram.

With an "Ouff!" breath, Olga draped the axe over her shoulder, the Dragonic Tool(Viralt) having been restored to its original size just moments before. She looked back at the two men with her usual expressionless face.

"Let's hurry. Before soldiers gather."

Tigre lightly patted Matvey's shoulder who was still stunned with his mouth half-opened. Thus Matvey finally came to his senses. Olga started running after confirming it. The two men also followed her in a hurry.

"...Did you know of that?"

"I have seen the other vanadis resort to such tricks."

To the Matvey's question, who still found it unbelievable, Tigre tactfully answered. She was the third person after Ellen and Mira. If it was only about a power beyond common sense, he should also count himself.

"So that means Alexandra-sama also has that kind of power...?"

"Most likely. I haven't seen it though."

Matvey covered his face with his hands and grandly sighed. Feeling somehow apologetic, Tigre added these words.

"However, it is better not to rely on that strength. That power has a lot of downsides. When I decided that Olga should use it, I wondered if it was just right to leave it to her."

"Oh, that's important."

Restoring his tough look that usually showed impudence, Matvey laughed. Although this recovery speed might due to many experiences, Tigre was thankful on this point.

"For a moment, you simply left Miss Olga to deal with everything, right? ... I almost think so."

"...Really, Sasha introduced me to a good man."

Flames which seemed to be of a torch approached. Tigre stopped and stretched out his hand to the quiver. His eyes that got used to the darkness at the time grasped the number of figures. He gathered three arrows, took them out, and simultaneously nocked them. Short screams occurred at the same time, and the torch fell on the ground.

"I also saw it a while ago, but how do you manage that?"

Olga who was impressed asked. Matvey also agreed and nodded.

"...Practice, I think."

"I doubt I would be able to do that, even if I practiced."

Even though they said that, Tigre could not think of any other answer.

They slinked around the rear of the castle. A red, burning campfire gave the trio the position of the door and that there were two guards. Both guards were wearing armor and holding a spear.

When they noticed the existence of the assailants, Olga leaned her body and rushed over, and an arrow was shot by the black bow that Tigre grasped. Their cry overlapped with a dull sound.

The door was made of wood and was locked. Searching the fallen soldiers' pocket, Tigre found a keychain. Meanwhile, Matvey tore the sleeve of his own clothes and wrapped around the spear that the soldiers had, creating an impromptu torch.

"Really handy."

Tigre turned a look of praise to Matvey. Although they were able to run so far with the help of the moonlight, as expected, a light is necessary if they want to proceed into the Castle.

"This is strange."

Olga suddenly raised her voice. Tigre and Matvey looked at her with a wondering face.

"It's awfully noisy."

Although they frowned for an instant, the two men soon noticed the anomaly. When they listened carefully, from the other side of the door - not only could they hear the sound of roaring and clanking of armor coming from within the castle, they could also hear the sound of cries and the sword fighting. It was sounds that only could be emitted during fights.

"Because you made a hole in the wall... no, that does not seem to be the case."

"I heard the sound of fighting. I was also thinking about it while we came from the mansion to this castle, but somehow there seems to be other people causing an uproar as well."

"Looks like it. Even so, that won't change what we must do."

Olga flatly asserted, without showing a slight change of expression. Tigre also nodded.

"We cannot afford to look away from the situation. But we must be cautious."

Opening the door, with Olga at the helm, the trio stormed the Castle. Matvey, holding the torch, was stood in the middle, with Tigre manning in the rear.

They swooped down on the soldiers coming back to attack while raising a shout of challenge, and asked for Jermaine's whereabouts. Though harboring doubts at the answer "He is in the audience hall," they had no time to brood about that.

"As expected, I felt the soldiers disperse."

Matvey leaked such an impression while running through the corridor towards the audience hall.

In the earlier fight too, it was only three opponents. So not only did they not get into hard fight, but they also easily found out Jermaine's whereabouts.

"For me, it's really fortunate. After all, I have a limited number of arrows."

And then after a short time, the trio arrived in the audience hall.

However, the situation had undergone major changes.

What the trio who broke into the audience hall saw, were just a few men and there was one corpse.

The corpse itself was not uncommon. Before coming here, they saw a few more and furthered the numbers with their own weapons.

However, if the corpse was that of the Lord of this Castle, then it was a different story.

The audience hall was far brighter compared to the corridor through which they had run. It is because the chandelier hanging from the ceiling lit all the candles and illuminated this large space.

Jermaine, sitting on the throne, drooped his head. His clothes were cut off in a crack and dyed blood-red black. There were several men around him.

Tigre stopped because he knew one of them. He was the commander of the hundred cavalrymen, Tallard Graham, his adjutant Kress Dill, and moreover the soldiers who should be their subordinates. Tallard was

hanging a sword on the waist, holding a bow. He nocked an arrow. Their eyes met.

Tension ran in the atmosphere of the audience hall filled with consternation. Tigre and Tallard set up their bow at the same time, and aimed at the opponent's forehead.

Olga and Matvey also stopped in their tracks. With the death of Prince Jermaine whom they originally planned to capture as hostage, and Tallard who was there, they were confused whether they should further attack, or should they protect Tigre. Since they had such mixed feelings, the two people could do nothing but stay put.

While grasping the black bow, Tigre felt a strong heat on his forehead. The Tallard's fighting spirit was given off by the iron of the bow and the arrow which he nocked.

From Tigre's position to the throne were less than 30 alsins (about 30 meters). It was definitely not distance he could miss. This also seemed to be the case for Tallard. Both also did not find a single word to say, they held their breath and focused on the opponent motionless.

Silence shrouded the audience hall as if it were cut off from the outside world full of bloody riots. That was created by the two men Tallard and Tigre.

If a single word were emitted, the two arrows would be shot at that moment, and the two lifes could vanish. The fear took the motion from all people who were in the place.

The heat that stuck to Tigre's suddenly disappeared. In the tip of Tigre's eyes that were widely opened, Tallard showed a smile lacking hostility.

Both simultaneously lowered their bows.

"You saved me the trouble of calling you... Let's leave it at that. Tigre-dono, there are a lot of things I want to discuss with you, will you please listen?"

◎

Their weapons had not been confiscated.

Tigre, Olga and Matvey were led into the guest room in the third floor of the Castle. What the trio saw on the way were sticky blood marks on the walls

and floor, heads cut crack, or a lot of corpses with abdomen cut opened on the floor, as well as the expression of excitement and madness (insanity) of the soldiers running in the corridor.

The corridor was filled with stench of blood and entrails, and the groan of people with a faint breath sounded intermittently. The ghastly aspect was the battlefield itself that was coming to an end.

"What happened here?"

Tigre asked so to Kress Dill who was guiding them to the guest room. The guest room was filled with cold night air, there was not the smell of blood, and the soldiers' voice and the sound of armor could also hardly be heard.

"The explanation will be carried out later by His Excellency Tallard."

Kress Dill answered so after putting fire into the brick fireplace. In his long face and his eyes reminiscent of fox, could not be seen feelings that seemed to be emotions. Rather than expressionless, it would be more appropriate to say it's like he put on a mask to describe the look on his face.

"But since it will take some time... Please take a break and wait here until dawn. If there is something you need, we will prepare it."

"Would you prepare blankets for three people?"

At Tigre who quickly said so, "Certainly!" said Kress Dill, bowed and left. Waiting for signs of him to disappear, Olga opened her mouth.

"Is this alright?"

She referred to whether they might trust them. Tigre, squatting in front of the fireplace, while warming his hands near the fire, answered. He did not sit down yet because the floor was still cold.

"After all, they put fire in the stove, and so far have not planned to kill us. Anyway, let's hear what they have to say. That aside, how about you two? It's very warm here, you know?"

"I also noticed it in that village, but... you're always so relaxed even during critical moments."

Matvey smiled and warmed himself likewise near the fire, squatting down to Tigre's left. Olga likewise walked up, but to Tigre's right side and sat down covering her hips with the end of the mantle.

Until Kress Dill's subordinates brought the blankets, the three people had been sitting in front of the stove without moving, and no one had used the bed.

When Tallard, accompanied by Kress Dill, visited the guest room, it had begun to brighten outside of the window.

"I kept you waiting."

Wearing the same clothes as yesterday, his blond hair slightly disheveled. However on his face was not seen even the slightest fatigue. Rather, he seemed even more shining full of drive.

He let his subordinate move a chair opposite to the trio and sat down. There was, respectively, Kress Dill standing behind Tallard and Matvey standing behind Tigre. This was insurance for immediate actions if anything was to happen.

"So, from where shall I start? Well, what do you want to hear?"

Tallard was talking to Tigre naturally, as though it was an everyday conversation with a smile. That friendly behavior might also be one of Tallard's weapons. Tigre, while being cautious so that he might not be surprised at whatever might be told, opened his mouth. He thought that he should ask about what happened last night.

"It may be too late to ask, but was it you who killed Jermaine?"

"Yeah. It was me."

Tallard readily recognized without being abashed and without assuming a defiant attitude.

"There are three reasons. One is that I could no longer overlook Jermaine's way of governing. Another is that we would lose to Elliot at this rate."

Tigre, after inwardly scrutinizing his words, judged that it was not a lie.

"And the third?"

"It is, of course, ambition."

With a bold and fearless attitude, Tallard asserted. Olga and Matvey stared wide-eyed. They did not think that he could assert so clearly. Only Tigre, no showing sign of agitation, slightly nodded.

"Even if it is to unify the divided Asvarre in order to save the people, I'm just a commoner. Since it does not change the fact that this is a coup d'état. I think that I should at least say that to you."

It is difficult to determine whether it was a truth or a joke. But Tigre thought that he was true.

According to what Tallard said, when he found out that he would be demoted to a hundred cavalrymen commander, he began to plan a rebellion.

"Jermaine left me this Valverde. I thought that there would be no problem if I drafted soldiers. It was convenient for me, though."

After that, Tallard gradually increased the soldiers who complied on their own while serving in the maintenance of security around Valverde, while also considering the strategy and time to capture the castle. By the time they were mostly gathered up, he met with the trio.

"I came early to kill Jermaine's soldiers. I predicted that there would certainly be uproar, and I hastened the time of execution and gathered the soldiers as much as possible. And it was just as I expected. Jermaine sent fifty soldiers after you. Thanks to that, it was very easy to carry out our plan."

On grounds of maintaining law and order, Tallard could freely stroll around the Castle and the mansion outskirts where the trio stayed at. Moreover, most of the servants and employees working at the castle were also residents of Valverde. It was easy for Tallard, who had obtained their trust, to explore the trends in the Castle.

"In such a reason, I'm currently the Lord of Valverde. Therefore, without delay, I have a favor to ask you."

"Do you want to forge alliances with us instead of Prince Jermaine?"

As Tigre anticipated and asked, Tallard nodded with a broad smile.

"I greatly appreciate that you catch on quickly. Though this will be after I hear the contents of the alliance in detail."

Matvey made a disappointed expression, Olga was watching Tigre with interest from the side.

The change of situation was already beyond the scope of Tigre's control. He answered that he should discuss with Zchted and should return as soon as possible. Even the King of Zchted should not blame him for that.

However Tigre calmly described the contents of the contract that he told to Jermaine. After hearing, Tallard smiled while patting his knee.

"Tigre-dono. If possible, I would also roughly like to make friendly relations with Zchted and Brune in those conditions, what do you think?"

"Roughly, is...? The content is written for Prince Jermaine, and naturally can't be directly used to negotiate with you."

Tigre carefully asked Tallard. A careless word should not be said.

"In regards to our support. I don't need troops nor fleets. I only hope that you and the vanadis next to you can help. I want you to lead the troops and stand on the battlefield. And when you defeat Elliot, as the Lord of Kingdom of Asvarre, I will make official friendly relations with both Zchted and Brune."

Even Tigre was surprised by this. Now, in a situation where he wanted even one soldier towards the fight against Elliot, it could be said that he thought about it very much. The proposal was too bold even if it was a bluff.

"Lord Tallard. How many troops are there in your hand?"

"I would say about three thousand that can immediately move. There are two thousand seven hundred regular soldiers and three hundred Sachstein mercenaries. By the way, I heard that Elliot has twenty to thirty thousand soldiers."

With a dark smile, Tallard took out to the number of enemy troops, even though he was not asked.

"... Which means you have a trump card for winning, right?"

"Of course. However, I won't tell at this point."

---It's a difficult situation...

If he declined, even if not killed, at least they would be imprisoned somewhere until the end of the war.

Tigre busily rotated his head. It was not good to think too long on the wrong side. As he moved his gaze at Olga next to him, their eyes met. She slightly nodded, still expressionless. She seemed to say that she would follow his judgment.

Before making a final decision, Tigre decided to try to gain time.

"You earlier said that Olga and I will serve as commanders, but... Just in case, I want to ask, what do you intend to use as a reward?"

---Though he might already have thought about the proper amount.

As long as the contents were not particularly important, he should only overlook it. Anyway, what he needed now was time to think.

