

杉原智則  
イラスト 03らくいん もんしゅう  
烙印の紋章Ⅳせいや りつ どうこくふ  
征野に竜の慟哭吹きすさぶ

西方より舞い戻り、“皇太子ギル”として復活をとげたオルバ。ビリーナとも再会を遂げた彼は、近い将来に起こるであろう戦いに向け準備を進めていく。

一方、帝都ソロン。皇帝グールは帰還したギルを偽物と断じ、老練な將軍フォルカーを司令官とした一軍をアプターへ差し向ける。

圧倒的な戦力差のなか、皇太子として反皇帝の狼煙をあげなければいけないオルバは、寡兵をもってして鮮やかな勝利を得るべく策を練る。両軍はついに激突の時を迎えるが――。

英雄への道を描くファンタジー戦記、第9弾！

烙印の紋章Ⅳ  
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烙印の紋章Ⅸ  
 征野に竜の慟哭吹きすさぶ

杉原智則



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# 烙印の紋章Ⅸ

征野に竜の慟哭吹きすさぶ

杉原智則

イラスト ● 3

復活した偽りの皇太子  
オルバ

「おれは、卑怯者だ」  
「存じております」  
「そして、嘘つきだ」  
「それも十分に」



ガーベラ国第三王女  
ビリーナ

「おれは、確かに一度は逃げたのだ。あらゆることから——皇帝から、  
メフィウスから、ガーベラやエンデのことから、そして姫、あなたからも」  
「——」  
「しかし、おれをここへと呼び戻したのも姫だ。  
馬鹿が、馬鹿正直に馬鹿げた行動をするから、  
こんなことになったのだよ」  
「誰が、馬鹿ですか」





「お久しゅう、アークス・バズガンどの」  
ギルは顔をあげてにこりと挨拶する。  
膝をついてはいても、ギルはアークスと  
直接同盟を結んだ間柄である。

「といっても、ここを離れたのは二日、  
三日ばかりのことではありますが。  
いまやタワーリアはわたしにとって第二の故郷。  
西方の風を嗅ぐと、なにやら帰ってきた、  
という実感が湧いてやみませぬ」





タワーリア領主  
アークス・バズガン

軍師  
ラバン・ドウ





「ギル・メファイウスだ！  
義も時節もわきままえぬ愚者どもよ。  
貴様ら左右にひれ伏して、道を空けるがいい」

ユライア・マツタイ

「われわれは、命をあなたに預けました。  
代価として得られるのは、  
メフィウスの輝かしい未来。  
皆、心同じくしているのです」

美貌の剣士  
シーク

ザース・シディウス

メフィウス十二将

フォルカー・バラシ

「だから、あえておれは大馬鹿者で、  
無能な指揮官になろうと思う」

# 大陸中央部



# Chapter 1: Land of Reunion

## Part 1

“Crown Prince Gil Mephius.”

Even though he himself had shouted out the name, Nabarl Metti could not believe that the person before his eyes was real.

He had never spoken in person with the prince but he had seen his face when at Court. That face was identical to that of the person in front of him. He was almost certain of it. Nonetheless, Nabarl's mind was in turmoil since Crown Prince Gil Mephius had lost his life right here, in Apta, and should no longer be in this world. Nor was it limited to Nabarl, his nearby subordinates, and even the war prisoners who had ridden in the same boats from the opposite shore of the River Yunos, were in the same state. Everyone was holding their breath and wore identically astounded expressions. It was as though time had stopped in that instant, until the man before Nabarl's eyes suddenly bent down and picked up something that had tumbled to the ground.

It was the sword which had dropped from Nabarl's hand just a moment ago. Its glittering tip which, just like the surface of the river, blindingly reflected the light of the morning sun, was offhandedly thrust towards Nabarl's own neck.

"Nabarl, was it? You've got quite some nerve to point a sword at me."

"Ah, n-no, that was..."

"I know. It's the proof that you're diligent in your duties."

The man who had exactly the same face as the prince and who talked in exactly the same voice as the prince smiled faintly, and returned the sword to Nabarl's waist.

The colour drained from Nabarl's face, just as the energy did from his entire body, leaving him looking faint and about to collapse at any moment.

Imperial Prince Gil Mephius left Nabarl in that state and started walking briskly. The soldiers hurriedly made way. He continued on, the rows of their bewildered faces flanking him on either side. Rogue Saian and Odyne Lorgo followed a little behind him.

As they climbed up the path carved into the cliff, cross-shaped stakes came into view, driven into the ground of the open training space. There were more than fifty of them. Tied high up on each one were men who were stripped almost naked. Gil pointed to them.

"Aren't they all former Imperial Guards?" he asked.

"Aye" replied Rogue.

"Didn't I ask you, General Rogue, to look after them in an earlier letter."

"Indeed. They were once serving under me."

The prince curled his lips in a way that did not make it seem like he was amused. "And yet now, they're tied up. Certainly, most of them are former slaves so they must be guilty of some kind of lapse."

"No. Given that His Majesty the Emperor has stated that the west had robbed Your Highness of your life and that testimonies from the Imperial Guards differed from that, Sir Nabarl deemed them to be suspicious and was going to have them executed."

"That's strange. As to why it's strange... Well, I'm still alive. Aren't I, Odyne?" keeping his eyes lowered, Odyne Lorgo gave a slight nod. "I'll take charge of them again. That fine with you, Rogue?" "The prince's word is my command."

Both Generals Rogue and Odyne interacted perfectly naturally with the prince, as though he had never been gone – or in other words, as though he had never been believed dead. In actual fact, their feelings, as though shaken by a

tempest, were just as chaotic as Nabarl's, but they did not let it show on their faces.

Nabarl caught up with them at that point.

"P-Please wait, Your Highness."

"What is it?" the prince did not even look at him.

Sweat glistened on Nabarl's rather fat cheeks. "H-His Majesty, this... Does he know that you are alive, Your Highness?"

"Right now, I don't have the leisure to be giving an account of every little thing."

"H-However, on His Majesty's orders, Apta is currently under my jurisdiction. And so are those former Imperial Guards."

"So then, was their execution ordered by my father?"

Nabarl was unable to utter another word. Sentencing the former Imperial Guards to execution by firing squad and undoubtedly been his own doing. Even though he had made that decision based entirely on the belief that the emperor would not object to it, he could not help but hesitate to carry it out now that it was being stopped by Gil Mephius, the heir to the throne.

Gil pressed forward in silence towards his intended location.

A crowd of people were gathered in that open space. Since it was usually used as a training ground for the dragons, it occupied an especially wide area within the fortress.

The execution of the former Imperial Guards, bound at the stakes, that was scheduled to take place was currently on hold. There had been a report earlier that Taúlian soldiers had appeared on the opposite bank of the River Yunos, and Nabarl's subordinates, as well as the generals, had all left because of it.

The people of Apta had been watching the execution of those involved in the prince's assassination from the other side of the palisade, but at this point, most of them had scurried home. Even those who had stayed behind, only to see things through with their own eyes, were understandably anxious.

For their part, the soldiers who had their guns at the ready were restless and looked as if they were wondering whether they would be ordered to intercept the enemy. The same held true for Gareth, the one who was in charge of them and also the one who had originally proposed that the Imperial Guards be executed.

Then –

"General!"

At long last, General Nabarl could be seen returning along the road on the western side. Rogue and Odyne as well. The soldiers who were likewise following in succession were not wearing tense expressions either. At any rate, it seemed that Taúlia had not trespassed across the border.

However, sensing that something even stranger was going on, Gareth closed his mouth shut.

The people's gazes were also spontaneously attracted to a certain point, and then, as though by common agreement, their mouths all dropped open vacantly.

Apta had only just greeted the morning but, for a moment, in that one corner of it, a silence as still as death reigned. Gareth, the soldiers who had been about to pull the trigger at his command, the former Imperial Guards whose four limbs were bound to the cross-shaped stakes, and also the people of Apta. Nobody uttered a sound.

The crunching sound of footsteps from the line of soldiers treading firmly across the ground was strangely loud. Then in that moment someone cried out –

"It's the Prince!"

From the other side of the palisade, one of the children pointed towards the head of the group. A man who appeared to be his father hurriedly caught him in his arms but, as though it had been a cue, a commotion ran throughout the surroundings.

"That person is..."



"I-Impossible. It can't be."

"No, but... Any way you look at him..."

The people did not erupt in delight but simply looked at each other as though hoping that someone would be able to transform their doubts into conviction, then had their eyes irresistibly pulled back in the same direction – towards the person with the same face as Prince Gil.

Although the Imperial Guards, who had been awaiting execution, and the riflemen, who had conversely been about to carry out that execution, all had their eyes open round in surprise; none of them could formulate any definite words or approach to the situation.

The temporary execution site was filled with a bizarre atmosphere.

Amidst it, Rogue Saian separated himself from the line of men and surreptitiously called for his subordinates. These soldiers had been lying hidden and, the moment the execution began, they had been going to save the Imperial Guards and restrain Nabarl and Gareth.

They received new orders from the veteran general and, although somewhat bewildered, put them into effect. Several of them drew out a single stake, cautiously laid it down and carefully cut loose the Imperial Guard with the use of their short swords. First one, then another - one-by-one, they released each of the prisoners from their bindings.

The people watched the proceedings in growing amazement and with a greater clamour than earlier.

*You...*

When Gowen, the former commander of the Imperial Guards, was freed from the stake, his gaze met Gil's. For now, Gil could only acknowledge those emotions with his eyes. Next to Gowen was Pashir, the swordsman who had formerly been appointed captain of the Imperial Guards' Infantry Troop. His face was all but expressionless.

"W-What is this!" Gareth called out in a panicked-sounding voice as Nabarl approached. His gaze was also glued to Gil and he did not so much as glance at his superior officer.

"Don't you get it!" Nabarl spat, his complexion devoid of colour. "The ways of the imperial family aren't for us to understand, tsk. Anyway, the execution is suspended."

At the same time, probably because they had already heard the rumour, more and more people were coming back to the other side of the palisade. As one by one the number of people increased, the population's astonished wonder was shared among the crowd. Although they were somewhat hesitant, they carried a faint hope in their hearts which went along with the actual sight before them, and it was undoubtedly with hope that they called out.

"Prince."

"Your Highness Gil."

When Gil responded with a slight lift of his hand, a crack opened in the people's hearts. And then all at once, the feelings that they had been tightly holding back were set loose from that crack.

"I-It's Lord Gil."

"He's alive."

"Everyone, His Highness Gil is alive!"

All around, shouts started to arise. Caught up in the raging fires of delirious enthusiasm, even the former Imperial Guards, who had only just been freed from the stakes and who had still been wearing uneasy expressions, all at once went wild, jumping up and down on the spot and hugging each other.

"You really believed in me," was the first thing Gil said. "I'm grateful, Rogue, Odyne."

"It is we who are grateful."

"It is good that you returned. Welcome back."

It was probable that not even facing certain death would cause the two generals' attitude, which was as firm as a boulder, to crumble; yet right now, their eyes were sparkling and shimmering like those of young men.

Gil Mephius gave a small smile then said, "I'm sure there's a pile of things to talk about but there's a lot that needs to be dealt with first."

"Yes." Rogue glanced around at their surroundings. This small part of Apta was overrun by the population and not a single person seemed about to leave.

*We should send in the soldiers and have them move for now* – As Rogue was about to suggest that, the prince said something unexpected.

"Rogue, I want you to dispatch a ship from your fleet. A battleship seating ten or twenty, maybe."

"A ship?" Rogue blinked, in a way that was very unlike him. "But, to where?"

"To the west, across the River Yunos and inside Taúlia's domains. There's no need to arm the ship. There's someone there who is waiting to be fetched."

"What, how?"

At Gil's lightly spoken words of sending a ship to the west, the two generals once again stared at him in amazement. Even without taking into account the long history between Mephius and the west, and simply considering the recent battle between the two countries, this was an order that defied common sense.

*And so –*

To Rogue and Odyne, what Gil had done and what he would do from now on, looked every bit a dazzling as the morning sun which was illuminating every face there.

## Part 2

*It's warm, she thought.*

Feeling somebody's warmth through their skin, heat seemed to permeate her cold body. She had never thought that human skin could be something so pleasant.

At first, Vileena Owell had not known who the owner of that skin - or rather, who the person who was holding her to their chest and gazing fixedly at her, was. That was because the area around their face was dim, as though a haze was hanging over it and the only thing she was sure of were two glittering eyes.

*So after all* – the princess thought from the depths of her somewhat nebulous conscience – *so after all, you really are a liar.* She had called out to them, but she herself did not know if her voice had actually come out.

However, she had the feeling that the desperation in the eyes of the man looking her way had imperceptibly softened.

The princess' eyelids fluttered faintly before she opened her eyes wide.

She blinked twice, three times. What she could see was neither the star-speckled sky nor the ceiling of a building. It was a cloth fluttering in the wind. After a moment, she realised that she had been left to rest in a tent.

The warmth of the skin she had felt was far away. The arms that had carried her, the chest that had held her, had all suddenly disappeared.

*So after all* – she thought once more.

That had always been her experience so far. Time and time again, as soon as she felt relieved that that was just a bad dream, she would be hit with the reality that this was what was really only a dream. And every time, she regretted it bitterly, feeling as though someone had seen through her indulgent

desire.

*So after all, I was just mistaken?*

Vileena had simply not been able to believe that Gil Mephius had vanished so abruptly. It was for that reason that she had left Solon, had deceive the people in Mephius, and flew an airship to Apta.

But what the girl who lived holding the pride of kings had been thrust into there was a harsh truth and the signs of a war that would engulf a great many people.

*A surprise attack.*

Vileena's efforts to stop the war between the two countries had been in vain and the opening of hostilities had cruelly unfolded. She had drawn fire to the airship she was piloting, had fainted along the mountain path she had crashed into, and had been rescued by a man named Rone Jayce. Along with his daughter Layla, he had taken great care of Vileena – of the girl who had been obliged to call herself by the false name 'Luna'.

The village that they lived in had been attacked by somebody. At first, she believed that it was by Mephian subjects. However, the assailant who had confronted Vileena clearly had Zerdian features and his aim appeared to be her own assassination.

Vileena's consciousness, which had awoken only a moment ago, was struck with stabbing pain and a flickering sensation. The flames burned a brilliant red, Rone's figure lay collapsed, his abdomen pierced through, Layla was crying out to him in tears.

Vileena abruptly tried to get up but, feeling a pain as though a blade was embedded in her own belly, she broke into a violent coughing fit.

"Princess!" She heard a young man's voice. An armed Zerdian soldier knelt by her side. "Princess, have you woken up? Ah, please don't do anything excessive. I will call a doctor immediately."

The soldier seemed about to dash off at any moment, so in a faint, trembling voice, Vileena called out to stop him.

Taking a second look at things, there were only herself and the young soldier guarding the entrance inside the tent.

He was a Taúlian soldier and apparently belonged to a different group than the party who had come to the village in search of her. While on route to the Mephian border, they had noticed that something unusual was happening at the village and had rushed over.

Although the young man was covered in soot and sweat, his expression and his voice were bright. From that, Vileena was finally able to entertain some hope.

“Then, you saved the village?”

“Of course, we also fought,” the young man nodded proudly, “but it was him who did the most to save you, Princess.”

“Him?” Vileena slowly lifted her torso. The joints of her body ached, especially around her abdomen, but there did not seem to be any particularly severe problem.

“Do you not remember? He was the one who rescued you, Princess, from a dangerous situation. There were some alarming rumours going around in Taúlia but, in the end, he is definitely the hero who slayed Garda. Maybe there’s something in his nature that guides him to places where he can demonstrate his heroic abilities.”

“I’m afraid I’m not very familiar with the people of Taúlia...”

“No, while he is certainly a mercenary of Taúlia, he is originally from Mephius. He is a masked swordsman called Orba.”

*“Orba.”*

At that moment, on opposite sides of the border, and although their situations and personalities were of course vastly different, Nabarl Metti and Vileena Owell fell into a very similar state of mind. Even as she herself said his name, there was no actual feeling of reality to it.

Furthermore –

“He immediately headed for Apta. It might be at Master Ravan’s suggestion

but I think it's likely that he is going to hold talk with Mephius. Moreover, he also said that a ship will soon be coming from Apta to fetch you, Princess."

"From Apta?" Vileena was falling into greater and greater confusion.

Mephius and Taúlia had only just clashed in battle. Vileena herself was in this land which had been turned into a battlefield. Yet even though that was the case, she was told that a ship would be coming from the Mephian territory of Apta to fetch her here in the western territory of Taúlia.

She did not have a clue what was going on. Her brain was functioning so poorly that she herself was irritated by it. Still –

*Something...*

Right, something was starting to move. Orba's name, what was being said about Mephius – while the "reality" she held in her head was being smashed into tiny pieces with each swing of the hammer, it also felt as though the indulgent desire that obstinately remained in the girl's heart was finally taking shape.

Still, taken another way, Vileena was a girl who had seen many "realities". She did not immediately latch onto the first sign. Afraid of having her hopes smashed again, she could not cling to the same hope twice.

Although the soldier repeatedly urged her to rest, she instead got him to help her get up.

She lifted the tent flap.

There was the village that Vileena had spent eight days in. Although saying so, not a single thing she had known of it remained.

Vileena almost collapsed in an instant for reasons that had nothing to do with her limbs being heavy and sluggish. The soldier hurriedly supported her by the shoulder. Although the Zerdian was caught in turmoil about whether it was appropriate for a young man of his social position to directly touch the skin of a young girl coming from royalty, Vileena's heart was too torn to pay any attention to that.

Most of the houses no longer retained their original form and had been

reduced to piles of scrap wood from which black smoke arose. In one part, the fire was still burning and half-naked men were working to extinguish it.

A crowd of injured people had lain on the ground to rest. There were men who had received injuries from swords or spears, women who had silently fallen prostrate, and young children who had been burned and whose dark-red skin lay exposed. The sobs and agonised groans were incessant.

Vileena hated herself for having been the only one comfortably sleeping in the tent.

At almost the same time, she took a shuddering breath. Among the injured who lay collapsed, she had spotted Rone Jayce. Lying next to him must be Lennus, the young man that Layla had been going to rescue. The front half of his right arm was gone. His expression was one of anguish.

The young soldier looked around them pityingly. "Medicine is being brought from the relay base even now. However, there aren't enough doctors. We have requested that more be dispatched but in the current circumstances, who knows how long it will take for a sufficient number of doctors to arrive at the village."

There were only two large-sized air carriers in Taúlia. Since a valuable ship had been downed during the counter-attack against Garda, they were currently forced to make use of older model ships. Given the present situation, it was uncertain whether the precious air carriers would really be sent out to provide medical care for the villagers.

Layla was also there, close to Rone and Lennus. Kneeling down, she was giving her father water to drink and wiping Lennus' sweat.

Vileena almost ran towards her without thinking, but stopped before she had even taken three steps. It was her life that the assailants had been aiming for. Rone and the others had essentially gotten entangled in that. On top of that, she had hidden her identity as a princess of Garbera. Vileena could not think of a single word to say.

The princess savagely bit her lower lip. Time passed. Then, as though having reached a decision, she broke away from the soldier's hand and took a step in Layla's direction.



At the same time, the soldier raised a flustered voice. "Princess, over there!"

In the sky, which was growing light, the outline of a ship had appeared. It was fast approaching.

What halted Vileena's steps once again, as she looked up at the sky, was that it bore the crest of Mephius. It was a twenty-man high-speed battleship. It was somewhat larger than the models Vileena was used to. That was probably because Mephius' techniques for producing dragonstone ships was inferior to Garbera's.

Amidst the shrill noise of its ether engines, the battleship landed by the edge of the village, blowing wind and earth throughout its surroundings as it did so.

Several Mephians disembarked. To show that they were not hostile towards the Taúlian, they carefully laid their guns and swords on the ground, then waited for the Taúlian soldiers to approach them.

After a brief exchange, one of Mephians was led into the village by the western soldiers.

His face was as young as that of the soldier who had escorted her out of the tent. His eyes met Vileena's.

"Princess!"

The Mephian's expression suddenly turned to one of delight.

Vileena recognised him. His name was Neil Tonson. He had been the commander of the airship division within the prince's Imperial Guards. The princess had instructed them during flight practice. Also, he was the one who had gone to meet her when she had left Nedain for Apta.

"There is no greater joy than to see you safe and well, Princess. Please be at ease now. I have come to fetch you from Apta."

"Why?"

Contrary to the somewhat excited Neil, Vileena's tone was cold. Neil was bewildered.

"W-What do you mean by why?"

"I warned Taúlia of Mephius' invasion. I do not recall criminals such as myself being greeted with such courtesy when they are about to be bound in chains."

"A criminal you say," the young man's ruddy face grew even redder, "... Certainly, Mephius and Taúlia were at war. But the ones who brought that to an end were none other than you yourself, Princess, and our Crown Prince, Lord Gil Mephius."

"Lord Gil Mephius..."

Vileena repeated those words in a murmur. Her expression was wooden. Just as when she had heard Orba's name, she had the illusion that on some level, she was still dreaming.

Thinking about it, Nabarl should also have placed this young man, Neil Tonson, under restraint. On the groundless accusation of having taken part in the prince's assassination. Yet he had come from Apta by ship to fetch her.

*It's, I see. No, but...*

A hundred, two hundred words that could not be expressed seemed to well up from within the depths of her heart and immediately fill up the tiny container that was the girl, threatening to overflow at any moment now.

"P-Princess?"

The young Taúlian soldier who was acting as the princess' guard and Neil spoke at the same time. They had expected her face to light up with joy but instead, her platinum hair abruptly fell forward and she hung her head.

After who knows how much time had passed and how many times they called out to her, Vileena raised her head and said something unexpected,

"How many ships of the same type as that one are there in Apta?"

For a moment, Neil mouth gaped open vacantly.

"General Rogue's air force is stationed there so there should be several such ships."

His words were somewhat vague as there were after all strangers nearby. Vileena paid it no heed and spoke quickly.

"Please have them send as many as possible here." She went on to explain that she wanted those ships to fetch the injured from the village and carry them to Apta.

Although normally it would be preferable to go to Taúlia, Apta was closer, however they would need to obtain consent from the Taúlian before Mephian ships were sent. But Vileena was loathe to waste all that time.

Naturally, both Neil and the Taúlian were startled.

"B-But, Princess..."

"There are no 'buts'. The people of this village protected me. I will not turn my back on the debt of gratitude that I owe them and unconcernedly escape by myself. Nothing will make me move from here without the guarantee of their safe arrival at Apta. But if you wish to tie me up and drag me away across the ground, by all means, please do so."

*She sure can rattle on* – the one who thought that about the princess' caustic words was none other than Vileena herself.

It was no one else's fault but her own that they had ended up in this situation so this was her responsibility. While keenly aware of that, Vileena deliberately adopted a high-handed attitude.

Neil excused himself for a moment and went to consult with what appeared to be the commander of the Taúlian side who was standing near the ship. In the end, it looked as though both sides accepted the condition.

Having come running back, Neil promised Vileena to bring a flotilla of ships from Apta.

"However, please return with us on board this ship, Princess. If you yourself are not present, the people of Taúlia will fall under suspicion."

"I understand."

After that exchange, the villagers were informed that Vileena was a princess of Garbera and the injured would shortly be transferred to Apta.

"No way."

"Why somewhere like Mephius?"

Shouts rose up and there was not a man there who did not have complaints.

Many believed that it was Mephius that had attacked the village and the Taúlian soldiers had to go around convincing them one by one. Vileena Owell herself went towards Rone Jayce to express her fervent hope.

Layla, who was nursing him, noticed the princess approach and quickly averted her eyes.

“There are a lot of things I need to tell you,” Vileena could not conceal the stiffness in her tone. “However, right now, the most important thing is your father’s life and the lives of the villagers. Please, won’t you come to Mephius with us.”

Of course, Vileena did not know the circumstances surrounding the Jayce family. She did not know what it would mean for them to set foot in Mephius. Layla however recognised that she needed to prioritise her father’s life over anything else. Apparently, she had already strengthened her resolve after consulting with her mother.

“I understand,” she answered in a voice that seemed to fade away.

And so, the battleship that Neil had ridden on left.

Vileena, Rone, Layla, who was attending on him, as well as seven others who were particularly badly injured were also on board. The man whose entire body was wrapped in bandages was also among them. Rone had found him before Vileena and the man had been in the care of the Jayce family ever since. He gave the mistaken impression that he had been severely wounded in the recent attack.

The airship slowly travelled along the surface. That was unavoidable since it was heavier than on the way coming due to increased number of people. As she looked out of the window to the remains of the village below, Vileena felt the back of her eyelids grow hot.

At most, she had only spent eight days in that village.

*But, those eight days...*

She had spent them not as the princess of Garbera, not as the fiancée of the Crown Prince of Mephius, but as an ordinary girl of the people. There she had encountered manual labour, the unfamiliar songs of the Zerdian people, and the warmth of the Jayce family.

Unheeding of such sentimentality, the airship picked up speed and landed in Apta before noon.

Instead of having soldiers suddenly burst in and seize her, or denounce her as a traitor, the Mephians greeted Vileena courteously and invited her to board a carriage.

They travelled along the paved street. Peering out of the window over which a curtain was half drawn, Vileena knit her eyebrows at the sight of the townspeople running along the way. There seemed to be a large crowd. And everyone seemed as excited as if a festival were about to begin.

At long last, they arrived at the side gate to the castle's main building. The princess stepped out of the carriage and once again set foot on Mephiian land.

Her heart was beating wildly. On the way to Apta, she had strongly repressed her own feelings. She was almost at her limit. She barely saw the people who sent greetings her way, or heard their voices. Even so, the moment she reached the top of the staircase and stepped into the upper part of the hall –

*Ah!*

Only that clear-ringing voice reached her ears.

Without her realising it, Vileena's feet, or rather, her entire body, came to a stop.

## Part 3

That day in Apta, in the southwest Mephius, had turned into an extraordinary one.

Against the backdrop of the brilliant blue sky and from a balcony that opened out onto the town area, Gil Mephius waved his hand as he was enveloped in the cheers of the people.

“It was here, that night, that cowardly bullets rained down.”

When Gil swept up his forelocks a vivid scar stood out clearly against his forehead. It looked like the traces were from where a beast had raked its claws. If you looked closely, you would realise that it was a mass of smaller scars gathered together, but from a distance, it could only be seen as a single, large wound running in a long diagonal line.

Confronted with it before their eyes, the people raised shouts mingling horror and surprise, grief and admiration.

“But I, Gil Mephius, am not one to die so easily. Especially if the opponent is someone as vulgar as Oubary.”

Amidst the roars of laughter, Gil Mephius’ lips did not lose their faint smile.

“Those who would attack me had best be determined. Do their hearts hold righteousness? Are they prepared to have their hands smeared in my blood for all eternity? Finally, do they have the courage to carry the weight of Mephius on their backs? Act only after thinking carefully. When I am about to take someone’s life, I certainly question myself.”

The people were in a frenzy over the calm figure of Crown Prince Gil Mephius. This was the land which had a deeper connection with the Crown Prince than anywhere else in Mephius. For the people, Gil Mephius, who had fallen in Apta and been revived in Apta, was already an object of almost religious faith and

unmistakably emitted a dazzling brilliance. Men who could not contain the excitement boiling in their blood brandished hoes or spades, while those who did not have anything like that at hand raised brooms, daikon radishes, or at the very least their arms to the sky.

It could well be said that at that time, almost every person in Apta had their gazes concentrated on Gil Mephius.





Vileena Owell was, of course, one of them.

Having been led by the soldiers, she was standing directly behind the balcony. The Garberan princess stood still, not uttering a sound. She could not clearly distinguish the back of the young man who was only some twenty paces away from her. Not even she understood why that was.

Layla was also among those with their eyes fixed on Gil. After alighting from the airship, she had been walking next to the stretcher that was carrying her father. Even forgetting to go with him, Layla stopped. The point she was looking up at was the youth who was making a speech. Although she had prayed to forget as soon as possible, not for a single day had she forgotten. That was, beyond any doubt, Gil Mephius himself.

The figure of the lover with whom she had once promised the future flashed through her mind. It was that man who had destroyed that future. Instead of happy days spent hand-in-hand with her loved ones, they had started out on a difficult journey away from Solon. Even when the journey had come to an end, it was to a life of hardship in a land she was not used to.

She had endured that daily reality, and just when she thought she had finally achieved the normal life of a human being where she could feel hope in tomorrow, if only a little, even that meagre wish was engulfed in flames. Amidst the blazing fire, the father who had always protected her had taken an assassin's blade and had fallen to the ground.

All of it, all of it had been caused by Gil Mephius. He was like something inhuman, a fiend born from another world that continued to curse and torment the Jayce family.

And then, there was one other.

The man whose entire body was covered in bandages peeled his eyes wide, almost devouring Crown Prince Gil Mephius with his fixed gaze. He was being transported when, along the way, he had heard Gil's voice and had run, half-tumbling, to the public plaza. The soldiers chasing behind had lost sight of him in the crowd.

When the man's gaze fell away from Gil, he started trembling violently and while the crowds gathered in the square before the hall jostled against him –

they were simply too excited and happy to pay it any attention – he alone went against the throngs of people and left the plaza.

Having finished his impassioned speech for the time being, Gil finally turned away from the voices of the populace who seemed reluctant to let him go.

As soon as he left the balcony, Gowen, the former commander of his Imperial Guards, promptly held out water for him. His bronzed face with its sparse beard wore a terrifying smile.

“For now, I’ll give you my thanks for having saved our lives, but there are a lot of other things I want to talk about,” he said in a hushed voice. Gil drained the water in one gulp. “Yeah. We’ll make time later.”

“And when’s that going to be,” Gowen muttered low.

There were not many people who knew the incredible truth that the current Gil Mephius had once been a sword slave. He had to arrange separate times for the people he needed to reencounter as Prince Gil and for those he wanted to celebrate his reunion with as Orba.

“However, Your Highness,” Gowen suddenly changed his tone as Rogue and Odyne approached, “there is someone that you should meet with before us.”

“Oh,” having drawn up to their side, Rogue immediately guessed what the topic was, “don’t worry about putting off uncouth men like ourselves. Even if it’s only a second earlier, please go and reunite, Your Highness.”

“Who’s this about?”

“That’s right,” Odyne pulled a wry face, “there’s the matter of Her Highness the princess to be settled. From what I hear, Your Highness’ subordinate Orba rescued her from peril. Is it because this information had reached you that you requested a ship? It can’t be that Your Highness has no suspicion as to how the princess was in a place like that.”

“She arrived in Apta just a short while ago. Now, please go and show yourself quickly. I’m sure she is waiting impatiently.” “...”

For a while, Gil remained silent. His expression was like that of a soldier

whose favourite sword had suddenly broken in half on the battlefield.

“Really, waiting impatiently?” a woman’s voice threw out.

It was Theresia, the Garberan princess’ head lady’s maid who had been the only person to accompany her when she had travelled to be married.

She was maintaining a distance from Gil and the generals, probably because she was mindful of her own social position, but contrary to that admirable attitude, her expression and voice were as cold as ice. “A little while earlier, the princess was also here. Apparently not even hearing my voice, she simply gazed intently at the prince’s back. And yet she flew off before he had finished talking.”

“W-What did you say?” Rogue’s voice sounded like he was spluttering. “A-And, where the princess go?”

“Well, how about His Highness be the one searching this time? Just as the princess was for a long... truly, a very long time.”

“Don’t speak so unkindly. Miss Theresia, you know, don’t you? Then how about telling His Highness.”

Despite what the old general said, Theresia turned her head away haughtily.

*This is...* The two generals exchanged glances, looking somewhat troubled.

“Me too,” Gil Mephius spoke. “I... please. Could you tell me where the princess went?”

Right behind him, Gowen bit back his laughter.

After rudely staring long and fixedly at Gil Mephius’ face – at the face of the heir to the throne of Mephius – Theresia said, “well, it’s fine. It was good that you showed yourself before the people first. Since you could not really have appeared covered in bumps and bruises, now could you?”

According to Theresia, the princess was in the parlour that had been allocated to her on the castle’s second<sup>[1]</sup> floor. As he was on his way there, any number of soldiers and fortress servants gazed at Gil excitedly, but he himself was pulling a somewhat long face.

*This*, Gil Mephius – in other words, Orba – surreptitiously touched his own

cheek, *maybe I should prepare myself to get hit once or twice.* It was after all *that* Vileena.

“I believed in your return and waited for you,” her saying that with tear-filled eyes was not something he could even imagine. What Theresia had said was not in the least bit exaggerated. This time, he had to be prepared for palms or fists flying his way.

And even more than the princess’ personality, the cause of that and the one responsible was clearly Orba himself.

That girl, with her unyielding spirit and a personality that hated to lose, had come to marry from a foreign country, moreover an enemy country, and had struggled to somehow familiarise herself with this land. Every time Orba had found himself in a predicament, she had said, “I want to help.”

Orba had betrayed that girl’s spirit in the worst possible way.

And there was one other thing.

Orba was worried about one other thing. When he had met Vileena again in Taúlia’s domain, it had seemed as if she recognised the masked Orba as “the prince”. Because she had been all but unconscious and was in a daze – *maybe she just made a mistake, or else...* At any rate, *that* was something that he would have to figure out.

But it was still too early. In fact, what it was that he was using to measure whether it was too slow or fast, even he himself did not know; but he simply felt that right now, he should not reveal his true identity.

Theresia left when they were in front of the door. Her eyes had remained cold to the last. For a while, Orba was unable to move, just as though her gaze had encased his feet in ice.

He hardly knew what he should say to start. Nor what kind of expression he should wear.

However, since worrying endlessly would not improve the current situation, Orba gritted his teeth. While steeling his resolve, for all the world as if he was going to face a giant with nothing but beat-up armour and a single sword, his fist hit the door in a light knock.

“It’s me,” he said. For some reason, both the knocking sound and his voice seemed to echo far too loudly. “It’s Gil Mephius. Princess, can I come in?”

There was no answer.

He wondered if maybe she wasn’t there, but there had definitely been signs that something had moved behind the door when he had knocked.

He cleared his throat once. Knocked a second time. As before, there was no answer. Yet more resolve was needed to make his next move. He grabbed the door handle and turned it. It felt heavy in his hand. Beyond the open door, there, in the centre of the parlour adjoining her bedroom, the fourteen-year-old girl was sitting.

Vileena’s gaze was turned out of the window to the side. With her elbows resting on a small table, her posture was evidently not one of a princess who was going to go and greet her fiancé.

When they had been reunited in Taúlia’s territory, she had been wearing the clothes of a commoner girl but, of course at Theresia’s urging, she had changed into a dress.

*Has she gotten thinner?* Orba wondered. He had the same impression as when he had met Princess Esmena in Taúlia some time earlier. Vileena’s figure, as she turned away from him with a grave face, seemed far more grown-up than in his memories. The shadows that her long eyelashes cast over her eyes, the soft lustre of her swaying hair – for some reason these intensified the feeling of tightness in Orba’s chest.

It was similar to a fleeting look up at a girl from a different social class striding along in a sunny place while he himself was just one of the crowd, hanging his head in the shadow of a building’s eaves – in short, Orba was suddenly made keenly aware that the difference in social position between himself and the princess was so great that originally, they should never have met.

*Why, at this point...*

Before entering the room, Orba had been worrying his head about what to say first about all sorts of things, but the moment he caught a glimpse of her, all

the words disappeared from his mind. Nor did he know anymore why or what he should do.