"I can't be cheap on that point. Though territories are not given, I intend to prepare five bags of gold coins for each. If Matvey-dono stands on the battlefield, I will pay him three bags of gold coins. Moreover, I was thinking of giving to Tigre-dono a title on par with Knight of the Moonlight(Lumiere) and Star Shooter(Silvrash)."

"I appreciate the gesture, but let's drop the title."

After all, two titles were enough. Though he found even those two unmanageable.

"That's a shame. And then-

Tigre was surprised as there was still something. Tallard without changing his expression continued.

"We will protect Sophia Obertas, held by Elliot, and turn her over to you."

Turning over the chair with a bang!, Tigre spontaneously leaned forward before Tallard finished speaking.

"...What do you mean?"

Sophie visited Prince Elliot as a messenger from Zchted. Although it turned out that he had ridden on Tallard's rhythm, Tigre could do nothing but ask it. Tallard showed a look of surprise at his reaction, but still answered his question.

"Did you know that Elliot concluded a secret pact with Muozinel?"

"...I have heard rumors."

Tigre sat back in the chair. As such, she was sent as an emissary to this country.

"So that happened. Elliot, on the surface pretended to deepen his relationship with Zchted, but secretly cooperated with Muozinel in the back. The cost of their support was Miss Sophia."

"Is Sophie... Miss Sophia safe?"

As he careless spoke of her nickname, Tigre hastily smoothed it over, but he had not been able to conceal the anxiety in his voice.

"According to the information from ten days ago, she is still safe. She is a valuable hostage, and an important piece in order to get support. She should not be crudely treated."

Though he was at wits' end, Tigre desperately controlled himself strongly, clenching his molars. Even if Tallard's words were probably not wrong, it was at most still only conjecture, too.

--Maybe, it's not something to worry about.

Sophie is a vanadis. Although it is hard to imagine from her gentle behavior, she has helped Lord Massas, who was targeted by assassins. Even though she teamed up with Ellen, she still fought against Brune's strongest knight Roland. As for having been dispatched to Prince Elliot as a messenger this time, she was probably expecting to get through some dangers.

"...Lord Tallard. I would like to add another condition."

But Tigre decided to accept this story after having thought so far. He owed Sophie. And moreover if anything happened to her, Ellen would be sad. Mira, too. And also himself.

Though there might be no problem, he couldn't ignore it no matter what.

"Until just before the decisive battle with Prince Elliot, I want you to keep our names secret.

At Tigre's request, Tallard put his hand on his chin pretending to think.

"If possible, can you tell me your reasons?"

"Zchted has not sided yet with Jermaine - Consequently, they don't support Tallard Graham. I want Prince Elliot to think so."

To ensure Sophie's safety, this was a trick. If he was aware of the existence of Tigre and the others, Elliot would use her as a hostage. He couldn't let him do such a thing.

"We swear not to reveal your names. In addition, I will deny it immediately if such a rumor comes out. Is this OK?"

"On that point, the three of us will cooperate with you, so that is well. Regarding the treaty between Zchted and Asvarre, after defeating Prince Elliot, I would like a re-adjustment on the agreement. As I said earlier, the contents were addressed to Prince Jermaine."

"Understood. With this, we have a deal. Tigre-dono."

Tallard outstretched his hand with a big smile. Tigre grasped his hand with a fearless expression.

"About Lord Sophia's matter, please pay heed to it."

Continuing the discussion would be carried out in the conference room, and the trio was taken to a room one size smaller than the guest room. Since they could hold their weapons, Tigre had his black bow in hands while Olga hung the Roaring Demon at her waist.

As the conference room did not have windows and an open roof, the only illumination in the space interior were the candlesticks placed in the four corners of the room and the sunlight coming from the air vents. In the center stood a huge desk set with maps of various sizes on the top with a piece representing the army placed on that map. Several other maps were also posted on the wall.

A man stood there. He ought to be less than 35 years old. In addition to red hair tinted slightly different from Tigre's, he had mild blue eyes. Though he had an average figure and physique, and was lightly dressed without armor, displaying only with a sword hanging on his waist, Tigre could not see any openings in his guard.

"This man might possess a considerable amount of skill," whispered Olga to Tigre.

"This is Ludra, Tigre-dono. I chose this man to serve as your adjutant. Please get along him."

"You are Earl Vorn, yes? I am Vaild Ludra, who serves His Excellency Tallard Graham. I'm glad to have the honor of fighting alongside you, who has many heroic tales surrounding your name."

Ludra bowed in a polite manner and outstretched his hand. Tigre also took his hand, and they gratefully exchanged a handshake. Though it is dangerous to judge someone from just the first impression, he did not look like a bad person.

"Well then, I will explain the current situation."

Kress Dill, with his eyes reminiscent of fox, stood before a map placed on the wall. That map depicted the terrain in the vicinity. With a short stick in hand, he pointed at Valverde Northwest Fort Lux.

"General Leicester of the Fort Lux declared his defection to Prince Elliot's side the day before yesterday."

Not only did Tigre stand speechless, Matvey did, too. They had heard the rumors, but it had just now become a fact, which is what they really didn't want.

Olga turned her eyes to Tallard for an explanation. The instigator of the coup d'état with his blond hair answered as if it was not big deal.

"That was to be expected. Since there was such a rumor before. Moreover, even if he under by my hands, I intended to execute him sooner or later, so you can say that the timing is just about right."

"Is he a difficult person?"

To Tigre's question, Tallard made a sullen face and shook his head.

"Though both his sword skill and his commanding of soldiers are quite good, he is a man who abducts the young girls he finds to his taste and brings them back to the Fort. We often clashed. Jermaine did not mind such things though... So for what reason did Leicester betray us?"

"Jermaine, no matter how much time passes, would have no regrets for having killed his siblings and would also continue his tyrannical actions. Such was his excuse. Elliot probably dangled him bait that would make him abandon Jermaine. It may be the promise of territory, or a perhaps a title...?"

"Or young girls?"

---But, having the three thousands soldiers of the Fort gone to the enemy side is really a headache.

Tigre stared at the map on the wall with a bitter face. Although he could sympathize with Tallard's feelings, still, the nearest enemy was at two days worth of distance from Valverde. They were in a situation in which they would most likely lose at any given moment.

In a tone like a strict teacher, Kress Dill tapped the map with the tip of the birch. He pointed at the coast of the port town of Mariajo in the north from Valverde.

"Prince Elliot's fleet lay stagnant at the shores of Mariajo. I think he is waiting to see how we react to General Leicester's defection. By launching a simultaneous attack on Mariajo, we can force them to surrender."

"...Is Miss Sophia located on that ship?"

Though he didn't know where to start with the horrors, this was what Tigre wanted to confirm first. Still because he was inured to the designation target, Sophie, the word "Miss Sophia" did not immediately come. Kress Dill, without moving one eyebrow, nodded.

"Even if the vanadis is, as the rumor says, an warrior with the strength of a thousand soldiers, she cannot escape if surrounded by the sea. Also, Prince Elliot keeps valuable items close at hand."

It was a really persuasive explanation. Tigre knew that Sophie has a Dragic Tool(Viralt) called Light Flower, but it should not of the kind that can be managed at sea.

"Then, I will explain how we will act from now on."

Tallard, puffing his chest with great confidence walked, to the front of the map stuck on the wall. His finger pointed toward Fort Lux.

"This Fort Lux, I would like Tigre-dono to capture it with three thousand soldiers. As I said earlier, I chose Ludra as your adjutant. About Miss Olga and Mr. Matvey following you is up to you to decide."

--With three thousand soldiers, you want me to capture a fortress which holds the same number of soldiers...?

"Meanwhile, Kress Dill and I will gather soldiers. I am expecting to gather about ten thousand. Afterwards, I will join Tigre-dono and then we will go to the north to battle and defeat Elliot. That is all."

Tigre could not believe his ears. It was too rough to call it a strategy. After all, in a situation where Prince Elliot's army numbered thirty thousand, if ten thousand soldiers were gathered, the resulting number would only equal one-thirds their size. It was still less than half, even if they add up Tigre's three thousand. He really wanted to yell at them whether they intended to win or not.

"I hope you can elaborate."

Before Tigre opened his mouth, Olga sullenly said. She also couldn't consent with the current explanation.

"How do you think Prince Elliot will move?"

"After the fall of Mariajo from the south, he will aim at this Valverde. In strategic terms, there is no other way to move his military force."

Tallard ran his finger in a straight line along a highway from the port town and stopped it in Valverde.

"Still, I don't think Mariajo will fall so easily. If the number of soldiers amounts to ten thousand, we will move to the north here, and board to Asvarre Island across the sea. We have a sufficient number of vessels, and without being found by the enemy, already searched for a rocky area coming out to the sea and also grasped the flow of the tide."

After turning round and round the vicinity of Valverde, Tallard brought his finger to the right above and advanced it to the island across the sea.

"And then, we will pretend to aim for the Capital... ambush Elliot, who would becoming back in a panic, and launch a surprise attack and finally crush him. We will do it in one battle."

Olga, also surprised at this, widely opened her narrowed eyes. Tigre and Matvey couldn't help but emit a groan of admiration. Tallard, seeing their reaction, revealed a pleasant smile and continued.

"Now that Jermaine is not here anymore, Valverde is but one mere city in the Kingdom of Asvarre. It is not shameful to abandon Valverde, but it would be a big loss for that man if he was deprived of the King's Capital by someone else. So Elliot can do nothing but come back."

"I see. But, in the case where Elliot does not move? Jermaine, who was a political rival, is already gone. He may choose to withdraw his troops on his own base and move in position to the Capital."

"In that case, it will be fortunate for me if he does so. I could confidently increase my allies around Valverde and expand my influence. However, Elliot has two reasons for driving this decisive battle."

To Olga who looked puzzled, Tallard stretched out two fingers.

"Elliot is of a royal lineage and cannot overlook me, who murdered Jermaine. It will jeopardize his reputation if he doesn't punish me as soon as possible. The Noble Feudal Lords will also despise that man. Another is that he is almost at his limit."

"Limit...?"

Tallard did not reply to Olga, who tilted her head, and turned a joyful look to Tigre. "Do you know?" was what his look asked to Tigre.

"It means that feeding twenty thousand to thirty thousand soldiers is not an easy task."

When Tigre said so, Olga surprisedly put her hand on her lips. Tallard broadly laughed at the answer that apparently was right.

"As expected, you guess well. King Zacharias's death triggered a civil war since about half a year ago. Elliot is using pirates as soldiers, but the struggle to keep them united is also not an easy task. If left alone, those men might go on an expedition to the coast of Brune or Zchted."

"They get food by two means. By looting of Prince Jermaine's territory - which is now our sphere of influence. Another is by levy of the noble feudal lords. To that end, the backlash of noble feudal lords against Prince Elliot increases day by day."

"Thank you. I understand."

Olga slightly bowed to Tallard and Kress Dill. She did not understand right away, probably because she had no experience in leading an army.

It was Elliot that expected a short-term decisive battle. Now they could understand why Tallard spoke of finishing the war with one battle.

---To do this, first of all, it's the Fort Lux, huh...

Tigre made a sullen face. He had experienced attacking a castle only once. It was when he attacked Mira, who holds the Tatra Mountains with Ellen.

"You said you will give me three thousand soldiers, but can you immediately mobilize them?"

"Oh! If you order to depart right now, they will be out of Valverde after a half Koku."

Tigre couldn't help but sigh inwardly for the rapid deployment. It meant that they had already finished the preparation for arms, food, sundries and various other equipments.

---Were they already ready, when they attacked this castle last night?

"I understood. Let's immediately head to Fort Lux."

Winking at Olga and Matvey, Tigre left the conference room.

---There are no other options for rescuing Sophie.

Leaving the city to find Elliot's boat, assaulting the ship, rescuing Sophie, and then fleeing. No matter how he thought about it, it was an impossible to do alone. The chances would be higher by cooperating with Tallard. While understanding this point, Tigre's feelings did not clear up in the fact that he would be assisting to Tallard's ambition.

While walking in the hallway with a disappointed face, he was accosted from behind.

"Tigre-dono."

It was Tallard who came out of the conference room to hail Tigre.

"I want to talk with you a little bit, is it alright? It's nothing serious and I won't take much of your time."

He pointed a finger across the corridor, suggesting another place. Tigre frowned. The required talk should have already been cleared up. Olga inquired.

"Will our presence be inconvenient?"

"It's not that, but..."

Tallard's answer was a bit hesitant. His expression was like that of a troubled child with no excuse, as if there is such charm that people could not help but forgive him. Tigre gently sighed.

"I understand. I will listen to what you have to say."

He just said that to help him. Tigre did not think he could do something at this stage. Moreover, it was not like he wasn't interested at all at the topic.

Deciding to have Olga and Matvey wait in the guest room from a while ago, Tigre followed after Tallard. Tallard went ahead through the corridor at a brisk pace.

Turning at the corner, they climbed the stairs to a place that could be said to be the inside of the roof. It was a part of the roof with a special structure, projected upwards from the original roof just like a wall. As far as they could look, this was the castle from the front. At first, Tigre didn't understand.

Then, there was a wide circular footing, with bows and arrows.

"Here is the highest point in Valverde, where we can see the entire town."

Tallard laughed proudly pointing to the wall instead of to the roof. They were able to overlook the state of the town from the gap in the roof made skillfully when they stood there.

"I don't know who constructed this ingenious design. I think that it might have been Zephyria, but they did not leave records. That aside, it's a nice scenery, right?"

Tigre straightforwardly nodded. Despite such a thing happening last night, the urban look was still peaceful. Though the soldiers' figure were certainly

noticeable everywhere, the streets were arrayed with dew shops, housewives shopping and chatting, and kids running in a narrow alley.

"It was a little noisier at dawn. After it was conveyed that I took over, it fortunately became quiet."

"Is this what you want me to see?"

When Tigre asked, Tallard put on a serious face and nodded.

"Women and children can walk the street without being scared. The shops can open without fear of being threatened. Waiting until dawn, the streets will waft with the smell of food... I thought it was a very common thing, but in the past six months I know that is not the case."

Peace, based on the meaning and strength in order to eke out living things. Regardless of what is missing, the world where bandits would become rampant in broad daylight would come.

Looking up at the clear blue sky, the blond young man's voice contained enthusiasm.

"Now, it is only Valverde, and several nearby towns and villages, but someday I want the entirety of Asvarre to become like this. However, for a mere general, it is impossible to do so. That's why..."

Seeming to hold back from shouting, Tallard exhaled. His blue eyes regained their calm brightness. However, in the depths of his pupils, was still burning the flame of passion.

"I aim to be king. What is spreading now under my eyes is the form of a country which I govern."

Tigre, still looking at Tallard, could not say anything right away.

His gaze and his attitude possessed a strong magnetism that could only attract those who see it. He had a mysterious charm to let people wanting to help him fulfill this ideal.

Even if other people had spun the same words with the same expression, it would probably not have this same effect. Or this might just be the distinctive character of a person worthy to be called King.

"Though there is a vanadis, this war has originally nothing to do with you. You won't probably be concerned with what will happen to the people of this country. But please, lend us your strength."

Silence descended. Although Tigre was just silently standing, an intense conflict unrolled in the mind of the youngster. Two means were opposed and fighting each other.

That battle quietly ended. If Tigre was a person from Asvarre, or if he was in a more liberal position, then maybe the answer would be different. However, Tigre already had things he wanted to protect, and also things he should protect. And it was not this place.

"'I'm sorry' is only what I can say, but I will try my best."

That was the most honest answer for Tigre. Though he also wanted to help Tallard, just as he said, Tigre had his own circumstances. No matter what happened, he would probably give priority to Sophie, Olga, Matvey, Brune and Zchted.

"That's enough. I appreciate the thought."

Tallard smiled and deeply bowed. And then picked up the two bows and arrows.

"Anyway, there's another reason I called you here."

"Is this for the archery match?"

Tigre asked so to confirm, because it was the only possibility. Tallard nodded greatly, stretched his arm upwards straight, and pointed at the clear blue sky.

"A single match. And it is to see who can shoot an arrow higher. That's all."

"Simple and understandable."

Tigre happily smiled back, and took an arrow from Tallard.

The two men respectively set up their bow. Two arrows and four eyes were turned toward the sky.

A faint sound which strained the bowstring tickled the eardrum of the both. Both sides held their breath, motionlessly staring at the sky. Only in such a state, after a time of about ten count.

Birds tweeted. With this as a signal, the two men let fly their arrow simultaneously. The two arrows wrapped around the wind, tearing the atmosphere, soaring towards the sky.

The arrows finally exhausted their strength. One of the arrows was digging in the space on the top of the other, only by a small margin. They (Tigre and Tallard) were on the ground and could not confirm that minor gap.

As they thought the arrows suddenly stopped moving in the air, they didn't expect the two arrows to draw a small arc and silently fall, following gravity. Rather than around the foothold of the two men standing, the arrows fell into the backyard of the Castle.

"....I lost, huh."

Tallard put down his bow, and laughed seeming to be impressed. Tigre stayed silent, and likewise showed a smile.

The eyes of two men were able to distinguish which arrow began to fall away.

Even if the arrows were the same, the bows were different. In a game of equal footing, the outcome would be difficult to say.

However, Tallard proposed the game, aware of this, and Tigre agreed. In that way, he was ready to accept the outcome of the results.

They shook hands, and went down the ladder.

Then, after a half koku, Tigre, Olga, Matvey and Ludra, leading third thousand soldiers set off from Valverde.

◎

To the northeast from the port town of Mariajo, at about one verst (about 1 km) ahead in the sea, were more than twenty vessels afloat.

Though there were ship types without uniformity, and regardless of which were large, each was equipped with two to three thick masts. The hulls were very old, but it seemed to be the proof that they endured many years of stormy seas and survived.

Now folding the sails, the sailors were drinking liquor on the deck, enjoying card gambling. They have tanned skin and the strong body typical of

sailors and whoever grew accustomed to violence would feel that they gave off a ferocious atmosphere.

They were pirates. They were people who could freely manipulate from big ships to small boats, made war in the tri-coastal rebellion, and now they were warriors wielding sword and axe under the lead of Prince Elliot.

Buried in a corner of the sea, in the center of the fleet, there was an especially large ship. Unlike the other ships, the hull was well polished and the bow was decorated with a silver goddess statue. On the sail rested a red dragon on a white background. Though folded now, once spread it will shine in the background of Blue Ocean.

Prince Elliot was in a room for guests of that ship.

If someone who knew Prince Jermaine saw him, he would describe him as 'thin Prince Jermaine'. Despite the age difference of two years, their appearance was so similar.

However, the atmosphere released was totally different. Elliot didn't have a gloomy side and a certain sense of duty like Jermaine, instead he possessed a bare desire and wildness typical of a hungry wolf. In some perspective, his well-featured face which gave a dauntless impression was colored with a loathsome arrogance.

He sat on a luxurious gilded chair with gold in the opposite direction, crossing his arms on the back of the chair, and putting his chin to rest on it. In front of the sight of his dirty smile, there was a woman.

She was about 20 years old. She was a beautiful woman with pale golden hair and emerald pupils, whose features which, though being intellectual, also possessed a loveliness that gave a vivid impression to those who gazed at her. She was wearing a light green dress, which highlighted the line that formed the constriction of her waist and her ample bosom.

She was a vanadis of Zchted, Sophia Obertas. Her Dragonic Tool(Viralt) was seized, and ten days had passed since she had been locked in this room.

She sat on a shabby old chair, and was bound by an iron chain. The chain did not strongly tighten around her so as to cut into her body, and also did not injure her skin, but it was complicatedly entangled and applied a lock on her back so as to prevent her from removing it.

Meals, water and hot water to wash her body were only what she required. Besides, she refused even one piece of alternate clothing other than hers and spent her days in this narrow cabin. Three times a day, that unpleasant chain which coiled itself around her body was taken off. It was only at time for a short meal.

Although her golden hair had lost its glossiness and the shadow of fatigue blurred her face, her emerald pupils had not yet lost their strong will.

Elliot visited this room that encaged her up once a day. He didn't get tired no matter how many times he looked at Sophie's beauty.

"Miss Sophia. Do you know why I come every day to see you?"

"You wish to wash away your anxiety by looking at me, your deal's physical asset, no?"

Sophie caught Elliot's look from the front and answered back in a cold tone.

"That's not it," said the second prince of Asvarre with a distorted smile.

"I want to test myself. I want to see if I won't lose self-control and push you down. Though you have spent a long time in this musty room, I have already killed twelve of my subordinates only by having you stay here."

Not understanding the meaning of Elliot's words, Sophie frowned. The second prince of Asvarre broadly laughed, swaying back and forth the chair in which he was sitting in.

"This room is guarded by a group of four people. And four groups of people take turns. I severely sentenced those guys. I declared that if even one of the four tried to attack you, I would kill the four of them."

Sophie felt a chill crawl up her spine. Elliot put up three fingers and loudly laughed.

"There were three groups. Twelve people died. It's not because I starve for women so much, but because I properly kidnapped you. However, even though the first group was used as bait, those guys did not give up. That only shows how beautiful a woman you are. Even me, if I did not have to extradite you to Muozinel, I would have pushed you down long ago."

"Do you wish to try now?"

Loathing unpleasant feelings, Sophie provoked Elliot with a bold attitude. Because of this action, the iron chain which bound her issued subtle sounds.

"Though I would like to accept your invitation, still I must decline. Since my interaction with the Muozinel people is very shallow. I doubt those guys would do body check, but still they might as well just in case. Even those chains, which bind you, were devised so as not to injure your beautiful skin, you know?"

After undressing her whole body with his eyes, and especially staring at her chest, Elliot revealed a look that seemed to be satisfied and stood up from the chair. He left the room in gait similar to that of a drunkard.

Confirming signs of him leaving, Sophie sighed.

She was thinking that Elliot would not take the bait, even if she provoked him, but it was as expected. Were she to give in to fear, it would just bolster that violent man's self confidence. As she is called the Brilliant Princess of the Light Flower(Presuvet), she could discern that man's true nature.

---I didn't think that pirate Prince would be my life-saving rope...

From what Sophie saw, Elliot did not particularly excel in martial arts. When they talked some time ago, he was full of openings.

---As long as I wish, Light Flower... My Dragonic Tool(Viralt) will come at my hands. And I could cut such chains right away.

But, Sophie did not do so. The reason was very simple, it was because she could die.

Sophie perceived that Elliot could not become an effective hostage. Pirates would mercilessly kill Elliot, have their way with her body and then probably kill her afterwards. They felt no concern whatsoever for such a place. This was because they thought that they should return to pirate business.

Only Elliot has found a political value with Sophie's body. The value as a tool to draw the support of Muozinel. Therefore, after capturing Sophie, he literally hasn't even lifted one finger on her. Though he enjoyed throwing out vulgar words.

---I was really careless.

Remembering the time when she was arrested, Sophie strongly bit her lips in vexation.

By a ship which Zchted kingdom owns, Sophie visited the Asvarre Island. Since she was an official messenger, in addition to the mother ship, there were three escort ships.

When they arrived at the Capital, Elliot was absent. He was in the sea area between Asvarre Island and the mainland. Elliot dispatched a messenger and asked for talks in his ship, but Sophie compiled a reason to declined, and still remained in the Capital.

Prince Elliot finally backed down, it only looked like that (on the surface). "I will come to your ship for the meeting. Your ship doesn't need to come here; it doesn't matter even if you stop at the port," he said so and came.

Sophie, who thought that it could affect the negotiations if she further declined, consented. Though it was only a friendly relation on the surface, until she got concrete evidence that Elliot was cooperating with Muozinel, she had to carry out this attitude.

Then a few days later, Elliot appeared on the ship with the red dragon on the white ground which folded sail. He jumped to Sophie's light ship, and the talk began.

The talk went smoothly to Sophie's surprise. Elliot always maintained a smile, even when he declared a vow to maintain an everlasting relationship with Zchted. Sophie, of course, did not believe him, but it is clear that the quiet atmosphere did not die out.

"The talk is over," said Elliot. "I wish to give you a gift, will you please come to my boat?"

Sophie was confused, but still accepted his invitation. Elliot's ship was anchored, and also surrounded by the three escort ships. If compelled, she could just jump down from the ship.

Moving second Prince of Asvarre's ship, Sophie, led by the sailors, climbed up the stern ladder.

An accident occurred at that time. As she thought she smelled a strange odor, a black smoke flowed out from the deck. When she thought "Damnit!", Sophie grasping her Dragonic Tool(Viralt), fell off the ladder she

just climbed up. Unfolding before Sophie's eyes as she came back to the deck, were crimson flames and black smoke that tortuously stretched.

Though surprised, she is also a vanadis. She decided to jump into the sea in one go, and rushed into the black smoke. However, Sophie's body bumped into something within the black smoke and bounced back.

Elliot was thoughtfully prepared. Waiting for Sophie to get off the ladder, they placed barrels and wooden box soaked beforehand with fish oil in the stern and set it on fire, and aside from that, they also efficiently set up a barrier of barrels. And only one the fall became the biggest failure.

The pirates under Elliot sailed while raising the anchor, and successfully escaped from the escort ships in panic that had begun to take action.

When Sophie was freed from the flames and the black smoke, the ship had already left the shore. While defeating the pirates surrounding her would be very easy, she had no confidence that she could swim back the port. She also understood that it was impossible to take over the ship all by herself.

As she was deep in thoughts while the ship was leaving the port, the three escort ships were surrounded by pirate ships that were several times more than when they escaped. She was told to drop her weapon by Elliot who appeared among the pirates, and Sophie put her Dragic Tool(Viralt) on the feet and surrendered.

Afterward, the people of the escort ships were held hostage to force Sophie to surrender, so she could only obey. Elliot did not kill them, he took them to the Capital and imprisoned them. He picked up subordinates to occupy the empty escort ships, and did not also forget to put on a way to prolong the negotiations.

Many people who were at the port saw Elliot's ship burnt down then. Zchted would find out before long. However, for Elliot, it would be good not to be found until the extradition of Sophie to Muozinel.

---Be patient for now, Sophia Obertas.