As a result, the silence dragged on for nearly five minutes until finally,

“A-Acting so rashly,” those were the first words that Orba strung together. Vileena still did not look his way. “Riding alone into Taúlia... that isn’t something a princess should do. At the very least, you should have given the order to my men.”

“All of your subordinates had been arrested at the time.” Her petal-like lips parted for the first time.

“O-Oh, right,” Orba was still just standing by the doorway. “They were falsely accused and going to be executed, huh. You also acted for their sake. You have my gratitude, Princess...”

“Your gratitude?” Vileena suddenly interrupted Orba’s words in a scathing voice. At the same time, her eyes turned towards him for the first time.

Being stared at straight on, Orba licked his lips.

*What is this?*

Orba was rooted to the spot. A strange feeling seemed to be noisily rising up from his feet to his chest.

“I-Indeed, my gratitude. Your brave actions, Princess, saved my men and Taúlia. So...”

“There is not the slightest reason for you to be grateful.” Her wide, beautiful eyes still fixed straight on him, Vileena rose from her chair. And immediately fired off these words, “since you are not Prince Gil.”

# Chapter 2: Atonement for Deceit

## Part 1

“W-What,” Orba faltered as he tried to answer. Finally, after repeatedly gulping back his own saliva, “What do you mean by that?”

He just barely managed to grind it out but in that instant, he had been so surprised that he thought that his heart was going to stop. The “mask” he had intended to maintain was crumbling and his real face was flickering into view.

Vileena gave Orba a searching glance, “it means what I said. You cannot be the Crown Prince of the Imperial Dynasty of Mephius.”

The heart, which he had thought about to stop, was once again pounding fast and furiously. The face and limbs his blood was flowing through were becoming hot.

“T-That... why?”

“Oh, but it’s very simple,” for some reason, Vileena’s tone and manner towards the disconcerted Orba closely resembled those of Ineli Mephius, “Lord Gil Mephius recently fell to the bullets fired by General Oubary murderous subordinates. Since then, he has not been seen. No matter where he was searched for or how many times his name was called, he did not appear. In other words, Lord Gil has passed away. Should I be in mourning? But then, given that we had not formally been married, it was, after all, someone else’s problem, so should I have speedily returned to Garbera?”

“Princess”

“Do not speak to me so familiarly!” Vileena’s manner made another

turnaround.

While he was wondering if she had suddenly become enraged, she dipped her hand under the table. When she raised it back up again, she was clasping a handgun. It was as though that series of actions had whipped up an ominous wind.

The muzzle was perfectly still and was aimed directly at Orba's chest.

"P-Princess..."

"I told you not to speak to me familiarly."

Vileena's eyes were smouldering palely. Recognising that those eyes were glittering with an urge to kill that was completely unbecoming of her flower-like countenance, Orba gulped again.

*This isn't in the category of getting hit.*

Vileena adjusted her stance to hold the gun in both hands. In a way, the contrast between the dazzlingly snow-white arms extending straight out from the sleeveless dress and the brutal black sheen of the handgun held at their extremity was more horrifying than an encounter with a vulgar assassin would be.

While maintaining her stance, Vileena drew one step closer towards Orba. And then asked –

"Who are you?"

In that split-second, even though the trigger had not been pulled, Orba was certain he felt the touch of steel gouging through his chest.

"I'm..."

His voice shook as it slipped past his lips. Vileena's expression did not alter. She looked at him as she would a bitterly detested enemy.

"I'm what?"

"I'm..."

*Gil Mephius in person.* Those simple words would not come out. It had been the same thing not so very long ago. Then too the other person had been a



princess.

"Oh my, was it by mistake that you called yourself Gil Mephius just a while ago? Indeed, if by chance you are Crown Prince Gil, you must be a ghost which slipped away from the afterlife by mistake."

"I'm..." Orba just managed to grind the words out in a somewhat pained voice. "No, I am certainly the Gil Mephius that you know. There was no other."

"Then you must have some way of proving that. Please do tell me, you who were fired upon here in Apta, what you have been doing until now and what led you to return?"

The muzzle was still being held up. Her fingers were constantly on the trigger.

Orba turned his eyes away from the muzzle, which was the equivalent of turning them away from Vileena herself.

"...You know that I ambushed Oubary's Black Armoured Division in a forest near Apta, right?"

Vileena neither confirmed nor denied it. But she and Ran had undoubtedly been present there.

Orba talked about his reasons for disappearing up until now as the thoughts occurred to him. Naturally, no matter how well he stitched it together, it was all a lie. That was why he could not face the princess straight on.

"At the time, I deliberately let Oubary escape from the village. That was because I suspected that he had been given orders for something by my father... by the emperor."

"..."

"Oubary hadn't taken it upon himself to move his troops just to seal my mouth because I had been investigating about the past. In fact, he was probably going to burn border villages again in order to lure the west into taking action. Even then, Father wanted to take Taúlia in the west. That's also why he prevented my troops from leaving Apta and going in reinforcement to Garbera."

Vileena's lips remained pursed together. Regardless of whether or not there was any slip-up in Gil's words, she simply maintained the gun muzzle in an

overly-cautious aim –

"I couldn't let them burn villages in Mephius' domains. So I stopped Oubary's violence and afterwards hit on the idea of pretending to have been taken down by his men in order to leave Mephius. As things were, my father would probably have forcibly called me back to Solon and dispatched some other general instead who would have found some plausible reason or another to cross over the border. Taúlia couldn't possibly not retaliate against the attack. So I went over to the west ahead of it. I was going to send a call out to the various powers scattered throughout Tauran and gather them together in order to keep Mephius in check."

Although he shared the same thought that Princess Vileena had had a while earlier about how he sure was able to rattle on, neither of them realised that.

Vileena opened the lips that had long remained shut. "Did you tell someone about this before leaving Apta? Is there anyone who can serve as a witness?"

"...The only ones I told everything to were the Imperial Guards Gowen and Shique. I needed their cooperation for the plan to work."

"Oh," Vileena's eyes glittered from the other side of the muzzle, "in that case, why not have added one more to those you confided in? Was Garbera's Princess Vileena Owell so unreliable according to Crown Prince Gil? Or was I so trifling and negligible that you never even considered asking for my cooperating from the start?"

Orba remained silent again. But not because he was thinking that one wrong word could lead to his death. Rather than fear, what he was feeling was, strangely, something closer to pain.

"...Taking a part in that plan meant..."

"It meant?"

"It meant deceiving the emperor of Mephius." The only thing in Orba's field of vision were his and the princess' feet. "I couldn't involve you, Princess, in that kind of plan. If it were exposed, it would not only be you but also Garbera that..."

Having spoken that far, his words failed him.

*Right, this kind of reason* – if he continued explaining like this, and even if he failed to convince her right now, once she calmed down it would still only be an excuse that would convince her for the time being.

*But* –

"Why have you fallen silent? Have you reached the limit of the lies you can tell? If you remain silent, I will definitely consider you to be an imposter and pull the trigger. Please, carry on." "Princess, I'm..."

Unthinkingly, Orba stepped closer towards Vileena. Startled, she drew back, reversing her earlier action of shortening the distance between them. Once again holding the gun straight before her in both hands, she said –

"Who gave you permission to come closer? That is as..."

"I'm a coward."

"I know."

"Also, a liar."

"I'm well aware of that, too."

"It's true that I once ran away. From everything - from the emperor, from Mephius, from Garbera and Ende, and also, Princess, from you."

"..."

"But the one who called me back was also you, Princess. Things turned out like this because an idiot foolishly acted with idiotic naivety."

"Who's an idiot?"

"The biggest idiot on the continent. What with Rycown and Zenon and you, Garbera is a complete nest of idiots. And Mephius is a hangout for fools. My father Guhl Mephius first and foremost!"

While he was talking, Orba's face had gone red. The restraint curbing his emotions had stopped working. Although he himself was not aware of it, it had been a long time since he had shown that aspect of himself to the princess. When they had first met, the two of them had often gotten into similar heated quarrels.

"Every last one of you does nothing but things I can't stand. That's why... so that's why I've had to resign myself to coming crawling back like this."

"Y-Your words... It's like you are saying that I'm responsible."

"As for responsible," Orba stamped his foot and opened his mouth wide as though to hurl more angry words but then suddenly lost his energy and gave a deep sigh. "There is no responsibility. If there is, it's mine to bear from now on. Princess Vileena, I won't ask you to believe in me one more time. But, although the directions we're facing aren't always the same, I definitely think that they're similar. So..."

"So?"

Right then, Orba raised his head and looked directly at Vileena for the first time since he had entered the room. The princess' eyes sliced through his heart with the sharpness of daggers. But this time, he was not intimidated.

"Please lend me your help."

His voice, like the heat of a flame, seemed to scorch his throat and lips.

There was a moment's pause.

Vileena continued to glare at Orba with eyes like the tip of a blade but –

"It's fine already," she limply lowered the handgun and shook her head without strength. "Please leave, Gil Mephius. I don't want to see your face anymore right now. Hurry and go."

"Princess"

"Hurry and go!"

Venting her feelings, Vileena stamped her small foot against the floor. Orba could only obey the orders of this very young princess.

A short while passed after Gil Mephius left the room. Vileena was still in the same position as when she had driven the prince away.

A new visitor appeared. This time, the door was opened without a knock. Out of reflex, Vileena threw a stern glare at the entranceway, but in the next instant

it was wiped away. Her drawn-down eyebrows rose and her eyes were suddenly filled with tears. She flung herself into the embrace of her new guest.

“Oh my, oh my. Now, now.” Theresia caught the daintily-built girl’s onrush with her full bodyweight and murmured in her ear. “My brave princess! Is today’s battle over? How many enemies did you kill and how many allies did you save?”

Back when the very young Vileena used to be covered in mud and drenched in sweat after playing soldiers all day long with noble children of similar age, after harshly scolding her, these were the words that Theresia had always whispered as she embraced the sobbing princess.

“How long are you going to continue to make me worry! Can a child like you, Princess, even understand how I felt when I learned that you had disappeared from Apta?”

“...”

“What did you say, Princess? I didn’t hear you.”

“I-I’m sorry.”

Theresia desperately fought back her own tears that were about to overflow and softly stroked the platinum hair that hung from her shoulders to her chest.

After a while,

“And?” gently pushing Vileena away, Theresia asked the princess whose eyes were large with tears. “Did you give him a good, hard punch?”

“N-No, later.”

“Hmm,” Theresia nodded, imitating Vileena. “While that is fine as well, I will teach you something good.”

“What?”

“Whether it’s a punch or showing your tears, use it as a last resort. So as to make a man feel guilty. If you are feeling frustrated or sad, it is better to smile. Men are creatures who are terrified of having emotions thrown directly at them.” Theresia’s smiling face was actually startlingly scary. “Gentlemen, you see, have the impression that they have gotten off lightly if they are hit.”

“Theresia, you’re very wise.”

“It’s not for nothing that I have lived twice as long as you, Princess.”

To say nothing of twice, it would not be too much to say three or even four times thought Vileena but she stayed silent.

Theresia produced a handkerchief from her bosom and held it up to Vileena’s nose.

“Right, let’s have your nose. Now blow.”

“I-I’ll do it myself.” Hurriedly seizing the handkerchief, Vileena turned away from Theresia.

Outside the window, beyond the garden where the trees’ leaves were rustling in the wind, the people of Apta was still caught up in their excitement and they could hear a multitude of voices singing and laughing.

*You did well, Princess.*

While listening to them, Theresia inwardly addressed Vileena’s small back.

*You endured well until now.*

In this world, the princess was certainly the one who, no matter what anyone had said, had believed more than anyone in Prince Gil’s survival. And she had respected his will more than anyone, willing to be condemned as a traitor by her home country and go alone to Taúlia’s aid. Essentially, it was not surprising that when she had seen Prince Gil and heard his voice, the emotions that she had been repressing for so long, and which had been accumulating in her small frame, had been released with almost startling force.

*Honestly, considering it’s you, Princess, it wouldn’t have ended with ‘one punch’. By your leave, even I want to slap that gentleman’s face. But...*

*But now* – it was alright, Theresia thought from her heart. In place of the handkerchief which had been stolen by the princess, she wiped the corner of her eyes with her finger.

Roars of laughter could still be heard from outside. The mood in Apta would probably be like this all day.

But for those who understood the situation a little, there was no cause for feeling festive. Emperor Guhl had decided to invade Taúlia under the pretext of a war of revenge for the Crown Prince. However, the Crown Prince, who should have been dead, was alive and had crossed the River Yunos from none other than Taúlia.

There were probably any number of people who were deeply worried about the signs forewarning the great disturbances that would be arising from now on. The ones to both start a war and to end a war were the imperial family. And therefore, it was also the imperial family's responsibility to appease the feelings of the people about it.

Vileena Owell, who was currently intently blowing her nose, was of course more than aware of it.

## Part 2

After leaving Mephius, Orba had been involved in a series of life-threatening battles. Since he had never had a life of ease or of sipping ambrosia, even though it was not what he wanted, he was at least resigned to it.

*The bill's come in to be paid.*

Between riding headlong throughout most of the night, saving Vileena in the burning village while en route, and finally arriving at Apta, then almost immediately giving a speech to assuage the excited people and being held at gunpoint by the self-same Princess Vileena, he had not had any time to rest.

There was a load of people that he had to meet with and talk to. According to what he had heard, two of them were undergoing medical treatment in separate buildings within the fortress.

One of them was Hou Ran.

He had learned from Rogue that a dragon that Ran had been taking care of had suddenly gone on a rampage and mauled a few of Nabarl's soldiers to death. Nabarl Metti had asserted that this was the handiwork of westerners and had decided to execute the Imperial Guards who were rumoured to be in relation with the west.

"But, in all likelihood," Rogue Saian had lowered his voice –

It was said that Nabarl might have decided beforehand to execute the Imperial Guards and, because he wanted a commotion that would serve as an excuse for that, he had allowed his men to assault Ran.

Moreover, Nabarl had not subjected Ran to execution even though she was supposedly the cause of the incident. It was possible that he had it in mind to accuse her of a crime at some later date, or perhaps he had intended to give her as a slave to the soldiers for their outstanding service.



“At least let her receive treatment for her wounds.” If Rogue had not expressly made that request, she would have been tossed into jail in the state she was in. Looking as though he found it bothersome, Nabarl had ordered that she be confined in a separate room. Rogue had sent a surgeon attached to his own division and had set up a strict guard in front of the room.

By the time Orba went to visit, the sun was already setting. Ran was lying on the bed but, as soon as he entered, she nimbly sprung up with the suppleness of a young, dark brown branch and asked –

“Can I leave?”

There were neither greetings for their reunion nor questions about how he had been up until then. That “Can I leave?” also carried the meaning of asking if she was now free.

Her strangely pale hair that was illuminated by the light from the single lamp dangling from the ceiling, her alluring skin, and her enigmatic beauty were unchanged. Orba stifled the urge to smile wryly.

“Yeah. But for now, go to sleep.”

“I haven’t seen those children for a whole day.”

“The dragons are fine. And so is the Baian that you protected. I’ve said my thanks to Rogue and Odyne.”

Orba had also recently suffered wounds in battle, but Ran did not lose to him in that respect. Her arms and legs were covered in bandages and more of them were wrapped around her from her cheeks to her forehead. She must be in considerable pain, and as proof of that, her eyebrows would sometimes draw together, but she looked as though she had enough strength left to go flying from the room at any moment.

“Act like an injured person for a bit.”

“Humph,” for now, Ran fell back onto the bed.

The expression on her face and her blunt attitude were so exactly the Ran that Orba knew that the number of days that had passed since they had parted seemed frankly unbelievable.

Ran looked around the room somewhat restlessly then beckoned him with her hand.

“Orba.”

As he went closer, she waved her hand up and down in front of her face, with exactly the same gesture as for soothing a dragon. The meaning seemed to be that she wanted his eyes at the same height as hers. As soon as Orba obligingly got down on one knee –

– there was the sound of a slap.

Orba staggered from a blow that was strong enough to jolt his brain.

Ran stared fixedly at the palm she had brought down on him.

“My hand hurts.” From her tone of blame, she seemed to be saying that was also Orba’s fault.

“T-Then use moderation!”

“There’s a lot to pay back. Why didn’t you tell me anything?”

“...I figured you might be angry like this.”

“It’s the same as with newborn dragons. Baians especially, when they do something wrong, they think that I’ll get angry so instead they act violently and ignore me.”

“Because Mommy Hou Ran is scary.”

“Idiot.”

Ran chuckled and poked Orba in the chest. Orba, without opposing any resistance, fell backwards. “Was there any other trouble?” he asked from behind the gap between his legs as he lay there, face up.

“Vileena asked all sorts of things about Orba. It was a bit troublesome but I soon got used to it. Have you seen the Princess?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh, so you saw the Princess first?”

“What?”

“Nothing. How long are you going to stay there like an idiot?”

“Help me up.”

Ran kicked Orba in the foot. He reluctantly stood up by himself. As he turned to look at her, she said –

“Anyway, you’re still busy, right. Later, tell me what you’ve been doing until now.”

“Sure. In exchange, listen to what the doctor says.”

“Well, okay.”

Her reluctant attitude made it sound strangely like she was being forced. Even though it was her own health, it was as though she intended to leave the problem to Orba.

After leaving Ran’s room, it was Shique’s turn.

This was something he had also heard from Rogue but Shique was said to have been bedridden ever since he had careened to Apta on his orders. While leaving Taúlia, he had apparently been shot.

*Back then –*

Orba had heard a gunshot.

*I was too careless.*

He had become sentimental and had neglected to be vigilant about his surroundings, and so had failed to realise that he and his subordinates were being watched by Taúlian soldiers. Because of that, he had unwittingly sent Shique into trouble.

In order to remain hidden, Shique, just like Ran, had not taken a step outside of the room in which he was being treated.

However, when he opened the door, Shique was waiting for him, his appearance from tip to toe that of a gladiator.

“Yo, I’ve been waiting impatiently for you,” he swept back his shoulder-length hair and bowed, his entire face smiling.

Orba frowned at the gesture which was like that of an actor making a greeting

on stage and said –

“I heard you were shot.”

“I’m completely fine already. I just shut myself away because I wanted to make you worry. You were a bit concerned, weren’t you?”

“Your face is a terrible colour. You should get more sleep.”

“It’s tedious,” Shique gave a yawn. “I’ve been locked up for more than three days. That’s why my complexion is bad. Once I go out, I’ll be just the same as before. More importantly...”

“More importantly?”

“There’s a bigger priority than me, right? Have you sent out search parties for the Princess?”

“Every last one of you,” Orba said bitterly.

After that, he explained about how he had discovered Vileena in a village near the Taúlian border and about how, just a short while ago, she had held him up at gunpoint.

“That...” after a moment of utter astonishment, Shique immediately burst loudly into laughter. He was laughing so hard that his body was bent double and he had to wipe the tears from his eyes. “That must certainly have been quite a sight.”

“It’s no joke. With *that* princess, I wouldn’t be surprised if the bullets were fully loaded.”

“But of course they would have been. And thus, the chronicles of the hero would have come to a speedy end.”

Just like Hou Ran, Shique was the same as always. Before coming to see him, Orba had been intending to apologise meekly, but by now he had already been completely caught up in Shique’s pace.

“You’re no doubt busy right now but later, when you’ve got a bit more time, you should go and greet the Princess, but as Orba the Imperial Guard.”

“What?”

“The one who saved the Princess wasn’t Gil but the masked swordsman Orba. It would be unnatural if Orba didn’t show up. Honestly, whenever it involves the Princess, your wits go wandering.”

“I don’t want to hear that from you...”

“Weren’t you the one who said that the injured needed to sleep? Ow, ow, talking makes my chest hurt.”

*Really, I wonder what he will do about things like this in the future...* – he added in a low voice while jokingly pretending to be in pain, but Orba didn’t hear it.

“Did you say something?”

“I was saying that from now on, things are going to get tough.” Shique smiled and abruptly changed the subject. “There were difficulties in the west too, but they can’t compare. At any rate, this isn’t on any ordinary level since the reason the Crown Prince came back was to rise up against the current Emperor.”

“Yeah.”

“Right, well since you’re going to be walking a path of bloodshed from now on, let me act like an elder for once and give you a piece of advice.”

“There can’t be that many things you can teach me.”

“It’s not something you should be so quick to make fun of. Do you know about the ‘flames of Laskeid’?”

There was a short pause. “Yeah,” Orba nodded but Shique’s smile got broader. *That’s lie* – his expression seemed to say.

Orba’s face went red. “I have heard of it!”

“Now, now. Don’t get upset. It’s an old legend. Older even than the Magic Dynasty apparently.”

It was a story about flames that burned blue.

Had the flames of a colour which should not exist in this world been created by magic, or had they come flying from the abyss of space, guided by something towards this planet? Whatever the case, in a quiet corner of the world, they

continued to burn blue.

There had been a time when it was a rumour widely taken as truth that whoever absorbed them into their body would obtain a power greater than that of the Dragon Gods who had once dominated the world.

“At the northern edge of the world. The one who found them at the bottommost level of a cave ravaged by ice and snow was a carpenter’s assistant named Laskeid. His family was poor, he had lost his job and had given up all hope for the future, so rather than saying that he believed in the legend, it was as a desperate gamble that he boldly took the flames into his own flesh. And when he did so, just as the legends had said, he obtained an immortal and ageless body.

However, the condition for having once absorbed the flames was that that body would forever more emit flames that would burn all those who approached him. In exchange for obtaining wealth, power and everything that he desired, he lost everything that he had until then. Family, lover, friends – and all the happiness that he might have had in the future.

Eventually, unable to bear his never-ending solitude, Laskeid increased the flames himself until his body was burned to nothing. Although he could have become a king that ruled over the world for all eternity, the one thing he could not endure was being alone in that world.”

"Oh," Orba interjected to show that he was still listening, at which Shique smirked even more.

“Do you remember now?”

“More or less.”

“Ha ha, when you’re the prince, you’re vigilantly cautious and choose your words, but when you’re with someone you trust, you just become childish.”

“I don’t remember trusting you.”

“Fine, fine. Now then, you’re busy, right? Go on, hurry off.”

Having kept him in conversation for a long time, Shique now drove him away. Orba stood up huffily, but it was true that he was pressed for time.

“Rest up for a while,” with those parting words, he left the room.

Shique stared at the closed door for a while then suddenly collapsed back into the bed as though he had been attacked by dizziness. He coughed violently two or three times.

After his fit had quietened down, he wiped his lips.

“Well,” he said, gazing at the palm of his hand, “Orba has reunited with the Princess. For now, it’s the same as before. As for what comes after, well, let’s see from here on.”

## Part 3

It was the evening of the day that Gil Mephius returned to Apta.

Having been informed that the preparations for his chambers were complete, Orba headed towards the largest room on the fortress' uppermost floor. It was an area that had collapsed at the time of his bombing raid and, since being restored to a barely usable shape, Nabarl had been using it these last few days. Nabarl had vacated it - be it of his own free will or digging his heels in all the way - and furnishings and artworks suitable for the lodgings of a prince had been moved into it.

When he saw the very first face that was there to greet him, Orba unintentionally called out in surprise, "Dinn?"

He was the page who had taken care of his everyday necessities back in the time when Orba had been a body-double.

From what Orba had heard, ever since he had faked his death and left Apta, Dinn had been attending Gowen under the false name of "Reeno". He had not returned to Solon. Dinn had originally been the servant working for Fedom Aulin, the lord of Birac, who had been assigned to Orba on Fedom's orders.

In other words, he was one of the few people to know that 'Gil' was a body-double.

Because of that, Gowen had been worried about the boy's safety. He was afraid that Fedom, having learned about Gil's death and dreading that the fact that he had installed a body-double and was planning to take over Mephius would come to light, might silence those who knew about it. And so, Gowen decided that Dinn's whereabouts would become 'unknown' and he refashioned him into his own chamberlain under a deliberate alias.

Dinn did not offer any long, drawn-out greetings. He simply bowed deeply and said, "Welcome back, Prince Gil."



Orba gave his head a light rap.

After which, he went to the table which had been prepared. Two wine cups had been set out. In a few hours time, Rogue and Odyne would be arriving there. The two generals would, of course, be coming in order to discuss what to do from now on; but before that, there was one other person that he would be talking to.

When it was time, a soldier standing on guard outside rang a bell to indicate that the visitor had arrived.

It was Gowen who entered.

He did not express any words of greeting either. He simply raised his hand then quickly sat in a chair.

After filling the wine cups and exchanging eye signals with Orba, Dinn withdrew.

The one-time gladiator and former overseer of slaves, who was also the commander of the Crown Prince's personal Imperial Guards, silently took a cup.

"Well then." After draining its contents in a single gulp, Gowen began to talk. It wasn't exactly in order to rekindle an old friendship, but Orba had made up his mind to telling this long-time acquaintance most of what had happened in the west, but – "have you set your mind to rest?"

He furrowed his brows at the unexpected words. "What do you mean?"

"Thanks to you coming back as the prince, I, all of the men, and also Ran were saved. For that, I dutifully give you my thanks. But you shouldn't stay here for too long. We'll figure something out for what comes next. You wait for the right time and escape from Apta."

"Gowen, I didn't come back just for the sake of saving you all."

"Oh?" the former overseer of slaves made a face that seemed to be saying that he had heard something surprising. "Then why? Was the luxurious life of a prince that unforgettable? Did you run out of spending money and came here to scrounge for it?"

"Don't be stupid."

"You can't possibly be thinking," while pouring himself a second cup of wine, Gowen turned his forceful gaze towards Orba, "that you'll be playing at being the Crown Prince for a little while again?" "And what's wrong with that?" Orba asked irritably, unable to understand why the other was suddenly becoming belligerent. Across from him, Gowen shook his grey head.

"There's something wrong with you. The Crown Prince is already dead. Even though you went to all that trouble to set up that 'death' and succeeded pretty well on the whole, why have you gone and raised the dead from under the grave? This time, you risk having your real identity as a slave revealed and ending up hanged by the neck."

"Gowen, you must know that Mephius has attacked Taúlia. It has to be stopped. If the emperor's tyranny goes beyond..."

"What's that got to do with you?"

"What?" Orba was finally provoked into open anger. "What's that supposed to mean? You're the one who's got something wrong with you, Gramps. I'm the one who decided to negotiate peace with the west. You said it yourself, didn't you: I have a responsibility. I'm here to see it through."

"You threw away that entire responsibility once before."

"So I'll..."

"Yeah, it's fine. So you're saying you'll carry the weight of it once again. So you're saying you'll call yourself Gil Mephius once again. Then tell me, how long are you planning to do it for this time? Until you've stopped the invasion of Taúlia? Until you've had your wedding night with Princess Vileena? And when it's over, will you drop everything again and run away somewhere else?"

Gowen's tone also hardened. At that point, Orba realised what the other wanted to say and suddenly closed his mouth. In the short silence that arose from this, the commander of the Imperial Guards, regaining his composure a little, drained his second cup then gave a heavy sigh.



"... I won't say anything bad. Get out of Apta quickly. Out of Mephius too. I heard about it from Shique earlier but it seems you've become known in the west as well. If you don't like that, go to the north, or the south, or wherever you want. There's no place for the gladiator Orba here."

"Gowen, listen to me! I didn't march back without thinking it through." Orba's fist slammed against the table. The wine in his untouched cup spilled out. "I saw all sorts of things, met various people and thought a lot. And I came to a conclusion. I... I won't run away anymore."

"You were playing at the Crown Prince because of revenge, weren't you?"

"I've already gotten my revenge."

"No," there was no trace of a smile on Gowen's tanned face, "Oubary is alive."

"What!"

"Not only that but he's only just been released from prison. Yeah, he wasn't executed. On top of that, do you know what excuse the emperor used to violate Taúlia's border? That the Crown Prince's assassination was the west's doing. In other words, it was revealed that Oubary had no part in the crime and he was acquitted."

Orba's fist which had been resting on the table clenched tightly. He did not even realise he was doing it. He heard then about how Mephius' army had reorganized its troops under the pretext of a war of retaliation for the Crown Prince.

His mind revived once more the gruesome scenes from the past. The figures of his brother, of Alice, of his mother whirled before his eyes and terrific speed.

"Can you leave that man be? Or will you find some reason to strike him down again? Becoming the prince means having enough resolve to forget about revenge."

"..."

"Let's hear it. If it's not for the sake of revenge this time, then what is it for? For the people, for Mephius, for the princess? Do you feel like being praised to the skies as a hero? You're just a former gladiator, don't get cocky."

“Gramps”

As Orba leaned forward and seized him by the scruff of the neck without thinking, Gowen sneered at him.

“Humph. If you take up the title of Crown Prince, then the people of the Imperial Dynasty, no forget the Imperial Dynasty, you’ll have to deceive the people of all the surrounding countries. If you get upset just from hearing that Oubary is alive and fly off the handle with only this level of provocation, you won’t be able to do it. Your true colours will show within two or three days and your head is bound to be cut off. And the Oubary that you hate so much will be laughing as he watches,” he coldly asserted.

Still leaning forward, Orba went rigid. He stayed that way for a long while, having lost all notion of time.

After a while, the soldier outside the door announced visitors again. Rogue Saian and Odyne Lorgo had arrived.

Gowen calmly rose from his chair.

“You’ve driven those two men into a corner too,” he added. “On the Emperor’s orders, their families are being forced to remain in Solon. Don’t know why... They haven’t tangled with Mephius’ forces yet, so for now, there’s still just barely time. Including Nabarl, the combined forces of the three generals can still invade Taúlia and get the capital to surrender.”

“... I won’t let that happen. I’ve decided I won’t let that happen.”

“Then forget about Oubary. Forget about the family you lost and about the name ‘Orba’. Don’t casually call me Gramps. And me, from now on I’ll... I will henceforth serve you as though you were Crown Prince Gil.”

And then, crossing by Gowen as he left, Rogue Saian, general of the Dawnlight Wings Division, and Odyne Lorgo, general of the Silver Axe Division, entered the room.

“You were talking with Sir Gowen?”

“Oh, it looks different from when it was Sir Nabarl’s room. Your Highness... Your Highness?”

Orba was still in the same position.

“... Thank you for coming.” He turned towards the two generals, his face pale even as he smiled.

He clapped his hands to summon the page, Dinn, and had him prepare more alcohol.

“Thank you for believing me and waiting,” Orba then said, plastering an expression suitable for Gil Mephius onto his face. “I heard about your families. I’ve gotten the two of you involved in trouble.”

“As for that...”

“We were brought to our senses by the Crown Prince’s words. If – I mean no disrespect – but if Your Highness had not come, we would still have taken action. For ourselves, for Mephius, and to show the true meaning of pride to our families.”

Both of them had clear gazes.

Orba remembered Rogue’s family. When he had still been a body-double, right after the end of his first campaign, he had been invited as the Crown Prince to Rogue’s house. Rogue’s young wife and very young son had been there.

Once more he tightly clenched the fist that he had lowered to his waist.

*I get it, Gramps.*

Even now, when he closed his eyes, images of flames and blood were still whirling around. Within the space of a heartbeat, they merged together and turned into a dark red wave that threatened to pierce through his eyelids and overspill beyond them. But unlike before, these scenes were not only of when Orba’s birthplace had been torn apart.

*For now, I’ll forget about Oubary Bilan. This isn’t just anyone’s war anymore. This is Gil’s – ‘my’ – war.*

# Chapter 3: The Subjugation Corps

## Part 1

“First of all, we have to send a messenger to Solon.”

In their outline, Rogue and Odyne’s opinions coincided with Gil Mephius’.

Rogue insisted on carrying out the role of messenger himself, but Gil brushed the offer aside. Of course, although the veteran general did not say so, Orba understood that he had family connections there. He could obtain a personal audience with the emperor and would appeal to him directly in the spirit of a warrior. He was a military man through and through, and had no fear of death. And it was because Orba knew it well that he did not nod his consent.

Orba’s chosen messenger was the general of the Blue Zenith Division, Nabarl Metti.

“General Metti?” Odyne tilted his head dubiously when he heard the choice of person. “I cannot possibly imagine him petitioning His Majesty for friendship with the west.”

He seemed to be saying that Nabarl was more likely to be full of boastful talk and ardent complaints about how unfairly he had been treated.

Orba laughed.

“I doubt Father would be moved. In that case, the most suitable one to be the messenger would be me.”

“Y-Your Highness...”

“I know. First we’ll wait and see what the reaction from Solon is. When I go, it will be after that.”

Upon receiving the order, Nabarl immediately left for Solon with the soldiers under his command. Since he had been torn between the Emperor and the Crown Prince, this was a stroke of luck for him.

Rogue and Odyne took that opportunity to reorganise their troops. Depending on the situation, after this they might be taking on the entire country of Mephius as their opponent. Rather than gathering a large number of soldiers with low morale, it was better to have a small armed force that was united in their resolve.

The two generals allowed their men to choose their own course of action.

Odyne, who had mobilised almost all of his reserve troops, started by dissolving the mercenary unit that was attached to the Silver Axe Division. About twenty percent of the regular soldiers also left. The remaining strength of the Division stood at a mere seven hundred.

Rogue’s Dawnlight Wings Division, on the other hand, did not have any mercenaries and he had originally brought about five hundred to Apta. Perhaps because the Winged Dragon officers and airship pilots were mostly young men in their twenties, only about fifty left.

Finally, all of Orba’s Imperial Guards stayed. Although they numbered less than a hundred, they were a precious fighting force in the current circumstances.

In a room in the castle, pouring over the paper on which this battle troop line-up was recorded, Orba crossed his arms. Very understandably, it was completely impossible to attack Solon with this level of military strength. It was doubtful whether they would even be able to repulse a single troop from the attack forces that would be dispatched.

Rogue’s air force and Odyne’s riflemen and artillery force were formidable, but –

*There’s no main force.*

The cavalry and infantry troops were severely lacking. If they scraped



together everyone possible from both divisions, would they even reach four hundred?

Orba gazed back and forth between the paper on which the battle array was written and the map of Apta's surroundings that was spread out on the desk. After having spent nearly half a day that way, he started writing a letter. Because he was imitating Gil Mephius' handwriting, it took a considerable amount of time.

When it was almost evening, his page Dinn brought in some tea.

"You've come at the right time." When Orba looked over his shoulder with a slight smile, Dinn fleetingly wore a horrified expression, then settled into resignation.

"You are going to ask me for some troublesome favour or another, aren't you?"

"Troublesome is going too far."

"The prince has not changed," the page sighed in spite of himself.

Orba ignored him. "There's somewhere I want you to take this letter."

He pointed to a spot on the map. Even though he was supposed to have resigned himself earlier, the blood instantly drained from Dinn's face.

"I-Impossible," he shrank back. "If I go, I will be killed."

"Yeah. At the very least, you won't be ignored." Orba kept smiling. The page felt more terrified than ever. "Thinking about it, he's a bold man. He won't let a good opportunity slip by before his eyes. So, since it's fine, hurry up and get ready."

There was no room for agreement or dissent.

*He really hasn't changed* – was written all over Dinn's face.

"I also want to ask you to get some things ready for me. Are there any clothes fit for a prince left in Apta? If there aren't, I'll need you to arrange what you can for me."

Dinn looked surprised at that order. In Apta, the Prince almost invariably wore

casual clothes. He wasn't going to turn into a dandy at this point in time, was he?

"Are you going to be going somewhere, Your Highness?" he enquired, and Orba answered casually,

"Yeah. To Taúlia."

"T-Taúlia?"

"Don't worry. I won't be staying for long this time. There's just some business I want to finish."

Orba looked at the letter that he had just finished writing. Dinn sighed inwardly once again.

Honestly, it was nothing but surprises with this master.

Meanwhile, Vileena was going to pay a get-well visit to the injured who were being taken care of at the fortress.

According to a physician that she spoke to, for the first day or two it had been as noisy as a battlefield.

Since there had, in fact, only just been a battle along the border, there were a great many injured soldiers within the fortress. Because the medical facilities were full to the brim with them, the great hall in the barracks had been thrown open for the villagers to sleep in.

When Gil Mephius had heard that there were not enough doctors, he had said "have them brought in from the villages on horseback or by airship," and had summoned anyone with even the slightest medical knowledge.

Fortunately, medicinal herbs with antibacterial and sterilization properties could be gathered in abundance from the forest around Apta. Gil had also sent soldiers with instructions from the physicians to gather those herbs.

Vileena stepped into the large hall.

There were faces there that she knew. Young men who had helped her carry water from the communal well. The lady from the marketplace who had asked

her, who was a foreigner, “Are you the girl from Rone’s place?” and sold her vegetables for cheap. There were boys from those who had crowded around the house to take a peek at her.

In the village, everyone had called out to her with a smile when they caught sight of her. Here, they all averted their gazes. They knew now that she was a princess.

Even so, unable to simply ignore them, she came to visit. But, thinking about how the villagers’ feelings had changed, she never stayed for too long.

It gave her some sense of relief that many of their lives had been saved.

As she was about to leave the hall, a voice called out from behind her –

“Princess.”

Turning around, it was Layla. She ran up to Vileena and curtsied.

The timing and speed were almost those of a surprise attack, even so Vileena opened her mouth to speak out of reflex but did not know what to say.

“Thankfully, my father has regained consciousness. It was only a little, but yesterday he was able to eat... According to the doctor, he should be able to move in a month’s time.”

“Thank goodness.” Even though she had mixed feelings about Layla calling her “Princess”, Vileena spontaneously broke into a smile upon hearing that Rone was doing well.

“It’s all thanks to you, Princess, and the good people of the fortress. Even we, who once gave up on Mephius, were so well received and...”

Overcome by emotion as she was speaking, the end of Layla’s sentence became indistinct and, one after another, tears spilled and fell from her eyes. After which, she fell to one knee as though having completely broken down in tears.

“Layla,” Vileena instinctively leaned forward and was about to hold out her hand, but –

“Princess, please forgive my rudeness up until now. Moreover, I have no words to express my gratitude for the help we have received from you. Those

such as the likes of us, in our position, we have no way to ever return your favour.”

“What are you saying?” driven by an ardent impulse, Vileena crouched down herself without thinking and took Layla’s limp hand. “I was the one to receive help. Instead of repaying that favour, I brought calamity to your village. I deserve to be hated and blamed rather than having you lower your head like this, Layla.”

Holding hands, the two young women warmly gazed at one another. A while passed.

“Princess... In truth, although it is shameless of me, I called out to you because I have request to make.”

“What is it?”

“As I said before, I have nothing. With my father in that state, it will take a long time before he can work again. Therefore, could you please let me work at the fortress? Of course, I do not mind what kind of work it is.” She spoke with her forehead pressed against the floor.

The back of Vileena’s eyelids grew hot. This was a girl who had once called her ‘Luna’ and cared for her like a little sister. While promising to do everything to grant her desperate request, Vileena left the hall, hiding her tears behind her hand.

The next day, Layla received a visit of a messenger from the princess.

It was while she was paying a sickbed call to her father, Rone. The hall had been divided with white cloth and Lennus was in the next bed. The boy who had lived next-door to them and had his right arm cut off during the disturbance. His face had grown gaunt from pain and fever but the medicine had now taken effect and they were abating.

The messenger informed Layla that she would be working as Vileena’s lady’s maid starting the next day. Layla bowed repeatedly to the messenger, as though they had been the princess herself.

Once they had left, Layla looked down at her father's sleeping form. The doctors had removed everything that the injured had worn and these were all placed at the patients' feet. Among them, there was a dagger in a scarlet sheath. It was part of the equipment which had been given to her father when he had been selected to be part of the Emperor's Imperial Guards.

Layla stealthily picked it up.

She drew it about halfway out.

Even though her father was supposed to have thrown away the past, it was obvious that he maintained it regularly.

Her lips were reflected in the blade as a name fell from them.

*Gil Mephius.*

## Part 2

Fedom Aulin disembarked in the port of Birac for the first time in several months.

He was the lord of this Mephian trade town but, since the marriage between Crown Prince Gil and the Garberan princess had been decided, he had constantly been away from Birac. First he had often been in Solon, the imperial capital, then, more recently, he helped with the governing of Kilro, which had only just had a change of lord, and finally, he returned after that to Solon to pay a courtesy call on the Emperor.

An incessant drizzle fell on the harbour.

A great many of the moored ships always bore the emblem of the Haman firm, but today they were particularly conspicuous. These were ships which should have been going to trade in the west but because relations with Mephius were once more strained, and although their cargo was loaded, they could not fly off.

Fedom returned to his residence. His mind was fully preoccupied even as he received the greetings from his wife and children.

Needless to say, what he continued to think about was always the same as ever: his too-grand ambition to depose Emperor Guhl Mephius and shoulder the responsibility of steering Mephius himself.

The war with the west was a omen that the country would fall into ruin and, for Fedom, it represented an unparalleled opportunity. He could sense that day by day, dissatisfaction with Guhl was growing stronger at the court. Thus, he had originally wanted to remain in Solon and increase the number of his collaborators even if only by a single one.

However, he had no choice but to return to Birac when the Emperor directly ordered him to do so.

The first offence corps, led by Nabarl Metti, having been miserably defeated, Guhl had immediately hastened the formation of the second corps.

“In order to make absolutely sure, make preparations for those forces to be stationed in Birac.” It had been that kind of thing.

In addition, Fedom had received a large quantity of war funds. These were for equipment such as swords, guns and armour, as well as for arming the ships.

He had not, however, been granted much time. So he questioned how much he would be able to get done.

*The Emperor is impatient.* Having returned to his room, Fedom paced around inside it like a beast on the prowl. The best chance to approach Solon would probably be when the large army was dispatched to the west.

The only collaborator he could be sure of at the moment was Indolph, the lord of Kilro. Even if there were a great many people who would take action together if an opportunity arose, what they were currently lacking was a really good opportunity. Nabarl Metti, who had been directly involved in fighting with the west, was in a position to provide such an opportunity and had originally been part of the anti-Emperor faction but, in order to wipe out this disgrace, he was more likely to work for the Emperor than for the Council.

*It's a shame I wasn't able to bring Simon to our side while I was in Solon.*

Simon Rodloom was the former president of the Council and was a powerful unifying force at court. He was currently under house arrest. All the elements were there to heighten distrust against the Emperor. However becoming more intimate, not with Simon but with the nobles that he was close to, was not easy. If Fedom could take the time to win some of them over, he would be able to deceive them by issuing an order to save Simon in a time of crisis.

*This is an important crossroads* – thought Fedom. At the same time, if he made a mistake at this point, there would be no second chance and all that awaited him was ruin.

When he went up to the window, the strength of the rain had increased.

“Eei,” Fedom cursed as though propelled by that strength. He was tired of always having to tread carefully. Thinking about it, Fedom Aulin was not a man

blessed with luck. No matter how many times he became enthusiastic about his schemes finally, finally coming to fruition, the situation would change and he would inevitably have to redo all his plans.

On the other side of the window, a single air carrier sailed across the darkened sky. This was not an unusual sight in Birac. Yet it caught Fedom's attention and he stared intently towards the sky.

The towering mountain range could just be made out to the north. By reckoning the direction from the position of those mountains, that ship was coming from the west. It gradually got closer. On its flank, he could see the symbol indicating that it belonged to the Haman firm.

*Is it a ship returning from Taúlia?*

It would be natural to think so but it would be strange for Taúlia, which had just crossed swords in a battle with Mephius, to deliberately return a ship, even if it was privately-owned.

Fedom was going to send a messenger hurrying off to the port. However, doing that would have resulted in their crossing each other without meeting since, as soon as they alighted, all of those on board barged uninvited into his hall.

From what they said, because of the recent battle near the border, they had for a while been forced to stay in Taúlia but, just the other day – which was not five days after Nabarl had gone scurrying back to Apta – they had received permission to return to their own country.

Among them there was one person with small build. At first Fedom thought it must be a woman but, when that person stepped forward, the expression on the lord of Birac's face changed completely.

While Fedom Aulin was still on the road heading back to Birac, Emperor Guhl Mephius chose the three generals for the second offence against Taúlia.

The commander of the Black Steel Sword Division, Folker Baran.

The commander of the Bow of Gathering Clouds Division, Yuriah Mattah.



The commander of the Spear of Flames Division, Zaas Sidious.

First, Folker Baran of the Black Steel Sword Division. Among Mephius' twelve generals, he was comparatively well-known even outside of the country.

During the war against Garbera, he had not suffered a single crushing defeat. He was an extremely tenacious man, unusual among the Mephian generals, even when the signs indicated that they were sure to lose. He was forty-five years old. With his tall stature and handsome features, he looked good in armour, but in actual fact, Folker was not personally proficient in the martial arts. He himself was well aware of this and so always commanded from the rear. In these times however, if a general did not sally out to the front and join swords with the enemy, it was difficult for them to earn trust and respect. Perhaps because of that, and even though Folker was recognised for his wisdom, he was very often tasked with cleaning up after a defeat and was, so to speak, a general of misfortune.

Next was Yuriah Mattah.

His Bow of Gathering Clouds Division mainly made use of air carriers. Yuriah himself was, of course, a Winged Dragon officer and had graduated at the top of the Officer Training Academy. At thirty years old, he was the second youngest among the twelve generals. He could well be called baby-faced. Let alone in his twenties, he looked like he was in the latter half of his teens. He himself was bothered by this and had several times grown a beard but, as it really did not suit him in the slightest, he had shaved it off every time.

Finally, leading the Spear of Flames Division, was Zaas Sidious.

At twenty-four years old, he was even younger than Yuriah so, in other words, he was the youngest of the twelve generals. However, he boasted an imposing dignity in both build and expression so that – in a completely different sense from Yuriah – he too was someone whose age you would not believe upon first meeting him.

He had directly inherited the Spear of Flames Division from his father, who had been killed in action during the war against Garbera. His father, Mirandola Sidious, had been a harsh commander, feared by friend and foe alike as 'battle mad' and when Zaas had taken part in his first campaign, not even three years

earlier, he too already displayed the same tendency. With that said, from the platoon leaders to the battalion commanders, every officer among his troops had been in the same position since his father's time. Although they looked favourably upon him and worked hard for the division, they were a bit too much for the young Zaas to handle.

Thus, the composition of the second Taúlia capture force gathered together the veteran Folker along with the youth, talent, and strength of the other two generals.

That day, shortly before they were to depart for the frontlines, the three of them were summoned to the grand hall of the imperial palace.

"As I have said before, this is a war of retribution for Crown Prince Gil Mephius." Holding a staff adorned with crystal at the tip, Guhl Mephius gazed down at the three generals. "The enemy excels in cunning. Be thoroughly prepared so that you do not follow in Nabarl's footsteps and underestimate your opponent."



A small dinner celebration, serving as the commencement ceremony for the military campaign, was held in the great hall.

Empress Melissa and her daughters Ineli and Flora were also present, which was rare for this kind of occasion. Naturally, the Crown Prince's seat was empty. It seemed that until this war, which was being positioned as a battle of revenge for Gil Mephius, was over, Guhl intended to make a point of displaying this ownerless chair.

Crowds of people hailed the generals, as much was expected of them in the war. Folker was popular with the men while Yuriah was surrounded by the women. Perhaps because he was young, after a period of peace, energy was surging from Zaas' entire body and he had a presence which did not readily encourage other people to approach.

Yet of the people who kept smiling, how many truly wanted this war?

If they were to seriously get involved with the west now, there was no telling to what extent that would affect the national interests. And also –

*Hopefully it won't turn out like the time with Garbera.*

Folker Baran did not fail to see that unease was plastered on the faces of those in positions of authority. That war had continued in part because the Emperor had grown stubborn, and it had slowly dragged on, causing many needless sacrifices within the country.

*Garbera, huh?*

Folker suddenly remembered the girl that he had seen several times at court. Fourteen years old, exactly the same age as his daughter. There were rumours within the court that Princess Vileena had supported Taúlia and that her whereabouts had since been unknown. The Emperor had made a statement acknowledging that fact. Ever since however, the topic of the princess had absolutely not been broached.

*At this rate, we might be at war with Garbera again before long.*

Folker worriedly tilted his wine cup. For some time now, the alcohol had not tasted of wine. It was like cooled molten steel.

"General Baran."

Zaas came up to him. As he drew closer, you could almost smell the fervour rising from his skin. Although he was clad in formal dress fit for being in the presence of the Emperor, it was so tight that it seemed as though at any moment, the cloth would burst open from within and expose his honed body. It was not only a problem of size, he looked like a man who would be more at ease clad in a breastplate and chainmail, prowling like a beast in a bloodstained wasteland strewn with severed heads, rather than behaving like a civilized person who lived surrounded by four stone walls.

"This will be the first time I cross swords with an enemy other than Garbera. General Baran, you've attacked Taúlia before, haven't you?"

"That was more than ten years ago. Crossing the border was easy and we even seized Taúlia at one point, only to immediately be besieged by western troops. If we intend to fight Taúlia, we need to be prepared for it to turn into a war with the west itself."

Folker spoke lightly, every bit the military man. Zaas' breathing on the other hand was rough and excited.

"That's what I'm hoping for. I've been suffering anguish from not being able to dip my sword in blood recently. With the west as the opponent, I should be submerged up to my ankles in a sea of gore."

"You are very like your father, Zaas."

Folker did not smile and his tone held neither praise nor condemnation. "Dipping your sword in blood is a warrior's desire" was a favourite phrase of Zaas' father, 'Battle Mad' Mirandola. Incidentally, Mirandola had not taken part in the attack on Taúlia ten years ago. This was because he had been assigned to defending the borders in the east; but his son, Zaas, seemed to think that not participating in that important war was a stain on the family's honour, and he appeared eager to restore their reputation.

*So I'm going to have those two youngsters for company on the march, huh?* Thought Folker as he watched Yuriah perform impromptu dances in the distance with the ladies. *Well at any rate, they're skilled. But just skill doesn't mean either brains or experience. In which case, their use will certainly be*

*invaluable.*

Folker was not entirely enthusiastic about war with the west but, as so far he had almost only ever cleaned up for someone else's lost battle, this was a chance to show off his own ability to his heart's content. As neither Yuriah nor Zaas suffered from an abundance of wit, they would meekly follow Folker's directions.

He was normally known as man of iron nerves but, just this time, ardour was simmering within Folker's breast.

When the small party was nearing its end, a man came rushing from one end of the hall, his back bent forward. It was one of the Emperor's chamberlains. When he reached Guhl's side, he whispered something in his ear.

*Oh?* Guhl's expression changed. His face seemed to indicate that, while he had been getting tired of the banquet, something of interest was suddenly about to start.

Guhl abruptly clapped his hands loudly.

"Everyone, our amiable General Nabarl has returned from the land of Apta."

*Heh?* The banquet was filled with a different kind of commotion from the one so far.

Naturally everyone there had heard the report of how General Nabarl had lost the first battle against Taúlia. But after that, he had remained in Apta and should have had a duty to protect the border along with Rogue Saian and Odyne Lorgo until the arrival of the second offence force – the troops under Folker and the others – that the Emperor was to send.

"Naturally, I did not order his return to the capital. According to the messenger, he seems to have something to tell me privately." Guhl let out a chuckle, as though he had just heard a joke from a close friend. "But what kind of secret that no one else can hear could this man possibly have at this point? I'm thinking of summoning the man immediately and in front of everyone here. Folker, Zaas, Yuriah."

"Aye"

“Listen well. Perhaps General Nabarl will tell us about Taúlia’s secret weapon. Otherwise he surely wouldn’t be scurrying back after an ignominious defeat, and without even permission to do so.”

“Aye, aye!”

While it was an unexpected development, if ordered by the Emperor himself, even Folker could only stand at attention.

Soon after, Nabarl Metti entered the hall. Pierced by a multitude of gazes, he walked a little unsteadily towards the Emperor and fell to one knee before him.

*His Majesty has a terrible personality.* As he watched expressionlessly, Folker inwardly pitied the man who had only just risen to the position of general.

Even though Nabarl was being summoned in front of a crowd, he had not warned the feudal lords beforehand of his return. Of course, when coming back to the imperial capital, Nabarl should have stopped at the major cities on the way so that preliminary announcements would reach the Emperor.

At the centre of the collective attention, Nabarl spoke while down on one knee. “H-Having a matter to report to Your Majesty, I have endured the shame of returning in this way to Solon.”

“You have something to report.”

“A-Aye!”

“How very interesting,” the Emperor opened his eyes affectedly wide. “Myself of course included, everyone here is extraordinarily interested in hearing about what you saw in Taúlia and about what you have conveyed to Solon. Do tell.”

With his head bowed so low that it could not have gone lower, Nabarl first explained that the defeat against Taúlia’s army was due to the betrayal of Garbera’s Princess Vileena.

As mentioned previously however, the Emperor currently had no liking for this topic.

As Guhl displayed a complete lack of surprise, the retainers exchanged whispered comments.

*Dear me...*

*What does he think he's saying with that air of importance?*

People simply thought that Nabarl was trying to gloss over his own failure by presenting out-dated information as something extremely shocking.

“I’ve already heard this,” with a few choice words, the Emperor interrupted Nabarl’s excuses when it looked like he was going to continue with them. “I do not remember giving you the order to return to Solon. State your reason for kneeling before me in this way instead of remaining in Apta and awaiting the arrival of the second wave of troops.”

“T-That is...” Nabarl Metti’s forehead was covered in sweat. With his back still curbed, he lifted his head a fraction and ran his eyes repeatedly over his surroundings. The audience’s snickering grew louder at his manner that seemed to silently be asking for help.

“Y-Your Majesty, perhaps clearing out the people here...” he said, but the Emperor stubbornly refused to nod.

“I ordered you to speak now.”

“Yes.”

Nabarl looked down once more. He loudly cleared his large throat a few times.

*Oh?* The audience once again spoke among themselves with relish.

*Everyone, it looks like there's still something to come.*

*What kind of hidden card will he pull out? This time, will it be a survivor of the Ryuujin tribe who helped Taúlia?*

“A-A certain distinguished person...”

For those who were openly jeering as they watched, the words that were stuck in Nabarl’s throat were certainly completely beyond the range of their expectations.

“A certain distinguished person unexpectedly came to Apta and gave me the role of messenger. He wishes to suggest to His Majesty the Emperor that any further attacks on Taúlia be abandoned... That is why I gave up on getting revenge on Taúlia and returned thus to Solon.”



“A certain person?” Guhl’s brows were drawn together in a deep crease. Recognising a sign of anger, the retainers held their breath. “At this point, what are you still hiding? And in the first place, do you serve any lord other than I, Guhl Mephius? Do you have a lord who is higher than the Emperor of Mephius and whose orders you will comply with at all cost?”

“P-Please do not be absurd! I, Nabarl Metti, have pledged my life and loyalty to none but the imperial family of Mephius.”

“And yet you have shamelessly returned. How do you explain this?”

“I-I will do so,” Nabarl’s forehead was already pressed against the floor. He cried out in a trembling voice, “it was His Imperial Highness Gil. The one who gave me the order was none other than a member of the imperial family of Mephius, Imperial Crown Prince Gil Mephius!”

## Part 3

When he spoke, the people in the hall fell into a state of almost utter confusion, unable to comprehend Nabarl's words.

*His Highness Gil. Did that fool Nabarl say that?*

*Yeah, that's what I heard too.*

*Preposterous. Was the cretin so terrified of His Majesty's wrath that he lost his mind?*

For all that the imperial family of Mephius was said to be descended from a Dragon God, once humans were dead they could not resurrect from beyond the grave. When they heard that Imperial Crown Prince Gil Mephius, who had fallen to the bullets of assassins in Apta, had once more appeared there for the purpose of advising the Emperor to halt the attack on Taúlia, it was impossible for most of the people there not to doubt Nabarl's sanity.

*This is...*

Folker listened to Nabarl's voice in understandably blank amazement, then looked to the Emperor to see his reaction. The expression of interest that Gil's father, Guhl Mephius, wore when he had first summoned Nabarl had disappeared, and instead he now rested his chin on his hand with an air of boredom.

Nabarl finished speaking and waited for the Emperor's response. His rotund body looked small.

Before a heavy silence could descend, Folker opened his mouth to speak.

"Sir Nabarl. Did you see this for yourself? Did you make certain that it was Crown Prince Gil with your own eyes?"

"I saw. Clearly, with my own eyes." Nabarl glanced towards Folker and his own eyes were as dark as those of ghost. "Not only myself but also my men, the

people of Apta, and both Generals Saian and Lorgo. Without a doubt, that was Crown Prince Gil himself.”

*Impossible.*

The commotion swelled. There were some who opened their eyes wide, those who exchanged whispers again, those who were forcing themselves to laugh – and, among the various responses, there were those who speculated that – *this might be some sort of entertainment that His Majesty arranged for the pre-battle ceremony.*

Only Nabarl’s face was pale. “After His Highness, the Garberan princess, Lady Vileena, whose whereabouts had been unknown, also returned to Apta. As she said that her life had been saved in the west, it became impossible for me to interfere any further there... And thus, I have come to entreat Your Majesty for your august judgement.”

“Nonsense”

The air in the hall grew tense. The hundreds of whispered words suddenly stopped and everyone’s gaze converged on Guhl Mephius.

With his cheek still resting on his fist, Guhl continued, “A trick which could not be more foolish and which could not make more of a mockery of Mephius.”

“A trick,” Nabarl half shrieked. “A trick, you say?”

“What else could it be? Gil Mephius is dead. I cannot say that I have not felt like clinging to even the smallest sliver of hope. But how much time has already passed since the report of Gil’s death? I have already lost all hope. I cannot cling to empty wishes forever. Nabarl, you appear to be a person who loves the imperial family but those feelings have been used by the west. They must have sent an impostor Crown Prince Gil with the intention of spreading mayhem within our Mephius.”

“B-But, but, Your Majesty. An impostor, that distin... No, that person who claims to be the Crown Prince, he looks just like Lord Gil. Neither General Saian nor General Lorgo held the slightest doubt, and both of them seemed to accept him as the Crown Prince.”

“In the west, there is a legend of an abhorrent sorcerer,” said Guhl, with no

indication that his mind had altered in the slightest. “The Bazgan House, which betrayed Mephius, borrowed that sorcerer’s power to found Zer Tauran. There is nothing mysterious in assuming that this loathsome sorcery has been passed down to this day. That being so, Nabarl, you should have dragged this insolent villain, who calls himself the Crown Prince, to Solon by brute force if necessary. With these eyes, I would certainly have been able to clearly distinguish the true from the false.”

“A-Aye.” Faced with unfaltering criticism, Nabarl could only prostrate himself.

Because the people there had not actually seen this “Crown Prince Gil”, they were readily able to agree with the Emperor’s words. The surprise at Prince Gil still being alive had already faded, and in its place was a sense that Nabarl truly was a unrivalled fool. Among those present, the proportion of those who were sniggering increased.

“I will send a messenger,” Guhl fired off his words as he was rising from his chair. He brandished the crystal-tipped sceptre. “Tell Rogue and Odyne to seize this scoundrel and bring him to Solon. I’ll cut his head off myself and perform a new oracle.”

*Oh* – a different kind of commotion now filled the room.

Three or four years earlier, the Emperor had held an ‘oracle’ during the war against Garbera. It was something like a promise that the imperial family, who were his descendants, exchanged orally with the Dragon God. However, the previous oracle could not be honoured due to peace with Garbera, so there was a strong probability that it would be forgotten by history.

*Will this oracle be left in the annals of history?* Folker thought to himself while the ripples of this new commotion spread throughout the hall.

*Be that as it may, His Majesty has a heart of iron. People say my nerves are strong, but when he learned that there was a chance, however slight, that his son might still be alive, he threw it away right from the start. That must be what they call royalty, a ruler. It might indeed be proper in a statesman, but...*

At that moment, Folker chanced to catch a glimpse of Mephius’ Imperial Princess Ineli. As was to be expected from a young girl, unlike the Emperor, she had not been completely without reaction. The blood had drained from her face

and, just like Nabarl, she was frighteningly pale. But, as Folker was wondering if, among the race known as royalty there might not be one part which did after all resemble him, that fleeting prospect was ruthlessly betrayed by the smile that curved along her lips.

Ineli took her leave from the hall at about the same time as the ceremony for the departure for war ended. This was unusual for her as, normally at a party, she would stay behind even after the host had left their seat; she would sit surrounded by her close friends and by young noblemen with promising futures or those from the military.

Perhaps she was in a bad state for, as she headed towards the Inner Palace, her feet stumbled repeatedly and her hands kept hitting the walls.

“Older Sister.”

Even when her younger sister Flora, who was walking behind her, called out to her, or when her ladies’ maids held out their hands to her, she did not appear to notice them in the slightest and simply continued to stagger onwards. Then, the hem of her dress got caught by her high heel. She almost tripped over and Flora, in a fluster, made to catch hold of her shoulder.

“Don’t touch me!”

When her sister turned around with vehement speed, Flora almost stopped breathing for a second. Her pale face and flaring eyes were like those of a completely different person and was more like those of a witch appearing in a nightmare. Then –

“Oh, Flora,” recognizing her sister, Ineli’s expression changed. Her face relaxed and her eyes became gentle. “What’s wrong?”

“Ah, umm, Older Sister, you...”

“My, were you worried about me? Such a sweet little sister.” Ineli stroked the dark, reddish-brown hair that Flora had inherited from their father. “But I’m fine. It’s alright. More importantly, how are you? We talked about it last time, didn’t we? Are you reading diligently and studying?”

“Y-Yes, Older Sister,” Flora bobbed her head back and forth. “I have a music teacher and a history teacher since last month.”

“We~elll, that’s good.” Ineli nodded exaggeratedly as she smiled.

Her smile and the swift gesture with which she brushed away her golden hair as it rhythmically beat against her shoulder both belonged to the older sister that Flora adored, yet for some reason, Flora’s eyes became even more frightened than earlier.

“Study seriously and become the princess that His Majesty hopes for. You might also one day be sent in marriage to another country. When that happens, you must not be embarrassed as a princess of Mephius.”

“Y-Yes.”

“And also,” Ineli pointed a slender finger at her little sister’s forehead, “it seems that recently, you’ve been inviting a girl from the people to come and play. Please stop that now. It’s not an issue that concerns you alone. If you are looked down on because of it, it is Mephius’ imperial family which will lose face.”

Ineli seemed to be in a good mood as she spoke then, accompanied by her ladies’ maids, she continued forward. Her gait had regained its usual self-confidence.

Flora did not follow behind that retreating figure.

“Princess?”

Even when the ladies’ maids attached to the second Imperial Princess called out to her, she only shook her head. Her thin legs had been trembling since a while earlier.

*She resembles her* – she whispered in such a tiny voice that it would never reach other people. *Mother. Yes, right now, Older Sister is just like Mother was back then.*

Anxiety and dread were forming within Flora’s small chest like dark clouds gathering.

Ineli and Flora’s mother, that was to say, the current empress, Melissa, had

lost her first husband, who had been the girls' father. He had not held any private territory within the country, but he came from a family boasting one of the most venerable lineages in Mephius.

But Melissa had clearly not been content with that. Again and again she had talked about wanting her husband to be more proactive about associating with the key figures at Court.

In her childish mind, Flora had thought that – *Mother wants Father to be even greater.*

However, her father was by nature an easy-going person and, rather than spending his days on Court intrigues, on manoeuvring to outwit others even if only by small margin, and on becoming embroiled in secret feuds, he seemed far better suited to playing with his two daughters at their mansion.

Eventually, her mother, by who knew what thought process, had suddenly decided to join the Dragon Gods' faith. Her father had objected but her mother had refused to listen.

“When have you ever listened to me?”

When he was asked that, her father had nothing to reply.

And then *it* started.

Flora remembered, even if only partially.

After her mother had joined the Dragon Gods faith, her father's physical condition changed. He, who had always been the picture of health, abruptly started to frequently fall ill. Usually he would recover his vigour after staying in bed for a day or two, but each time his round cheeks turned increasingly hollow; the flesh fell from his legs and arms, which had once not moved an inch even if both his daughters swung from them, and in no time at all, his entire body grew gaunt.

In the end, Melissa's untiring nursing and his two young daughters' prayers were in vain, and he became unable to take a single step out of bed. Doctors responding to her mother's appeals had visited the mansion again and again, but her father's health had never recovered.

“I’m sorry,” that morning, when Flora had brought him breakfast, her father had softly stroked her head. His smile had been almost frighteningly serene. “Next month is the Founding Festival. Flora, you hate the gladiatorial games, don’t you? Well then, while your big sister and your mother go to the tournament, how about you come shopping with Father at the festival?”

Her father had remembered how, at the previous year’s festival, his daughter had gazed in fascination at the brilliant sights while tirelessly peaking outside of the window of their carriage. Flora had wanted to leave the carriage but her mother had chided her, saying that it was improper to mix with the townspeople to go shopping.

So Flora had been delighted at her father’s promise. Because of the shopping, of course, but also because her father never lie; so she believed that if he had said that, it meant that by next month he would be completely better and they would be able to go outside together.

Her father passed away that night.

The day after the first time he had lied to her.

Dressed in the grey clothes of a widow, Melissa had stroked the heads of the sobbing Ineli and Flora and had said –

“There is nothing for you to worry about. This isn’t the end of everything. Rather, something might just have begun.”

Flora remembered the smile that Melissa had shown to none but her daughters at that time. It had felt as though her entire body had been paralysed.

There was a close resemblance between her mother’s smile back then, her mother’s gaze back then, and Ineli just now.

Meanwhile, having arrived at her own room, Ineli sent her ladies’ maids away. They received strict orders not to let anyone approach her room until she herself had given them permission to do so.

*It’s the same as when His Highness Gil died.*



*Does she intend to seclude herself again?*

Even though they did not speak, their feelings were clear to see. Ineli ignored them and closed the door to her room, then she threw herself onto the bed without changing her clothes.

After rolling about from left to right, she lay face-downwards. Her slender shoulders and wavy golden hair slowly began to shake.

Nabarl Metti was a man whose name she barely knew, but those words he had spoken during the audience in the great hall...

They were still reverberating in her ears.

“It was His Imperial Highness Gil. The one who gave me the order was a member of none other than the imperial family of Mephius, Imperial Crown Prince Gil Mephius!”

Nabarl’s voice had been shaking.

In the instant she had heard that, Ineli had felt like she had been struck by a thunderbolt and had almost fainted. She had even forgotten to breathe for a while.

She tossed about on the bed again.

Although her now upwards-facing body still trembled, a smile was unmistakably etched across the face which was framed on either side by voluminous hair.

*I knew it.*

Ineli muttered in her heart.

*I knew it, he’s alive.*

*I knew it, that man is alive.*

Unlike Ineli who had been in a state of shock, her step-father, Guhl Mephius, had decisively declared it to be an impostor. As Ineli turned that scene over in her mind, her smile broadened.

*Indeed, Father. That is an impostor. But only I need to know that. Because the one holding the Crown Prince’s secret and the one who will expose it is none*

*other than I, Ineli Mephius.*



Soon, unable to contain herself any longer, Ineli sprang up from the bed. She summoned the ladies' maids that she sent away earlier and told them –

“From now on, any and all information related to the Crown Prince is to be brought to me.” Faced with the bewildered ladies' maids, she continued, “the vile west, in its hostility towards Mephius, is starting a war of information. In order not to be misled by wild rumours flying around, it is necessary to tighten things in the Inner Palace.”

From there on, Ineli launched herself into activity. Seizing any pretext, she held balls and tea parties to which great crowds of people were invited, making it hard to believe that the Inner Palace had been closed to the outside since the news of Gil's death.

Among the ladies' maids at Court, there were those with acquaintances among the children of the nobility and the army officers. Leveraging these connections, she invited to her parties people with whom she had barely exchanged pleasantries up until then. With her natural sociability, Ineli could quickly become friendly with anybody.

She intended to build herself an intelligence network.

Hers was by no means a patient personality. Rather, since she was more the type to blow up quickly and cool down immediately if she did not immediately receive the information that she wanted, she was apt to easily give up. Yet now she displayed patience, which was unusual for her.

And then, less than half a month after Nabarl had returned, a certain interesting rumour reached her ears.

It was said that a suspicious-looking man had shown up in front of the palace gates. He claimed to be a subordinate of General Oubary Bilan and requested a meeting with the general. However, as the general's health had been destroyed from being incarcerated for so long, he was currently undergoing medical treatment; and besides, since the man's appearance was extremely dubious, he had promptly been driven away.

The man was yelling as he was being pushed by the soldiers who were forcing him to leave, and this was overheard by the soldiers of a separate unit that happened to be passing by at the time.

“I know. I know the truth about the resurrected Crown Prince!”

Ineli’s eyes started glittering sharply. The one telling her this was a company commander whom she had only just become acquainted with, who was part of Solon’s garrison, and who was in charge of an area mainly inhabited by the populace.

“Find that man at all cost,” she ordered the company commander, “and bring him to me without attracting anyone’s notice.”

Meanwhile, at almost the exact same moment that Ineli was issuing that order, the former Council President, Simon Rodloom, was still at his mansion under house arrest.

Nowadays, Emperor Guhl Mephius did not bring up Simon’s name even in idle gossip. Was it because of lingering fury against the faithful subject who had remonstrated with him, or was it because, what with the west or the impostor prince, he had so many things that he needed to sort out that he had completely forgotten about him?

Recently, Simon had been absorbed in reading books. Every day, he would instruct a page to bring him books and the next day, as proof that he had read them, the piles of books stacked in a corner of his room would grow taller.

Being as he was, he gave the impression of an ascetic hermit who had cast aside all connection to this mortal world, leaving behind everything concerning the Emperor and Mephius.

Yet even Simon showed an interest when he heard about the affair with the Crown prince, rumours of which had spread not only within the Imperial Court but also throughout Solon.

“His Highness, Gil Mephius?”

For a moment, he lifted his head from his book.

“Even if,” he whispered to himself. “Even if Rogue and Odyne have been ensnared by the west’s black magic, they won’t have awakened to the kind of lust for power that can change a person.”

After which, he did not say another word. Although actually, he did speak, but

not in a voice that could reach his page.

*It will soon be time to decide once and for all. His Majesty, those in authority who did nothing for fear of change and, of course, I myself.*

Simon's eyes turned back to the book in which he had written down what was already ancient history.

# Chapter 4: The Attributes of a King

## Part 1

Winding back time a little.

The day after Nabarl and his men left Apta as 'messengers', Orba once again crossed the River Yunos as Gil Mephius.

"I need to formally give Sir Ax my thanks and my greetings," he explained to the generals. Seeing the prince breezily cross over the border between the two countries, Rogue and Odyne looked like they were in the grip of strong emotion. "I'll be back soon. You're in charge while I'm gone."

Even though he had been missing until just recently, Orba said that entirely in the manner of a lord. Of course, the generals and Imperial Guards were respectful.