Looking at the slightly dirty floor, Sophie persuaded herself. Just wreaking havoc would certainly be a vanadis's shame. An opportunity would surely come some day. She just has to wait until that time.

---Shall I go meet Lunie-chan first, after I safely return to Zchted?

She imagined a happy future and cheered herself up. She remembered the figure of the young dragon with green-blue scales which was at her friend's place. Then, Ellen, Mira, Sasha's figures crossed her mind, and then emerged the face of the youth with darkish red hair.

"That reminds me, I didn't meet him for half a year. Even though it is a rare occasion for him to be in Zchted."

The reason that she did not see him was very simple, it's because Sophie was so busy that she had not the time to visit LeitMeritz.

"I would like to meet him after such a long time. I wonder what he is doing now-"

Of course, Sophie had no way of knowing, that Tigre was in this country right now.

Chapter 5 The Fall of Fort Lux

When Ludmira Lurie visited LeitMeritz and enjoyed friendly chats with Tigre, she once said something about castle siege.

"Castle sieging is, in one sentence, psychological warfare."

While sipping the tea which she brought in the guest room of the Imperial Palace, and glittering her blue eyes, she proudly launched a speech.

"Even if you can make a hole in the rampart, you cannot destroy the entire rampart. How to keep up the morale for the troops, how to dampen the enemy's, leading a large army surrounding the fort, as well keeping it well fed. Everything is for that purpose."

"But, there are also examples of overwhelming the rampart, relying on sheer numbers and the momentum, and of invading the Fort and altogether knocking down the enemy and occupying it."

In the strange attitude of Mira which stretches her moderate chest, if compared with Ellen's, and can somewhere be regarded as lovely, Tigre had a rebuttal. The Snow Princess of the Frozen Wave(Michelina) was not particularly upset.

"Just as you said, there are also precedents of this, but only to a certain degree. Keep that in mind, Tigre. What to do to make the enemy's morale drop significantly. Whether subjugating the enemy's General, or burning out the enemy's food, or also requesting reinforcements, it is just one of these means."

As he was kindly admonished, Tigre, scratching his head, had no choice but to feel ashamed of his own innocence. Though Lim too, it seemed that teaching Tigre was also a very pleasant thing for Mira.

"I wonder if it is because you are honest unlike someone I know. Although it would be nice if you honestly accept my invitation, too."

The Vanadis of Olmutz revealed a pleasant smile. Tigre, himself up to now had never considered a castle siege. Even such basic knowledge for him was very precious and he was thankful for that.

--Now, then, what should I do in this situation...?

While recalling the conversation with Mira, Tigre rode forward. Beside him were Olga and right in front, Tallard's subordinate Ludra, each respectively straddling horses.

Following behind them were three thousand troops, with the sound of hoofs and clattering armor. Three hundred of them were the aforementioned Sachstein mercenaries. They were marching a slight distance away from the regular army.

The General Commander of those three thousand soldiers was Ludra. Neither Tigre nor Olga.

Though Tallard said he would entrust the troops to Tigre, the young man requested that Ludra act as the General Commander. The three people Tigre, Olga and Matvey were acting under the pretense of being Tallard's close friends, and Ludra was responsible for supporting them as adjutant.

Tigre and the others were heading to the Fort via the highway linking Fort Lux and Valverde. For the moment, there were no problems that occurring, and if they kept up this pace, they would probably see the Fort before noon tomorrow.

There were several sheets of papers in Tigre's hands. It was some detailed sketches of the Fort Lux. These were the ones that were in the castle of Valverde, Tallard let him have them.

---Though there is no moat, the walls are very high and very thick. There are no water wells, they get water from the underground waterway.

On the maps, even the underground waterways were drawn in great detail. In a case that the Fort was captured by the enemy, Valverde would be placed in a very dangerous situation. This level of preparation was, of course, natural.

---If I use that power, it should not be difficult to capture the Fort, but...

Thinking of that, Tigre immediately reconsidered. If he used the power of the black bow or Olga's Dragonic Skills(Veda), it would not be difficult to capture the Fort Lux. After all, just blowing a hole in the rampart so that the soldiers break into from there should be simple.

However, Tigre decided not to use the power of the black bow, at least in the battle for Fort Lux. He also asked Olga not to use her Dragonic Skills(Veda), except in extreme emergency.

Since this was not Zchted, but Asvarre. Olga and Matvey were the only people he could call true allies.

Thinking about the threat, showing the power of the black bow or the Dragic Tool in the current situation, aside from being wary, the battlefield would be locked in their lives, and they would not stand being confined. He was hoping to avoid conspicuous action, at least until they rescued Sophie.

Moreover, Olga aside, he himself did not think that he could handle the power of the black bow.

He shook his head to brush away idle thoughts. At that time, Matvey came riding a horse. For him who could freely speak the Asvarre language, Tigre had him look at the state of soldiers.

"Have you thought about any plans?"

In a cheerful voice while turning a look to the bunch of papers which Tigre had, "Not at all." was Tigre's reply by shaking his head.

"How are the soldiers?"

"Their morale is quite high. The army appears to be organized in soldiers accustomed to war, most people look cold, and almost no one is disturbed."

"What are they thinking about General Leicester? I mean, they were allies until the other day, right?"

"Knowledge of the traitor seems to be common. Lord Tallard has certainly betrayed Prince Jermaine, but before that, the fact that General Leicester went over to the enemy has a greater impact on them. In addition, they know that Lord Tallard hates General Leicester."

Looking like he had no words to say, and rummaging his darkish red hair, Tigre looked up at the sky. The blue sky mixed with the end of summer and the start of fall looked like it lacked some vividness.

"So both fighting spirit and proficiency are enough, huh. I wonder how they are seeing us."

"Foreign guests, so it seems. Because of the announcement that we are Lord Tallard's friends, so you should not worry about it, but if it can fully be trusted... is hard to say. That being said, they trust Lord Tallard and

Ludra-dono, and swear an oath of loyalty. As long as we're in no big gaffe, then it won't matter."

Hearing the same answer as speculated, Tigre was relieved.

The reason that he requested Ludra to act as Commander was this. Even though there were under the pretense of being Tallard's friends, not only were they not of Asvarre, but would the soldiers really bring themselves to entrust their life to people whose identities were not apparent to them?

For Tigre, for example if it happens that an unknown person, who claims to be a friend of Ellen, commands the soldiers of Alsace, he wouldn't help but feel uneasy.

Though Tallard entrusted the soldiers to Tigre as proof of his trust in him, and chose Ludra as adjutant so that no trouble occurred, Tigre, when departing from Valverde, finished the formality.

If Ludra acted as Commander, the soldiers would be relieved, and moreover, taper their vigilance towards the trio. Above all, this was their war. Tigre did not mean to meddle more than required.

"Thank you. So please continue to check out."

As Tigre's expression of gratitude, Matvey saluted and turned the horse. He rode the horse to the side of soldiers again. After seeing him off, Tigre began to rethink about the plan for the capture of the Fort Lux.

---First of all, I must solve the issue of the same number. And then, I want a military unit that will follow me. It would be impossible with the soldiers of Asvarre. Since there is almost no relationship of mutual trust between them and me. As such, I will ask Ludra...

Absorbed too much in his thoughts, he seemingly failed to pay attention to the horse. The pace of a horse shifting horizontally (to the side) little by little, as Tigre was startled, he stopped right next to Olga. The Vanadis with light pink-colored hair looked up at Tigre with her deadpan expression.

"Is something wrong?"

Tigre revealing a wry smile, scratched his darkish red hair trying to dodge the question, but immediately reconsidered that this was a good opportunity.

"I would like to ask something to Olga, can I?"

He actually wanted to ask it earlier, but there were many things he had to keep track of even after leaving Valverde leading the army, and he accidentally delayed it.

"In the audience hall after meeting Tallard. Since then, you have entrusted (all) the decisions to me. That's what I'm concerned about."

About Olga's current status, Tigre was feeling guilty for the fact that, by the course of events, he might have involved her. Although he was very grateful that she lent her power, he did not want her to overdo it.

"I do not say anything because there is especially nothing to say."

Olga's reply was clear and concise. However, re-thinking that this alone was not enough, the 14-year-old Vanadis added.

"If I think that there is a problem in Tigre's judgment, I will also give my opinion. So far, I do not think so."

"But, there is no need for you to join this war."

He knew Olga's strength. It might be more reassuring than anyone if she fought to his side. But, on the other hand, he had a hesitation to take her to the battlefield.

"Though while bearing the title "Vanadis" it's not to me to say it, I, who fled from the land which I should govern, probably do not deserve to be called a Vanadis. However, while knowing Sophia Obertas's crisis, I cannot overlook it."

"Have you and Sophie met?"

"Only once, when I went to the Capital; she did not give me a bad impression."

After answering so, Olga moved only her line of sight upward looking Tigre.

"So Sophie is her nickname. Tigre, are you close to her?"

"Rather than saying close, she is more a benefactor. She really helped me in various ways regarding the matter of Brune."

Hearing Tigre's answer, Olga just made a "hmm" sound. After 3 to 4 counts, she said in a casual tone.

"Tigre. As for me, I trust you. Whether having revealed you that I am Vanadis, or still being here now, you may think that it is the proof to that. So-

Olga was shy, with a slightly faster tempo, and slightly raised her voice as she continued.

"When calling my name, you can also put a little more affection."

Not being able to understand right away the meaning of what she said, Tigre steadily gazed at Olga's profile. As her face slightly flushed, the young man finally understood. With a wry smile, Tigre gently patted Olga's shoulder.

"Count on it."

However, this alone could not seem to satisfy Olga who slightly pouted.

◎

Among the three thousand soldiers of Tallard, there were three hundred Sachstein mercenaries. The name of the man commanding these mercenaries was Simon. He was exactly 30 this year. He was a veteran mercenary recognized by his subordinates.

He was neither too large nor too short with a height that met his age, and his sturdy body was forged in the mercenary life. Plus, one might say he had a teenage constitution with short black hair and sharp eyes, and a baby face, but the big scar in his left cheek denied the youthful impression.

"When covering the left side of the face, he is very cute", was the statement of the whores who have slept with him.

A young man was visiting the tent of that Mercenary Captain. That was Tigre.

"What can I do for you?"

Deliberately putting on a steep expression, Simon, scowling at Tigre, applied (issued) an irritated voice. In the slightly soiled camp, there were two mercenaries other than him. The three people including Simon were dressed in iron armor, and their waist was girded with a sword.

On the other side, Tigre was lightly dressed just wearing leather armor on hemp clothing. Though he still held the black bow, the sword was obviously more advantageous in the tents.

However, not only Tigre showed no signs of being frightened, but he also caught Simon's line of sight with a hearty expression. It was not a bluff, and he seemed rather satisfied.

"Mercenary Captain Simon-dono. I have something I want to discuss with you."

---Ooh...

Simon still with a stern expression was inwardly impressed while silently staring at the young man. About Tigre, Simon only knew that he was Tallard's guest.

---Clothes and leather armor are also decent. He gives the feeling of a noble young master who got lost his way in middle of the hunt... But the fact that he is scared neither by this atmosphere nor by my voice shows that he is quite brave.

That was the reason Simon put on a steep expression and suddenly poured on a threatening voice on Tigre. He was not really angry, nor hostile to the young man.

In addition to the belief: "If you underestimate a mercenary, you will be doomed", coupled with the observation of each other, there was the purpose to make the opponent falter if lucky, and advantageously carry subsequent negotiations. Even now, he was calmly assessing Tigre in his mind.

Since Simon did not speak, Tigre continued.

"I want you and the three hundred mercenaries led by you directly under my command. I have already got Ludra-dono's permission. To what Lord Tallard currently pays, I will add one piece of silver coin per day. Two pieces of silver coins for those leading more than 50 persons. Three pieces of silver coins for more than 100 persons. While it's five silver coins for you. What do you think?"

Simon did not answer immediately. Just like wild beasts, eliminating the presence of those who suddenly show up and observing the situation, he was sitting still on plain chair staring at Tigre.

"Which country language are you good at?"

After a while, Simon uttered these lines. Tigre, even though revealing a surprised expression, still answered Brune language.

"Then speak to me with Brune language. I can't stand to hear your third-rate Zchted language."

"Sorry about that."

As Tigre smiled and politely bowed, he once again repeated what he just said in Brune language. Simon looking the young man did not ride on provocation. He brought himself to hear the story just a little.

"Why come to us? You should ask Ludra-dono to borrow regular soldiers."

"Are you not a friend of Tallard?" As he implicitly asked so (As the question included such overtone), Tigre shook his head. Erasing his smile, he put on a serious expression.

"What I need are soldiers who will go forward as long as they judge the command to be correct, even if it is a bit dangerous."

"I think the loyalty of those fellows to be quite considerable."

In a sarcastic voice, Simon replied. He did not intend to exaggerate. Even aware of being clearly numerically inferior in comparison with the enemy army, the soldiers here still believed in Tallard, as well as his subordinate Ludra.

Likewise, Simon was here simply because he bet on the General who led the first string of Tallard army.

Tigre showed an attitude of thinking, it was just the time for about two breaths.

"You know that I am a person from Brune, right?"