He boarded an air carrier along with a few others. Gowen was among them. They had not met directly since their violent verbal clash, but now Orba deliberately went up to him.

"This your first time in the west, Gramps?"

He clapped him on the shoulder expansively. The old warrior, unused to the rolling of the ship, staggered forward and returned a glare towards him.

*I told you not to call me Gramps* – was probably what he was thinking, but Orba paid it no mind.

"It's a good place. The people, the atmosphere and the land aren't bad at all. But right up to the end, I just couldn't get used to the food."

"I see."

"There are also many beautiful women. Gowen, you're still in active service, so don't go too wild."

When he said that, the Winged Dragon officers manning the bridge laughed. Gowen managed a strained smile, but once Orba's back was turned, he gave a small scowl in his direction.

News of Gil Mephius' survival had turned into a rumour that had been carried on the wind back to Taúlia. There had not yet been any official announcement, but just how much of an impact that rumour had was obvious from the way people were lined up along both sides of the streets where the carriage travelled, standing on tiptoe and craning their necks to try and catch even the smallest glimpse, as well as from the sight of people running alongside it. It was proof that the story that Mephius' Imperial Crown Prince Gil was riding in it had spread like a flash.

Despite the fact that Mephius had only very recently violated their border, the people's expressions held neither hatred nor fear. Instead, they were as wildly enthusiastic as if they had been eagerly awaiting a hero's return. That was in part because there was a widespread rumour that just as the second attack force was about to leave Apta for Taúlia, Gil Mephius had appeared in person to halt their march.

Finally, the carriage entered the premises of Taúlia's castle. Naturally, the people could not enter with it so they gathered along the fence on their side, forming a ring of excited faces.

In the audience hall, on the highest floor of the castle, its master was sitting on the throne for the first time in a long time. Ax Bazgan had hurried back to Taúlia as soon as he had received the news from the strategist, Ravan Dol. On either side of him was that self-same Ravan Dol, Ax's wife, Jaina, and his daughter, Esmena.

Decked out in full uniform, Bouwen Tedos stood slightly before the royal family, while the remaining high officers were also assembled.



It was not just Taúlia; Lasvius from Helio, Moldorf and Nilgif from Kadyne, as well as the commanders who had come rushing from the various countries were lined up shoulder to shoulder.

Since some time earlier, this crowd of people had constantly been exchanging glances and talking among themselves. They were hardly any less excited than the populace.

Only Ax Bazgan looked a little despondent.

The noise instantly stopped when the door to the audience chamber opened and the soldiers showed a man in. Leaving those soldiers standing by the doorway, the man proceeded to walk alone straight into the throne room.

The first to react was Princess Esmena Bazgan. Seeming startled, she suddenly got up from her chair. Her mother Jaina gestured to rebuke her for her lack of manners, but nobody was looking. All eyes were turned to the man who was striding along.

Although they had, of course, been informed beforehand of the visit, neither Ax nor Bouwen could hide the surprise from their faces. *Oh, this man is...* – Lasvius, Nilgif, the Blue Dragon of Kadyne, and the others, meanwhile, observed him with great earnestness.

Only one person, Nilgif's older brother Moldorf, wore a slightly different expression from that of the other officers but, as with Esmena, there was no one to notice it.

The one who had stepped forward - Crown Prince Gil Mephius of the Imperial Dynasty of Mephius, dropped to his knees in front of Ax, his cloak fluttering.

In appearance, he was the very picture of a fearless young warrior but it was said that only a few months earlier, he had been shot by an underling and had almost lost his life. The significance of the decorative circlet on his brow was that it was to hide the scar. But what astonished the people gathered there more than anything was the story that it was none other than the lord of Taúlia who had saved him when he had been wandering between life and death.

Both of these things had only just been explained to them a short while earlier by the strategist, Ravan Dol.

"It has been a long time, Lord Ax Bazgan." Gil raised his head and gave his greetings with a smile. For all that he was kneeling, Gil and Ax were bound by a relationship of personal alliance. "Although having said that, it's only been two or three days since I left. Taúlia is now like a second hometown to me. When I sensed the western wind, it truly felt as though I was coming home."

Ax did not answer for a while. It was unclear whether he actually intended to create that 'gap', but when Ravan Dol discreetly cleared his throat, he replied with unchanged despondency,

"The most important thing is that you have recovered from your injury, Prince Gil."

"It's thanks to you. As long as I live, I will never forget the warm care that I have received from you Lord Ax, and from Taúlia."

*Damn that sly fox.*

While forcing himself to smile, Ax was seething with rage. When he had received the urgent notification from Ravan, Ax had truly considered whether he should just finally strangle the old strategist. There he was saying that "Mephius' Crown Prince Gil was actually being sheltered in Taúlia" as though it were perfectly natural.

It was a story that passed his comprehension.

When he got to see Ravan Dol face-to-face to grill him about it in detail, he was told that, "it seems that the subordinates I have spread throughout Taúlia looked after the injured prince without knowing who he was. Once he had recovered from his wound, he announced himself as Mephius' crown prince and I, hearing about it, rushed to him with all haste."

Gil had asked that no one be informed for a while that he had survived. In exchange, and as thanks for sheltering him, he had sent his men, the former Imperial Guards Orba and Shique, to enlist as mercenaries in Taúlia's army.

"And of course, you didn't think the situation important enough to tell your liege about it."

"My lord, there is a time and a place for all things," Ravan gravely informed him. "You, my liege, being honest and frank, are a gentleman who cannot tell a

lie or be sneaky."

"In other words, you're saying that I'm foolish and stupid. Yeah, that's right. I splendidly made Orba captain of the mercenaries without realising that he was Gil's subordinate."

"I am filled with awe at your perspicacity."

All seemed to be well. It looked as though Ax had not realised Orba's true identity but had only clearly discerned his sharp wits.

"However, I would like you to pretend that you knew from the start, Lord Ax. If we say that it was according to your intent that Sir Gil was hidden here, the situation from here on will proceed far more smoothly."

"With the way you cleverly deceive me, it's as good as saying that you actually intend to make Taúlia yours one of these days."

"Even if that were the case, I do not have many years left to live. There is no doubt that I will be called to the Dragon Gods before you are, my lord. Fortunately, as I have neither child nor grandchild, I will not be leaving behind the seeds of calamity," Ravan said nonchalantly.

While Ax vowed in his heart to drink a toast in celebration when the old man eventually died, he had no choice but to go along with the plan. Gil needed to have some kind of weakness. After all, there was still that matter of the sovereign's seal from the Ancient Dynasty, which is proof of being king, not only of Taúlia, but of Zer Tauran. When they had assaulted Apta, Gil had stolen it with his own hands, although it had later been returned to Ax through Esmena.

Before Gil's visit, Ax had summoned his officers and had given them a general explanation about the prince – the matter of the sovereign's seal of course excepted.

Bouwen, who was personally acquainted with Orba, seemed utterly astounded. Certainly, they had once fought at Apta, but he could not possibly have imagined that the masked swordsman who had cornered them then was the same person as the one who had killed Garda.

"Well, if we're talking about goodwill," wiping his various emotions from his expression, Ax spoke to Gil, "we're also grateful for you having lent us a capable

subordinate, Prince. He magnificently accomplished a difficult task. I would like to purchase him for a high price, but I don't suppose that his prince would nod his consent."

"Orba is certainly an able man. Somewhat like a sword forged by a master craftsman. No matter how sharp it may be, if the one wielding it is not endowed with strength, it will be of no more use than a pillow. To tell you the truth, I too was surprised by his accomplishments this time. As expected of Sir Ax Bazgan, the leader of the west, you skilfully use your soldiers."

"Humph, well, anyway," Ax's bad mood had lifted. However, "Orba's name is now quite well-known throughout the west. Returning him to you, Prince, is regrettable, after all." Seized by the sudden urge to make mischief, he grumbled deliberately. Standing beside him, Ravan gave him a sidelong glare but Ax ignored him. "I've been thinking. How about taking a man from Mephius, and furthermore, one of the prince's subordinates, as a high-ranking commander here in Taúlia? If we did that, the people would surely be impressed by the friendship between our two countries."

"Well. That's..."

"Humph. Still not satisfied with the offer? Then, for example, how about Esmena here?" Ax glanced at his daughter who was looking blank. "If I approach Orba with the offer of Esmena here for his wife should he stay in Taúlia? I wonder how he would answer?"

At the word 'wife', Gil Mephius coughed violently. Unusually for him, he could not hide his consternation over Ax's teasing.

The people filling the room however were naturally well-acquainted with their master's personality and did not take it seriously. *Our liege has started joking around again.*

They watched the exchange with warm, contented feelings, and only Bouwen Tedos looked stunned.

Even though he had known that Orba was Mephian, Bouwen's feelings towards him were a little complicated as he had neither realised nor been informed that he was the crown prince's subordinate. In all honesty, he kind of wanted to seize him by the scruff of the neck and send him flying, but it would

be beyond a joke if his childhood friend Princess Esmena were to be added into the mix.

Just as he was about to unthinkingly throw aside his position and rank, and loudly rebuke Ax –

“Father!” Princess Esmena cried out in such loud accents that Bouwen was even more astounded than before and even Ax was surprised. Esmena had once again risen from her seat and, with everyone’s attention focused on her, she regained control of her tone of voice.

“... His Highness Gil looks troubled. It would be rude to let a joke go too far. On your orders, Father, Sir Orba, who is a foreigner, risked his life and defeated Garda. Has this not sufficiently expressed the faith and friendship between our two countries?”

“D-Definitely, it’s as my daughter says,” although taken aback by his sheltered daughter’s unexpected behaviour, Ax nodded magnanimously. He then purposely took the war fan hanging at his waist in his hand. “Indeed, when Taúlia and Mephius join hands as though the sorrowful history that passed before were no more than a lie, there is definitely nothing that they cannot accomplish. It is because these two countries joined forces that the menace that was Garda could be driven from the west...”

“And that I, Gil Mephius, could be saved,” Orba continued.

Ax Bazgan gazed in turn, not only at his own retainers, but also at each of the officers who had been invited from the various other countries.

“How about it? It is my wish that Taúlia should continue in its friendship with Mephius. The other countries of the west are certainly not without relation to Mephius but would you welcome this?”

“For us, there is no doubt. Both His Excellency Hardross and His Highness Rogier are in agreement.”

At Lasvius’ answer, the Red Dragon Moldorf threw out his massive chest.

“If the king of Taúlia, which shares a border with Mephius, says so, Princess Lima is certain to have no objection either.”

Ax nodded in satisfaction.

“However,” the one who interpolated was Gil Mephius, “however, for this to come to pass, it is first necessary to halt a certain ambition.”

“What ambition?”

"To devour the west, starting with Taúlia - my father, Guhl Mephius' ambition."

The atmosphere in the audience chamber immediately became tinged with a hint of sternness.

Considering the implications of the crown prince's survival and of his formal visit to Taúlia, this development was to be expected. But now that Gil himself had broached the topic, those who were there, standing at the crossroads of history as they were again about to confront Mephius together, the omens of war swirling ever more strongly in their hearts, felt a strange and deep emotion sweep through their breasts.

"You, his son, are saying that?"

Ax's expression grew taunt. Gil nodded.

"It would be meaningless to gloss over things at this point. Therefore, I bare my heart and although this may be shameless of me, I have a request to make of you, King Ax, as well as of you gentlemen of the many western countries."

"Soldiers," Ax anticipated Gil. Since this was naturally to be expected, Ax was showing consideration by voluntarily making the proposal himself. "We will not spare our strength in helping the prince who gave us assistance in subjugating Garda. So, how many do you need? When should they hasten towards Mephius?"

His tone was incredibly light but there was doubt that Ax's words expressed considerable resolve. If he lent a great many soldiers to Gil, it would mean war between the west and Mephius. And there would be casualties. To earn the neighbouring country's friendship – taking a long-term view, this could not be more beneficial, but how strenuous an effort it would be for the Tauran region, this war that would have no immediate benefits for the west that was exhausted after suppressing Garda.

Was it because Gil understood that situation that he said –

"About a thousand."

"A thousand," repeated Ax.

It was by no means a negligible number, but a slightly surprised look flickered across his face. Taking into consideration Mephius' full capacities, he had to wonder if the prince could really fight with only those reinforcements. And what Gil Mephius said next had not only King Ax, but also Lasvius and the Twin Dragons, opening their eyes wide.

"Yes, a thousand. But there is no need for those troops to leave the western territories. It'll be enough if they can raise their banners in full and show Mephius that the western forces are prepared to move."

"What?"

Just as Ax was finally unable to conceal his emotions any longer –

"Oh, and also, there is another thing I'd like to request."

"W-Which is?"

Unconcerned by the lord of Taúlia's confusion, Gil remained quiet for a moment.

Should it be said that he had played his hand well by aiming to create a pause at the last moment, when the other was becoming impatient? Gil Mephius gave a radiant smile that was quite unsuited to the strained atmosphere in the hall and spoke.

"I would like to borrow a few dozen of the beautiful dancing girls that Taúlia is so justly proud of."

## Part 2

"What the hell are they doing?" Talcott, a mercenary born near the coast, asked, thoroughly pissed off.

All around him were Stan, with whom he had worked for a long time, Kurun, an apprentice dragoon from Helio, and all the other members of Orba's unit.

Speaking of Orba's unit, they had, of course, accomplished considerable achievements in the war against Garda. And they had been given a very warm reception in Taúlia. Yet a crowd of soldiers had suddenly marched in on them, imprisoning nearly all of them together in a large room.

Having said 'all of them', they were actually short three people: the all-important captain of the unit, Shique, and Gilliam. In other words, only the Mephians had vanished.

"They can't possibly have really been executed?"

The reason for Talcott's misgivings was that just before they were imprisoned – which had been shortly after the invading Mephian army was driven back – Orba had been confined alone. Rumour had it that, at that time, Bouwen Tedos, who had been left in charge of Taúlia's army, might have flown into a rage against Mephius for disregarding the peace agreement by attacking, and, as an example to others, had Orba executed.

Just as Talcott was about to start feeling genuinely anxious about their own fate, they received a change of environment. Having been locked up in a single room, they were now transferred to a large hall. It had a great many rooms and, as Orba's unit had never been large, each member was provided with his own bed. They were also given freedom within the building. Although Taúlian soldiers stood guard outside, it was somewhat different from the treatment given to criminals.

At the same time, the Mephian mercenary Gilliam was brought to the hall and



was locked up in it along with Talcott and the others.

“Jumbo, what the hell’s going on?”

“Who knows,” the contours of Gilliam’s eyes were black and blue, as though someone had hit him, but he laughed cheerfully. “If you’re clever, you’re a patriotic hero, if you’re unlucky, it’s the scaffold.”

After two days had passed, Gilliam began to talk about the truth of the situation. At first, Talcott completely disregarded the idea of Orba and Shique serving as Imperial Guards to the crown prince of Mephius, and that they had come to the west to accompany the prince, who had himself been forced by circumstances to leave Mephius.

“Why would the crown prince’s men fight against Mephius?”

“That’s just it. The crown prince himself doesn’t want war with the west. That’s why he had them drive back the Mephian army that one time.”

After that, the crown prince had given Orba a letter to take to Mephius. As on the Taúlian side, they had still not been able to ascertain the prince’s identity, until Orba returned, the people of his unit were detained as hostages.

“What a joke! What Imperial Guards? Playing along with your bragging is just going to end up putting us in danger!”

Talcott was starting to become enraged when Stan calmly interrupted.

“No, Brother. When it comes to Mephius’ masked swordsman Orba, even I’ve heard of him. They have the same name and both are swordsmen that wear masks. It makes sense.”

“Again, why can’t you keep your mouth shut when it’s important?” Talcott spoke disgustedly. “We’ve always been together for a long time now, there is nothing that you know that I don’t. Stop playing along with his reckless bragging.”

“Brother, that’s because you’re always in a trance over some woman or another and don’t listen properly to what people are saying.”

“What’s that, you bastard?”

Even if they quarrelled, their situation did not change. They were given food

each day and, if they asked the guards, they could even get books and board games, but not knowing what was going to happen to them left them increasingly irritated.

On the third day after they had been moved to the hall, the streets had been noisy since the morning. As they were wondering what was going on, the door to the hall opened and a man wearing a hood appeared. Talcott and those by the door leapt up, convinced an executioner had arrived but –

“I’ve caused you trouble.”

The man pulled back the hood and exposed his face. Well, in this case, rather than a face, it could be better said to be the mask worn over his face.

“Captain!”

Many of the mercenaries rushed towards the entranceway. For a moment, Talcott, mouth wide open, clung blankly to a pillar. Then –

“Y-You. What’s with that nonchalantly showing up? Whose fault do you think this is?” He lunged to grab Orba by the collar.

Faster than anyone around them could react, Orba dodged lightly then flung a heavy leather purse onto a shelf in the entrance hall where things like water jugs were kept.

“I don’t think that this is enough to be forgiven, but... It’s prize money from Sir Ax.”

“Prize money?”

Acting out of something like a natural instinct, Talcott snapped out of his rage in an instant and immediately started inspecting the contents.

“It also includes all of your wages up until now. It’s to be divided equally between everyone.”

“What does this mean?” Stan asked in place of Talcott, who was busy counting the money.

Orba looked around at all of the members of the unit who were gathered there.

“The unit is being dissolved,” he told them. After which, he repeated the same explanation that Gilliam had given them. “I was not lying about my loyalties when I wielded my sword for Sir Ax, but actually I’m an Imperial Guard to Crown Prince Gil Mephius. Having also received permission from Sir Ax, I’ll be going back to Mephius with the prince.”

“Gilliam also told us about it, but are you saying that you fought against Mephius even though you’re the crown prince’s subordinate?” Surprise was plastered all over Kurun’s face.

“It’s a question of having made up my mind,” Orba said impassively. “But for most of you, Tauran is your birthplace. You won’t be as determined as I am, and besides, you’ll all be far more concerned about the reconstruction of Tauran than about the civil war in Mephius. So I’m dissolving the unit.”

“That’s pretty abrupt, isn’t it?”

Where had the energy that Talcott had when he tried to seize him gone? He had rapidly gone back to looking listless and dispirited.

Orba once more looked around at everyone.

“I’m fine with you hating or resenting me. But please don’t think that because I’m the prince’s subordinate, I deceived you to have you fight. There was absolutely no connection between my real identity, the swords you wielded and the blood you shed for the west, or with the heart and soul you all displayed for the sake of defeating Garda. And it is a truth beyond all doubt that you are heroes who saved the west from the hands of evil.”

The entrance hall fell completely silent.

Everyone was moved to the point of being paralysed. When at that moment, “your manner and tone have kind of changed, huh,” Stan expressed his feelings in a low voice.

*Ah!* – Orba inwardly put up his vigilance. Because he had not worn the ‘mask’ of the crown prince for a long time, his words and manner had come out as exaggerated. Nonetheless, the words he had just spoken to the soldiers were undeniably Orba’s true feelings and he was grateful towards the people who had fought for him under all circumstances.

After that, he summoned the unit's treasurer and had him start dividing the money between the members. While that was going on, Orba called Gilliam to a spot away from the others.

"You made it back."

"Yeah, somehow."

When Shique had left for Apta, Gilliam had been imprisoned for the crime of helping him escape. However, once the meeting between Orba and Ravan Dol ended, he had temporarily been released. After which, Ravan Dol had personally come to see him.

"This is what you need to tell the people of the unit for now." He had drilled into him the 'circumstances' that Gilliam had recounted to the members of the unit. The idea was to prevent too many rumours from springing up in the future.

"Since I was locked up in here, I couldn't go and see the crown prince's face as he went along the streets."

"He was in a carriage, so you wouldn't have seen it either way. Why the interest?"

"Because it's the Prince's face and, more importantly, because it's the face under that mask."

"Oh"

"You don't need to keep putting on an act for me at this point. So now that I know, you going to have me stealthily assassinated?"

"Looks like I'll have to be careful who to choose for the assassins. I don't want to lose a whole bunch of soldiers just to take one life."

Gilliam burst into loud laughter. Then, he placed his brawny arm around Orba's neck.

"It looks interesting, so I'll stick with you a little longer. But I'm only promising this for now. If you ever feel like I know too much or I'm in the way, and want to have me killed in secret, you don't need to choose any hitmen. Come at me yourself. I've been thinking that one of these days, we should fight seriously."

From behind the iron mask, Orba looked at this man that he had known since their time in Tarkas' gladiator company.

"Got it," he nodded.

'Orba', who had entered Taúlia, as 'Crown Prince Gil', had not played the part of 'Imperial Guard' for a long time.

As soon as he left the hall, he had to go around giving his greetings to a number of people as Gil Mephius; then, by which time it was nearly dusk, he had to go and see people as Orba. Bouwen Tedos was one of those that he had to greet a second time.

Basically, in the morning, he had thanked him as Crown Prince Gil for looking after Orba, and in the afternoon, he went as Orba the mercenary to apologise for having kept silent about the prince.

"The Old Master knew about it, right? Then it's fine," Bouwen had some inner conflict but, having also talked with the prince first-hand, his manner was outwardly calm and mild.

"Thank you for your care, General."

"What are you talking about? Thanks to you, even I, who couldn't join the punitive force, was able to be hailed as a hero to some extent. I'm grateful. But..."

"But?"

"I hope that next time we meet, it'll be as friends."

"Of course."

It could not be said that Orba did not feel warmth welling up within him. The two of them shook hands firmly and parted ways.

After that, Orba went to call on Ravan Dol in his room within Taúlia's castle. Although, for all that it was his room, it was so filled with old books that there was literally nowhere to stand. There were quite a few of those books that

piqued Orba's interest. Noticing how Orba's eyes immediately went back to them as soon as he had finished his hurried greetings, Ravan laughed.

"Later, I'll be happy to let you have as many as you want."

After having regained the 'mask' of Gil Mephius, Orba had received no few favours from the old strategist. He started by giving his thanks for those.

Ravan's attentiveness had been at its height when it came to crossing the River Yunos to return to Apta. First, he had provided boats on the pretext of returning Mephian war prisoners. Orba, his face hidden under a hooded cloak, had ridden on board along with the prisoners, but there had also been a man there with the exact same clothing as him.

Acting on Ravan's arrangements, he was, so to speak, another 'body-double' for Gil Mephius.

It was to be feared that if Prince Gil had appeared in Apta right after Orba, the swordsman in the iron mask, had headed that way, the soldiers who had acted as Orba's guards or the war prisoners who had travelled with him might become suspicious and start to wonder if those two people might not be one and the same.

Therefore, a person with the face covered by a hood had been slipped in among the war prisoners, and as the soldiers had been ordered to treat that person only with courtesy, when they wondered about it later, everyone would have been made to think that the man must have been Gil Mephius.

Said person was one of RavanDol's men who had received his orders directly from him. Once Orba had used the name Gil Mephius after crossing the Yunos, the man had secretly removed his cloak and, feigning innocence, had returned to the other shore along with the Taúlian soldiers.

"He's a man I've watched grown up from a baby. He is part of the group that I raised and that I spent as much time training as the dragons in order for them to become my eyes, hands, and feet." Ravan explained. "His intuition isn't bad so he may have somewhat guessed the situation, but he is a man who always keeps my orders in mind. He won't reveal anything."

"I see."

“Although,” Ravan’s gleaming eyes were not at all like those of an elderly person, “just as with the books, if you want it, I will be happy to present Your Highness with his life. Ever since sailing back from Apta, he has, after all, been preparing himself to die at the Prince’s hands.”

“No need,” said Orba. “There are already two people in Taúlia who know my situation: Princess Esmena Bazgan and you yourself. There is no one with more influence than them in Taúlia. With these two people around, no matter what kind of rumours may spread within Taúlia, it is precisely because they know the circumstances that they will be able to put out the fire. And if, in the unlikely event that these two people decide to use that knowledge to harm Mephius, then...”

“Then?”

“To extinguish the fires, one will simply have to extinguish Taúlia itself. But that scenario is of course purely hypothetical.”

“Oh, indeed.”

Ravan nodded with the air of one having a pleasant chat over tea.

Having been able to express his gratitude to the Old Master, Orba was going to leave for the moment but –

“Actually, Your Highness, I would like to ask that you do not needlessly reveal what I am about to tell you.” Ravan’s somewhat guarded tone cut that thought down.

Orba smiled involuntarily. “Then we’ll be on equal footing when it comes to not letting out secrets. What on earth is it?”

“To tell you the truth, just the other day, my liege-lord Ax Bazgan was assaulted and very nearly lost his life.”

Ravan spoke with his usual detachment but even Orba found himself at a complete loss for words.

“One might suppose that my lord’s opponent was a particularly brawny assassin but, from what I heard from the soldiers who were acting as his bodyguards, it was a woman. Furthermore, the fact is that he was almost

stabbed as they were sleeping together.”

Ravan explained with the air of one forced to endure their humiliation.

Orba, for his part, could not hide his surprise. If Ax were to die now, it would be a hard blow, not only for Orba himself, but also for the entire western world. Since Ax could now be considered the leader of the western alliance, while on the one hand he had all the fame and popularity that he could wish for, it could also mean that the threats to his life had increased.

However –

“This was not an assassin who was simply sent to rob us of control over the west,” although there was no else around, Ravan lowered his voice.

According to his story, the one who had saved Ax from the assassin’s blade had been neither his guards nor he himself with his trusty sword, but another unidentified person. After this person had driven away the woman who used mysterious spells, he had conveyed to Ax words to the effect that –

*Garda is still alive.*

“Garda?”

Orba repeated mechanically. Garda – the very sorcerer who had once dragged the whole of the west into a tempest of atrocities. The one whose life Orba himself was supposed to have taken with the sword he wielded.

Ax’s unidentified saviour had further added that he himself “came from the Barbaroi village”.

Garda and Barbaroi. Orba frowned, unable to grasp the meaning of those words suddenly appearing.

“Actually,” Ravan Dol picked up a book in his collection from a set of tomes that looked particularly ancient, “after Garda was defeated, we investigated the ruined temple in Zer Illias that served as the sorcerer’s base and found books similar to this one. It seems that they were memorandums left behind by a subordinate of Garda’s – by ‘Garda’, I am not referring in this case to the sorcerer that the western alliance fought against, but to the man who served as the head magician and High Priest to the Dragon Gods more than two hundred



years ago, in the era of Zer Tauran.”

“Oh?”

The story was becoming increasingly perplexing.

“Naturally, the Bazgan House, descended from the king of Zer Tauran, also possesses books from that period but, most of them do not go beyond conforming with the doctrines of the royal family and of the priests. The real facts about the dark side of history, or in other words, the parts which are inconvenient for the royal family, have not been set down in writing. This book however is held to be particularly precious as the author, despite being one of Garda’s direct subordinates, appears to have incurred his displeasure at some point and was thus kept away from politics and religious functions. Probably so as to avoid it being burned if it was later found by people from the royal family or by Garda, the entire text is written in code.”

“Meaning that it records something close to what the people of the time really thought?”

“Exactly. Moreover, it is the true opinion of a man who was close to Garda, who has remained an enigma from that day to this.”

Naturally, Ravan had been seized by an intense curiosity. Fortunately, Ax had ordered him to convalesce a while so as to heal from the wounds he had suffered during the war and so he was able to spend most of his waking hours studying the book.

“I’ve still only managed to decipher part of it, but for a westerner like me, even that one part has been astounding. As an example, it contains a description related to the ‘Dragon God’s Claws’. Your Highness, you are aware of what these claws are?”

“The sovereign’s seal of the Ancient Magical Dynasty... was it? If I’m not mistaken, Sir Ax holds one of the pair.”

“That is correct.”

As for ‘being aware’ Orba had himself been in possession of that claw for a while. However, he had not directly laid eyes on it. It was stored within the war fan that Ax always kept about his person.

“According to the history books, these claws were left behind by the very mightiest of the Dragon Gods that once ruled the world, a being that must certainly have been very much like a deity. It is said that these items are imbued of a wondrous power and that those who possess them can even dominate the world, but for a long time, they were protected by a nomadic tribe that roamed the high plateaus of Tauran. And then, one day, Yasch Bazgan, who had at the time been dispatched from Mephius with orders to survey the west, chanced to encounter these nomads. The history books say that the elder of the tribe proclaimed Yasch ‘the vessel of the king who will dominate the world’ and conferred upon him the Dragon God’s Claws – thus leading to the founding of Zer Tauran.”

However, according to the memorandum that Ravan had analysed, it seemed that somehow or another, the head magician Garda had long been in possession of the Dragon God’s Claws.

“Did Garda originally hail from that tribe of nomads or did he steal them from them – and besides, the tale that the ‘Dragon God’s Claws’ were owned by a Zerdian tribe was never more than a legend in the first place. In any case, Garda personally handed one of them to Yasch and recognised him as king, while he himself excavated the ruins that had stood throughout the Tauran lands since the time of the Ancient Magic Dynasty and wracked his brains over studying them. And Garda’s magical powers increased proportionally to that, until finally, he was so powerful that not even King Yasch himself could interfere with him, says the memorandum.”

“ ... ”

“And then, Barbaroi.”

Ravan directed a glance at Orba.

“The author states that Garda held an uncommon degree of interest in Barbaroi. The legendary territory said to be by the shores of Lake Kurán. Whether he had any basis for his belief in it, I don’t know, but what is certain is that at some point, Garda had some form of ‘contact’ with Barbaroi.”

“When you say ‘contact’...?”

“Garda himself personally visited it and there is what appears to be a

description of his return. Since the author did not accompany him, the details are unclear however. Did he attempt to hold a dialogue with the Ryuujin tribe that lived in Barbaroi, did he lead a raid against them, or did it even perhaps go as far as war... Anyway, the memorandum goes on to say that from that time, Garda acquired a woman.

“A woman?”

“Yes. The author of the memorandum speculates that Garda might have taken this woman away from the Barbaroi village. Here is a description of her: ‘in appearance, she is much like a Zerdian, but her pale hair is unlike that of any of the people on this planet. Furthermore, her entire body is tattooed with unintelligible designs and she does not vocalise human words.’ Garda seems to have spent most of his time locked up in the sorcery research facility built beneath the temple, so that even the author, who at the time still had Garda’s trust and could even be called something like his right-hand man, could only seldom meet with him. The author talks about how Garda might have made this mysterious woman into an object of research into sorcery. And then...”

Ravan, who had spoken in a single breath, paused to inhale .

“And then, the woman seems to have been called a ‘Dragon maiden’ by the researchers who were close to Garda.”

“A Dragon maiden.”

“Indeed. They are beings who are also mentioned in the legends about Barbaroi. In exchange for not having human voices, they need only emit a single sound to control dragons as they please.”

Orba remembered having heard something similar. If he remembered correctly, it was just after he became a mercenary of Taúlia that his fellow mercenary Stan had told him the same tale.

And there was one more thing.

Halfway through listening to Ravan’s story, he could not help but call to mind a certain acquaintance of his. There were many similarities.

He did not seem to be surprised and shaken to the core. Rather, Orba was serenity itself. That was because the girl who had spontaneously appeared in

his mind always wore the same unchanging smile.

*Well, I'll hear about it when she feels like it* – was all he thought about it.

Ravan Dol had said that he had previously seen 'her' on the battlefield. So there was no doubt that he was trying to connect this story with her, but even so, Ravan did not talk about it any further.

“Garda still being alive is honestly hard to believe. If a sorcerer could continue to live after having his head cut off, he would have to be a being that distorts the very laws of life itself. But if Sir Ax's life really is being targeted, we can't afford any lies or careless remarks. It's not for me to say this, but make sure there's a strict watch around his person.”

“I understand. Just to be on the safe side, we are currently investigating the temple ruins in Zer Illias and probing into the area around Lake Kurán where the Barbaroi village is believed to be.”

As expected, there were no oversights from that strategist.

There were certainly many points he was still curious about, but for now, Orba decided to put this conversation aside. His own war was waiting very close at hand.

## Part 3

By the time he was finally reaching the end of his round of greetings, the evening was fast approaching. But –

“Found you!”

“So this is where you were?”

The Twin Dragons Moldorf and Nilgif, followed by Lasvius, Helio’s commander of the dragoons, ran up to Orba.

As soon as he arrived beside him, Nilgif wound an arm that was just as thick as Gilliam’s around Orba’s shoulders and urged –

“Come join us. And no saying no.”

His breath already reeked of alcohol.

At Orba’s resigned expression, Lasvius stealthily whispered from behind him,

“Don’t worry. Tomorrow we have an informal war council with Sir Ax. Most likely about organising the troop of a thousand to be the reinforcements for Mephius. The Twin Dragons have already drunk plenty so you won’t have to keep them company for long.”

That was an outright lie.

The Twin Dragons of Kadyne, Helio’s Lasvius, as well as Orba and Gilliam, who had joined them at some point, were occupying the second floor of a comparatively large inn and were having platters of food and drink brought in one after another. Trade between Tauran and the north had just resumed and, on top of that, the various city-states had in turn presented gifts of food and wine to “Lord Ax, the leader of the west” so that in Taúlia, the mood of thrift that had accompanied the war only recently and suddenly turned into one of

gaiety.

*What do you mean, 'not for long'?*

Lasvius, the very one who had vouched for that, did not have a high tolerance for alcohol and had left in less than an hour; and Orba had the distinct feeling that the Twin Dragons had, from the start, no intention of letting him go until morning as they kept offering him wine cup after wine cup.

"It's a contest," he had been told, but apart from those involving swords, horses or a battle of wits, Orba had no concept of 'contest'.

He was very much afraid of revealing his real identity if he got too muddled up but no matter how much he set his mind to not getting wasted, the more time passed, the more he became light-headed and he repeatedly had to shake off the drowsiness that was creeping into the back of his consciousness.

"So you were on a mission for the crown prince of Mephius?" Nilgif had been going over the same topic for a while now. "Is that sharp brain also something you learned from him? The etiquette and methods of war are probably different between the west and Mephius," he nodded with conviction to himself as he thought it over. "Huh? Your glass is empty. Well then, have a refill."

He started to fill the cup to the brim. It seemed that Nilgif had no patience for a situation in which the wine was not constantly flowing.

"No, I've had enough."

"What're you saying? I bet it's because you still resent us for the time when we were enemies and haven't opened your heart to us yet. Am I wrong? Right, we warriors are the sort that feel that whatever the past, once we drink together, we're like comrades-in-arms who have had each other's backs since long ago. Here, drink, come on, drink, just drink!"

Orba had long since passed his limit. How long had it been since they had entered this store? His sense of time was become increasingly vague and he finally succumbed to sleep, starting to nod like a boat bobbing up and down.

As soon as he noticed it, Nilgif made to slap him on the back to wake him up, but then, his eyes happened to fall on the mask.

Glancing around, miraculously, no one was looking that way. His brother Moldorf had only just left his seat. He must have gone to the kitchen to order something directly.

He softly cleared his throat once.

There was no sign of Orba waking up.

Nilgif gulped. Slowly, taking his time, he stretched out his large arm. A dark shadow fell on Orba's mask. He still did not wake up. As he gradually extended his fingers, Nilgif felt the touch of iron.

"Sir Nilgif."

A voice called out from behind and the Blue Dragon's burly shoulders leapt up. Looking around, it was Gilliam with a bottle of alcohol in hand. Although they had not encountered him on the battlefield, the Twin Dragons had taken an instant liking to this Mephian soldier.

"What are you doing?"

"N-Nothing."

"Then let's have another drinking contest. Morning is still far away."

"Just what I wanted."

Hearing that exchange, Orba suddenly woke up. At some point, the Red Dragon Moldorf had also reappeared nearby.