"I can somehow guess from your accent, as well as your face."

"I just got acquainted with Lord Tallard, by serving as a foreigner. Even if I persuade them with Ludra's help, I do not think that the soldiers will entrust their life to a person that they do not know well."

Simon who, inwardly believed that it makes sense, was also amazed. He was young, and yet he understood.

If the commander is a foreigner, he must whether have very high prestige and reputation, or require the ability to convince the soldiers. Though most of the mercenaries led by Simon were people of Sachstein, there were also those from Brune, Zchted and Asvarre. It was Simon's power and prestige that could unite them.

"...So you think we would listen to what you said?"

"Compared with the regular soldiers, it is easy to sustain (your) trust by money. Besides, the point of 'foreigners' is hard to be much of an issue. I thought so."

A smile appeared on Simon's mouth. This was a satisfactory answer. He let his men prepare to put a chair on the corner of the tent, inviting Tigre on the seat.

"Let's hear the story. If I can be convinced by your suggestion, I will accept the offer made a while ago."

However, Tigre did not sit on the chair.

"Before that, I have a proposal."

Simon silently nodded, urging Tigre. The young man with an amiable tone said.

"I am very skilled with the bow, don't you want a match? From your squad, choose people good at the bow... Let's say, about five people. We will use a bow. And we won't use crossbow. If even one can shoot an arrow farther than me, let's add ten pieces of copper coins to the allowance that we said a while ago."

Steepness disappeared from Simon's face. It was happiness that emerged instead.

"Okay. I get on."

Mercenary is basically on the merit system, following the person with superior ability obediently.

It was Ellen who taught so to Tigre. "Of course, there are also exceptions", Was what she added while slightly sticking out her tongue.

The young man was betting on this now. To get their trust in a short time, he intended to do all what he could.

Tigre's purpose was to let the mercenaries - particularly the Captain Simon recognized his skills with the bow. Even if there was a user of the bow superior to him, it was not particularly a problem. Because if there was such a strong person, he would be there to be reckoned long ago.

In addition, Tigre had just felt an incredible urge to compete.

---There might be someone somewhere who can shoot an arrow farther than me.

He had that feeling in a corner of his heart. The encounter with Tallard which was a bow errand with ability equal to him, gave the young man a lot of shock and strain.

In the rest of the interval of the march, Tigre played the match with the mercenaries.

And then Tigre won the trust of the mercenaries.

◎

Just around noon the next day, the 3000 of the Tallard army led by Ludra stopped the lineup to the south of the Fort Lux.

The Fort Lux was built with piled up black granite, and was obviously of a strong structure.

Though there was no moat, it was endowed with a high thick walls, it had two gates to the north and one to the south. On the south side was the main gate, here was something sturdy which inserted the board of the oak into thick iron plate.

The back gate on the north side was around two or so smaller (than the main gate) and there was also only one small iron plate. The second gate directly next to the back gate had a size that could not safely be referred to as iron door rather than gate. This gate was used when the main gate and the back gate must be shut.

With the dense forest spreading directly at the north of the Fort, such as the deployment of troops or the setting of siege weapons were nearly impossible. That is why the north gate was small.

On the other side, to the south was a flat prairie. The way this Fort highly rose the forest over the back, appeared like a black giant was standing in the way, so the offensive momentum atrophy (shrank).

Though the soldiers of Tallard army were also overwhelmed by the appearance of the Fort, they regained their composure seeing the calm way of command of Ludra.

Ludra completed the lineup in the south of the Fort. Even though it is said the south, it was not in the vicinity of the Fort. It was about five hundred alsins (about 500 meters) away.

"Do we not make the castle siege?"

Olga emitted a wondering mutter. Tigre also thought about the question, but that was cleared immediately. It's because he was told that Ludra, taking over more than ten horsemen, went toward the Fort. Tigre and the others asked him to let them accompany.

Even when seeing Ludra and his subordinates approaching, the Fort showed no reaction in particular. As they stopped the horses in a place where arrows could not reach, Ludra shouted toward the Fort.

"General Leicester and his followers. You probably already know, but Prince Jermaine, by who you took the banner of revolt, is dead. Now, General Tallard Graham became the Lord of the whole area centering on Valverde. Don't you think we should avoid unnecessary conflict, and join hands (bid together)?"

This didn't sound great, but could be heard clearly. His men also shouted the same thing toward the fort, and then after a short time General Leicester appeared on the rampart.

With some brown hair bequeathed on the left and right ears, he was almost a bald man. As Ludra, he was probably not more than 35 years of age, but he gave a different impression (vibe). His physique (build), though medium, was easily wearing a heavy armor, and one could see that he was trained (well forged).

"The likes of a hunter born in a fishing village shouting for Generals really make me laugh. We have inherited the royal bloodline of Prince Elliot as his peers. If you bastards do not want to be known as the vanguard of traitors, you should throw away your weapons and prostrate yourselves to

the seedling of the castle gate. From then supplying wives and daughters in order, I will convey to Prince Elliot."

The soldiers on the rampart also repeated Leicester's words aloud. Matvey, twisting his tough look, which seems to say "It's helpless" shook his head. For Tigre, too, the mood was souring (unpleasant).

"It's such a man, huh. It's as Tallard said."

When he finds young girls of his liking, he kidnaps them and brings them back to the Fort. As for Tallard, who was fighting for people to live in peace, even a temporary cooperation (joint) could not maintain long-term friendly relations between the rivals.

Ludra and his men did not continue to speak, and with the attitude that he did what he could, he returned to the army. The Fort side silently saw him off.

Like that, the sun set while both armies were on alert at each other, and on the first day, without major incident, it was gradually approaching night.

In the commander's tent, there were four people Ludra, Tigre, Olga and Matvey. They were sitting around the sketch (on the map) of the vicinity of the Fort.

The autumn nights of Asvarre were very cold, but this tent, which was only for Commander service, blocked the cold night air with thick clothes overlapping, and the ground was also covered with a carpet of animal hair (fur). Therefore the four people, only dressed with a mantle on top of the armor, were able to continue the war council.

"So, Tigre-dono. What should we do?"

Without interrupting his mild smile, Ludra asked. Tigre asked back.

"That the enemy did not come out from the Fort, is it unexpected for Ludra-dono?"

"It is within the scope of expectation. This side and the enemy have the same number. Therefore, I expected them to come strongly attack, but it should be say it's as expected of General Leicester. However, there is something that I learned."

The sun was setting, and in the tent, only the light of candlesticks lit up the four people. The trio felt that Ludra's added dreadfulness.

"Today's provocation was to check General Leicester's actions. If he opened the gate and come out, I was planning to break through in the prairie. However, they firmly shut the gate. I'm afraid that they won't come out until Prince Elliot's troops appear."

"In there, we will take advantage that the enemy stays indoors in the Fort and the cave which connects to the underground waterway... Underground tunnels will be dug and we will attack from there?"

At Tigre's words, Ludra could not help but leak a sound of admiration.

"Just by looking at the map, you were able to think of that, eh?"

Tigre just smiled and did not answer. In addition to the knowledge he learned from Mira, he also made his judgement after getting Matvey's careful analysis of the 3000 soldier army. Receiving reports that only some kinds of siege weapons such as castle mallet fracture (battering ram) and catapult were missing, Tigre held his conviction.

"It's just as you say. Waiting until the cave is connected to the underground waterway, we will perform a flashy castle attack as a diversion, and with that chance, a squad will sneak into the Fort to open the gates."

"Will that go well for you?"

Matvey showed doubts. Though Olga did not say anything, she seemed to be of the same opinion. Ludra, quietly confident, calmly nodded.

"Before we leave Valverde, Lord Tallard spread a rumor in this whole area. If His Excellency gathers an army, the plan is to be joining with us first, and assault the Fort Lux, as we are just the advance party before the real attack of the castle."

If they believed the information that Tallard spread, it would be better for Leicester to strike this army of three thousand before it's too late for him. Besides, only the capitulation declaration was carried out here, the troop's deployment being also away from the Fort, there was a lack of motivation, such as "don't do anything until the army of Tallard arrives".

However, Leicester did not take the bait. Unless a major change occurred, he intended to devote himself to the defense of the Fort. As for Ludra, only with capitulation declaration and lineup, he virtually took the means of sortie from Leicester.

"The underground tunnels are scheduled to be finished digging in 4 days. While being on alert of the enemy's actions till then, we're going to act as if we are really waiting for that army (Tallard and other troops). - Do you have any questions?"

"...Can you listen to my plan? No, it's not that I deny your strategy."

Looking at the map of the Fort, Tigre said so. It was a brilliant plan, but without drawbacks. He thought so.

Ludra, after hearing the main points and the proposed amendment from Tigre, was speechless for a moment, and then patting his knees with a delightful expression, he accepted the suggestion.

Four days passed after, then Tallard army took up their lineup in front of the Fort Lux.

Meanwhile, the three thousand soldiers scheduled only with a large wooden shield spent the days of sporadically attacking by shooting with bows and arrows.

Likewise, the enemy took action against this attack by only fighting back with bows and arrows. The Fort Lux should also have catapults, but did not mean to use them.

"In view of the situation, I have to prepare a false rumor that the army of His Highness Tallard will show soon."

It is an opinion of Ludra, and the trio also held the same view.

There were dozen people of Tallard army who suffered minor injuries, but injured person also hardly appeared on the fort side. There were too few arrows which reached the top of the wall.

Around evening of that day, the four people gathered in the commander's tent.

"The number has somehow become complete."

Ludra, said so to Tigre with a smile, and Tigre nodded back, too.

"As scheduled, we begin the operation at dawn."

On the map of the vicinity of the Fort, Ludra ran his finger.

"First, my squad will attack from the front. Besides, with 500 soldiers, we will make a surprise attack from the underground waterway. And then---"

Ludra's fingertips pointed the west of the Fort drawn on the map.

"Waiting for the internal uproar, Tigre-dono and Olga-dono along with the mercenary squad of 300 will climb over the walls from here."

Ludra, half dumbfounded and half amazed, looked at Tigre.

"It's a bit late, but the height of the walls is 12 alsins (about 12 m) high"

Walls exceeding 10 alsins were very rare. Not only they swelled highly enough to spend an extraordinary amount of time and materials, but it was also because they lacked stability. Walls five or six alsins were common.

Meanwhile the Fort Lux, not only thickened the walls, but also imparted a gradient (a slope) through his structure to solve this problem.

"They will somehow manage. Since they also said that they will do it."

"Since I increased their pay, it would be troubling if they don't make better work than usual."

Ludra revealed a wry smile. He moved his eyes back to the map.

"Last - Tigre-dono's squad will get down the walls and open the back gate in the north, and the squad sneaking into the forest will break into from there."

"Do we divide our troops in four parts as the enemy?"

"It's because it's the same number. To remove the advantage of the enemy which is the walls, we just have to disrupt them by exploiting the gap."

To Matvey who groaned folding his arms, Tigre replied with an optimistic tone. Although the unit led by Tigre was the most dangerous, the young man's face did not reveal the slightest sense of tragic.

He reconfirmed the order, and when the war council was drawing to a close, Olga suddenly raised her hand.

"I have a proposal."

"...Please, speak."

Ludra which was half-rising to his feet sat again on the carpet, revealing a wonderful expression. During these three days, even though they held the war council every day because they need to confirm the situation, Olga never spoke.

Since Tigre had also been thinking that she rode on his plan, he stared at Olga with a surprised face. Only Matvey showed anxiety in his tough look.

"Before the attack, I want to go to the Fort as a messenger."

"As a messenger... do you want to propose the capitulation again?"

At Ludra's question, Olga shook her head.

"These four days, I asked Matvey to do a little investigation. About the type of girls that General Leicester likes. He seems to like girls my age."

Tigre understood what Olga was trying to say. Approaching Leicester under the pretense of messenger, she would try to assassinate him. With a stern look, the young man forestalling rejected.

"No"

"...I understand."

To Tigre's surprise, Olga gave up easily.

In this way, the war council was disbanded.

After finishing the war council, Tigre and the others visited the mercenary camps, and prepared adjustments and props for the force attacking from the west.

As the sunset had long gone, there were only the twinkling stars shining in the sky and the flames of the campfire. To prevent the Fort to detect them, they chose this time to start working.

The length of the siege ladder was about six alsins at best. In front of the walls of 12 alsins, it was useless. In this, Tigre, Simon and the others prepared a rope tied to the claw tip.

Since this was not high enough even if normally cast out, and it must be tied with a rope to the bolt of crossbows, Tigre and other mercenaries skilled at using crossbows shot them out to hook.

Tigre having thought of this plan two days ago, tested it at a remote place from the Fort. As the result was not bad, Simon and the others suddenly became motivated to do it.

When Tigre noticed something unusual, he finished the preparations.

Matvey, whom he said that he had something to discuss, and Olga who suddenly disappeared were missing. Asking Simon, he replied that he did not also know.

"That can't be", as he thought so, Tigre jumped out of the camp, leaving the command to Simon.

The tent where the trio was sleeping was next to the Commander's.

When Tigre proposed to set apart for theirs a tent for Olga, she refused saying that there was no need to do so. For Tigre, considering their own safety, also knew that it was better for them to stay together, so he did not say anything.

When he walked inside, Tigre realized his fear became reality. There was no figure of Olga, but only a note with her handwriting left in a conspicuous place.

『I will sneak into it (the Fort). I hope you do not get angry at Matvey.』

--What did you...

After reading this sentence, Tigre tightly grasped the black bow, and ran to the commander's tent. Though the soldiers turned a surprised look, he could not afford to care about such trifles.

When he rushed in out of breath, there was only Ludra inside. He was probably re-examining once again the plan of this time, and sitting on the carpet, he was looking at the map and the sketch of the Fort. Though he was surprised for a moment after seeing Tigre, he soon revealed his usual mild smile.

"...Did you know?"

"I have just heard. She wanted me to keep that secret from you."

Though it is a very brief question even though he guessed correctly, Ludra replied.

Olga headed to General Leicester pretending to be a messenger of Prince Elliot.

"Did you not stop her?"

"From my standpoint, to capture this Fort, her proposal was quite attractive."

As Ludra indifferently replied, Tigre, with nowhere to vent his anger kindled, and firmly clenched his fists. However, he clearly understood that it would be meaningless even if he beat him here.

"She said that she wants to be helpful to you."

He knew that. And it's precisely for this reason he did not want her to do something like this. Since it was her, she should have no problem. There was also Matvey.

--But...

After a long silence, Tigre turned his anger into a sigh and spitted it out.

"...We will proceed as scheduled, okay?"

As he only asked that, and confirmed that Ludra nodded, Tigre made depressed left the tent.

◎

The moon considerably inclined to the west, and the night wind was getting severe when the sentries began to feel that dawn was near. In Fort Lux's north gate, there were two shadows.

"I am a messenger of Prince Elliot. Please open the gate."

Matvey deliberately with a rude voice shouted towards gate. Olga stood beside him. Both were dressed differently from usual.

Matvey wrapped his body in linen clothes and leather armor stained slightly which really harked back to pirates, and girded a curved sword to his waist. As a sailor, he who had a sturdy body and an explicitly tanned skin should not be happy that this outfit really suited him.

After for Olga, she was wearing slightly soiled clothes pretending to be a village girl. She was holding a small decorative ax, which looked quite heavy.

Since the other party was only two people, while the soldiers of the Fort Lux were cautious enough, they opened the small second gate next to the back gate and received Matvey and Olga. The two of them were sandwiched around six soldiers, and guided toward the room of Leicester - The Commander room in the top floor of the Fort.

"It's you, huh. The messenger of Prince Elliot."

"Yeah. The messenger is me, and this small one is a present"

If a person knowing Matvey saw the scene in which the scary-looking sailor was talking with a rude voice, he couldn't help bursting into laughter, but for someone who did not know him, he was the ill-bred pirate himself.

While Olga kept her usual deadpan, Matvey intentionally pushed her out in front of Leicester.

The bald General's eyes, tinged with color of lust looked down at the girl. Whether the swelling of her flat chest one could see even through her clothing or her delicate body was very consistent with his preferences.

At this time, Leicester finally noticed that the girl had a small axe. With a structure even smaller than a hatchet, and from its beautiful decorations, one can only think of a kind of artworks and the like.

During the time about the count of three, Leicester silently stared at the axe. This man felt the extraordinary power hidden in the axe.

"...Well, I should leave this for later. There is something that I must check first."

However, Leicester frankly gave priority to his own desire, and turned a lecherous gaze at Olga.

"You can put that axe on the wall there."

Olga silently obeyed. Still keeping his eyes on the silhouette of the girl with light pink-colored hair, Leicester palliating dignity at most only in his voice, asked a question to Matvey.

"By the way, what does Prince Elliot say?"

"Oh. That he will come here with twenty thousand soldiers after three days. He hopes that in the meantime, you don't let this Fort fall."

"Oh! Three days, huh. That's really quick. I wonder how he captured Mariajo."

Matvey tilted his head as saying he didn't know.

"I was just ordered to take this fellow down with a small boat, going through the highway up to here..."

Leicester believed that it was probably something like that. He would not possibly speak about important information to a pirate he sent to deliver a souvenir (present).

--It means that Prince Elliot also attaches great importance to this Fort and me.

Even Leicester, who led an army as General, understood the importance of this Fort. Therefore, he believed Matvey's words.

What was above all important for Leicester was to satisfy his own desires.

In other words, when finding a girl of his liking, he abducted her, had his way with her, threw her away when getting bored and looked for a new prey. As long as he was allowed to do it, whether the monarch was Elliot or Jermaine, did not matter.

--In the reign of King Zacharias, it was necessary to devise enough to pretend to be the act of thieves, but... Now it's a good time. In fact, if I wait a little more, I will no longer need to refrain.

"You've worked hard. I will give you a room, you should take a rest until dawn."

Leicester ordered one of his soldiers to prepare a room for Matvey. However, he did not forget to add in a low voice.

"Just in case. You watch him so that he doesn't do something suspicious."

As the soldiers left, Olga and Leicester were the only two left in the commander room. Since the soldiers knew the hobby of their master, even if they heard some bawl (wails), they would pay no heed to it.

Leicester directly after sitting on the bed wearing armor, and accosted Olga with a smile.

"Come on, take off your clothes and come here."

Olga admitted some mistakes in her calculation. Apparently this man intended to 'play' with her while in armor. It was still too early to act. She should obediently abide.

Olga approached Leicester while carefully calculating the distance, and put her hands on the clothes. But suddenly filled with a feeling of disgust, Olga's hands stopped.

--Even though it was okay with Tigre.

"It's good, don't be afraid. I will be as gentle as possible."

Misunderstanding Olga's hesitation, Leicester revealing a lecherous smile talked in a coaxing voice. Olga holding back her shyness took off her coat. Revealing a delicate body fantastic fruit. Coupled with her adorable look, even if not Leicester, one would probably feel a fairy-like beauty.

Olga was more confused here, but noosing her mouth as seeming to be determined, she put her hands on the clothes covering the bottom of her waist.

"Enemy attack!"

A scream from outside the door quickly pulled back Leicester to reality.

◎

The Fort Lux capture, before dawn as scheduled, the curtain was opened by an attack to the south.

The war cry of nearly 2000 people shattered the silence of the night, some people held a large wooden shield, and some other charged at the huge gate with a battering ram which reinforced the log. Furthermore, those who set up the crossbows covered their companions by shooting thick arrows at the top of the walls.

The impact of a roaring in the void of the forthcoming dawn shook the gates and walls.

The soldiers, on top of the walls lining up side by side in a row, poured a rain of arrows. Countless groans overlapped on the ground, and several figures fell.

"Don't falter! Those guys just woke up - They cannot set up an aim in this darkness!"

While holding a large shield, Ludra shouted. Several arrows piercing the shield which he held made a dry sound.

---Not yet. We must still continue to attack. We must attract the enemy's attention.

Perhaps, a bolt was put to the other side of the gate, and in addition, woods and stones were piled up supporting the gate. It was within Ludra's predictions. If the enemy made the choice of not coming out from the Fort, naturally the treatment course should be performed. But, though expecting so, Ludra had to order the charge by battering ram many times.

To attack the Fort side, fire arrows were also mixed. There was Fire here and there. The flames were revealing their position to the enemy's eyes.

Constantly looking down at the motionless shadows of his companions collapsing one after another, Ludra began to feel anxious.

---How much longer can the soldiers here hold...? In the meantime, will we be able to take General Leicester's head?

Though there were nearly two thousand soldiers here, only about five hundred participated in the siege warfare.

The remaining (about) one thousand five hundred were only collar people employed in the neighboring villages and towns. They were only employed in order to bluff loud in the rear.

This was Tigre's proposal. The plan was to make the enemy think that there were more people there.

The collar people were in the place where arrows could not reach. In this darkness, they could not be distinguished with soldiers, even the light of fire arrows would not be bright enough to illuminate them.

Before long, an uproar occurred inside of the Fort. It was the soldiers who invaded from the underground waterway.

When he confirmed the situation, Ludra ordered a retreat to the soldiers. This, of course, did not mean that it was over. Reorganizing only the soldiers who can still move, he intended to attack the gate again at regular intervals.

The soldiers who tried to rush from the underground waterway, however, did not succeed breaking into.

The underground waterway was connected to the water reservoir, and although the soldiers of the Fort were to scoop enough water from the water reservoir, an iron grill was inserted to the boundary of the underground waterway and the water reservoir.

This is what was originally ordered since Leicester came to guard this Fort, and it was not drawn to the sketch which Tallard had obtained, either.

The soldiers of Tallard army who tried to undermine the iron grill with swords and axes did not succeed, on the contrary, they fell into the waterway one after another by the bolt of the crossbow which the guards of the Fort shot over the iron grille.

Both the underground waterway and the water reservoir turned bloody red, even the defending soldiers were horrified by this frightful spectacle.

At that time, an uproar occurred a third time in the Fort. From the West of the walls, several hundreds of soldiers invaded. It was the mercenary squad led by Tigre and Simon.

"You guys do not have to quietly sneak anymore! Give me a war cry! Scare those guys with your voices!"

After Simon shouted these lines, the roaring of the mercenaries holding up their weapons overlapping rang throughout the Fort. Simon and the others did not miss that the guards were confused. They bravely continued to attack, cutting down the enemies one after another.

The soldiers with spear in hand, who were running on the walls, were good targets for Tigre. On walls, the carrying fire was also burned at regular intervals, and it rather helped the young archer as a result.

Nocking two, three arrows at once and shooting, the guards shivered to the feat that he hit every soldier he aimed at. Roaring, scream and agonizing cries whirled here and there on the walls, the persons invading (intruders) and the persons invaded wielding their weapons, and getting

closer, killed each other in a situation in which they could not even clearly know the enemy's face.

The narrow corridor on the walls was soon filled with corpses, and the people still alive violently kicked them down to the ground (and cleaned off). Or they tripped and fell, and were added to the string of casualty.

While the allies being killed and also killing the enemies, Tigre and the others moved on the walls to the North little by little.

---No matter how easy it is to aim at them, if there are so numerous...

Finally, the sky of the east began to dawn, and even though the air was still so cold, some drops of sweat floating on Tigre's forehead were drifting. His first quiver was already empty, and now it was the second. This, too, would be soon empty.

"Simon, how is it?"

Tigre, while nocking a new arrow, asked the mercenary captain with a scar in his cheek. While throwing a hatchet toward an enemy at a distance, Simon answered back yelling.

"Don't worry, kid! So many people are still alive, there's no problem!"

As he responded those words, some mercenaries raised a war cry. But, it was clear that the dead becomes conspicuous to the companions.

Originally, everyone was light dressed in order to climb up the walls. There were even those not wearing leather armor. Such persons almost certainly lost their life by a stroke of the spear. Even if they endured it, they would lose their balance because of too much pain and fall down from the walls.

Nobody would be safe falling from a height of 12 alsins. Even if luckily saved, he would certainly be surrounded by enemy soldiers, and died. They would even be mistaken as guards and be killed.

The number of companions was dreadfully decreasing, around half, Tigre and the others finally arrived at the north gate. At that time, the guards' offensive was also settled.

"Go down-"

Holding the rope with his bow on his shoulder, Tigre started sliding down. He understood that it was not what a commander should do, but did not give up.

Receiving the support of his companions, Tigre safely got down on the walls. Quickly setting up his bow, he nocked an arrow, and shot. The soldiers who were the closest was pierced under the nose and died.

Other enemies poising their spears were trying to stab him, but were hit directly by corpses falling from the top of the walls, fell and never got up again. As he looked up, he caught Simon's line of sight. It seemed to be him who suddenly dropped the corpses.

--I should say as expected from mercenaries...

With a twitched smile, as he responded waving his hand, Tigre again nocked an arrow.

As he killed about several enemies, the figures of the guards were no longer found around for the time being. At that time, several companions including Simon went down to the ground. Half was on alert of the surrounding, and the remaining half was smashing open the smaller gate.

From the forest spreading to the north of the Fort, a war cry broke out. More than 1000 soldiers of Tallard army, brandishing sword and spear rushed in like surging waves.

Tigre camouflaged the number of soldiers deployed to the front with collar people to deceive them, but thereby he infiltrated here more than thousand soldiers.

During these four days, Tallard army would only employ the collar people whenever the same number of soldiers was made to lurk in the forest. They would take a big detour around the Fort. And they would move using horses to shorten the time.

They could not deploy a large army to the North woods. The setting of siege weapons was also impossible. However, it was possible if they divided the squad into dozens of units and lie hidden in the forest. Even Leicester did not think of this blind spot.

By attacking from various directions, the deployment of the guards was fully dispersed. There, 1000 soldiers newly surged. They spurred the guards' confusion.

Tigre and Simon leading the mercenaries ran straight towards the top floor of the Fort - Aiming at the commander room. However, soon in the top floor, the guards caught up.

Because they were invaded so far, they were also desperate. Raising a cry without words, and desperately swinging their swords around, they rushed with spear. Simon clicked his tongue.

"Kid. Go ahead. "

Tigre, with a surprised expression, stared at the mercenary captain with scar on the cheek.