"That was dangerous."

"What was?"

"Weeeeell, who knows. So, are you joining us?"

"No, I've had enough to drink."

Instead, Moldorf invited Orba to go outside the inn and behind the building. Thinking that anything would do as long as he could escape from the alcohol, Orba quietly went along. The gentle touch of the night breeze felt good against his flushed skin.

As he was wondering what they were doing there, Moldorf exposed his lower half and vigorously spewed forth from it.

They were in Taúlia's better residential area, in a slightly elevated location. Moldorf's urine drew an arc, flew over the fence and disappeared among the flickering city lights beneath them.

"Go to the privy. Why come here especially?"

"It was jammed packed when I went earlier."

Orba sighed but before long he too felt the urge to urinate and, in the end, started pissing outdoors alongside Moldorf.

Sometime later.

"This Gil fellow that you serve," Moldorf asked abruptly. "What kind of man is he?"

"A man with many secrets."

"Yeah, I'll bet."

Moldorf laughed. Because he was still urinating energetically as he shook, Orba leapt to one side.

This bravest of all the western generals had seen Orba's face when he had removed his mask in the temple at Eimen. And he had, of course, been present that very day when Orba had appeared in Taúlia's audience chamber as Gil Mephius.

"Conversely," this time the question came from Orba, "how does the Red Dragon see that man?"

"He doesn't give himself room to relax."

"Room to relax?"

"Or rather, outwardly, he pretends to be relaxed. Taken the opposite way, that's proof that his heart doesn't have the leeway to be as composed as he pretends. Although the show he put on wasn't bad, I haven't accumulated all these years beneath my belt for nothing. The hidden side of such a heart is easy to read."

"I see."

Orba had already emptied his bladder but Moldorf was still going on.



“Moreover, it’s best not to create too much distance from yourself. If someone is always on their guard, even more than for the person himself, the hearts of those below them will shrivel. Being a prince is different from being a platoon leader. The number of lives they’re responsible for is different, and so is the number of people watching them.”

“ ... ”

“I wonder if that was meant to be taken seriously.”

“That?”

“Sir Ax said that he wanted to have you marry the princess.” The momentum having finally abated, Moldorf jiggled his large body up and down while he laughed.

“Oh, King Ax did, did he?” Orba acted as though he was hearing about it for the first time.

Moldorf glanced at him sideways. *So you didn’t fall for it?* his expression seemed to say but then he immediately burst out laughing.

“It’s like what we were talking about earlier but above all, it’s a very good example. Take a look at Sir Ax. Does that lord even know how to create a distance? But that’s absolutely fine by me. His retainers and his people are also really carefree. It’s my first time coming here, but I’ll remember Taúlia with all the nostalgia I would my hometown.”

The next day, Gil Mephius bade his farewells to Taúlia’s court and, properly showing his face this time, he made his way to the air carrier, showered in cheers from the people.

That he sometimes swayed as he rode along, was it because the serious gun injury he had received had still not healed, even several months after the fact? And since his complexion was pale, it gave rise to needless speculation among the crowd that was seeing him off.

“It’s absolutely heart-rending that the crown prince of Mephius almost lost his life because of a base, cowardly vassal.”

“Even though he’s in this state, he came all the way back here for our master, Lord Ax. He’s such a gallant man.”

“Ah, he’s waving his hand this way! Prince, Prince Giiiiil!”

Gil Mephius – which is to say, Orba, somehow managed his horse while enduring the violent nausea in his gut. It felt like his stomach was roiling like the sea in a storm every time he was jolted up and down on horseback, but even so, when the horse had taken a few steps beyond the castle gate, he suddenly turned his head over his shoulder and looked up high above his head.

Esmena Bazgan was at a castle window.

Orba nodded lightly and then once again faced forward.

Where he was headed was, of course, Mephius. Apta.

Nabarl would soon be arriving in Solon and would transmit the report of the crown prince’s survival. Which meant –

*Finally.*

The fight would start. Orba’s personal fight.

# Chapter 5: More than a Bouquet of Flowers, a Crown on your Head is what I...

## Part 1

In the Kingdom of Garbera, the seasonal winds were at their peak.

The strong winds that made the green meadows ripple like the blue water's surface and that set innumerable petals dancing as freely as though they were white feathers fallen from the wings of fairies had, since long ago, been an oft-selected subject for poems and songs.

However, there were also days in which the sky was overcast with heavy grey clouds and the howl of the rising wind would play a strangely ominous melody.

It was on just such a day.

“Father!”

When Zenon Owell opened the door and stepped forward, King Ainn Owell the Second was utterly unable to hide his expression that said – *here comes a troublesome one*.

Their location was a chamber for the exclusive use of the royal family within the palace. A terrace with vivid flowers extended outwards from it. Also within the room with Ainn was Zenon's older brother, the First Prince of Garbera, Razetta.

“How disgraceful for the commander of a knightly order to walk with such rough footsteps.”

“I heard about Salamand. Why did you give that man the role of envoy?”

“Ah, yes, it’s that, is it?” Ainn repeatedly nodded up and down. “You’re a brother who loves his little sister. I should have said something to you. But since you were in Mavant and it was urgent, I decided to leave it to Salamand who had personally come to volunteer.”

*Volunteer nothing* – whether it had come from volunteering or from something else, Salamand had managed things well this time around. That much was news that Zenon had long since caught wind of.

Salamand Fogel was the vice-commander of the Order of the Badger. He was a man who displayed peerless ability on the battlefield, but he was also a man who was not always able to control his ardent personality, who had disparaged the royal family a little too much in his admiration for Ryucown, and who had thus once even been imprisoned.

It seemed that recently, Salamand had frequently been approaching the King on the subject of Princess Vileena.

“My King, Mephius makes little of the life of a member of our august royal family. Even if we must do so a little forcibly, we should go and meet with the princess.”

As a matter of fact, it was doubtful whether Vileena was even still alive. But Salamand contented that since Mephius was delaying making any official announcement, they should go and verify things for themselves.

Unfortunately, at the time, Zenon had left for Mavant, where his troops were garrisoned, while there were a great many nobles and officers from the anti-Mephius faction at the Court. That was of course why Salamand had chosen that opportunity.

The image of his father growing flustered under the pressure of these many retainers suddenly appeared before Zenon’s eyes.

Salamand had further added, “And to think that they have accused Princess Vileena of the disgrace of being a traitor. At this rate, the people will also lose sight of the power of the Garberan royal family and who knows if the country might not likewise fall into chaos. I beg of you, please give me duty of envoy. I

will without fail bring the princess back to this palace. And also, I would like to sit in discussion with Mephius to ask them for an explanation in the name of the King.”

Considering that his position was merely that of vice-commander in a knightly order, his speech made him himself sound like someone who made little of the royal family.

However, not even King Ainn could afford to ignore the rumours that were coming from Mephius. Whether it was because he was worried for his beloved daughter or for some other reason, if he dismissed them as mere hearsay, it would undoubtedly tarnish the prestige of the royal family. Equally however, if they forcibly took back the princess, it might put the alliance in jeopardy and led to a resuming of hostilities.

That was when a noble in the prime of life had intervened –

“Your Majesty, please be at ease on that point. Mephius appears to currently be in some kind of a dispute with the West. Moreover, it seems that the fight is harder than they had expected. They will not want to have to face our country in addition to that. We have also received information that the general who lost the battle has, in his despair, begun to claim that we instructed the princess to betray them. This proposal might allow us to gain the upper hand.”

Having received this explanation from a vassal in which in he had no little faith, King Ainn authorised Salamand’s proposal. The King himself penned a letter to the emperor and gave it into Salamand’s keeping.

*That damn Salamand; just when did he acquire that kind of political influence?*

Zenon had been completely astounded that Salamand, whom he had viewed as a hot-headed fighter, had bided his time to make that speech after he had increased the number of his allies.

However, that was proof that Salamand’s, or rather Ryucown’s, influence was still considerable. Or perhaps there was another ringleader somewhere, and Salamand had merely been chosen as the advance guard.

“Are you aware that Salamand is taking the entirety of his troops with him? If he is going as an envoy, what need does he have to command such a large

number?”

“As to that,” the King explained, “Salamand said that he intended to take up station at Zaim Fortress until permission to cross the border was received. If we give a bit of a demonstration of our military might by strengthening our forces near the border, Mephius will judge that they can’t dismiss the situation and will receive our envoy.”

Zenon unwittingly raised his voice, “No! Once he receives permission from Mephius, that scoundrel intends to push through with his troops.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Salamand can’t do anything with the numbers he has under his command.”

“There are those within the country that want to continue the war with Mephius. If you include those who harbour the same wish in secret, the numbers become nothing to despise. There is no doubt that his actual intention is to create an opportunity to direct the mood within the country against Mephius.”

“Zenon, if we’re talking about those who want to continue the war with Mephius, aren’t you also one of them?” Razetta interjected. “Have you forgotten how many times I’ve rebuked you over it?”

“That was the case, but it’s different now.”

Zenon cast a glance towards his older brother. The Kingdom of Garbera’s First Prince was currently thirty-three years old. As his hair was bound back, his broad forehead was even further emphasized. His personality conformed to the gentle cast of his countenance and he was not knowledgeable about war.

He turned once more to their father, “Salamand has deceived you, Father. As evidence of that, that scoundrel loaded weapons into several ships and sent them beforehand to Zaim.”

“What? I haven’t heard anything like that.”

“If you prick up your ears a little, it’s the sort of thing that will naturally end up reaching them. Although, if you were a bit more cautious, Father, we wouldn’t have to be stopping them at the very last minute.”

“Watch what you say, Zenon!” Even Razetta, renowned for his gentleness, ended up raising his voice.

Zenon however continued to protest and to reason at length with the King that this was an urgent situation for Garbera.

“Salamand is essentially the same as a cannonball fired towards Mephius. It will fly towards its target then explode. The wind will fan the fire at the point of impact and Garbera will be showered with the sparks. Salamand intends to die. And with his death, he plans to tear through the curtain which had been brought down on the war against Mephius.”

The King and the First Prince, no doubt growing concerned, occasionally exchanged worried looks.

“S-So, what do you want?” Razetta asked.

“Permission for subjugation,” Zenon answered without a second’s hesitation. “Before he arrives at Zaim, I’ll get there ahead of him by ship. The crewmembers of the ships Salamand sent beforehand have probably seized possession of Zaim, or maybe they had collaborators already lying low there, one or the other. I’ll start by capturing Salamand, or subduing him if he resists. After that, I’ll wrest back control of Zaim.”

King Ainn Owell wore an expression of profound anguish.

What statesman did not fear divisions within his country? It was better said that all statesmen had to exercise great caution and vigilance. If what Zenon was saying were true, Salamand certainly had to be stopped, but right now, it was no more than speculation. If they over-reacted, it might instead stir the anger of those who harboured an unvoiced desire for war with Mephius.

“Your Majesty.”

“Wait. It is not yet certain that everything is as you say,” his father said. Whereupon –

“When meeting Salamand directly, start by talking to him. Even if he is planning something reckless, he won’t turn his sword against a member of the royal family who has rushed over to reason with him,” his older brother added soothingly.

Zenon felt that it was as if, for the two people who were weighing the pros and cons in front of him, he himself was the danger that would bring division to the country.

*No matter how much time I spend here, nothing will come of it* – he concluded.

“Very well,” he assented for the time being. “May I have your permission to take a ship? I will start by hurrying to where Salamand is with only a few men.”

“Yes, doing it that way, you won’t put him on his guard any more than necessary.” Razetta was delighted at how reasonable his younger brother was being.

But when Zenon had said “start”, he had done so on the assumption that there would be more to follow.

Less than half an hour after leaving the royal palace, Zenon was at the air carrier launching ground.

Just as he had promised the King, he would “start” by flying to Zaim with a few men. However, he had already arranged for his own Order of the Tiger to ride in separate ships and to be ready to fly off from various different locations.

A ship that was originally used for transporting the troops of the Order of the Tiger had been prepared. Rinoa Kotjun, who had arranged for the ships in those various other parts of Garbera, had come to the port to see Zenon off.

Since talking together at the party, the two of them had rapidly grown closer to each other. When Zenon had been in Mavant, they had several times used Kotjun couriers to exchange letters and he had received the news about Salamand making his move from none other than Rinoa.

Zenon had immediately contacted his friend Noue Salzantes. Noue’s reply had been just as prompt. He had told Zenon that he should hurry preparations to send the knights of his Order to Zaim. And for that, Zenon had asked for the assistance of the Kotjun House.

“I’m grateful,” Zenon thanked Rinoa. “Even if my heedless father and brother



don't realise it, it's practically certain that the scoundrel has bared his fangs against the royal family."

As the launch ground for air carriers was in an elevated position, the wind was strong there. Rinoa had wound a shawl embroidered with gold and silver thread around her head. "Don't worry about it. The truth is... this might not be unrelated to my father."

"What do you mean?"

Rinoa's father, that was to say, the current head of the Kotjun House, was shrewder than the previous heads of the family and did not content himself with just Garbera, having secretly sent his private prospectors to other countries. According to reports, her father had found a yet untouched 'dragon graveyard' in southern Mephius.

"In other words, untouched dragon fossils... There's a vein of dragonstone?"

"In order to get his hands on it, my father, always under the guise of parties and starting with Salamand, gathered prominent members of the anti-Mephius faction and concluded a secret alliance."

"To not notice that movement..."

"I'm very sorry. I was convinced that Salamand was only getting closer to my father because he wanted war funds."

"Not you. It was my oversight," Zenon shook his head. Considering that it was thanks to Rinoa displaying her inborn intuition that they had gathered information around Salamand, he should rather be saying that she had been a very great help.

*Each person has their own convictions.*

Even though those who were born and raised in the same country had the same love for that country, each of them had their own way of expressing it through their actions.

*Those who cannot recognise them all might not be fit to be king – he thought.*

*But we are not gods or demons, and there can be no such humans – he also believed.*

Right, he who was no god could do what he could with his own strength.

Just before Zenon flew off, Rinoa had said –

“Salamand is a man whose broodiness makes him dangerous. In that respect, he resembles General Rycown, whom he so admired. As Sir Salzantes has already told you, Prince, he has already made up his mind to die and intends to implement this plan thanks to his own death. Please bear that in mind.”

“I understand.”

Zenon took Rinoa’s hand and kissed it to show his gratitude.



After which, he boarded the ship and had soon traded the earth for the sky. He had arranged to meet up with Noue at a supply base along the way.

The ship had no weapons but it could carry over twenty fully armoured soldiers. Nor did it shake in the strong seasonal winds.

With the royal capital Phozon beneath it, the ship soared to the north.

## Part 2

Just as in Garbera, signs of internal strife were on the rise in Mephius.

The first was the news that greeted Orba when he had just returned to Apta from Taúlia.

He was told that when Nabarl had returned to Solon in lieu of a messenger, Emperor Guhl had curtly refused to recognise this Prince Gil as anything but an impostor and had sent a letter directly to Rogue and Odyne.

“Well now, what pleasure awaits?” The generals crowed that day when an official envoy from Solon arrived in the early afternoon.

Although Gil Mephius specifically offered to meet him, the envoy refused. He met only with the two generals and handed them the letter directly. On the whole, the contents were exactly what Orba had expected.

Seize the impostor Gil and drag him to Solon.

After casting his eyes over it himself, he asked –

“So what will you do, Generals?”

“Well, I have no idea what His Majesty is talking about.”

“That’s for sure.”

Air carriers were flying today too from Apta port. Recently, the Haman House had been increasing its number of flights.

“Go-o, sky-o,” the crewmember’s sing-song voices could be heard as they sent the ships into the sky with that age-old call that was like a short verse. Apparently, it had originally been a rowing song along the River Yunos.

“Father has made his decision about me.”

Even when he had sent his own letter, Orba had never expected the emperor to view it with favour. It had simply been a signal to inform the emperor, and

with him, the entirety of Mephius, of his survival. He also needed to take the feudal lords and generals into account.

*In order to get them moving* – the first thing that was needed was to display determination, action, and undeniable ability.

Be it Orba, Rogue, or Odyne, they still all looked calm; but this was based on their understanding that the path ahead would be a truly difficult one.

Back in Solon, capital of the Imperial Dynasty of Mephius, after a few more days had passed. At that time, there was a greater crowd than usual in the palace's audience hall. The envoy who had been dispatched to Apta had finally returned with the reply in hand.

Everyone had been surprised at the news of an impostor crown prince having appeared, and everyone was curious about it. To be perfectly blunt, they found it entertaining. Quite apart from the tension due to imminent war, the Court at Solon was constantly enshrouded in an oppressive atmosphere, so this situation, which in a way was starting to shake the imperial family's authority at its very roots, was viewed with amusement by people.

But when they saw that the envoy's face was as white as paper, most of them realised that this would not end as amusement or as a joke.

"And why have you not brought the villain who calls himself Gil?"

The emperor was as displeased as he could be right from the start.

The retainer Colyne Isphan took the letter from the hands of the envoy, who had respectfully prostrated himself, and passed it to the emperor.

"This is?" Even as he asked that, he spread it open to read.

And every single one of the assembled people came to regret having chosen to go there that day.

Emperor Guhl Mephius' expression suddenly changed and in the next instant, he had crumpled the letter in his hands.

"Signed with Gil Mephius' signature, it says that I need to reconsider advancing on the west." Although his voice was soft and low, it reverberated throughout the wide audience hall. Guhl hurled the crumpled-up letter to the

ground at his feet. “And to top it off, Rogue and Odyne’s names are written alongside it. The west’s black magic is truly wonderful! Or maybe they were seduced by Taúlia’s sweet words and plan to use this opportunity to rebel against me?”

Apart from the emperor, nobody in the entire hall was able to utter a single sound anymore. Aggressively trampling on the letter, Guhl Mephius rose from the throne.

“I hereby declare that Folker and the others are to suppress the rebel army which has occupied Apta!”

Two days after Guhl had spoken, armed troops started from Solon. Commanded by Folker, it was originally the second Taúlia capture force but its purpose had now been changed to that of a liberation army.

The townspeople who had come to see it off did not do so with their usual liveliness. There were some who voiced their apprehension that the opponent might well be the real Gil Mephius, but for the most part, the reason was because people could not comprehend this war. Civil war would only weaken the country.

In any case, the force numbered three thousand. Since on Orba’s side, there were currently about a thousand two hundred troops stationed in Apta, this was more than double their amount. If Solon dispatched a second or even a third wave of reinforcements, those numbers might increase another twice over. Since Birac, where the liberation army would be stationed, was Mephius’ centre for foreign trade, it would be able to host a force of this size for an extended period of time.

So when he heard about this troop formation, Orba decided –

“First, we’ll defeat these three thousand.”

In fact, having arrived at Birac, the commander of the liberation army, Folker Baran, was watching for what move Apta would make while anticipating the arrival of support troops.

They had half a month.

If it took them longer than that, Apta would potentially find itself isolated. As

they would not be able to replenish supplies, voices of dissatisfaction would arise among the people and soldiers, and when that happened, the unifying power of the impostor would easily collapse.

The emperor however had set a delay of one month for liberating Apta.

“If we ignore that fool who claims my son’s name, it will only drag the imperial family’s name in the mud.”

Those words probably represented his real thoughts on the matter, but to Folker’s mind, the emperor had one other consideration – *he might be thinking that he cannot afford to ignore the effects this might have.*

The news of the crown prince's survival had spread with the speed of the wind, not only within Solon, but to every town in Mephius.

There was also the fact that the long-serving generals Rogue and Odyne were following him. Then there was also the feudal lords who were starting to think that maybe...

The unrest among the officers was especially marked. Emperor Guhl Mephius had branded it a rebellion of the two generals', but the military men who were well-acquainted with their personalities could not easily accept that.

Furthermore, they had received reports that as an example to others, the emperor had their families detained. If their families were executed, and Rogue and Odyne demonstrated their respect for Crown Prince Gil to the bitter end, Mephius would find itself confronted with the fires of civil war.

Previously, Zaat Quark, one of the twelve generals, had plotted to take over Mephius, and it was Gil who had prevented it. Ironically, the ringleader this time was calling himself by that very name, 'Gil Mephius'.

Certainly, we can't let this go on for long.

Folker felt that he could understand the impatience swirling in the emperor's heart. If they met with any delays, the confusion and unrest that were hanging over Mephius would pour oil on the fires of rebellion.

"Failure will not be tolerated."

But for all that he felt that way, Folker also undeniably wanted to take more



time so as to play a sure hand, and he was having a hard time because of this contradiction.

On the other hand, Yuriah and Zaas, who were under his command, were optimistic.

"General Saian and General Lorgo are both commanders to be respected, but in the end, they only have a very small force."

"General Baran, should we start with a single swift strike to show them that we're serious about this? Wouldn't the enemy collapse from within without us even having to encircle them?" They enthused.

"I see, Folker Baran, is it?" Rogue groaned during the council of war.

It was the day after the Apta Liberation Army had arrived in Birac, to their north.

"My Prince, do you know him?"

"Well, maybe I do." Orba prevaricated.

Although he had intended to memorise the names of all of Mephius' key figures during his time as a body-double in Solon, he could not recall at all the names of the three generals who had been chosen for the liberation army.

"To be sure, he is not a commander who stands out if one were merely to list instances of distinguished service," Odyne was the one to speak but both generals were in agreement.

"You can't let your guard down around him," they said in unison.

"Yuriah and Zaas are newcomers among the twelve generals but both of them are skilled. Zaas especially. Not only is he a formidable swordsman himself, but his spirit on the battlefield is so fierce that it transforms even his men into demons of war."

"That kind of opponent tends to be rather easy to deal with."

Orba was even terser than usual. But when the two generals had all but started to wrap things up, he called their names again.

"General Rogue, General Odyne."

"Aye," the two respectfully answered.

"It goes without saying that from here on, the enemy is Mephius."

"Aye."

"The ones your swords will be slicing through and your guns will be aimed at will be Mephians."

"..."

*Can you do it? He was going to ask.*

But no further words were spoken. Not because he had turned timid. With the two before him, he did not think that he needed to check their resolve at this point in time.

In the end, Orba did not say anything and, with a nod, they left.

Shique, from the Imperial Guards, had also been attending the council of war.

"I was expecting you to question them much more thoroughly," he said after the generals had gone and the two of them were alone. He was not talking about their readiness to fight against their own country, "usually, you're frantic about gathering information about the enemy."

"The enemy currently has twice our numbers. There's no point using excessive measures to try and smash them. Thinking about our own procedures is more important right now."

Orba replied while dropping his eyes to a map. It showed the outskirts of Apta as well as the fortress' interior. Within the forest that stretched out between Apta and Birac, there was a small fortress called Jozu. When he had previously been stationed in Apta, it had been no more than a air carrier supply base. After Taúlia's surprise attack, he had expanded the base out of necessity.

The fortress itself was newly-built, but Orba had the surrounding terrain fixed in his mind, that was because he had intended to gather woodcutters in that area and have them organised as a group. At the time, Orba had entrusted the management of the woodcutters to Kalgan, an administrative official that he had brought with him from Solon.

Kalgan was the third son of the lord of Idoro, Julius. Orba had only recently heard that he had refused his father's insistent invitation to move to Idoro and was currently still in Apta, and had called for him earlier.

"I see, so that means that you've already traced the path to victory in your head."

"You shouldn't be worrying about me but about your own health. You're still not fit to walk about much, are you?"

"Your concern makes me so happy, I might even cry. But I can't go and sleep when the fighting is so close. I've said it before, but you can't do anything without me."

"So you say."

It was the same frivolous exchange as ever, but Shique looked as though he still had something to say. He closed his mouth however as though he changed his mind.

Orba's eyes did not move from the map. Although this was the same attitude that he always had before a fight, Shique found it difficult to shake his uncomfortable feeling.

## Part 3

During the second council of war, Orba described the strategy that he had drawn up. Gathered there were Rogue, Odyne, Shique, Gowen, and several officers with ranks equivalent to vice-commander from each of the military units.

“In the first step of the strategy,” on the map spread out over the desk, Orba pointed to Birac, the city north of Apta, “we must make Folker’s force move from there, where they’re currently stationed.” Everyone was of course well aware that if they waited too long, the enemy’s numbers would increase. Which was why Orba had decreed that the first step was to make the enemy troops move. By deliberately drawing the enemy to them, and with enough preparations, they could contrive to ambush them.

“Can we not ask Lord Fedom, the master of Birac, to lend us his assistance?” Suggested Gowen. He pointed out that Fedom Aulin had once adopted an attitude like that of a guardian towards Crown Prince Gil, “there is a high chance that gentleman would side with us. May I respectfully suggest secretly getting in touch with him and having him attack the enemy forces from the rear?”

Fedom was the one who had been behind making Orba into a body-double. He had reluctantly put Orba in place to avoid political chaos at a time when the political marriage with the Garberan princess was close at hand – or rather, he had worked out a stratagem to further his personal ambitions.

Since Orba was still alive, Fedom’s mind was sure to be in disarray. As far as he was concerned, Orba’s existence was nothing more than means to achieve those ambitions, but at the same time, because he knew all of his plans, Orba was also a tricky opponent for him to deal with, and it would not take much threatening for him to speedily agree to cooperate. Since Gowen was aware of this, he was implicitly pointing it out. But –

“My acquaintance with Fedom certainly runs deep. With a single letter from me, he would believe in my continued existence and since he is also a man who previously lamented my father’s egotism, he would spare no effort to help us. However, his attacking from the rear won’t get us anywhere,” Orba shook his head. “The defence of that trade city is mainly assured by the twelve generals or by their assistants, who take it in turns to do so in yearly units. Even though Fedom is a lord, he is not a military commander. In a crisis, he is in a position to station to take control of all the forces stationed in Birac, but if he were currently to declare that he was going to follow the Prince, Folker and those under his command would not obey. Which means that the troops he can move at will are only those of his private army of about five hundred. Not enough to be effective for a surprise attack from the rear.”

“I see.”

“Well then,” Orba looked at each of those present in turn, “first we have to make the enemy move at all cost, and then use every possible to repel them. If we defeat a frontal attack with our own might, it might have the effect of sending a shock throughout the whole of Mephius.”

“Most certainly. However, the difference in our numbers is beyond our control,” Odyne said with such a serious expression that he almost looked gloomy. “Your Highness, have you then already thought of a plan to bring about victory?”

“Of course.”

Orba laid out the details of his strategy. He took time to explain each procedure. No one spoke. Although the contents were startling, they seemed to generally be accepted.

But when it came to the last step,

“Y-Your Highness!”

Rogue and Odyne both expressed disapproval.

In the final stage of the strategy, Orba – or rather, from their point of view, Crown Prince Gil Mephius – would have to take his sword and fight. Moreover, on the frontline.

“That stage is too dangerous for Your Highness to be involved in.”

“Please, will you not let us take care of it? Unworthy and incompetent though we are, we will show you our best exertions in the face of death and fate.”

“No,” Orba shook his head with a obstinate expression. “I fully recognise your determination. But whether, once in battle, the soldiers can maintain that level of determination is a different matter. Not only are we outnumbered, our opponents are our fellow countrymen. When they raise their sword, or have their fingers on the trigger, they might have a second’s hesitation and confusion. And that second can mean the difference between victory and defeat. At that time, what they need is a banner.”

“.....”

“With that banner flying above them, not matter how weary they are, they can fight to the full because they can believe that they will have both victory and a future. They can plunge forward, their spirits high, fearing neither their own deaths nor having to kill their opponents. And in this instance, that banner is me.”

Orba spoke with unusual fervour. He was perfectly aware of the danger. He knew what it was to slip past hundreds of bullets and drawn blades to seize victory.

If Gil Mephius' figure was there among them, if he was inhaling the same gun smoke, if he was advancing with them while being showered like them in the blood of their defeated opponents, the soldiers would be roused. *For this commander* – the figure of Gil Mephius would represent a future worth risking their lives for.

This was how war was since time immemorial. What was originally just a scramble for power between blood relations, or a desire to snatch land in the name of national interests, was presented as a great cause which statesmen brandished as banners capable of making the soldiers take action. Put otherwise, an ideal future that was worth dying for and killing for was born simply from the cause that was the banner.

Rogue and Odyne said no more.

At the end, Orba once again looked at each of the warriors in turn, as though to confirm their determination.

"In this fight, we cannot afford to miss any opportunity. That is all. What is most important above everything else is that each and every one has a strong will and resolve. You are, of course, well aware that this is not a battle that we can win without losing soldiers. By all accounts, Folker appears to be an outstanding commander, but negligence is sure to arise since their numbers exceed ours. Go for their throats the moment you see an opportunity. And once you have them by the throat, never let go. Beyond the corpses of the friends we will have to step over, at the target we are charging towards, lies the true Mephius that we long for."

Lately, not even Shique had been able to speak with him. He had only shown his face once then had immediately flown to the west and, since then, he spent so much of his time in councils of war that you might wonder if he had actually come back. The outline of the strategy was set, but in order for it to work in practice, there were a ton of smaller issues that needed to be decided for each part of it; and in three days, Orba had personally taken part in over twenty smaller-scale meetings.

Even so –

*At this rate, things are going to get ugly.*

Orba's fleeting thought was not about the lack of soldiers or the insufficiency of supplies. As he was walking in the castle early that morning, giving instructions to the soldiers, he had unexpectedly passed by Theresia. Noticing it was Gil, she stopped and stood aside with a curtsy; but as he passed by her, the glance that the Garberan former head lady's maid flashed his way was as sharp as a blade. He could actually feel it piercing his back.

Thinking back on his actions since being reunited with the princess because of it, he came to that conclusion –

*Definitely ugly.*

Orba reached a decision and contacted Princess Vileena through his page,

Dinn.

"We should have supper together once in awhile."

And thus, the two of them sat face-to-face in the dining hall that was reserved exclusively for aristocrats. With deep-fried fish from the River Yunos, venison, nuts, goat's cheese and the like lined up along the table, Orba and Vileena went through their meal without speaking.

Vileena's manner was aloof from start to end.

*Even though you were the one who invited me* – she thought. After their initial greetings, Gil Mephius had remained silent.

Observing him anew, his way of eating was coarse. She had thought that this might be the Mephian style, but having had a number of occasions to eat with the country's leading nobles, their manners were clearly different from his. It was, so to speak, 'the Prince's style'.

It was hardly surprising as Orba's table manners had been terrible since his days as a gladiator. With a book open at his side, he would not eat unless he was reading. Because of that habit, he still sat with his back hunched during meals. Vileena was seized with the urge to stick behind the Prince and instruct him in the etiquette for dining.

Meanwhile, Orba, who was eating cheese that he had picked up with his hand, was wondering bewilderedly – *what can I talk about?*

On the whole, he was a man who was not good at making small talk. His interests and concerns were mostly directed towards military matters, and you could say that he did not know anything about anything else. Additionally, since he was acting as Mephius' crown prince, he naturally could not talk about the things he usually had with the gladiators and mercenaries.

Even so, as he was definitely finding the silence uncomfortable, he decided to speak.

"Princess."

Vileena lifted her head. She was making a show to the Prince of eating 'modestly'.



"What is it?"

"You said that you spent a while in Taúlia, was there any food there that you liked? Apta is the only place to have resumed trade with the west. If there's something you like, I can have it ordered for you."

"Well," Vileena's gaze fell as she continued her meal. "I was there for a specific reason, so I did not eat at the castle. Oh, but, when I was in the villagers' care, I was given grilled green rabbit meat. In spite of its appearance, it was delicious."

"Yeah, I've tried it too. Although there's not much of a distance, it seems that green rabbits are rare animals in Apta. I'll have it ordered later."

To Vileena's utter amazement, Orba seemed satisfied with their conversation. Feeling that he had achieved results just from their actually having talked to one another once, he continued eating.

*What a strange person* – the princess thought to herself.

She could not exactly say that she herself was used to conversing with members of the opposite sex of around the same age as her, but the Prince was even worse. Still, Vileena felt that this situation called for tactics.

"Prince"

Since the meal was almost over, it was practically a surprise attack.

"W-What is it?"

Convinced that he fulfilled his quota, Orba had been utterly at ease and, as per the princess' intention, had been unprepared for the assault, almost dropping his knife.

Vileena observed the Prince intently through almost half-closed eyes.

"Next month, I will be turning fifteen," she said. "It will be my first birthday in Mephius. I will be looking forward to my present."

"R-Right," Orba recovered himself. "Is there something you want? Given that it's you, Princess, I guess you might like an airship, or maybe even a large carrier? If it's clothes or some kind of accessory... that's difficult, I don't know anything about them. Shique's more knowledgeable about that sort of thing. I'll

get him on it, so just say whatever it is you want and...”

“It is not a thing,” the princess decisively interrupted Orba. “If possible, I feel that I would like to return to Garbera next month,” she said, as though declaring their separation.

“Princess”

“Of course, it would only be temporary. And I would definitely like you to come with me, Prince.”

“Me?”

“Yes. I would like you to meet my grandfather. Don’t you think it would be beneficial for someone like you to receive a scolding from Grandfather at least once?”

Orba had no comeback to that.

Vileena finished her meal, aloof to the end. However, just as she was about to leave her chair –

“The battle this time around,” her voice dropped, “... I will not say anything more. My being wilful will only cause trouble to others again. So please think only of yourself as you wage war. I’m happy for your solicitude in inviting me for a meal like this, but it is perfectly fine for you to forget about me.”

“...”

“Your victory is...”

“My victory?”

“I knew from the start that since it is you, Prince, there was a good chance that you would take it at face value, but my saying that I wanted us to go to Garbera together was simply a joke. What I truly wish for is your victory. If you win, Prince, the ties of friendship and peace with my native country, Garbera, will remain unbroken.”

“I get it.”

“You say that so easily. When it comes to something like this, you are able to answer straight away,” Vileena unintentionally burst out laughing. “Very well,

please let me see what you are capable of. As I said just now, I have absolutely no intention of doing anything unnecessary or of disregarding your wishes, Prince. I just want to watch.”

In point of fact, Vileena’s promise was destined to be broken in the not-too-distant future. But setting that future aside, at the time, she truly did not intend to do more than watch the Prince fight. She was not optimistic. She did not know much about war, but she could well imagine that this fight would be harsher than any the Prince had experienced so far.

Furthermore...

*Family* – the opponent the Prince had to fight was his own father.

The soldiers would have to turn their guns and swords on the comrades who had once stood alongside them on the battlefield.

Vileena had always been asking herself about the meaning and duty of royalty. Her heart could feel no joy over a country being torn apart and blood relatives crossing blades.

Since being informed that a punitive force had been dispatched from Solon, she had spent more than one sleepless night worrying over the problem of – *is there no way other than fighting?*

Every time, as the morning sun washed over her through the chink between the curtains, she reached the same conclusion: *the Prince has already made his decision.*

Even though Gil Mephius was a despicable liar, he was by no means a thoughtless fool. Despite being incapable of thinking about people's feelings, he was a man who was surprisingly considerate of the people and of the oppressed slaves.

And that prince had decided to fight.

*Which means that there is no way to avoid this battle.*

And since Gil Mephius had decided to fight, that meant –

*That there is a chance of victory.*

Vileena Owell could not help finding it strange. Although he had betrayed her

so many times, she felt a certain trust towards the prince.

Orba, meanwhile, naturally did not know the intricacies of the princess' heart. However, he was no dullard lacking in perception. He realised that the princess did not have only one or two things she wanted to tell him, but rather fifty or a hundred. Military strategies aside, how did the prince intend to act from now on – specifically, what were his intentions regarding his relationship with herself and with Garbera?