"However, you should give me the reward of the Commander's head."

"That's if Olga has not yet taken it."

As he responded to a joke with a joke, Tigre and Simon ran respectively in opposite directions. Tigre ran up the stairs leading to the top floor, and Simon, while commanding his mercenaries, went to intercept the guards.

With the sound of clashing weapons behind, Tigre ran.

Immediately after, he set foot on the top floor.

Like a storm mowing down trees, a frightful roar shook the atmosphere, and gave a feeble shock to Tigre's whole body. Rattling and numbness spread to his face and hands, the flame torch that was on the walls violently shimmered like a (hopping) dance. There was also something lying on the floor.

--What was that, just now.....?

He heard a roar which would possibly not be that of a human coming from the inside - the Commander room. Olga's figure flashed across his mind, and while his chest was tightened with uneasiness, Tigre ran the corridor.

Subsequently, the roaring sound shook the whole Fort. It was a Commander room. And, a petite figure rolling out to the floor came from the Commander room. It was Olga.

"Olga.....!"

As Tigre rushed over, he stopped. From the wall that was blown away, something white caught a glimpse of his figure. At the same time, a pain ran through Tigre's left hand.

Unintentionally turning his gaze, the black bow which he was tightly grasping was clad in something which was neither black mist nor dust. As if it wanted to tell something to the user.

---I will think about that later.....!

Tigre nocked an arrow, and drew the bowstring of the bow to the limit. The shot arrow flying tore up the dusk, and, as planned, pierced that white something. The white thing which was trying to approach Olga on the floor stopped his action.

---A human? No, to say that's human is a bit.....

While Tigre drew out a new arrow from his quiver, he advanced at a careful pace. That something, in a visible range, had a human face. But, what kind of thing was it that it was in such a high position and that it rubbed its head against the ceiling? Besides, looking well, something like a horn was growing from his forehead.

『I heard it from that man and Drekavac, but..... It's truly the "bow".』

Before that face, issuing gloomy Laughter, Tigre held his breath.

Coming to a close distance of ten steps to that something, he finally caught his full picture.

That was a pure white giant.

A little time back.

General Leicester which received the report of the enemy's raid immediately pulled himself together. Though he did not release his gaze smeared with lust from Olga, without taking off the upper armor, he continued giving clear directives.

This was an unexpected miscalculation for the Vanadis with light pink-colored hair, as she remained standing on the spot for a while, waiting for a chance to strike.

The change in situation occurred when he received the report that Tallard army invaded from the underground waterway. Leicester thought to have fathomed the intention of Tallard army.

"Attracting our attention by making a noise on the surface, and invading from the culvert in that chance, huh. You should miserably fail."

"Attracting our attention by making a commotion on the table, and taking the opportunity invading from the underground waterway, huh. You should miserably fail."

Leicester had already taken measures by inserting an iron grille in the underground waterway. Feeling confident, he turned his whole body to Olga.

"I kept you waiting. Well, then-"

It was at that time that Olga moved.

Kicking the floor, she rushed over the Roaring Demon which was leaned against the wall, and twisted her body at the same time she grabbed it. A growl of the wind continued in the atmospheric noise, Olga shot a mortal (deadly) blow to Leicester.

It was a movement, in which it could be said that the speed and the timing were perfect, but the shock transmitted through the Dragonic Tool(Viralt) was totally different from what she expected.

『I see..... It was a Dragonic Tools(Viralt), huh.』

Leicester's mouth leaked a strangely cloudy sound. Just like a beast which barely speaks human language.

Olga stunned, was unable to move for a moment.

The single blow of the blade which could cut easily armor was caught with bare hands by Leicester. Moreover, black blood was dripping from the palms of his hands. Only this exception could be used to describe the scene.

『I cannot seem to use the rest period as an excuse. Perhaps it is because I spend too much time in a human's skin for too long, or... because you looked too delicious.』

Leicester's hand grasped the blade of the Roaring Demon. His eyes emitted red light, and piercing his forehead from inside, three spiral-shaped horns grew diagonally. His skin turned so white that it was eerie, and his body swelled up and squeezed the armor he was wearing.

Leicester's body, which was of medium height, instantly grew 20 Chet(s) (about 2 m), and the metal fittings of armor emitting a high-pitched metallic

sound bursted and flew. The parts of the armor scattered on the floor screeching a rasping sound.

Olga could not even utter a word, as she stared at the change of Leicester in utter amazement. Though she was a girl who had travelled for a long time, she had never seen something like this. Leicester's limbs became thicker than the pillar of the Fort, his body hair was also falling, and his huge body was swelling larger.

『Vanadis... Our enemies, eternal battle maidens (Valkyries)! I will violate your body, enough to make you regret you were born on this world. Afterwards, I'll eat you without leaving even a bone, like those humans.』

"- First: Crushing Fang!"

Finally coming to her senses, Olga shouted. Receiving the command, the Dragonic Tools(Viralt) in her hands soundlessly distorted. The blade lengthened up and down, and changed into a saw-like shape.

It was simultaneous that Olga crushed Leicester's left hand, and that Leicester which turned into a monster beat the girl with his right hand. Although she quickly used her Dragonic Tools(Viralt) as a shield, Olga's petite body who took on the monster's fist flew in the air. She was flung against the door.

"What is it, General?"

The guards who were in the hallway, feeling doubt in the strange sound from a while ago, rushed in almost kicking down the door by force.

What they saw, was a white giant monster which grew horns from the forehead. And it was also what they last saw.

Leicester, who took a step forward, swinged the palm of his hands from right to left. The leather bag filled with air emitted a sound also similar to explosion, and the soldiers who entered the Commander room were blown away. Blood started to gush, when hands and feet parts bent in an unlikely direction, and they were flung against the wall, they all ceased to breathe.

The walls were stained red with blood and entrails, and the bodies clothed in broken armor fell.

Leicester without even glance at the soldiers overlooked Olga. Similarly, Olga could not afford to glance at them. If she showed an opening even for an instant, she would become just like those soldiers.

The pure white monster stopped his movement, and inhaled a breath. His round face became near globular. Olga on alert set up her Dragonic Tools(Viralt) as a shield.

Immediately after, Leicester spitted out the breath into roar. A moment later, an invisible shock wave was released from the monster's body. The ceiling and the walls were destroyed, and crushed (by the blast). Although Olga minimized the damage, she still could not stand it, flew towards the back door and crashed down on the ground. Hitting her back, she stopped breathing a moment.

It was then that Tigre appeared.

He was running low of arrows. There were only four remaining. If he returned till the place of Simon and the others, he could replenish in arrows since there should have been some bow user.

However, Tigre realized this was probably impossible.

--This feeling, I remember it...

He couldn't help but swallowed saliva. In more than six months ago, it was after repulsing the Muozinel army which invaded Brune. A monster which declared itself Vodyanoy appeared, and Tigre and Mira fought him together. There was no doubt that Tigre by himself, or Mira by herself would have been killed, it was a formidable.

--It resembles that Vodyanoy.

Not his appearance. But the brutal blood thirst released from his whole body. A sign peculiar to what was not human.

--But, this guy still had a figure close to a human's.

He wondered how he should describe the monster in front of his eyes.

Red eyes and twisted horns, hideous giant body and too white skin. He could not imagine that it was something of this world. He cowered in fear just by confronting it. Like being lost to another world, and being attacked by the uneasiness, Tigre wanted to close his eyes and ears, and run away.

His heartbeat was awfully clearly audible. Also there was confusion in his breathing.

"...Who are you?"

While moving his tongue which was about to get entangled, and exerting power to his belly so that his voice might not tremble, Tigre asked. In reality, rather than calling out, he should (probably) get away from here in a hurry. Call Simon and the others downstairs, it must be to throw the Fort even if a little and to leave far away.

However, Tigre chose the path of confronting the monster.

One reason was that he could not abandon Olga who seemed not to get up as she fell down onto the floor.

The other reason was the black bow which he tightly grasped. It sizzingly gave his left hand a pain baking since a little while ago.

However, just this pain made Tigre come to his senses, and regain his calm. It told him that this situation was unmistakably (undoubtedly) a reality.

And it gave Tigre a faint hope and courage. The hope that if it was the black bow, it might get through this monster.

『The ax aside, if I'm asked by the "bow", I can't help but answer, eh?』

The white giant who grew horns turned toward Tigre, and gave his name with a muddy voice.

『Torbalan. It's like that acquaintances called me.』

--As expected...

The monster of the fairy tale known for mainly abducting young girls. For Tigre, it was a name which came out when a mother scolded naughty children. Saying that, "if you do bad things, Torbalan will kidnap you".

There was another thing that had been worried him. Since a little while ago Torbalan called Tigre "the bow".

--Vodyanoy was also aiming at this bow.

It meant that this bow that he did not understand even after investigating had a connection with the monsters. But, it seemed that he could not afford to ask him about the black bow.

『I'm different from the others, you know? Please die, the "bow"!』

Leicester, no, Torbalan attacked Tigre. Roaring, the strong white arm which raised a growl and was swung downward was avoided by Tigre, jumping. A large hole opened in the wall, and the scattered debris poured into Tigre who fell on the floor.

Torbalan mercilessly threw a kick to Tigre who tried to get up. But, the hit was blocked on the verge by a dark gray blade. It was Olga.

"Are you alright?"

To Tigre who was glad that she was alive, although he leaked a hoarse voice, Olga did not answer. Since just blocking Torbalan's foot was the utmost she could do. The girl who caught the fist of a knight in his prime of life with one hand, now blotted sweat and was forced to retreat little by little, shaking arms and legs.

As Tigre got up, he simultaneously shot two arrows aiming at Torbalan's eyes. The giant monster did not even try to avoid it, and smashed the arrows in the air with the invisible shock wave breathed out from his mouth.

Furthermore, Torbalan flicked (fling) up his left arm. In an instant judgment, Tigre carried Olga, and kicked the floor.

Roaring sounded many times. The floor crumbled, the mortar-like hole which ran countless cracks was drilled. In the rising sand cloud, Torbalan proudly standing was looking down on Tigre and Olga.

"...Do you know that guy?"

Getting up, while regulating her breathing, Olga briefly asked. Tigre, also while drawing out an arrow again, answered.

"It's a Monster."

This answer was enough for the time being.

"Sorry, but can you help me to gain some time?"

While gritting his teeth in vexation of pushing her forward to fight, Tigre asked the girl. Olga, without asking anything, silently nodded. There were only two arrows remaining.

He could not afford to mind that he could be seen by someone. If he did not do his best, both he and Olga will be killed by the monster.

Olga kicked the floor. Torbalan revealed a joyful smile.

Tigre nocked an arrow, and drew the bowstring to the limit aiming at the monster. Maintaining his posture, he appealed to the bow. The black bow emitted a black light as if responding to him, converging to the sickle.

An unusual strong pressure attacked the young man's whole body. This was something that did not disappear even if he could handle the power of the black bow to some extent. From before dawn beyond the walls, by rebuking his body tired of continuing fight, Tigre bears it.

---Please. Olga stepped forward believing in me in this situation. I don't want to let that girl die. I won't let her die.

Even without looking around, he knew. For those who see that this scene could be mistaken for hell.

Even earlier, it must have been be hell named battlefield. However, unfolding now in this whole area was also a different hell. A power beyond human comprehension (common sense) was mercilessly displayed, the stone-made ceiling, the walls and the floor were easily destroyed, and the soldiers had been killed like insects.

Tigre must break this hell back to the battlefield.

Olga dealt with Torbalan's attacks devoting herself to protecting her body, cleverly gaining time. And also the black light gathering in Tigre's sickle increased its brightness (radianc).

Tigre slightly inhaled, exhaled, while releasing his finger. His aim was the face. As the monster was a large body, it was easy to set the aim since Olga was short in stature.

Though Torbalan had fiercely continued attacking the Vanadis with light pink-colored hair, he noticed Tigre's arrow just before. The arrow approached the monster with an amazing speed.

As he realized that the evasion was no longer possible, Torbalan stood firm. Inhaling, he gazed at the black arrow with his red eyes. A shock wave was released from his right hand and projected straight. Olga was blown off back.

The atmosphere raised the growl and raged in a whirl. The monster's blaster blocked the black arrow which Tigre shot in the air. As it is, the shock wave and the arrow issued a screaming wind, and violently clashed each other while scattering the black light.

『Only this level, huh-』

Torbalan was laughing, but soon stopped his action while opening his mouth as if having grown senile (as if dumbfounded). Past the line of sight of the monster, Tigre nocked a new arrow with the black bow.

With the first arrow, Tigre was already worn out so that even standing was painful. The hand holding the bow was also paralyzed, and could not enter (access) the power well. He had a headache, and his vision was also swaying (shaky). Even so, the young man applied his shaking fingers to the bowstring, and drew it to the limit with power to his feet as hard as possible. Just as before, a black light gathered to the sickle. Tigre was surprised.

As he understood visibly, the convergence condition of the black light to the sickle was slow.

『Too slow!』

Torbalan roared. As the monster vigorously shook his head, a spiral horn growing from his forehead bent like a whip, and extended several times. It cut the atmosphere and headed toward Tigre. It was difficult for the present Tigre to avoid it.