Yet Vileena purposely remained silent. In a way, it resembled how he had deliberately refrained himself from asking Rogue and the others "can you fight your fellow countrymen?"

And so Orba had stopped trying to line up the right words to explain himself. In terms of determination, Vileena held the same resolve in her small chest as Rogue and Odyne did.

When the meal was over, the two of them turned to leave the dining hall at the same time. Both their attendants were waiting by the door. Dinn seemed to be doing so a little impatiently and just before Orba reached him, he held out a napkin to him. Realising from that that he had sauce stuck around his mouth, Orba wiped it away with a sour expression.

*Damn it Princess, you couldn't even tell me* – he glanced towards Vileena.

And in doing so realised that Theresia was not the only lady's maid waiting for her. There was a young woman beside her.

"Who's that?" Orba asked with no real interest, to which Vileena answered –

"She is someone who has recently started working for me."

"I am called Layla," the woman bowed her head.

Maybe it was because she was nervous about meeting the crown prince face to face, but she did not look well.

"Layla?"

As Orba repeated it, there was something that was bothering him. He had heard that name. Also, he remembered the woman's face.

Vileena clapped her hands together as though having remembered

something.

"Oh, yes. Prince, would you please let her meet with Orba one of these days? He saved her father and she has been saying for some time that she would like to thank him."

"R-Right"

At that, Orba finally remembered. He had seen the woman in the Taúlian village that he had rushed into to save Vileena. If he remembered correctly, she had been clinging to her father who had been stabbed in the abdomen.

"I heard about it from Orba. Is your father well?"

"I-I am grateful for your concern. Thanks to the princess and to your Highness, he will be able to continue to live long."

Layla kept her head bowed. Vileena tilted her head –

"Speaking of being saved by Orba, I was too. Wanting to thank him, I have looked all around Apta for him, but I have not seen him since then. Where is he at the moment?"

"Working out of sight," Orba replied with a sullen face. He had thought that he had gotten out of a tough spot by having a meal arranged, but now the things he needed to do had just increased.

After that, Vileena, Theresia and Layla took their leave.

*Layla – Layla?*

Even though he remembered the woman, he seemed to recall having heard the name 'Layla' some other time in some other place. The two memories did not coincide.

"Your Highness? Is there a problem?"

"No"

"Are you planning something? You are not going to come out with something outrageous again, are you?" Dinn spoke resentfully. The boy had gone to a certain place on Orba's orders, and had only just returned to Apta the day before.

“Now I get it. Well done, Dinn.”

“W-What?”

“Don’t worry. I’m not sending you anywhere. There’s somewhere I’ll be heading myself tonight. I need you to get things ready immediately.”

Orba smiled enigmatically. From his manner of speaking, it was just as though he were going for a long ride in the area, but with ‘that’, he was going to make his opening move against Folker’s army.

# Chapter 6: Preliminary Skirmish

## Part 1

Jozu Fortress was a small fort between Apta and Birac that also served as a relay base for air carriers. Three hundred soldiers were permanently stationed there. Their composition was a hundred regular soldiers dispatched from the urban districts and two hundred reservists recruited from the local population.

The fortress had only recently been built. Taúlia's attack on Apta had revealed a problem: that, for a border defence fortress, Apta was a little too far from any other base. Accordingly, while expanding the air carrier relay base that lay in the direction of Birac, a cluster of buildings allowing soldiers to be in permanent residence were also built there. The one who had attended to these constructions was Kalgan, an administrative official from Apta.

Normally, it was a place that never had the slightest disturbance and where the only gunshots to be heard were from soldiers who sometimes hunted in the nearby forest. These last few days however, it had been wrapped in an unusually tense atmosphere. This was because there was some suspicion about what was going on in Apta.

First was when a large number of soldiers passed through Jozu on their way to Birac and Solon. They were the mercenary troop that Odyne had dissolved as well as soldiers stationed at Apta. The next day, Nabarl, one of the twelve generals, and his Blue Dome Division travelled through Jozu.

Upon being asked, they said that –

“The crown prince has returned.”

It was not a story that Walt, the battalion commander in charge of Jozu Fortress, could easily believe. It was simply suspicious. He also had a premonition that things would not end peacefully.

“Get a ship ready for me, would you?” When Nabarl had been stopping at Jozu Fortress, he had wanted the means to return quickly to Solon.

“It would be difficult for me to do so,” Walt had obstinately declined. It was not that he was looking down on the upstart general. If it had to be said, his own origins were those of a gladiator. It was simply that he was a man devoted to his duty. “This fortress’ role is to send soldiers to Apta or to Birac in case of need, or to take in fleeing troops. There is no knowing if we won’t need to transfer a large group all at once to one of the towns, and in any event, the ships are for use in emergencies.”

“You are defying an order from one of the twelve generals?”

“I am not your subordinate. If you want a ship, please go as far as Birac. You should be able to appeal for one directly from Lord Fedom.”

Nabarl’s face had flushed scarlet and he had headed to Birac, spewing invectives as he went.

“So is it true what they say about how he was beaten by Taúlia?” Asked one of Walt’s men as he watched from a fortress window while the column of Nabarl’s troops galloped away.

“Probably. But the part about Lord Gil Mephius having returned beggars belief.”

“Then there’s that rumour that Generals Saian and Lorgo are plotting treason. They might be sending us an advance unit from Birac, no?”

“Treason,” Walt stroked his plump face, “considering their personalities, I find that even harder to believe than the Prince’s return. On top of that, no matter how you look at it, the soldiers currently in Apta don’t even make up two thousand. What could they even do with those numbers... Be that as it may, all ships are to stand by on maximum alert. Don’t relax your vigilance when it comes to the area around Apta.”

“Aye.”



Walt was in his late thirties. Both his face and body were plump, so much so that when he wore full armour, he looked like a poorly-made doll for children, but although the soldiers might be expected to disdain him because of it, he was actually very popular.

He was also very skilled. Ten years earlier, he had won the Gladiatorial Championship in Solon. He had then been appointed as a regular soldier and had seen service in any number of battlefields during the war against Garbera. On one of those however, he had been shot in the face. Walt had fainted but, miraculously, the bullet had crossed through his right cheek and had exited out of his left. Afterwards, when he regained consciousness, he had to evade enemies lurking along the mountain and only received proper treatment ten days later, when he had made it back to Solon.

As a result, both his cheeks were now constantly swollen, giving him a decidedly humorous appearance. Although he could not go so far as to say that he had originally been handsome, he lamented over the fact that, as a warrior, he had previously had a reasonably impressive face; which might have been why he indulged in binge eating while under medical care, resulting in him ending up with a plump physique.

Whereupon, his popularity actually increased. Personality could be influenced by appearance, but in this case, it was perhaps that his had been concealed beneath a warrior's harsh exterior. Strangely, people would gather around him, including nobles, whom he had not previously had much to do with and who now invited him and called out to him at balls, dinner parties, and the like.

Even after he returned to the battlefield, Walt's distinctiveness won him fame among friend and foe alike. He was idolized by the soldiers, loved by his commanders, achieved some military gains and, three months earlier, he had been entrusted with the newly-built Jozu Fortress.

Since the surrounding villages and marketplaces were under Apta's jurisdiction, he had neither the authority nor the revenue of a feudal lord but he was still quite successful for someone who had risen from being a gladiator.

At the fortress also, he was very popular with the soldiers. His orders were promptly and thoroughly put into practice.

And then, about ten days after Nabarl had passed through Jozu, there was a report that a large force had been dispatched from Solon to Birac, and the level of tension increased all the more.

Around the same time, the net of airships spread out in the direction of Apta hurriedly returned. When he received their report, Walt's narrow eyes went wide. Even the assembled soldiers were visibly shaken.

“W-What should we do, Commander?”

“We can neither ignore it nor turn him away,” Walt pondered for a while. “Then we may as well let him in. Whatever the cause, let's be grateful for being blessed with the chance to see his face.”

Walt had never met the crown prince of Mephius in person. At most, he had only seen him from a distance in Solon.

If this was an imposter, there was a very close resemblance. Nor was it only his appearance: Walt felt that his boldness at having suddenly shown up at Jozu Fortress with only a few attendants and his subsequent dignified demeanour were not things that just anyone would be able to imitate overnight.

Gil Mephius.

Without any prior warning, he had suddenly knocked on the gates of Jozu Fortress.

“I am honoured to meet you. I cannot express my delight at being able to behold the crown prince's noble visage even in such a remote and backwards place.”

“Yeah, but this place really has nothing going for it, huh?” His legs folded one over the other, Gil faced Walt with an impudent expression.

From the upper reaches of the fortress, they could look down on the surrounding forest. Once night fell, all four sides would be enveloped in darkness. Despite it being a newly constructed fort, merchants did not gather there nor did prostitutes flock towards it, so there was no entertainment whatsoever. It seemed that the soldiers stationed here must need considerable fortitude.

When Gil Mephius pointed this out, Walt answered him conscientiously –

“I give the soldiers leave once every ten days in shifts. Most of them go to Birac and spend their time there as they please. Although, as Birac it is a trade city in which people from all over Mephius congregate, I occasionally dig into my own funds and invite a troupe of entertainers here.”

Even as he answered, he was harbouring doubts.

*For all that he says there's nothing here, what kind of business brought him then?*

The Prince only had about fifteen attendants with him. Being that they were brawny, they were possibly his Imperial Guards, rumoured to have been promoted from being sword slaves, but given that they were lightly armed and so few in number, they could not possibly be planning to take over the fortress.

*Hmmm* – while Walt maintained a calm expression, inside he was hopelessly torn. The man in front of him was perhaps going to cause Mephius to be split in two. If he captured him now, should he send him to Solon? No, first should be a messenger to Birac. From there, they could perhaps contact Solon and await orders from His Majesty?

Walt had not yet received official notification from Birac. The natural course would have been for Lord Fedom to have sent his instructions once the troops led by Folker Baran had arrived, yet no messenger had come.

While Walt was thus conflicted –

“I wanted to see the new fortress with my own eyes. Also, I felt that I should personally see the soldiers. Since it's close to Apta, there will often be all sorts of instructions to send. It will be an advantage in those cases if the soldiers know my face and if I know theirs.”

“Aye”

Gil Mephius glanced towards Walt, who was maintaining a respectful attitude. And then, as he swatted away an insect that had flown in front of him with one hand, “I'm thinking of staying here for a while,” he lightly said something utterly astounding.

Not even Walt could repress his emotions and he raised his head with a jerk.

“S-Stay?”

“Is that somehow inconvenient?”

“No... But...”

“To tell you the truth,” Gil cupped his hand around his mouth as though imparting a secret, “the Garberan princess went to the west and hindered Mephius’ invasion. You’ve heard of that, right?”

“There is something of a rumour, but...” Walt also lowered his voice and chose his words carefully.

“I have a slightly hard time handling *that*. Nothing could be more embarrassing than handing my fiancée over to His Majesty like I’ve been told to, but at the same time, I don’t know what kind of punishment Father will hand down to me if I openly defy him.”

*What!?*

Walt was both disgusted and furious with the man before him. He was going to split the country for nothing more than saving his own face. At the same time though, it had become increasingly difficult to ascertain whether or not this was the crown prince since he had brought up the matter of the Garberan princess.

*I don’t know. If he’s an impostor, why are two of the twelve generals following him and even his fiancée the princess seems to be standing on his side. Or else, is it a plot against Mephius that the princess herself set up? No, there’s no way a fourteen or fifteen girl could.*

“Commander”

While he was becoming increasingly mired in confusion, one of his men called out to him. He stepped away from the prince for a moment and heard the report.

“What? From Lord Fedom?”

“Aye, it has just arrived from Birac. He has something to say about Apta.”

*It’s finally arrived* – he felt that it was a bit slow but at least it had still arrived

in time. Walt mulled over his thoughts for a moment.

“Right, I’ll go straight to Birac from here. Since we may need to send messengers at a moment’s notice, have the airships on standby along the highway.”

“Aye. ...And, about His Highness?”

“It’s actually rather convenient that he came here. Since he said he wanted to stay, let’s grant him his wish. Don’t let him go back. You lot do everything you can to keep him here. Use every means possible to prevent him from changing his mind.”

If Fedom – or rather, His Majesty the emperor who would be contacted through Fedom – decided that the man here was an impostor, he would just need to arrest him and take him to Birac, and his duty would be complete. They would be able to prevent the country being torn apart in vain.

“But for all that you say to use every means possible, there’s nothing but forest here,” the soldier, whom Walt had known for a long time, looked baffled.

An amiable smile crossed Walt’s puffy face, “this is the most important task since I took up my post at Jozu Fortress. I’ll do it even if it kills me. If I have to, I’ll even offer a few of the women I fancy,” he joked.

In actual fact, Walt had never been known to bring anything like a mistress, but his subordinate soldiers grinned in response.

“Are you leaving? I figured as much when you got that report earlier, but you’re really busy, huh?” enquired Gil Mephius, looking completely unsuspecting, as soon as Walt announced that he had to start getting ready to go.

“I am truly very sorry. Although there is nothing here that can distract Your Imperial Highness from boredom, please take your time and relax as much as you like. My subordinates have their orders, so if there is anything that you wish for, please do not hesitate to tell them.”

“Oh? Well, I’ll do as I like then,” Gil said nonchalantly. “Anyway, what’s this

business that's got you in so much of a hurry?"

"Well, it is not me. Lord Aulin is ever abrupt. He sometimes likes to bring his family to go for a stroll in the forest, so maybe that is what it is this time too?"

"Humph. If it's such an idyllic place, maybe I should go out for a walk too."

"Ah, by all means."

Walt hurriedly left Jozu Fortress.

Before long, a succession of carts arrived from Apta one by one. They were loaded with clothes, food and large quantities of wine – in short, they were Gil's personal belongings sent for his stay at Jozu. Given that the Prince's luggage had arrived right after he did, it appeared that he had, from the start, intended to ignore whatever wishes Walt or those at the fortress might have.

Since the carts kept arriving incessantly and insisting on checking each and every one of them might incur the Prince's displeasure, Gil's men were asked to stay by the gate and were left to identify the goods and people.

Moreover, opening and closing the gate each and every time was extremely laborious. So there was no help for it but to leave it open. Of course, the number of guards around the gate was reinforced but, as people and goods arrived one after another, they grew exasperated and just watched them pass through.

## Part 2

The next day, Gil spent the entire day looking around Jozu Fortress. During that time, the succession of goods continued to arrive.

When, while still broad daylight, they saw him and his men sharing a toast from the contents of a wine cask that had only just arrived, Walt's subordinates exchanged whispered comments.

"Is he really the crown prince?"

"With that kind of behaviour, he can't be the prince."

"No, if he was an impostor, he'd make sure to behave like a real crown prince and absolutely wouldn't be so unguarded."

"At any rate, Crown Prince Gil was known as a 'fool', ya know..."

"Shh! If by any chance he's the real thing and he hears you..."

By and large, Gil seemed to spend the entire day enjoying himself. But when dusk fell, he suddenly complained in a deliberately loud voice that –

"This is boring."

As soon as they heard that he had lost interest, Walt's men were suddenly thrown into a panic. They ran around calling at the villages around the fortress and scraped together whatever pretty young girls and villagers that had any kind of talent they could find. That night, they held a small banquet to welcome the prince.

In that way, they were able to prolong his stay by a day, but the fortress soldiers were wracking their brains to figure out how on earth to arrange an entertainment programme for him from then on, when, "I want to see what you can do, since you're the ones defending the fort," Gil once more abruptly brought something up.

It was in the early afternoon of the second day.

“The attendants I brought with me were hand-picked as the best among the Imperial Guards. How about it? You could have a contest with them.”

That was equivalent to telling them to have gladiatorial contests with the Imperial Guards. The soldiers were naturally taken aback.

“I’m not saying to fight with weapons. You, my friends, are probably thinking that you’re not gladiators. How about bare-handed wrestling?”

“That’s harsh, Your Highness,” the giant swordsman Gilliam laughed out loud. He had officially become an Imperial Guard in Apta. “We’re called Imperial Guards now, but we were all gladiators. There’s no way we’ll lose to them and they’ll just be disgraced at having been beaten by former sword slaves. Who’d want to get into a fight with absolutely no advantage for them?”

The Imperial Guards all roared with laughter.

Most of the soldiers at Jozu Fortress only had experience of doing what Walt told them to on the battlefield. One could tell at a glance that hostility had started gleaming in their eyes. Besides, they were under strict orders from battalion Commander Walt to induce the Prince to stay at all cost. They accepted the contest that he had forced on them.

From then on, the contest was held until the sun set.

The first to go were soldiers who gave an impression of strength, but after several of them were pinned to the ground in no time at all by the former gladiators, people with confidence in their own skills were clamouring to barge in. Even the one who, from the looks of it, had been acknowledged as the boss of the infantrymen within the fortress, was as helpless as a baby in Gilliam’s hands.

Every time one of the soldiers from the fortress lost, a man who seemed to be a company commander would yell for someone to get a certain person, until finally, even those among the guards on lookout who seemed somewhat skilled were mobilised. The former gladiators heaped victory on victory but they were much fewer in number compared to the fortress’ soldiers and, after a series of bouts, they were starting to show signs of fatigue. That being the case, more



and more of them suffered defeats, so that the fortress soldiers became increasingly charged up.

“You did it!” the crown prince clapped his hands in delight. “But after all, there aren’t that many of them. I’m not saying that to make excuses, but the fairest way to settle this would be to have a deciding match between the strongest from either side.”

And so it was decided that whoever was the strongest among the Jozu soldiers would compete in the next round.

“Our side will send out Pashir. Oi, someone run back to Apta and get that guy here.”

Since the runner-up from the Gladiatorial Championship was going to come, the feeling of competition became even more heated.

That evening, a new group of visitors arrived at the fortress’ front gate. Because there were a lot of them, and also for one other reason, the sentries were wary; however, as the entire group was composed of women, and as they also explained that their visit had been requested by the prince, they were soon allowed to pass inside. The other reason for the soldiers’ caution was because the women were all Zerdians.

As well as the people, wine caskets, and cages hung with curtains were also carried in at the same time. They were being pulled by several medium-sized Houban dragons, but what was surprising was that the one leading the Houbans was a woman.

The group entered and headed towards the soldiers, who were completely exhausted from the fights. They were all beautiful young women. It was as though the stench of sweat and men that had been hanging over the fortress had been swept away and a cool breeze carrying tinkling laughter had blown in instead.

“They’re a troupe of Zerdian dancing girls,” Gil raised his voice to welcome them.

Prompted by the Prince, the dark-skinned women started whirling and dancing throughout the fortress, playing their flutes all the while. The soldiers’

eyes were glued to those bewitchingly supple limbs and ostentatiously contorted bodies.

“This is the least I can do to show you all my appreciation. Zerdian women aren’t bad to look at, right? Come, drink, sing. The dancing girls are dancing and twirling for the brave heroes.”

For most of the Mephians, it was their first time seeing western dances and hearing the expressive sound of their flutes. Their weary bodies and minds seemed to be lapping up the sights and sounds. As they, of course, also did with the alcohol that Gil had had prepared.

The banquet that was a complete change from the wrestling contest grew lively. There were incidents in which someone mistook the Zerdian dragon-handler for a dancing girl and tried to come on to her only to get kicked; but, other than that, everyone drank and sang a lot, with the soldiers even throwing off their leather armour to join in a large dancing ring.

The Prince was merrier than anyone, pressing drinks on the soldiers and throwing his arms around the shoulders of the dancing girls to sing together. The soldiers who were under orders to detain him there felt that it was their duty to take part in the revels, and so continued to eat and drink without restraint.

It was probably the most boisterous night that Jozu Fortress had known since being built.

And so.

The night wore on.

Most of the exhausted soldiers were lying collapsed all around. Dancing girls crowded flocked around those who still retained some of their senses and offered them wine or pressed them into dancing with them, so that the number of victims kept increasing.

“What’s this, you guys, you’re pretty undisciplined,” Gil laughed flippantly as he himself staggered along between people. “Even though you’ll be going sightseeing after this – Oi, get it ready,” he shouted in a loud voice and clapped his hands.

At which, cages with a pulley were brought from the front gate. Those who still had some consciousness left strained their eyes towards these huge cages, wondering what he had in mind this time.

But when the curtain was opened, what leaped out completely overturned any of their expectations.

A row of soldiers in full armour and weaponry, complete with guns and swords.

While the soldiers raised their voices in astonishment, about fifty jumped out of the cage and, as though their deployment had been determined beforehand, they quickly ran to every strategic point in the fortress and, encountering almost no opposition, they seized complete possession of it in no time at all.

There were three cages in total. The last man to come out of them had a body no less powerful than that of a lion and he walked calmly towards Gil.

“Did you call for me, Your Imperial Highness?”

Pashir.

Gil laughed. “You’re a bit late. I was going to have them choose the strongest soldier in the fortress, but... Everyone’s completely wasted.”

“Then should we wake everyone up?”

The soldiers serving at the fort were rounded up in one place. Since the majority of them had fallen asleep and those who were still conscious were worn out and had been made to drink far too much, nobody put up any resistance. Naturally, most of their weapons had been confiscated.

“W-What,” Walt’s adjutant shouted, although apparently unable to articulate. He was not tied up but he was surrounded on all sides by Gil’s armed soldiers. “W-What ish thish, Your Highness! D-Did you d-desheive us?”

“I’m having you take some time off,” Gill said between hiccups. “We won’t take your lives. Right then, tomorrow, you’ll be leaving for Birac. Anyone who has luggage to take had better gather it up now.” There was not a single lie in Gil’s words. Without a single exception, the soldiers were sent away. They were forced to get themselves ready without being able to fight back.

Seated in the reception hall on the ground floor of the fortress, Gil kept an eye on the proceedings as the soldiers scuttled away. Not far from him, Pashir was hurling out instructions to the men deployed throughout the fort. It had only been five days since Gil – or rather, Orba – had reshuffled the unit centred around Pashir into the Imperial Guards, but it looked as though he had already efficiently unified his subordinates.

A Zerdian woman came up to them. Unusually for her, and so as to put the soldiers off guard, Hou Ran was wearing make-up and was dressed up. Her long-sleeved, long-hemmed clothes and the veil over her face cleverly concealed her scars.

Orba was going to give her his thanks but, faster than he could open his mouth, she stomped on his foot with all her strength.

“Drunkards tried to fondle my breasts three times.”

“What? W-Who on earth would do such a thing?” Orba asked with the pressure still weighing down on his foot.

“The expression in their eyes were the same as the Prince’s right now.”

With an air of having said all that she wanted to say, Ran suddenly turned around. Pashir was facing away to one side, his shoulders quivering.

The conclusion was that within one night, Jozu Fortress passed to Gil Mephius.

The next day, the full-scale transfer of supplies and military personnel began.

As far as Orba was concerned, one of the biggest gains was that they had gotten ahold of a great many ships. There were no large air carriers big enough to transport huge groups of soldiers, but there were three each of both the cruisers and the high-speed crafts that could carry four or five people. Furthermore, there were reserves of precious ether since the base often served as a relay station for airships.

He had not only summoned soldiers from Apta, but also several administrative officials. Among those was Kalgan, who had been serving Orba since long before. At Orba’s prompt orders, they rushed to contact all the nearby villages, assembled groups of woodcutters who made their livelihood by

felling trees and working the timber, and, just as before, organised a hierarchy with Kalgan at its summit.

Incidentally, although every last one of Walt's soldiers had been driven away, the non-combatants that were the servants had remained at the fortress. As 'Crown Prince Gil', Orba personally addressed them as much possible, so that even though their safety was at greater risk than before, they felt a sense of security about not having their jobs taken away from them.

Meanwhile, Walt had arrived at the trade city of Birac and had met with Fedom.

"I don't remember summoning you," he had said, his face momentarily bewildered.

As Walt explained about the Prince's visit to the fortress, Fedom's expression had changed in the blink of an eye.

"Fool!" He had yelled so forcefully that his saliva went flying. "You were tricked by the impostor. Even if Jozu Fortress is falling to flames right this very moment, I won't be held responsible for it. It was all because of your stupidity!"

Could the shock Walt received then even be measured?

Before long, news arrived by the airships that were distributed along the highway for carrying messages that his subordinates were heading in a column towards Birac.

When Walt heard the full story from them, his face boiled red with a rage that was no less than Fedom's.

"T-That, that swine!"

He did not seem to hear anyone's voice as he threw himself on a horse and galloped towards Jozu Fortress. A dozen of his men, thrown into a panic, chased after him but half were unable to keep up with him and got left behind.

It was late at night two days later that he finally reached Jozu.

"Impostor Prince. You and your cowardly tricks! Come out here. Come out and fight me fair and square, one on one!" He yelled as his horse raced around

the fort's circumference.

Along the fortress' outer wall, soldiers stood in a row, holding torches aloft. With the light from the flames shining on Walt, all of them threw vulgar jeers at him. Walt's winsome face was now entirely like that of a demon.

Orba emerged and looked down at Walt's galloping figure. When Walt noticed him,

"So you've come out, you cur. Well, come on. I won't let your men interfere. Come and fight me!"

He raised his unsheathed sword and brandished in provocation. Orba smiled in spite of himself.

"He's nothing if not bold, that man."

"Should we aim our arrows at him?"

He held back the Imperial Guard who had suggested that and had Pashir sent for. The runner-up in the Gladiatorial Championship came rushing.

"That man," Orba pointed to Walt, "seems to have been Clovis ten years ago. Can you do it?"

"If that is your order."

Orba found it almost provoking how Pashir gave the impression of neither hesitation nor doubt.

"Shall I take his head?"

"Don't put your life in danger. Apart from that, it's fine to just rough him up."

Pashir gave a single nod then left through the fortress' main gate. When Walt saw him, he leaped from his horse.

"That damn coward. Is the impostor not coming out?"

"He's the crown prince," Pashir said calmly. "Did you seriously think that he was going to fight someone like you?"

"Fine, Brat. I'll defeat you then drag that man out."

At the same time, he took his stance with his longsword then slowly started

closing the distance between them.

Under the flames lined up along the top of the wall, their two shadows were darker than darkness against the surface of the ground. When those shadows crossed one another – in that instant, both thrust towards the other.

There was a shower of blue sparks.

Walt's physique had changed a lot since his time as a gladiator, but his skill with a sword still far surpassed that of an ordinary man. He was more agile than seemed possible with that body of his.

However Pashir's ability was also far from ordinary. When he felt the other draw too near, he jumped back. Time and time again, Walt's blade cut through empty air.

The blood had rushed to Walt's head when he had gone racing towards the fortress. All of a sudden, he charged headlong.

The thought crossed Orba's mind that they would see Pashir's movements become much faster in response. It was the intuition of someone who had once crossed swords with him, and it was entirely correct.

Pashir drew a semi-circle that let Walt charge past him. The distance between them was so short that it almost seemed measured as to need only the barest of movements. Pashir's sword extended to the side. Compared to Walt's assault, it looked lax and dull, but the tip of his blade unerringly struck the back of Walt's hand.

Walt collapsed forward. As he remained on his knees, groaning bitterly, the soldiers mocked him with their laughter and applause.

Orba lifted his hand and brought it to a stop,

"The match is over," he announced loudly. "Now then, Battalion Commander, return to Birac. If you want to have a match with me, ask Folker to let you join the front. I'll look forward to seeing you come at me with your sword drawn."

Walt threw a glare in which pain and hatred was mingled towards Orba. But there was something of a lack of strength in his eyes. Setting aside his personal feelings, the man he was currently looking up at deserved praise for his

attitude, determination, and his ability to take the fortress, so that Walt could no longer think of him as a mere fraud.

He borrowed the help of his subordinates, who had finally arrived rushing behind him, to get back on his horse, and left Jozu Fortress as fast as he could.



## Part 3

The fall of Jozu Fortress was naturally not only a shock for Walt but also for the liberation army gathered in Birac.

*So the other side is making a move.*

Folker Baran had been taking his time to arrange the troop formation in part because he had been entertaining the faint hope that the enemy side might offer their surrender.

He knew that the emperor's wish was for them to crush the enemy without delay, but it would have been far preferable if things could have ended without shedding the blood of fellow countrymen. Generals Rogue and Odyne would naturally agree with this. And so, Folker had intended to wait for a little while, but it seemed that the opening that had created had been made use of and that he had been forestalled. It was not Walt's responsibility alone.

*However* – hastening their plan at this point would be the height of folly.

Jozu Fortress had undeniably been taken, but the enemy numbers still remained unchanged, and while they had gotten their hands on ether and a few small ships, this was not a serious blow for Folker's side.

*Jozu and Apta – even if they use both strongholds, the distance between them is too great for tactical usage and they won't want to divide their soldiers into even smaller forces. Which means they can't use them to strategically restrain us either.*

Therefore, there was no great difference between the actions that Folker needed to take before, and those now that Jozu Fortress had fallen. For now, he would take his time and gradually corner the enemy psychologically.

Although, speaking of things that had changed a little from before –

“General Baran, the enemy is looking down on us!”

“If you give the order, my fleet can turn a fortress like Jozu into a sea of flames within a day.”

– With regards to calmly chiding the hot-blooded Zaas and Yuriah, his workload had increased.

At around noon on the day after Jozu was taken, Folker was meeting with the lord of Birac, Fedom. On top of making his periodical report, he also had a request for him.

“A letter?”

“Aye. A recommendation in your name that they surrender, Lord Aulin.”

It was one means of shaking up the adversary.

Fedom Aulin crossed his meaty arms. “It’s not that I don’t know either Rogue or Odyne. But...”

“But?”

“They openly defied His Majesty’s orders. Are they really the same amiable generals that I knew?”

Naturally, he was not saying that even the two commanders were impostors. Fedom long-windedly quoted several historical examples of people who had easily changed according to how the wind blew. Folker had a boring time of it. However –

“Having said that, I can’t be seen to remain silent. Right, I’ll write it. It’s foolish to hope for those two to have a change of heart at this point, but it’d be good if the enemy could fall apart without our having to do much.”

Folker was able to achieve his aim for the time being.

Several hours later, a messenger started off for Apta carrying the letter.

*Right then, O Impostor Prince* – Folker was known as man with nerves of steel. He hardly ever openly showed his emotions, especially when on the field of battle. *First you took Apta, then you grabbed Jozu. What will your third action be? If we don’t make any move, the most you’ll be able to do, you bastard, is to fuss about on that narrow strip of land. Will you declare yourself king of that tiny domain and hold a coronation ceremony? Or will you line up your troops in*

## *Jozu and insist on meeting us in battle?*

Folker's assessment was that the enemy did not have a main force. While they might have artillery power and air force strength, they were lacking in ground forces. With such an unreliable battle line-up, with what kind of method did they hope to pluck victory?

There was a part of him that was somewhat looking forward to seeing it.

The first thing Orba did after seizing Jozu Fortress was to secure the timber resources and to gather skilled carpenters. Kalgan was the administrative official in charge of both of these.

And then, in a situation in which he did not know when the enemy might attack, he began construction on a new fort. Three kilometres east of Jozu, they cut down every tree in the area and used the timber from them to build fences to defend against the enemy cavalry as well as turrets in which riflemen could stand at the ready.

Orba himself focused intently on walking around Jozu Fortress' interior and exterior. This was in order to firmly fix the terrain in his mind. Once he had gotten the information with his own feet, he would finetune his initial tactics, hammer them into the various commanding officers, and have the soldiers train exhaustively.

Every day, the soldiers were made to run while carrying their guns until they were completely exhausted. In a situation where the enemy might attack today or tomorrow, it had to be wondered if they would even be good for anything.

Orba visited each training session one by one and spoke up to them –

“Go, go go. Use your whole body to see and hear. Move at the first sign. Those in front, know the way perfectly. You over there! If your shoulders are touching, you won't be able to move properly in an emergency.”

Gil Mephius' harsh words echoed wherever he went.

The riflemen wore no armour. Mobility was life. Orba would repeatedly yell at them that, “if you stop, you die!”

“Ah!”

While running along the passageway, one of the soldiers bumped into the wall with the grip of his gun and dropped it. As they were running at full speed in straight columns, he realised that he could not stop, and reluctantly carried on running, swept along with the group.

After all the members of the unit had passed, Orba picked up the gun.

“I-I am very sorry.”

The soldier returned and received the gun back from Orba on his knees. Orba viewed his noticeably pockmarked face.

“How old are you?” He asked.

“Yes, I, hum, I will be sixteen.”

“Been on the battlefield before?”

“T-This will, be the first time, for me.”

*I see* – Orba silently thought in response then tapped the child soldier on the shoulder. “Go back.”

As he galloped away, Orba watched him retreat and thought – Roan was about the same age when he went to Apta. For whatever reason, he had a heavy feeling.

“You’re really working hard, I see.”

“I thought I told you to stay in bed.”

Shique had appeared. While waving his hand in a feminine gesture, he replied –

“Your roars can be heard all over the place, so how am I supposed to sleep?”

“Didn’t I specifically tell you to go to Apta?”

“I remember, right before we first headed to Apta, you were trying to set up an airship unit and were roaring at young ‘uns in Solon too.”

“That’s right.”

Orba looked as though he hardly heard what was being said to him. *Somehow*

*or another, this is the first time I've seen him like this* – thought Shique as he observed his irritated profile.

When they were in the west, even though his face was hidden by a mask or bandages, he had felt that now that the crown prince's mask had been removed, Orba's real, boyish face had been slowly starting to appear. When he had once again donned the crown prince's persona, Shique had expected him to go back to how he had previously been, yet he was different from how he usually was before a battle.

His eyes showed that he was giving himself no space to relax.

Shique could guess that the upcoming war would be harsh, but looking back at his battles until now, he had been able to reverse situations where the conditions or military strength had been unfavourable before. Although he could not go so far as to assert that they would therefore win this time as well, Shique felt that was not the only reason that Orba currently seemed so tightly wound that he could not relax.

An airship having been made ready for him, Orba left Jozu Fortress and headed towards the newly constructed fort to the east. Because the local people called the area 'the Forest of Tolinea', it had been named 'Tolinea Fort'. Apparently, in the old language, it referred to a bird with a short lifespan. No one knew why such an ominous name had remained.

Shique went along with him.

Orba summoned Kalgan and got a progress report from him. Construction was advancing more or less on schedule, but Orba was not happy with the fort's current appearance.

"Although we won't be stationing any soldiers here, don't cut any corners in making it look more real than the real thing. Otherwise, we won't be able to deceive the enemy."

"A-Aye, aye!" Kalgan could only respectfully obey when talked to directly by the crown prince.

Hou Ran was also actively contributing to the work there. Dragons were responsible for transporting the quarried stone and cut timber, and she was

briskly giving them instructions. The soldiers and labourers seemed to have been frightened at first at having them prowling in their vicinity, but by now, they were thoroughly used to it.

When Orba counted the number of dragons however, he asked Ran –

“Can’t you bring out a few more?”

Hou Ran’s expression made it clear that she felt offended.

“Baians and Yunions are by nature unsuited for this kind of work. But since the obedient Houbans have large builds, they can’t move about in a forest. If I’m not good enough, hire another dragon handler.”

Just as Kalgan had been with him earlier, when told something by Ran, Orba could also only go along with it.

“ ... ”

“What? Is there something stuck to my face?” Ran asked, looking displeased. Orba was staring fixedly at her as he remained silent.

*No* – he silently shook his head and left.

As she was watching him leave, Ran suddenly stood still and started touching her face all over.

After that, Orba went to thank the woodcutters and carpenters, the soldiers who had been rounded up to help with the manual labour, and the slaves for their work, then returned to Jozu Fortress.

“That really is a bad habit of yours,” Shique cut into Orba’s mind as they boarded the airship.

“What is?”

“When you start something, you try and keep everything about it in your sight and in your mind.”

“Obviously,” Orba said curtly. “If I didn’t, how could I take command during battle? If there’s an error in the preparation stage, the war will be lost before it even starts.”

“This is different from things on the level of a platoon or a company. Did you

get so used to war in the west that you've forgotten what war is for a prince? There will be parts that your eyes cannot reach."

"Then I'll have to prevent that from happening."

"Listen, Orba. You're aiming to become the country's crown prince. Are you saying that from now on, and when the time comes for you to shoulder the responsibility for Mephius, you'll watch over the entire country all by yourself? You're not a sorcerer, you only have two eyes. But watching what goes on around isn't yours to do alone, they'll be a huge number of other eyes. The talent to use them effectively is..."

While he was talking, Shique became fretful at the almost total lack of reaction.

Orba would always lend his ears when he was being reasoned with logically, but somehow, this time, it seemed that he had, from the start, no intention of listening. Or rather –

*His head is so full that he doesn't have the leisure to take in anything more.*

Perhaps it was because he was convinced to the point of being menacing that 'this is the way we have to win', but as soon as they arrived at Jozu Fortress Orba was going to check the state of preparations from start to finish all over again.

*Oh well.*

This was not a good time to quarrel loudly. Shique gave up for the time being and decided to choose a time when there weren't so many people around to talk to him about it again.

A deep sigh escaped from his lips as he came to that decision. Even he thought that always being the one to do nothing but worry was an unprofitable role. However, he also felt that – *there's no one apart from me to notice that sort of thing about him.*

Since those around him recognised that it was normal for Gil Mephius to be in a bad mood, they did not notice when there were slight variations from his usual self. And since Orba himself, of course, did not think that he was any different from usual, there needed to be somebody who accepted having

gotten the short straw and who could squarely point things out to him.

*Honestly* – he almost sighed again.

“Prince, prepare yourself.”

Just as he thought he had suddenly heard a voice coming from behind him, Orba lurched forward.

“Ow!”

When he looked to see what it was, a piece of wood fell to the ground. Realising it been hurled from behind, Orba and Shique both turned around, and thereupon opened their eyes wide. Orba’s hand had gone to his sword, but the one who stood there was a royal princess. In a posture that was evidently that of someone who had just thrown something.

“P-Princess,” Shique was the first to speak. “You came here?”

“I thought that I would like to take a look at the place that will become a battlefield.”

Recovering from his momentary surprise, Orba picked up the piece of wood with a displeased expression.

“...What’s this about?”

“It is because I was wondering if, right now, even I could strike you down, Prince.”

She nimbly caught the piece of wood that was tossed back at her, drawing a parabola as it went. With Theresia and Layla behind her, she then thrust it towards the ground like a sword.

“Since knowing that I had come here might have caused the Prince unnecessary concern, I was thinking of staying silent and observing, but hearing your foul language ringing out from all over the place, it was absolutely impossible to remain quiet and composed.”





Her words were similar to Shique's.

Having come from Apta, the princess was certainly not wearing a flight suit for piloting airships, however neither was she wearing a dress fit for Court. She had on a blouse with the barest amount of lace ornamenting the cuffs and collar, matched with a long skirt and with a wide belt tied firmly around her waist. Her high boots were the type favoured for horse-riding and a cloak for going out was draped at her back. Her hair was done up behind her head, so that the back of her slender white neck was completely exposed.

“Does the princess then go around beating men to death when she is not quiet and composed?”

“When the commanding officer is that irritable and, on top of that, does not even listen to what his retainers are saying, killing him may be best for all concerned.”

What surprised Shique was the fact that even though the princess was deliberately choosing provocative words, Orba's expression did not turn unpleasant.

The princess puffed out her chest, “if it comes to that, it is fine to leave things to me. Shall I take command in your place, Prince? Put me on the bridge of the flagship and I will show you that I can encourage everyone far better than you can, Prince.”

“Earlier though, you said that you were going to leave everything to me, Princess. Also, this coming war is going to be more dangerous than previous ones.”

“Everyone will naturally be risking their lives. So of course I too should...”

“I said no!” Orba spoke sharply.

Vileena scowled huffily, as though to say – *you can't even understand a joke anymore?* Then asked –

“What are you afraid of?”

In that moment, Shique was again taken aback. But it was a different kind of surprise than earlier. He gazed thoughtfully at Orba as he, looking as though he

had lost interest in the conversation, disappeared off into the fortress.

Vileena had her hand on the upright stick as though it were the hilt of a sword and she was watching a defeated army retreat, but she murmured to herself –

“Did I say something wrong?”

“Well, that’s...” Theresia started wryly.

“That is to say...” Layla said.

They looked at each other.

“It’s just that,” Theresia cleared her throat, “you should not point out something like that in public. The Prince will be worried about his retainers looking down on him.”

“If he loses to a woman in an argument, he is not fit to command an army in the first place.”

“No, there are plenty of examples of brave generals who have intimidated armies twice the size of theirs, or of famous and peerless strategists who have driven away armies ten thousand strong with only a thousand men, but who would still bow their heads to their wives or lovers. For truly feminine ladies, it is enough to be careful about allowing gentlemen to throw their weight around in public while holding the reins in private. Because that is not the kind of fight that can be ended by taking a life with a gun or a sword.”

Vileena looked dissatisfied but Shique could still feel the shock reverberating inside him.

*Right, he’s afraid.*

It was his first time seeing Orba’s true self.

Meanwhile –

*What was that, I’m not afraid.*

Even when he reached the inside of the fortress, the echoes of Vileena’s words had still not vanished from inside Orba’s mind.

*What could I still be afraid of at this point?*

When he was a gladiator, killing one another had been an everyday

occurrence. After becoming the crown prince's body-double, it was no longer enough to simply kill opponents; instead he found himself fighting in an arena that was in some ways far more dangerous, and where having his identity revealed would lead to losing his life. After becoming a mercenary, he had personally stood on battlefields where bullets flew and the clash of weapons never ceased.

Before a battle, you had to work out your strategy then just walk forward, filled with exultation.

Even though that was how it should be... so why was it that at this late stage, he felt that his steps were unsteady?

Feeling the impulse to scream something, anything, Orba firmly clamped his mouth shut.

# Chapter 7: The Battle of Tolinea (First Part)

## Part 1

There was half a month left of the deadline set by the emperor.

Folker Baran intended to make full use of the time until then. He saw no benefit in hurrying things and being the attacking side.

So for that reason, when a soldier came rushing in, shouting “e-enemies” as he gasped for breath, Folker eagerly stood up, thinking – *have they finally made a move?* However –

“T-To the west, Bafsk Fortress has lit a beacon. Western troops have appeared near the border. Their numbers: about a thousand!”

“The West, you say?”

For all that he was known for his nerves of steel, even Folker looked grim.

A short while later, an airship flew in from the west.

To the west of Birac, at the end of the River Zwimm, Bafsk was the fort that defended the westernmost tip of Mephius. As it was situated in a gorge, there was no town attached to it and those stationed there were soldiers detached from Birac’s garrison, so that it was, in effect, a detached bastion belonging to Birac.

According to the report, a large number of western troops had been sighted at dawn. Counting the infantrymen, dragoons, and cavalry, they numbered about a thousand.

The many banners of the western countries fluttered in the wind, but their

assembled troops had made no further move. The large, black mass seemed to crouch silently and the Bafsk soldiers held their breath at the uncanny feeling they gave off. Coming as it was right after the battle with the Taúlian army in the area around Apta, and during further war preparations, they were requesting reinforcements from Birac.

*Damnit!*

Folker did not show any emotion in front of the soldiers, but inwardly, he was seething.

Normally, reinforcements to Bafsk would be sent from Apta and Birac. But naturally, they could not currently expect any assistance from Apta.

It looked as though in waiting for the enemy to feel under pressure, they were the ones who had ended up being pressured.

“So that impostor has revealed his true colours,” Yuriah sneered when he heard the news.

“What do you mean?”

“It’s just as His Majesty said. The enemy is being backed by the West. This is the best possible proof that they’re cooperating together.”

It was not that Folker did not share that thought, but that still did not explain why Rogue, Odyne, and the Garberan princess were supporting the impostor.

“It’s possible that this is retaliation from Taúlia. But there’s no doubt that this move is to the Impostor Prince’s advantage.”

It was unclear whether the west and the impostor had formed an alliance, but naturally, they could not afford to ignore either of them. If both of them advanced their war horses at the same time, Folker’s troops in Birac risked being attacked from multiple directions.

“How about first driving the West out of Bafsk then attacking the troops in Jozu Fortress?” Zaas, the youngest of the twelve generals, suggested. Folker however did not nod his assent.

They should not cross the border. It was too dangerous to push into western territory at this point. That one thousand... there was no way of knowing where

an ambush might have been laid.

It was best to first sort out the Impostor Crown Prince's troops, since they knew what their numbers were.

While he was busy thinking, the lord of Birac, Fedom Aulin, also came rushing in.

"They didn't heed the advice to surrender. But it wasn't entirely without results."

"What do you mean?"

"According to the messenger's report, he was able to meet directly with the two generals, and it looked as though both of them had some doubts. They're still not certain whether or not it's the real prince, so, General, we should start with that side. If we attack them, they might prove unexpectedly fragile."

Folker did not have any objections.

First, they took soldiers from each troop and sent about five hundred west to Bafsk as well as leaving three hundred overall to defend Birac. The main force of over two thousand began preparations to march. Folker had heard from his scouts that the enemy had built a new fort in Tolinea Forest.

*So it's to be battle, is it?*

Although he regretted having been 'made to make a move', Folker did not think that was enough to overturn the situation in the enemy's favour. He had considered that if they were cooperating with the West, they might have secretly borrowed soldiers from Tauran, but it did not appear that any large number of people had been moving in and out of Apta or its vicinity.

"The enemy's troops are mostly composed of riflemen and air forces. In order to use their ranged weapons effectively, they have the option of remaining entrenched in their positions. But if they do that, they won't be able to hold out," Folker said to Yuriah and Zaas. "First, we peck at them with our spears. Whatever you do, do not chase them too far. For now, we just want Jozu Fortress to fall. The enemy is not in a position to be able to replenish their soldiers, so the plan is to tighten the net around them then fight them one by one."

Folker was by no means looking down on the enemy. There was something uncanny about an unknown enemy army.

In the early morning of the day after the Western troops had appeared along the border, the army left Birac.

This was the earliest action in what would be known in Mephian history books as “the Battle of Tolinea”.

*So they've come?*

When he heard that the army had left Birac and was starting to head south, Orba rose to his feet.

It was, of course, at his request that the Western troops had appeared at the border. He had estimated that Folker would not be able to disregard them and would definitely move his troops towards Apta.

Their strategy was already entirely set up. They had been able to complete their preparations before the enemy arranged their battle formations. The enemy were two thousand. Their own total number was half of that, one thousand.

It was said that in battles revolving around castles and fortresses, the defending side had the advantage. As the only troops they had enough of were Rogue's air force and Odyne's riflemen, if all they were to do was to defend, they should be able to withstand one or two assaults.

However, exactly as Folker had guessed, their supply line was weak and they truly could not be said to have enough in the way of ground forces.

Moreover, Orba had divided the soldiers into two groups, one each in Jozu and Tolinea. Orba's field of expertise lay in making use of the mobility of small units but, if there was even a single mistake, each and every one of them would, in the twinkle of an eye, find themselves in danger of being crushed.

But at the same time, this division meant that the enemy would also be forced to divide their troops so as to avoid being caught in a pincer attack.

Orba intended to lure the enemy towards the two forts for as long as he was



able to do so. Their infantry and cavalry was insufficient. Therefore, they would lure the enemy to the point of penetrating into the forts, where the riflemen would be able to snipe at them.

Of course, that would be no more than a delaying tactic. But that was fine. And if, in the worst case scenario, both Jozu and Tolinea were partially destroyed in the fighting and were no longer useable, that didn't matter either. To say nothing of Tolinea, which was no more than hastily constructed fences and turrets, even Jozu was, as far as Orba was concerned, the equivalent of a paper decoration existing only to attract the enemy.

*Meanwhile, we will be moving our detached force.*

The cavalry of two hundred led by Pashir. They had been selected from among the best from Orba's Imperial Guards and from Rogue and Odyne's troops.

At the same time as the battle would start, they would circumvent it by taking a route going from south to east, and would arrive in a position giving onto the enemy headquarters. Since Orba liked investigating terrain, several possible routes had of course been established beforehand.

Once the detached force found the best place for them, a beacon would be lit.

At that moment, Orba would launch the dragoons, which would have been kept in reserve, into the fighting at Jozu.

The timing had to be simultaneous with the enemy becoming convinced that they could push through with brute force. For Folker, this would offer a longed-for opportunity to seize victory. So as not to lose the momentum, he would separate part of the troops defending the headquarters and would send them out to the front as a second wave.

As soon as the enemy headquarters were under-manned, Pashir's force would attack.

It would be at that moment that the soldiers from the two fortresses, Jozu and Tolinea, would finally also push out.

By aiming for the gap during which the enemy formation weakened and

attacking in one go, they would even be able to score a direct hit on their headquarters.

There were a lot of sequences involved.

Jozu and Tolinea had to defend their positions to the death until Pashir's unit had finished moving into position, and Pashir's unit itself naturally had to move with caution. If any of these three forces made even a single mistake, the flow of battle would immediately turn to the enemy's advantage and it would be difficult to recapture it with any half-hearted measures.

And yet – the strange unsteadiness in his steps, which Orba had felt since before the war began, seemed to come from something different than the uneasy suspense before battle.

*But to say that I'm afraid –*

Princess Vileena's words were still echoing in his ears.

Certainly, even if they won, this strategy would not be able to avoid there being a great many victims. As the commander-in-chief who would be luring the enemy in close when the time came, while also covering Pashir's attack, Orba himself would need to lead a suicide attack, sword in hand.

The final effort.

In the instant that momentum was in their hands, they would push and push and keep pushing to the end.

Which would come first: Pashir's unit successfully striking the enemy headquarters or their side falling to the enemy's superior resources? Unusually for Orba's strategies, a desperate gamble was incorporated at the very end.

Needless to say, this was because of the difference in military strength. Still, there should have been a way of lessening that pressure. They could have borrowed soldiers from the west and incorporated them among the frontline fighters.

Yet Orba had not chosen to do so.

Ax would have moved as many soldiers as Prince Gil requested, but the West had a long history with Mephius and, above all, there had been a battle not so

many days past. Not only was it uncertain whether they would be able to cooperate effectively, there was also no telling how long the Tauran soldiers would be willing to risk their lives for Prince Gil.

And then there was one other thing. One other aim in this fight in which Orba was announcing himself to be Prince Gil.

*First, we have to seize victory with by our own strength.*

Since Gil had chosen friendship with Taúlia, borrowing soldiers from the West could, in a sense, be said to be Prince Gil's strength. However, what Orba needed to earn in this battle was not simply victory. What Orba was looking at was not Folker, the one who was right in front of him, but what lay beyond him: the Imperial Capital Solon and all the lords and generals of Mephius.

He needed to influence them by winning this fight. The resurrected Prince Gil was opposing the emperor's irrational orders and, with a strength born from righteousness, was fighting him headfirst and crushing his evil designs. This was what Orba currently hoped for above all else. Therefore, without ambushes or surprise attacks, without borrowing the power of other countries, he would wage war with nothing but his own troops – such was his decision.

“Notification from all units. The preparations for the strategy are complete.”  
A messenger knelt before him.

Orba stood up, placing his sword to his waist.

Odyne was stationed here in Jozu, Rogue was at Tolinea.

The detached force led by Pashir had already started moving and Gilliam had been incorporated into the cavalry that would lead the assault, so neither of them were present.

Shique was in the command room as the representative of Orba's Imperial Guards.

“Good.”

Without needing to be prompted by a glance from him, Orba hid the unsteadiness of his steps and, treading firmly with both feet, he stared sharply before him.

“Let’s begin.”

## Part 2

Very soon after Folker's forces started taking up their battle formations, the day turned to early afternoon.

The sky was the colour of lead.

The wind was somewhat tepid.

"The enemy has apparently set up a new base in Tolinea," while the battle formations were being set up, in the tent that served as their headquarters, Folker had unfolded a map and was showing it to Yuriah and Zaas. "Well now, what could be their intention?"

"To have one of them watch for our assault while the other can attack us from the side," answered Zaas. Now that it was right before battle, his nerves were stretched even tauter than usual, his eyes were flaring, his breathing was ragged and his expression was like a fiend's<sup>[2]</sup>.

"Right," Folker nodded gravely. "But we can suppose that their aim is to make us cautious of what you've just said and have us divide our forces in two."

"In that case," said Yuriah, "send my air force to Tolinea. If we burn the forest to the ground, that cobbled-together base will be destroyed in no time."

"Naturally, I think so too. Anyone would think so. In other words, the enemy will also have thought of it," Folker sounded neither hurried nor impatient. In fact, his tone was rather leisurely. This was the same attitude he had whenever he was in a situation where bullets where might come flying at any moment, and it made him impressive in a different way than swinging a sword from horseback would.

Perhaps because they were fascinated by it, both the explosive Zaas and the overly self-confident Yuriah interrupted him as little as possible.

"For all that he's the scoundrel that is usurping Crown Prince Gil's name, the

enemy's way of taking Jozu Fortress was pretty good, if you ask me," Folker said easily. "And so, I'm thinking I'll be a great fool and an incompetent commander."

"What do you mean, General?"

"By all rights, this is an opponent that we should defeat without suffering the slightest wound ourselves, so we will deliberately expose our skin and invite ourselves to be wounded. In doing that, we will watch what the enemy does."

*Even now, you still want to watch what the enemy does?* – was what no one said.

"First, Jozu Fortress," Folker Baran tapped his finger at a point on the map. "We will have soldiers advance on it."

"Oh," Yuriah nodded but Folker did not say anything further. The two young generals were bewildered for a moment by the unnatural silence, but very soon Zaas seemed to catch on to something and he looked towards Folker.

"And Tolinea? Are we going to ignore it?"

"For now, yes," said Folker.

The enemy had taken up two separate positions and were planning a pincer attack. That much should be obvious to anyone, and therefore, –

*They're trying to lure us to them,* was Folker's assessment.

"They've probably placed the highly mobile air force in Tolinea and intend to defend Jozu so that they can contain the attacking forces there. So don't get drawn in by them. The enemy is planning something – something that will allow them to beat us despite their low manpower. And the first step to that is to have us divide our troops. And so the first thing to do is to deliberately advance our soldiers on Jozu. When we see how Tolinea moves and how much of their strength they send to Jozu, the movements of the entire army will be visible as a matter of course."

*Certainly, that's...*, Yuriah and Zaas did not say anything, but the impression they had was the same.

If Folker were overestimating the enemy, or in other words, if the enemy

were no more than an average commander, his tactics would undoubtedly be the height of stupidity. Many soldiers would die needlessly. Having perfectly understood that, Folker had said that he would from now on be “a great fool, and incompetent”.

Gil Mephius – or rather, Orba, and Folker Baran.

Of the two of them, Folker had done a better job of clearing the initial hindrances.

Essentially, Orba was the one who had needed to become a ‘fool’. He should have pretended that he was going to fight a large opposing army that there was no hope of winning against, and in fact, if he had been the same as he always had been until now, he would successfully have done so.

But this time, Orba had underestimated his opponent.

Was it because he had become conceited from winning fights in which he had been at a disadvantage up until now, or was it because he had, from the start, been fixated on the idea that a commander facing an army less than half the size of his own would not feel the need to be vigilant? Either way, he had been lacking in information about Folker Baran.

Orba’s side did not have the reserve manpower or the spare energy to prepare a new plan in the case of their strategy failing. As such, one could say that a mistake from the start might well already determine how the battle would flow.

Folker removed his finger from the map and looked at Zaas Sidious.

“There’ll be a dangerous task. Can I leave it to you?”

Zaas shivered. It was obvious from the gesture with which he struck the armour at his chest that it was absolutely not from fear that he was trembling.

“When it comes to the battlefield, the only orders at which I shake my head,” Zaas smiled ferociously, “are the ones to withdraw before my sword has been dyed red.”

With their strategy and battle formations completed, all that remained was to wait for the signal to march.

Just when it looked like the sky had become dark and overcast, an especially strong ray of sunlight would occasionally break through a gap in the clouds and brightly light up the surroundings of Tolinea Forest, which would soon to be turned into a battlefield.

As per standard strategy, Folker established headquarters in an elevated position on a hill. It was defended by four hundred of the Black Steel Sword Division as well as by a hundred infantrymen led by Battalion Commander Walt.

Obviously enough, as this was the same man who had been the commanding officer at Jozu Fortress. Having splendidly been tricked and robbed of the fortress, he had become the laughingstock of those around him. Walt, however, was not the sort of man to seclude himself indefinitely and shun others out of shame.

“Please send me to the front,” he had pleaded with Folker on his knees.

As the commander, Folker was a willing taker of that zeal but, while he was ready to make good use of their numbers, he had not felt any need to incorporate a separate unit into his strategy at such a late stage, and so had given them the order to defend the headquarters.

Walt was definitely dissatisfied, but he had no choice but to accept the situation. *Actually - if I see a chance -* he was even willing to charge alone at the Impostor Crown Prince or at the swordsman Pashir who had smeared mud all over his face.

*But –*

Along with his ardent hostility, there were also doubts that he could not shake off beneath his heavy breastplate. He had heard from his subordinates afterwards that the man he had fought in single combat was called Pashir. They also told him about his history.

Walt had been running around getting ready to transfer to the fortress at about the same time that the Founding Festival was being held in Solon, so he knew practically nothing about who was this year’s winner in the Gladiatorial Contest that he himself had once won, nor about the circumstances surrounding it.



According to what he had heard, although Pashir had been the runner-up in the contest, he was also a heinous criminal who had plotted an uprising against Mephius. However, the crown prince had incorporated the slaves, Pashir included, into his own direct subordinates.

It was conceivable that Pashir, hating Mephius to this very day, had conspired with like-minded people to kill the prince, put an impostor in his place and take over the country.

*But, is that man really just an impostor?*

Walt shook his head with his swollen face in confusion.

His bearing was very dignified. He had spared Walt when he should have taken his life. "If you want to have a match with me, ask Folker to let you join the front," were the words he had fired off at the time.

*Well then, it's fine.* Walt was not to sort to agonize endlessly. If there was something that he did not understand, he would just have to check with his own eyes and his own sword.

Wrapping it in that extra layer of meaning, Walt vowed to himself that he would, without fail, cross swords with the man who called himself the crown prince.

And thus, when the drums resounded, six hundred from Zaas Sidious' Spear of Flames Division were the first to sally forward. Most of them were infantrymen but there were also about two hundred of the soldiers who carefully carried guns. Two cannons mounted on wheels were being pulled by horses, and twelve airships flew overhead.

A further two hundred soldiers were advancing in front of the main force of six hundred. They had neither armour nor guns, and their appearance was truly wretched. They were what was known as battlefield slaves. They were in essence human shields, and, in accordance with what could be called the Sidious House's traditional way of waging war, that family's troops always marched while pushing the slaves before them.

While the tactic might seem despicable, both Zaas and his father were very

good at grasping the slaves' hearts.

Each individual slave was only sent to the battlefield once. If they survived, they would be free. Of course, if the person themselves wished for it, they would officially be appointed as soldiers. The possibility of death was certainly very high, but, holding on to the thought that – *if I can just make it through this one time* – the slaves turned into demons of war. Sometimes, that spirit even allowed them to surpass soldiers who had been tempered through years of experience. Hoisting up spears and brandishing crude blades, they marched on with rough footsteps.

“Don’t hurry too much,” Zaas hurled the order from atop his horse. “Walk slowly enough to give the enemy plenty of time to get scared.”

When they arrived within sight of Jozu Fortress, the air reverberated with a loud booming noise.

The fortress had fired the first shot.

When the cannonball crashed into the ground, fragments mixed with earth and sand were sent flying in all directions. Although they were still far, Zaas' horse reared up on its hind legs and whinnied.

While forcefully bringing it back under control, Zaas roared, “Go, go, go!”

Away from the ranks of soldiers, on either side of them, the cannons returned fire. As they were not fixed in place, they were low on precision, but that also meant that they draw away the aim of the enemy guns.

While both sides exchanged their first shots with the roar of cannon fire, Zaas sent a messenger to Folker.

"So they still aren't moving?"

It was to be expected that those in Jozu would not move having drawn the enemy to them. However, even though Zaas' troops had positioned themselves in such a way that their flank was open for attack, there was absolutely no movement from Tolinea.

Meanwhile, in Jozu Fortress, a messenger had come running.

*Folker Baran, was it?*

When Orba heard the report that although Zaas' infantry was gradually drawing closer while returning fire, the enemy was not otherwise taking action, it was only then that he truly became aware of the enemy commander.

The Western army's appearance at the border meant that Folker had to quickly subdue Orba's side, yet the enemy commander was remaining superbly calm.

On top of that, he was willing to make sacrifices in order to set up a tactic that allowed him to sound them out. When it came to sheer audacity, Folker did not fall behind Orba.

Tolinea did not currently have the manpower to allow them to move soldiers. Or rather, it did, but now was not the right time to unleash them. Even if the enemy had acted as they had anticipated and attacked on two fronts, they had only arranged for enough riflemen to be able to hold the fort, so there was no way for them to hinder Zaas' assault by attacking his flank.

*He actually did it.*

Jozu was merely one of the decoys to lure the enemy in. It was a strategy that meant incurring damage, but until the detached force had completed their manoeuvre, and even if they were driven to the point of having only a single soldier left with only a single gun to use, they had to defend their ground by every possible means.

*He saw through us.*

Orba hurriedly ordered that a messenger be sent to Tolinea. To request that several airships for Jozu. Attacking Zaas' flank was one way of steering the enemy their way, but in all honesty, he would have preferred for Tolinea to make a move without his having to dispatch a messenger.

It was proof that they did not have good coordination.

Although scattering soldiers had since long ago been recognized as a stupid tactic, if they could move with flawless coordination, conducting their operation as though the entire group were but one person, then it would be the same as though hardly any soldiers had been scattered at all. But for all that Rogue and Odyne were comrades whose sympathies were aligned with the prince's

position, their relationship with him was not one of having conducted operations together since way back.

Zaas' troops had finally all but closed in on Jozu. First, the airship flight that accompanied their march used a hit-and-run tactic, then, when the enemy fire had been drawn upwards, the slave unit began its charge.

Of course, the firing from the fortress was intense. Bullets poured down like rain. They pierced into the slaves one by one, and one by one their fallen corpses piled up on top of each other to form a small hill in front of the fort.

Zaas was giving orders for the deployment of each platoon of riflemen to return fire, while at the same time ostentatiously flying the flag of the Sidious House from his horse as he galloped left and right, bellowing the whole time.

"Don't be afraid. Look, they haven't even grazed me. The enemy is just a group of cowards who have been fooled by an impostor after all. Bullets fired by the likes of them won't reach us spirited warriors!"

Despite his age, his manner was in every way that of an imposing general.

While the gun fight was unfolding, airships came hurrying from Tolinea in the east, but Zaas was quick to respond to the threat and ordered the airship flight from his own side to attack.

At the same time as the fighting started in the skies, back at the headquarters, Folker nodded.

"Ah yes, there is that method of drawing us to them."

The enemy's method was to divide the attacking side in two, draw them to them, and carry out a resolutely defensive battle.

*Are they planning to have the West attack us from the rear when the time is right?*

Folker worried as he stood outside the headquarter tent. In front of him was the map on which was the current battle progress was jotted down.

*No, what if their plan is to make us think that? If we fixate on the West, we'll aim to settle things here quickly and decisively. Attacking once we show a gap...*

Something flashed through his mind.

*With a detached force.*

That possibility struck him. After luring the soldiers into two groups, their method would be to send a detached force to attack the headquarters.

*I've seen through them.*

The reason why Folker was known for being an unusually tenacious Mephian commander was not simply because he was good at salvaging retreats. He was, so to speak, a similar type to Orba and was known for gathering all possible information about the enemy before a battle.

This time around, information had been limited, which was why he had decided that sacrifices would first be needed before they could spread their net. Now that he had obtained his information, Folker Baran hesitated no longer.

"Send a messenger to Yuriah. Attack Tolinea. Once it's burnt to the ground, join up with Zaas. Provide support fire for the attack from the ground troops."

Just as Folker had guessed earlier, their air force was probably lying in wait within the hastily constructed fort. Its defences looked as though they would not be able to withstand enemy assaults for more than a few days, but, supposing the aerial troops had been concealed there, once the enemy had been lured to them, they would be able to throw that enemy into disarray.

At the same time as Yuriah and Zaas were carrying out his orders, Folker would have his own Black Steel Sword Division defend the headquarters. Anywhere where it looked like they might be able to charge at, he deployed troops behind the ones arranged a little in front, creating double and triple defence lines. And –

"The enemy's shock troops might be drawing in on us," so saying, he divided the airship and cavalry platoons more or less in two and ordered them to scout out the surroundings in all directions. In the distance, the incessant sound of bombing and shooting could be heard.

Meanwhile –

"Hup," Pashir's detached force was steadily getting closer.

They had been weaving their way through a grove of trees but, suddenly realising that the sound of ether engines was coming their way, Pashir gave everyone the order to dismount. They were still at a distance, but the airships were definitely flying over the trees. If they continued to advance, they would soon be discovered.

*Have they figured it out?* A tense look passed over Pashir's face. At this point, they had no choice but to go back. He gave the signal and they turned back along the way they had come.

## Part 3

Another soldier came rushing in again. A messenger from the detached force.

It appeared that, as the defences around the headquarters had been reinforced, Pashir's unit was not in a position to move.

Although Orba remained outwardly impassive, he was clenching his fists so tightly that the muscles in his arms had bulged to twice their usual appearance.

Moreover, Yuriah's fleet had started advancing on Tolinea. Including the flagship, it contained four cruisers. Each of them carried six airships and was being escorted by a further three airships. The commander, Yuriah Mattah, was young even for a Winged Dragon officer. He considered that the doctrine of using large, heavily armed warships was outdated. He believed that, at least when one was on the attacking side, it was best to make full use of mobility in the sky.

Even with the fleet approaching, there was no conspicuous movement from Tolinea.

*Do they not have that many guns?* Yuriah Mattah wondered from the bridge of the flagship, and he had one of the other cruisers lead the way.

Sure enough, even when they were within cannon range, there was no movement from the enemy. Yuriah gave the cruisers the order to start bombing.

The trees bulged along the surface of the ground and one of the watch watchtowers was blown away. Right after that, a number of enemy airships flew out in apparent disorder from behind the hastily built fences.

"Ah, we've smoked them out," Yuriah chuckled to himself. Following standard practice, he had the ship momentarily pull back; then thrust a lit torch into the nest to scatter the noxious insects.

Still, Tolinea was a little too weak for a “nest”. There could not have been more than ten airships that took to the sky.

Very soon, the aerial battle started but from the first, Yuriah’s side held the momentum. And not only because of their numbers. In terms of tactics also, there was a wide difference between Yuriah’s and the enemy side.

“Humph,” Yuriah smiled scornfully as he observed the situation through a pair of binoculars.

The enemy was surely the Dawnlight Wings Division led by General Rogue Saian. He was, undoubtedly, a highly-experienced commander; but when it came to tactics for the use of airships, Yuriah had a slight edge thanks to having studied the newest strategies at the Military Academy.

All that the enemy did was charge as though they were cavalry riders, swivel around, then take up the exact same posture to do the same again. During the war against Garbera however, Mephius had been able to study the techniques of an enemy that excelled at handling airships. And their latest tactics had been taught at the Military Academy.

Always send out airships in groups of three in aerial combat, and have one ship lure the enemy to create an opportunity for the other two to attack it from the rear. These were the basics that Yuriah had had hammered into him. And just like him, his subordinates were young. They had made these flexible tactics their own.

On the opposing side, Rogue’s airship units were completely unable to compete with this method. They were barely able to scatter and run without having shot down a single one of Yuriah’s crafts.

Whereupon, the airships immediately commenced their bombing operation. As the defence line crumbled still further, the ships drew near for a second round of bombardments. The hurriedly constructed fort was collapsing.

Meanwhile.

“Your Highness.”

While the attack on Tolinea Fort had begun, Orba was still clenching his fists. Although Shique had been calling repeatedly for a while now, he did not



answer.

“Your Highness!”

“What?”

He finally turned to look at Shique.

“Tolinea will fall. Even if we use that to attract the enemy’s ground troops, Pashir still won’t be able to move. This is...”

“This is?”

"Should we launch ourselves at an early stage than the one planned for? If a chance comes up to bring that out in Tolinea, we could hugely disrupt the enemy lines."

Zaas Sidious' forces were still closing in on Jozu Fortress. While gunfire was still being exchanged, they had finally started to set up the large-scale guns.

*It's no good!* Orba screamed, but only inwardly.

Certainly, their strategy had relied on launching themselves at the cost of there being victims among them. But that was only after the enemy had been drawn further in, when Pashir's unit would have been on the verge of breaking into the enemy camp.

Since Pashir's troops had not yet lit a beacon, it meant that they were not yet able to attack. If they launched themselves at this stage, how long would they be able to hold out, waiting for their shock troops?

"Your Highness, we can go with that option," Odyne also spoke up, but that option seemed to lead to almost certain death.

*There has to still be something* – thought Orba. Something which would allow them to remedy the state of the battle other than a suicide attack that would cost an untold number of lives.

At that very moment however, Yuriah's air force, which had effortlessly broken through the aerial defence line, closed in on Tolinea Fort.

He did not order an immediate bombardment as they could get information from the sky. At the news that his ships returned with, Yuriah's smirk grew

wider. On the other side of what appeared to be a hastily-constructed abattis<sup>[3]</sup>, there was only one single old-style cannon manned by a small number of artillerymen, as well as a huge pile of tree branches.

"I see, so once they had drawn our soldiers in, they were planning to set them on fire." The leaves and branches were no doubt those that had been accumulated when they were building the fort. "Then we'll save them the trouble. Notify the fifth platoon, they're to bombard Tolinea's fort. The third and fourth platoons are to guard them. The remainder are to drive enemy airships from the sky."

Even now, Yuriah still did not send out all of his ships. Rogue Saian's flagship, as well as the vessels which should have been seized when they captured Jozu Fortress, had yet to appear on the battlefield, which was why he kept some back in case of need. However, the sky remained clear of the enemy ship.

Was it being used to fortify Apta's defence? Or was it on standby behind Jozu Fortress in order to evacuate the military personnel? Either way, it had lost the chance to fly to Tolinea's defence. It was safe to say that the enemy had been a step too slow to make good use of their air power.

The fifth platoon started dropping ammunitions from the sky above Tolinea. They did not need to repeatedly circle and bomb the target; because of all the dry wood, the fire spread quickly and Tolinea Fort was soon engulfed in raging red flames.

The soldiers within the fort threw aside their guns, looking like baby spiders as they scattered and ran. Rogue's airships had already escaped into the sky.