Shortly after, dry impact sounds (dry sonic boom) overlapped. Before the three horns reached Tigre, they wriggled in the air and deeply pierced the ceiling.

"I did it as promised... I gain time."

With her disheveled light pink-colored hair dirty with soot, Olga carrying the Roaring Demon on her shoulder, sharply glared at Torbalan. It was her desperate single blow that flipped the three horns, and diverted (bounce change) their direction.

Torbalan's red eyes were colored in rage. The white giant swung his left hand, trying to hit Olga. At the same time, Olga with her petite body also swung her axe. The handle of the axe lengthened, and the thick blade reminiscent of the half-moon increased its size and sharpness.

"The Second Horn of Piercing(Dvarog)"

The blade of the Roaring Demon swung down with a tremendous speed grinded the demon's left hand, and moreover, cut his left foot encroached

into the floor. Black fresh blood which sprayed from the wound uncannily dyed up the air, and Torbalan screaming fell to the ground.

It was at the time that a pale red light was emitted from the ax-shaped Dragic Tools(Viralt)At the tip of the double-edged axe, a crescent moon-shaped light was formed. While the light drew a spiral in the space, it flowed into the sickle of the arrow that Tigre held. In addition, the small gray cloud of dust and pellets scattered on the floor was mixed in with the light and sucked up into the arrow.

Olga standing with a dumbfounded expression was looking at this scene as if having been possessed (as fascinated).

"- It's for having saved me."

Tigre, rather than self-deprecating, muttered his sincere appreciation. He loosened his fingers from the arrow.

At the instant it was fired from the bow, the arrow changed its shape. The cloud of dust that clung to the arrow formed a dragon head, and as it let his form become gigantic while absorbing rubbles scattered on the floor and, it went straight toward Torbalan. The dragon's eyes were charged with a pale red brightness (glow), and it was clad in a black light to the whole body.

The gray dragon drawing an arc fiercely attacked the monster.

Torbalan shouted a roar. Though he struggled to repulse it with the three horns, after an instant the horns were entirely shattered by the charge of the dragon. The gray dragon clashing with the shock wave caught up with the first arrow, swallowed and received it into itself. The black light wrapping around the dragon increased its strength.

The shockwave collided with the dragon, and scattered leaving only a sound of popping air, and the dragon far from letting its momentum wither devoured Torbalan with a tremendous force.

A thunderous roar, which could not be compared with the earlier, struck the ears of Tigre and Olga. The two people's eardrum within a short time abandoned the task to convey sound, and their vision also became shaky. Though the Fort itself was also shaking, they did not notice it.

The Commander room was filled with moats and cloud of dust, and completely obscured the vision of the two people. As the dust rose and the

vision became clear, one could see the sky gradually brightened through the huge hole drilling to several layers of the ceiling.

Tigre and Olga stood dumbfounded for a while.

The war for the capture of the Fort Lux left a legend. Many soldiers, whether allies or enemies, unanimously said so.

That "A light darker than the night sky, which destroyed the Commander room flew straight to the sky, and disappeared-

Epilogue

"Please explain."

It was Olga's first time speaking, ever since she had settled down, with both mind and body. It was also hard for both of them even to open their mouths because of extreme exhaustion. The two people leaned, side by side, on the only wall to escape from the destruction, and like that trailingly sat on the floor.

"Before that, apologize."

Tigre had an indignant face overlooking Olga beside him. She snorted and turned her face away. 'I didn't do anything bad'. She advocated without words.

Tigre blankly looked up at the early morning sky from the hole opened into the ceiling.

--It seems I couldn't control it as usual.....

The hole roughly extended right above from the Commander room. The gray dragon clad in black light had devoured the monster and flew to the sky afterward.

--Perhaps it is because I overdid it by shooting two arrows successively?

"I..."

Olga's voice, which was somehow sulky, pulled Tigre back to reality.

"I wanted to be helpful to you."

Come to think of it, Tigre vaguely remembered that Ludra also said such a thing.

--But, really, she is an honest child...

The time after seeming to be stubborn, until she explained the reason was short. At 14 years old - even remembering himself three years ago, he felt he would be more stubborn. As Tigre managed to lift the hand which did not turn power, he patted Olga's head.

"I'm happy you did that for me. But... I was worried."

Tigre said that, after about a count of three, Olga whispered the word of apology "Sorry".

After Tigre gently stroked her head, Olga's body slanting (slantly) leaned on the young man as she felt relieved. Tigre did not reject her, and left it so. Feeling the warmth coming from the girl's body, he leaked a sigh of relief. At last, the feeling that it was finally over surged.

"I will tell you later what I can say. Also, please do not talk about this to anyone."

"...Even to Matvey?"

At Olga's question, Tigre nodded. Matvey was a capable man and also very tight-lipped. Even so, no, precisely for this reason, Tigre did not want to tell him.

"I understand. You... Since it's you, I trust you."

"Thank you"

As he expressed his gratitude, Olga somehow embarrassed squinted (narrowed) her eyes.

"It's me who should thank you."

"-Heeey, still alive?"

Suddenly, from the distance, came a sound. And also the sound of armor. Looking over there, nearly ten mercenaries with Simon at the vanguard were moving toward them. They were dumbfounded by this horrible sight, and even forgot to be cautious of the surroundings.

As Simon came up in front of Tigre and Olga sitting on the floor, while looking around the uncanny marks of destruction, asked.

"...What happened here?"

"I don't know, either"

Tigre shook his head. Although Olga stopped her action to think about something for a moment, she nodded as to show that she agreed with the young man (she was of the same opinion).

They didn't know what happened, either. "Let's put it this way" Tigre decided to do so.

'If you speak, you will have to start with the absurd talk that General Leicester was actually a monster. They might believe it looking at the situation where the ceiling and the walls were destroyed, but if the talk extends to how we defeated it, we will be very troubled.'

"That aside, what about the people below? Is the battle over?"

Tigre changed the topic. Though very explicit, Simon, being fascinated by the Commander room which was half blown away, inattentively answered.

"It's over. It could be seen almost from anywhere that the Commander room was blown away by a strange black light. Did you see General Leicester?"

"...Just when I thought that I finally arrived, the cocoon of my eyes becomes filled with black light, and when I came to myself, it was this. And General Leicester was not around (was nowhere to be found)."

"Is that so? Well, anyway, it's our victory. The soldiers alive all surrendered, and this Fort... Though one part was literally destroyed, became ours. I count on you for the pay."

While lending his shoulder to Tigre and getting up, seeming to have finally pulled himself together, Simon grinned. Likewise, Olga was carried by another mercenary.

"By the way... What would you do if General Leicester came out?"

Feeling a little uneasy, Tigre asked Simon. Though it would be good if he smashed to atoms by the black bow, if he luckily managed to escape, it would be frightening. Both Tigre and Olga have already erase traces of fight.

"If that happened, of course, we would surround him and take his head."

While pleasantly laughing, Simon supported Tigre and walked the hallway full of cracks. His men carrying Olga followed.

Simon and his men, as they walked around shouting General Leicester was dead, even the guards, who still showed intention of resistance threw away their weapons one after another and surrendered. Their morale melted like pills of ice which bathed in sunlight, and faded away.

The Fort Lux fell. Although accompanied by 3,000 soldiers, they lost approximately five hundred, and there was nearly the double of injured persons' result, but considering that it is in the siege - and more importantly, having encountered a monster, this loss was fairly small.

Vaild Ludra had two worries.

One was how to report the fall of the Fort Lux. He could explain up to the Middle, but he could not fully understand what happened to the end.

The disastrous scene of the Commander room that could not have been a human work, it was almost like a giant from fairy tales rioted and destroyed it from the inside, how on earth should he report all this to Tallard?

Summarizing what he himself had witnessed, coupled with the issue of the black light which disappeared into the sky through the Commander room, Ludra was at wits' end.

The second worry was about Tigre. This one might be more serious.

The day before leaving Valverde, Tallard gave the plan for the capture (of the Fort) to Ludra, but at that time, he said so.

'Test the ability of Tigrevurmud Vorn.'

Tallard was curious about what kind of strategy Tigre would take to capture the Fort. If Tigre could not propose anything, he should use Tallard's strategy to capture the Fort.

Sure enough, Tigre proposed an excellent plan.

Camouflaging the number here by employing the collar people. And making the soldiers lurk in the north woods. Before dawn, making a surprise attack from the west where the daylight did not reach, and opening the north gate and letting the army invade (the Fort).

These were almost the same measures as those of Tallard's strategy given to Ludra. However, in Tallard's strategy, since Tigre could not grasp Asvarre soldiers, he gave the soldiers someone who they could trust as a Commander, and made a surprise attack from the west side of the walls.

--Tigre-dono... No, Lord Tigrevurmud, at the single point of holding the soldiers, has exceeded his Excellency's expectation.

He could not help but leak a sigh of admiration. Having tested Tigre's ability in this matter, he honestly praised him.

---While being a person from Brune, it's also a person able to think of the people of a foreign country. So that the employed collar people don't get injured, he made distribution taking it into account as much as possible.

Ludra thought that the problem was there. Sooner or later, when he would notice the falsehood of Tallard's words, Tigre would probably not forgive Tallard.

As it would become a battle if Tigre could not forgive Tallard, he would probably be a formidable enemy that Tallard had never met.

---If possible, I really hope that such a future won't come.

Ludra with his usual smile gave instructions to the soldiers, but to his face, the shadow of suffering faintly blurred.

In a room of the Fort Lux, Tigre, Olga and Matvey had gathered.

As Matvey who kowtowed and apologized, Tigre laughed and forgave him. Although it would be good if he did not cooperate with Olga, shelving himself who was not able to admonish the young Vanadis, Tigre could not blame the tough-looking sailor.

Incidentally, Matvey was monitored by soldiers. He was imprisoned, that was why he safely managed to survive. The curve sword he was wearing when in disguise was taken up before he met with Leicester.

Matvey was a brave man, but he did not have the recklessness jumping out to battlefield unarmed, and he saved himself this point.

While Ludra added, among the soldiers who surrendered, those who returned to allegiance and reorganized the army, the people who would not follow Tallard were given food for a few days and released.

The soldiers collected the corpses whether those of enemies or allies and buried them, and washed away blood stuck within the Fort with water. This was an epidemic counter-measure as well as a measure to get rid of the ill feeling of those who surrendered. Tigre and the others also helped.

When the day was about to end only by such work, a hectic (hurried) report was brought to the Fort.

"Prince Elliot leading 30000 pirates has landed. It is still unknown whether he will be aim at this Fort or Valverde, but they are in a distance of about two days from here."

Shiver spread throughout the body. They did not receive report that the port town of Mariajo fell. While avoiding showing anxiety (impatience) to his face, Ludra asked.

"Did Mariajo fell...?"

The soldier shook his head to say "No".

"The enemy attacked several fishing villages at the coast, and seemed to land from there."

"Impossible! There's no way that such large vessels could anchor in mere fishing villages....."

Saying up to there, Ludra pressed down his mouth with his hand as he thought of something. Tigre, who seemed to have understood in the same way, asked with a look at Matvey's face.

"I'm afraid Prince Elliot prepared a large quantity of boats. They drew closer by large vessels till the good place, picked up pirates on the boat from there and commuted back and forth at high speed."

"Using such method, they won't be able to return the boats to the large vessels....."

"They go down with ten boats from the open sea, and nine boats of pirates landed. The remaining one will get back dragging along the nine which became empty. Pirates should be accustomed to such work."

Olga was thrilled to the brief and clear explanation, and Ludra, with a serious expression, nodded.

Up to now, they have not received any contact from Tallard.

However, these thirty thousand enemies were drawing near at a distance of a day or two.

"-Calm down, for the time being, we shall do what we have to do."

The trio confused was accosted in a calm voice by Tigre.

"...Do you have any plan?"

Matvey blotted an unprecedented seriousness in his tough look and asked. After Tigre calmly shook his head, he continued with a smile.

"Not yet. But, I had a similar experience before, and I came through it (I broke out the storm)."

'Therefore, I will somehow manage; I will do it.'

When Tigre finished speaking, Olga, Matvey and Ludra regained their calm. At this time, the three people felt like having touched the container of the young man called "Tigrevurmud Vorn". They felt that they could believe the words of this person, this sentence opens the horizons, and they got the vitality to move forward.

"Then, I must go calm the soldiers for now."

With his usual smile, Ludra left the meeting room. With quick steps, but at a calm pace as to not let people feel uneasy. Olga opened wide her eyes at the remaining two, and said with admiration.

"I feel like having caught a glimpse of a king's ability."

"Don't make fun of me."

"I am serious."

At the earnest words of Olga, Tigre shrugged his shoulders. He thought that she was the kind of person to never say such things. It was true that he had no plan. From now on, he must figure it out anyway. Before the enemy arrived here.

--But, I will prove that I can do it.

Without fighting spirit, and even without trying to look big, Tigre had naturally decided so.

The sun of autumn cast a mild light through the window.

References

1. ↑ V-shaped formation
2. ↑ White Dolphin

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