"Tolinea has fallen. Good, let's hurry to go support General Sidious. Turn around," shouted Yuriah Mattah. At the same time,

"Your Highness!" In Jozu's command room, Shique likewise raised his voice. "We have known from the start that we are at a disadvantage. Since they are coming from Tolinea, we should also attack. At this point, the enemy - right, the enemy should start to get careless at this point. If we can link up with Pashir's unit on the way, we can probably draw up to the enemy headquarters."

His face pale, Shique loudly spoke his thoughts. Orba looked at him from

sideways on and glared.

"Don't interfere. You don't understand anything so shut up."

"No," Shique's gaze did not flinch.

His sense of regret was as strong, no, stronger even, than Orba's. He had known that Orba was not in his normal state. He should have probed more deeply into that and, more importantly, he should have helped him back to a normal frame of mind.

He did not know if it was only because the plan had failed, but it was now obvious that Orba was –

"Your Highness, what are you afraid of?" Shique finally asked.

"What did you say? Afraid," Orba kicked his chair back as he sprang to his feet. His violent inner conflict suddenly disappeared, replaced instead by an even stronger emotion that filled his mind at a terrifying speed. "Are you that desperate to launch a suicide attack? In that case -"

'Go ahead and do it' was what he had been about to say. But at that moment –

*What are you afraid of?*

Vileena's words re-emerged from within his memories and, resonating with Shique's voice, they struck him hard. Orba suddenly faltered.

*Afraid.*

*Am I afraid?*

When he asked himself that question, the burning torrent that had been filling his chest vanished abruptly. A feeling so cold it almost made him shiver took its place.

The image of himself fighting, sword in hand, flashed through his mind. Followed by a rush of images of enemies raising swords, spears, axes or guns with blood-curling yells.

It felt as though a pale, unidentifiable hand was clutching his heart, and Orba stood paralysed.

The sky roared with angry voices, the sound of cannon fire echoed in crescendo, the forest soaked up the blood of corpses until it was dyed red, everything flickered violently until even the bright sun in heaven became entangled in it and silently started falling.

That was –

*Death.*

When he thought about it, Orba realised that for the first time, he was afraid.

He was afraid of fighting.

He was terrified of dying.

It was the first time he felt like that. Which was why it had taken him so long to identify the feeling.

"..."

Orba had experienced countless dangerous situations. Every time, he had wondered if he was going to die.

He had had to survive for the sake of fulfilling his revenge. Put otherwise, if he had fallen along the way and lost his life, his only desire would have been crushed.

It was different now.

He no longer had a goal that he could not die without accomplishing. It was just that now, he had the feeling that –

*I mustn't die.*

*If I fall here...*

Orba's unfocused gaze hardly saw the people assembled in the command room. What he saw in his mind's eye were Rogue and Gilliam and the others that were lying in wait for their chance, and the soldiers who were fighting and shooting their guns. Although it might mean betraying their own country and facing Mephius itself, each of them was prepared to risk their own lives.

*If I –*

If his corpse were to be exposed, the brand on his back would be seen.

The Gil Mephius who had risen in rebellion would be revealed as an impostor and a former slave. He would be labelled a fool and a heinous criminal with ambitions far above his station, who had sought to use his striking resemblance to the crown prince to take over Mephius.

Not only that, but it was obvious that Rogue and Odyne would be presented as villains who had taken part in the plot in order to snatch for themselves the positions of chief retainers.

Those who had longed for Mephius' future and who chivalrously fought, even at the cost of innumerable sacrifices, would merely end up captured and killed as part of a despicable rebel army, their names reviled forevermore.

It was different from when he had fought for revenge. That had been Orba's own personal fight.

And the meaning was not the same as when he had joined the war in the west to bring down Garda. That had been "Ax's battle". Victory and defeat, the honours and the future had all been for Ax Bazgan to carry.

Now it was Orba alone who bore the burden. Of the corpses piled on today's battlefield, of each and every one of those lives.

*Do I have what it takes to carry that?*

Even if it was just one battle, the boy that Orba still was felt dizzy from the weight of it.

And in that case, what kind of person did you have to be to shoulder the responsibility for an entire country?

Zaas, who was fast approaching Orba's fortress, Yuriah who was bombing Tolinea, Folker who was commanding them from the rear and, even further behind them, the one who was pulling the strings, Emperor Guhl Mephius.

Now, Guhl's shadow was like that of a giant, filling Orba's vision. Stretching a huge black arm, he struck Orba in the chest. And, for all he boasted of being forged by training, that chest now seemed as frail as a baby's as the impact went right through him.

Orba staggered and sat back down in the chair from which he had just risen.

“Y-Your Highness.”

“What happened, Your Highness!”

Immediately after, a small tremor shook the command room.

An enemy cannonball had smashed through the fortress’ outer gate. The infantrymen raised their war cries as they began to break in.

Odyne’s men, who been watching for this, and, from the top of staircases, from the covered galleries, from the shadows of pillars, they all started firing at once. Since the plan had been from the start to draw the enemy in, their ambush was fully prepared.

But Zaas Sidious had ordered the battlefield slaves to rush in first. Sprays of blood were spurting upwards. Trampling over the corpses of the slaves, Zaas’ riflemen followed after them. And started returning fire.

In no time at all, Jozu Fortress was filled with gunpowder smoke and the echoes of gunshots.

# Chapter 8: The Battle of Tolinea (Conclusion)

## Part 1

“Your Highness.”

“Your Highness!”

For a moment, Orba did not realise that all the voices calling out were calling to him. The fear that froze him was so great that he had even forgotten the existence of the very ‘mask’ he had gone through so much trouble and effort to maintain.

“Orba.” Only a voice whispering quietly in his ear got through to him, the shock of it reverberating through him as though metal had pierced through his brain.

Shique.

Orba gazed with startled eyes at his long-time acquaintance – at the man who had also been a gladiator, living in an environment in which neither of them knew if the next day would ever come.

Shique drew himself up with a slight smile.

“Your Highness, I believe that I understand you.”

*I know you.*

In this situation, Shique mischievous eyes seemed to be conveying a message intended only for Orba.

“You are a kind person and are worried about our lives.”

*To the point of being an idiot.*

The gunshots and small tremors continued. While the fortress' roof might cave in at any moment and come down from above, Odyne and the assembled commanders watched in silence.

“Apparently Zaas Sidious is using slaves as a shield, but from what I have heard, the slaves volunteered to take to the battlefield in exchange for their freedom. If they can win their lives and freedom, then they gladly go to face death. Naturally, it is the same for us.”

*Orba, that's like you.*

“We have entrusted you with our lives. What we wish to obtain with that price is a bright future for Mephius. Everyone is of one heart.”

“...”

“Does Your Highness think that we are dolls? Is that you cannot bring yourself to damage the dolls that you are somewhat fond of? Pardon my rudeness, but that is looking down on us a little too much. Be it generals, soldiers or slaves, we all have hearts. We can use our own heads to think and our hearts to choose our future. Since we are not being forced to die by an unknown somebody, there is no reason either for anybody to worry about how we use our lives.”

Shique once again came up to Orba and this time stretched/extended his hand to his waist.

With a sound of sliding steel, the short sword that he wore there was drawn. Shique placed the tip of the blade against his own white neck. Before Orba's eyes that opened wide in surprise, he said –

“Die.”

As everyone suddenly held their breath,

“Come, die. Go ahead and die – It is perfectly fine for Your Highness to simply give that order.” He gave a faint smile then continued, “we have already decided that our ideal future is the future that you, Your Highness, aspire to. In a manner of speaking, we have chosen a future of being killed on your orders. Therefore, there is nothing for you to fear. Please use our lives as you see fit.”



Was it mere coincidence or had it been Shique's intention all along, but the word 'Orba' engraved on the blade seemed to collect all of the lamplight within the command room and to emit it as its own glow. What came to Orba's mind was of course the figure of his brother Roan, who had given him the sword. But the scene he pictured him in was not one that Orba had seen himself.

It was his figure as he fought and gave encouragements to his companions in Apta Fortress. Wearing armour and a helmet that didn't suit him, wielding a sword that looked too heavy, he was desperately fighting to survive. He had heard from Sodan, the master blacksmith, that those had been his brother's last moments.

Believing to the end in the commanding officers who had already deserted their men, Roan had rallied his comrades and defended the fortress.

*Believing.*

Orba felt an intense pain in his forehead. The scar left from where a fragment of the mask had bitten into his flesh was giving off heat.

*Roan believed.*

Although he had given the soldiers the order to defend Apta to the last, General Oubary had abandoned them, had used them as nothing more than a way of buying time, and had fled.

Orba's rage against him was unfathomable, but –

*Right now, I'm doing the same thing.*

In the sense that he was betraying trust.

Orba had felt pity towards the nameless soldiers. He had felt guilty at making those nameless soldiers fight. But wasn't it a greater betrayal towards those soldiers if he failed to grasp the victory before his eyes because he was too busy worrying about them?

He remembered the time when he himself had wielded his sword as a mercenary. If Ax Bazgan, or Duncan and Surūr, who had been his direct superiors, had worried excessively about the soldiers of whom Orba had been a part, and had been fixated on keeping them alive, their allies would probably

have faced complete annihilation.

*I would kill that kind of commanding officer.*

The faint glitter of the sword now dimly illuminated Orba's eyes. Those nameless soldiers entrusted their lives to someone other than themselves when they fought, buying victory with those very lives.

On the battlefield, where the line between life and death was extremely thin, that person other than themselves that they had to believe in from beginning to end, the one who gave them encouragement and sent them out to fight, was their commanding officer.

It was not somebody else.

*It's me. Because this is my fight.*

An unusually strong tremor shook the entire fortress. Exactly as though he had been waiting for that opening, Orba once more stood up.

He grabbed the short sword from Shique with all his strength and returned it to his waist.

"Anyone would think you were in charge of bringing me up, Shique."

"Your Highness, I could never hope to be so blessed."

Dust was raining down incessantly from the ceiling but Orba paid it no attention as he opened his mouth wide and laughed –

"Since a father is a father," he said, then looked at everyone in the command room.

Their bewildered faces showed that they were wondering if that was something they should be laughing about.

Orba's expression immediately went back to looking serious.

"Then die," he cried. While they were looking as though they had just been struck in the face, he once more gazed at each of them in turn. "It doesn't matter if it's for my sake, or for Mephius, or to leave your names in history, or for some other, better reward. Whatever the case, if you are hoping for victory, die. Go ahead and die."



Shique bowed his head deeply as Orba continued sharply,

“An order to the soldiers. We’re heading out. Don’t be so much as a second late.”

“Aye!”

“Aye, aye.”

Odyne among them, the various commanders had started to move as though this had all been decided beforehand.

While watching their brisk movements, Orba repeated taking breaths at short intervals to calm himself down. He remembered doing the same thing back when he was a gladiator in the small, partitioned-off antechamber. Once he took a step outside, what was waiting for him was the scorching sun, the earth-shaking roars of the crowd, and an enemy intent on killing him.

Although the positions of crown prince and slave were as far apart as heaven and earth, the situation hadn’t changed all that much. The only point of difference lay within Orba himself.

His heart still held a fear that he did not understand and which did not leave him, as though it were now deeply ingrained in his body.

Orba’s life was no longer his alone. Now that he had recognised this, this fear would probably never leave him during battle.

*In which case* – rather than struggling uselessly to shake it off, it would wiser to tame it. He would need to grope for a way of doing so from now on.

*I’m still like a baby.*

The thought flitted across Orba’s mind. When he thought of how, despite his being somewhat used to handling a sword, there were those who could easily block him; and how, as commanders, there were those who had earned so many military exploits, he was seized by the feeling that he needed to study again from the beginning.

His eyes turned to Shique, who was hurrying the preparations despite looking pale.

*Right. There’s still a lot I need to learn from you.*

Orba's arms were showing a tendency to shake, so he tightly clenched his fists to keep them under control, then he silently called out to all of those who were there with him as well as to all those others who were not there but who were fighting for the same future –

*Everyone, entrust your lives to me.*

The violent gunfight continued on.

At first, Zaas' troops had fallen to the rattle of the ambushing troops' gunfire, but still they plunged in, prepared for sacrifices. Under the cover of their bullets, the infantrymen continued to press on, and, as the enemy were few in number, they became gradually unable to hold their position.

Finally, the inner gate was destroyed and Zaas' infantry ran up the stairs, like a torrent rushing towards the soldiers lying in ambush along the corridors.

The fortress soldiers started escaping with startlingly well-coordinated steps. They had received a signal from Orba, but Zaas Sidious, pushing forth, did not realise that.

“Ignore the escaping soldiers,” he shouted from beneath the horned helmet that had been passed down to him by his father. “Hurry and secure the main positions inside the fortress. Go, go, go!”

According to future historians, Gil was good at “coordinated evasions”.

It was hard to imagine from the historical facts handed down about his exploits and personality, but where Gil displayed exceptional ability was in defence rather than in attack. Using terrain and setting soldiers in ambush was easier to do when defending. Later historians and scholars of military science all agreed that Gil Mephius' strong points were defensive battles that made use of small castles and forts, manoeuvre warfare<sup>[4]</sup>, and that he excelled at luring the enemy by pretending to run away. Above all else, he had an outstanding “eye” for discerning opportunities.

Or perhaps, to echo Shique's earlier words to Gowen, it was closer to a “nose” than to an “eye”.

He could smell with precision the air on the battlefield. Morale, bloodlust, arrogance, nervousness – being able to sense each fluctuating situation within both enemy and allied ranks, he could move in such a way as to create for himself the next “situation”.

Perhaps, rather than an innate talent as a commander, it was something that he had developed by standing on the battlefield as a soldier.

Judging that all the enemy soldiers had evacuated, Zaas had his men rush up to the top of the fortress. They were to fly the standard bearing the crest of the Sidious family.

But they were spared the effort. The fortress’ large structure was shuddering. Cracks appeared in the wall right before Zaas’ eyes.

“The hell!” He wondered whether his own men had bungled things and were continuing the bombardment.

This however was an old trick of Gil’s. He had commenced firing on his own fort.

His artillery had been positioned behind it in advance. There had been no way for Zaas to realise that this was not so as to provide support fire for the fortress, but so as to aim for the fortress itself.

To reiterate what had been said before, both Tolinea and Jozu were decoys. Orba had never had any intention of prolonging the battle. Or rather, they did not actually have the reserve power for a drawn-out fight; and besides, there was absolutely no need to preserve Jozu Fortress for posterity.

Needless to say, as well as the soldiers having retreated, everyone else within the fortress had been ordered to evacuate beforehand.

“The tactics of desperation!”

Although rage coloured Zaas’ entire face when he learnt about the enemy bombardment, he gave the order to withdraw from the fort. The attack had come as a surprise, but it was a truly ridiculous tactic. The actual harm done to his side was minimal.

Conversely, having lost their base, the enemy should be feeling cornered both

physically and mentally. Since they were now all but naked, all Zaas needed to do was to regroup the formation and charge at them.

Meanwhile, elsewhere.

“They have commenced bombardment from the rear of Jozu Fortress,” a non-commissioned officer announced upon receiving the report from a messenger.

“They’re early,” next to him, the general of the Dawnlight Wings Division, Rogue Saian, muttered vaguely.

While flames rose from Tolinea and Jozu Fortress was drawing the fires of a bombardment, the area where they were was almost unbelievably dark.

“They were unable to draw ground troops to Tolinea. We have also received a report that the defence of the enemy headquarters remains firm. They will no doubt have decided to accelerate the plan.”

“Fine, it was never going to be an easy war, anyway.”

Rogue Saian had experienced countless battles. He was not going to be shaken because things were not proceeding according to strategy. It was far rarer for a battle to go perfectly as planned.

His manner entirely the same as usual, yet the order he gave to the men scattered around him was undeniably strange –

“Surface.”

## Part 2

From the very start of its existence, it had not really been appropriate to call Tolinea Fort a fort. It was simply an assembly of abattis and turrets built overnight; and now, having been engulfed in flames, those man-made structures had been burnt to nothing.

In the sky above, Yuriah's flagship and the three other cruisers ignored the flames and turned to fly towards Jozu. The airships that had bombed Tolinea led the way.

Standing on the bridge of the flagship, the general of the Bow of Gathering Clouds Division, Yuriah Mattah, looked back only once to confirm the results of the battle.

He chuckled to himself. It would be nice if those huge, vivid flames could cross the border to the west, he thought.

*Our next opponents will be the western savages.*

With the traces of the flames still smouldering behind his eyelids, he turned forward.

At that moment, behind him, the flames 'cracked'.

What had been one huge mass of flames now split apart into innumerable fragments and were thrown in the air, but Yuriah had yet to notice.

"E-Enemy ship!"

Yelled the soldier who was observing the surroundings from above the deck. His voice reached the bridge through a speaking tube.

"Putting in an appearance at this point?" The smile still remained on Yuriah's lips as he spoke.

Everyone on the bridge turned as one to look back.



And Yuriah's smile instantly faded. To their eyes, it looked as though Tolinea Fort vanished to ash amidst the flames, and a new 'life' seemed to be reviving from within the fire.

The Reinus, flagship of the Dawnlight Wings Division.

With branches and leaves that were still alight clinging to it, the dark red hull suddenly surfaced from within the flames.

Yuriah's fleet had no time to manoeuvre. The Reinus aimed at them from behind and opened fire. One of the cruisers took a direct hit and sunk instantly. Another of the ships had part of the structures above deck blown away and, although it just managed to maintain flight, after receiving a further a succession of shots, it became unsteady and started falling.

"C-Come about, come about!"

Filled with the roars of soldiers, the bridge was in such turmoil that it seemed like a completely different place from what it had been just a second earlier.

By the time Yuriah's flagship had finished turning, the Reinus had risen further into the sky and had released its airship force.

*You're joking – Yuriah was still in shock even as he sent a message for the airship units to return – you're joking, they were concealed? During the bombing, surrounded by fire, under that? Impossible...*

Tolinea was, of course, a decoy to attract the enemy. On top of it being hastily built, Orba's side could not afford to divide their already inferior numbers. And so, they had concealed the battleship under what looked like a large pile of leaves and branches. The plan was that, once the enemy firmly believed that Tolinea had fallen and turned their rudder towards Jozu, the instant their behind was turned, the bombardment would begin.

However, that was the last stage of the plan and was only supposed to have happened after Folker had left the enemy headquarters open to attack. It was meant to facilitate Pashir's assault by mowing down the air force besides causing the enemy's attention to lose focus. Orba having, as it were, switched over to brute force tactics, they were playing what should have been their final hand.

At the command of the Reinus, Rogue understood that they had been compelled to change the plan. Because of that, just like Yuriah, or perhaps even more so, he was shouting out encouragements to his men.

“We have to take the skies at all cost. Never mind if we have to slam into the enemy’s main force, as long as we cover our allies’ attack. Sky Fang Unit, Wolf Fang Unit, give the signal to send out your platoons!” While shouting on from the bridge, he brandished his trusty sword.

A beacon was sent up from the deck and the airships, that had earlier been pretending to defend the sky above Tolinea but which had actually been making a speedy and calculated escape, now returned. The ships that had launched from the Reinus joined up with them. Without missing a beat, they launched an attack from the sky on the enemy ships.

Opposite them, Yuriah had his airships spread out in a defensive formation. He intended to use that chance to have the ship fix its position and start shelling the Reinus.

Ship and ship passed by each other at speed.

Gunfire was exchanged.

Mephian airships were built to look like flying dragons. The scene in the skies above the Forest of Tolinea was like that of a clash between the last surviving winged dragons.

On the ground below.

While Zaas Sidious was temporarily evacuating Jozu Fortress, he intended to round up his fleeing men.

*I’ll regroup the formation*, then charge again. That was the only thing on Zaas’ mind, so when a roar to make all of one’s body hair stand on end erupted from the side of the fortress, he naturally went rigid.

It was the dragoons that Orba had kept in reserve as shock troops. Their slimy wet scales glittering, reflecting the colour of the flames, a mixed force of the medium-sized Baian and Yunion dragons plunged towards them.

The effectiveness of cavalry charges against infantrymen lay in the speed of

the horses and the pressure put on soldiers who could see themselves being trampled under their hooves. All the more so with dragons. Zaas' unit, which had already lost formation, lost to the pressure from the oncoming dragons and fled just as it had from the fortress.

One of Zaas' allies was caught by a dragon's tusk and was writhing and groaning. Zaas was about to go and try to somehow save him when,

"General, this way!"

A company commander pinned his arms behind his back and dragged him away.

"Let me go!"

This commander was one who had served since his father's time and that was another thing that Zaas could not stand. He felt as though on top of being played by the enemy, even his allies were saying – *you're still just a child*.

"Holding our ground is what the enemy wants. General, if you want to win, for now, we have to pull back."

"For the enemy, this is their last chance at victory," another one of the commanders joined in to persuade Zaas. "They won't get us with this. With our numbers, we just need to get back into formation and demolish them!"

Zaas Sidious reluctantly gave his men the order to further withdraw.

Meanwhile, Orba had, of course, also left the fort.

Just before the bombardment began, he, along with Shique and the others, had taken a shortcut to the forest west of Jozu Fortress. The assault unit, Gowen and Gilliam among them, had been kept waiting there. All of them were leading horses, but there was one Baian dragon mixed in among those.

"It's started?" Gowen called out when he noticed Orba.

Realising that Orba was only smiling with his eyes, he corrected his tone.

"... Has it already begun?"

Before answering, Orba looked around at the assault unit. Two hundred cavalymen, one hundred foot soldiers. In a way, they were the choice picks,

but that was with regards to the ground troops of which there had, right from the start, not been enough. Moreover, the most able had preferentially been incorporated into Pashir's detached force, so it was inevitable that, compared to them, they were at a disadvantage.

The mounted soldiers especially had been taken from Rogue Saian's troops and a few dozen soldiers who were "good at handling horses" had even been separated from Odyne's riflemen. Apart from that, what stood out were the Imperial Guards whom Orba knew well.

"After this, we're going to be running into the enemy headquarters," he said. He paused for a moment but none of the soldiers' faces showed any trepidation. "Don't turn around, not even once. Pay no attention to your comrades. Those who gallop forward gallop only forward. Those who fall from their horses are to hold back and kill as many enemy soldiers as they can even if they are alone."

Neither Orba's voice nor his expression was tragic or heroic. It was exactly as though he were simply saying – *there's a guy I can't stand so I'm going to go beat him up.*

Yet everyone there understood the situation. What would be coming next would be a suicide attack pitting their meagre numbers against six hundred ground troops. Moreover, even if they managed to break through, the same number of troops again would be waiting for them at the headquarters.

Thinking about it normally, there was no hope for them to even first break through. However, and although the procedure had been a little different from the original plan, they had dealt a serious blow to Zaas' ground troops and to Yuriah's air forces.

They would stab at that opening.

There was no saying how long the enemy would have that opening, but if they launched a swift, sharp attack through it, there was a chance that they would be able to stretch it wider.

"What's the reward for taking Folker's head?"

Gilliam had his vaunted battle-axe hefted onto his shoulder. Orba flashed his

teeth as he laughed –

“A word of praise from me,” he answered.

“There’s something to be grateful for. So much so, I could cry,” Gilliam roared with laughter.

Orba walked up to the Baian that the dragon-groom from Apta was keeping chained. He had made a snap decision to choose not a horse but this medium-sized dragon. The original plan had been for Orba and the others to lure the enemy reinforcements. Now however they were aiming for a central breakthrough of the enemy lines. Accordingly, it would be better for Orba, who would be leading the unit, to be riding a dragon.

It was a dragon that Hou Ran had been taking care of since their time in Tarkas’ Group, so Orba wasn’t without any connection to it. The Baian groaned as though it had been waiting impatiently. While touching the nape of its neck the way he had seen Ran do, Orba unfastened the dragon’s chains.

Leading the unit, he took a shortcut through the forest.

They were able to confirm the retreat of Zaas Sidious’ troops simply by looking. Most of the dragons that had charged at them were riderless, at most there were three dragoons among them. Hou Ran herself, riding a small Tengo dragon at the very back of the unit, was getting the dragons to move according to instructions from those three.

Orba immediately had the Baian run up to Ran’s side.

“Move the dragons away towards either side,” he called out to her.

Once they were excited by the blood, the dragons would lose the ability to distinguish friend and foe. They might well hinder the charge.

On the Tengo’s back, Ran gave a slight nod and blew on the small flute that hung at her neck. She had once said that the flute had been carved out of the bone from a dragon’s talon.

Although Orba could not hear a sound, the effect was immediate. At Ran’s signal, the dragons moved quickly – some of them too quickly – to get their large bodies out of the way, parting towards the right and the left.

As soon as the path ahead was free, Orba yelled “Let’s go!”

That shout itself seemed to cleave through the enemy. Raising a spear, he started charging.

Trailing a wreath of dust behind them, a group of riders and foot soldiers cut in a straight line towards Zaas’ troops.

“What!”

“U-Uwaah!”

The Baian sent one soldier flying in the air. Following behind him on horseback were both Gilliam and Shique, one wielding his axe, the other a spear. To the left and to the right, two soldiers who were just managing to respond to the attack were cut down.

“I am Gil Mephius!” leaning forward as the Baian ran on, Orba himself claimed that name. “Fools who understand neither justice nor the times. Prostrate yourselves and make way!”

His voice resounded so clearly and sonorously that it seemed unbelievable that he was being violently jolted up and down as he rode the dragon.

That the enemy commander-in-chief – who was also a man who claimed to be the heir to the throne of Mephius – would charge out to the front line on a dragon was a situation that was well and truly outside the expectations of the Mephian soldiers.

Moreover, his face was perfectly identical to the crown prince’s, and for those among them who had ever so much as caught a glimpse of Gil, the shock of engaging him on the battlefield was identical to that of being pierced by a spear or a bullet.

“His Highness!” One soldier fell on his backside as soon as he caught sight of that face.

“That’s the C-Crown Prince! Pull away your spears!” Another ordered, turning to his comrades.

On the other hand,

“Gil Mephius, you said?”

In the middle of retreating, Zaas Sidious heard the voice saying that – or rather, he heard the commotion raised by the agitated and bewildered soldiers. Although he should have regained his calm, once he heard that the enemy commander had come out, he lost it once more.

His blood was not only raging from the prospect of earning the greatest achievement in this war, he also wanted to check the enemy's real appearance with his own eyes. Zaas shook off the company commander's attempts to stop him and turned back along their escape route. While shaking away his men who were getting in his way as they agitatedly escaped, he arrived to see the Spear of Flames Division, feared since his father's time, being effortlessly cleaved in half.

But that was not the only thing that made his eyes open wide.

*Huh!*

The one riding the dragon in the lead was, without the shadow of a doubt, Gil Mephius.

And even as he recognised that, he drew the sword that had temporarily been sheathed.

“Damned impostor!” the cry flew from his lips.

Having run through battlefields since he was young, Zaas had inwardly despised the crown prince. In the Sidious family, what determined the worth of a ‘man’ was one simple and unequivocal rule: how many enemies he could slaughter. And so, whenever he caught sight of the prince and gave him his greetings at the palace, Zaas would look down on him. *When I was your age, I'd already reaped the heads of plenty of enemy soldiers on the battlefield.*

Thus it was unthinkable for *that* Crown Prince to be splendidly leading troops like this, and furthermore to be charging in the lead. Even though their facial features might be identical, Zaas could only see them as completely different people. In a way, it was because he had such a simple and unequivocal rule that he could so easily see through to the truth.

“We fight!” Zaas shouted and spurred his horse onwards.

As Gil continued to strike down the enemy forces, Zaas once again mowed his

through his allies to confront him head-on.

Orba did not recognise this opponent as Zaas Sidious, but he could tell that the young warrior charging straight at him was a formidable enemy.

With all the strength of his youth, Zaas first threw the sword that was in his right hand. Orba knocked it away with his spear. Countless sparks came to life before him.

While Zaas' horse shied a little to the right as the sparks were still scattering, Zaas himself extracted his spear from his saddle.

The distance between Orba and Zaas was now that of a single blow.

And then, a galloping rider weaved his way into that distance.

Zaas' spear was struck from two directions.

It was Shique, wielding his double swords.

"Your Highness, leave this to me."

Hearing Shique call out, Orba nodded from atop the Baian. As he himself had thoroughly hammered into his men, he raced forward without paying any more notice to what was going on behind him.

Zaas was close on his heels but Shique skilfully rode his horse to block his pursuit. He drew up so close to him that the horses' heads were almost touching.

"Eei, move!"

"I won't be moving."

"A paper warrior like you thinks he can be my opponent?"

Zaas gave a broad swing of the spear in his right hand. Shique bent his upper body and returned the blow.

In that time, Orba's assault troops rode past Zaas, raising a cloud of dust behind them.

Seeing through their strategy, Folker Baran had, on the one hand, driven them into a corner, but their desperate charge was also certainly bringing them some pieces of luck. First of these was that they had been able to reel in the



Division commander, Zaas Sidious. Having lost sight of him, the Spear of Flames Division had at the same time lost their centre of command. Be it rallying the soldiers to encircle the enemy from the front, sending the best among them after Gil only, or any other plan to halt the enemy's charge, they could implement none of them.

And simply because Shique understood this –

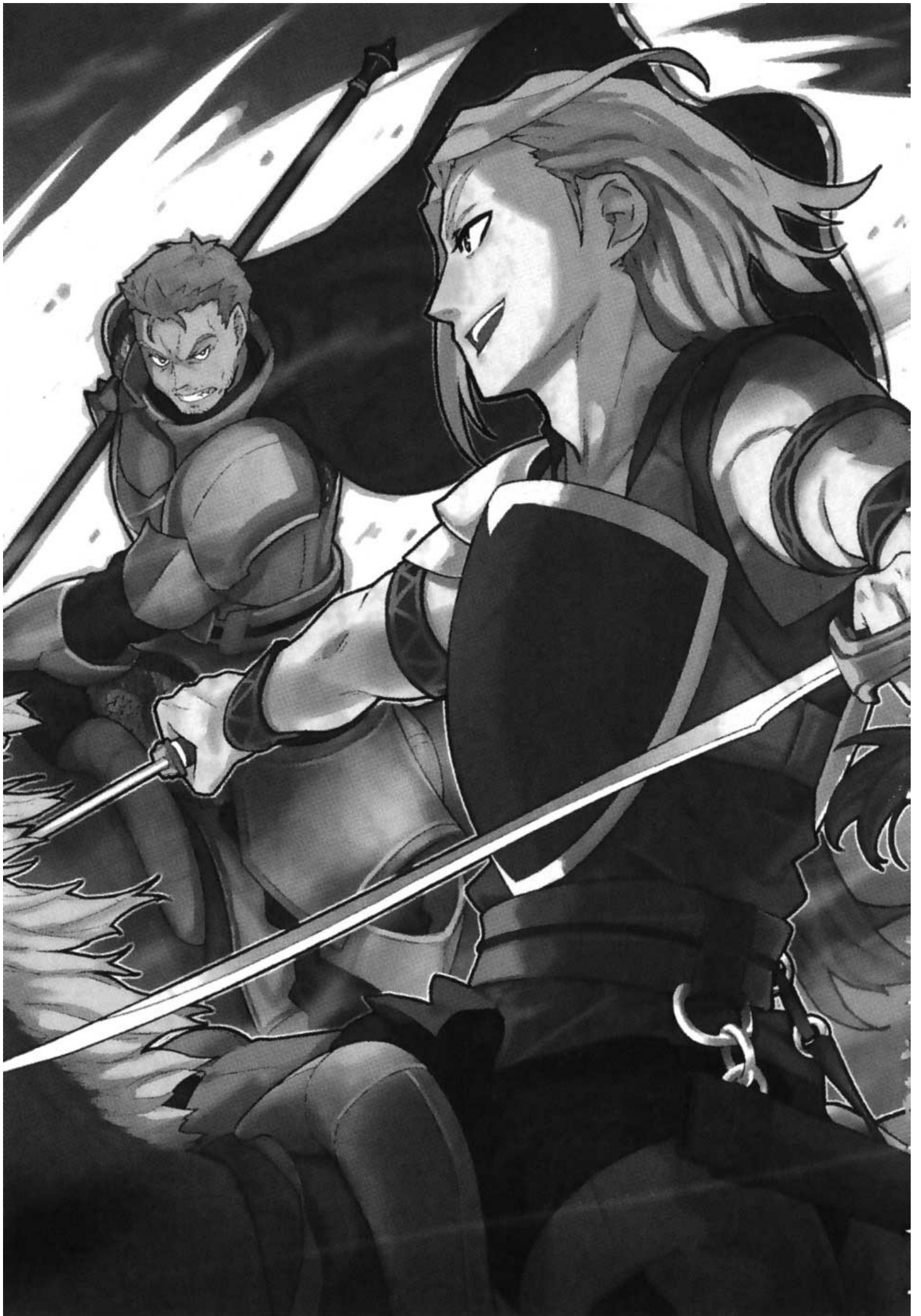
“Hah, according to rumours, the Sidious House has fallen. You can't gauge your enemies' strength. Looks like you aren't half what your father was,” he jeered.

Zaas silently thrust at him. The blade swept over Shique's shoulder. While sweeping it away with his right sword, he was going to slice through him with his left, but the distance was too great.

*Ha ha.*

Atop his horse, Shique laughed. He was not trying to provoke his opponent, but Zaas became even more piqued and spurred his horse closer. Zaas' spear and Shique's swords flashed as they sped, creating a fighting space that no one else could approach.

*Oh, what the hell.*



Zaas' spear grazed Shique's side. He had expected a burning sensation but felt no pain. He immediately shifted into a counterattack and blew away Zaas' shoulder pad.

Neither side faltered.

They lunged for another attack.

The Spear of Flames Division having thus, in effect, been abandoned by its commanding officer, Orba's charging troops tore right through it.

However, there were many lower-ranked commanders that formed its backbone. Even amidst the chaos and panic, they remained unaffected. And many among them recovered quickly, gathered up their platoon or their company, and were starting off in pursuit.

"Give chase!" The company commander who had once pinned Zaas' arms and urged him to retreat now yelled, brandishing his spear above his shoulder. "This is nothing but a desperate charge. We'll catch the enemy in a two-sided attack along with the defence line at Headquarters!"

Although their battle formation had been thrown into disarray by a series of surprise attacks, there was still room to recover. Even though they had the momentum of the charge, taken the other way, that was all they had. If they could obstruct even one step of their advance, they would be able to overwhelm them with their numbers.

"Give chase, give chase!" All around, Zaas' troops were turning around and were about to start their pursuit.

In that moment, a furious roar thundered again.

But this time, it was not dragons.

Because so many canons had fired at the same moment, the overlapping reports had sounded just like a dragon's roar. One by one, holes were carved open into the backs and chests of the soldiers who had only just turned around. They toppled forward as blood and screams gushed out of them.

"Second row, in position. Fire!"

The one issuing the command was Odyne Lorgo. On either side of the enemy

group, his riflemen were laying in position, lined up in threefold rows.

These were the soldiers who had originally lain in ambush at Jozu Fortress and who had fought Zaas' troops there. At Gil Mephius' signal however, they had temporarily drawn back to the rear of the fortress, and had then once more advanced in time for his assault.

When Gil Mephius had been fighting hard to cut through the enemy, a sidelong glance had told him that the riflemen had moved in to flank each of the groups to either side of him in which enemies and allies were mingled.

At that time, Odyne had given strict orders not to shoot. Desperate to provide cover for the crown prince, he had felt like giving the order to fire immediately, but given the situation at the time, they would inevitably have injured their allies. And so, they had been waiting eagerly, hidden behind debris blown away from the fort or nearby trees.

And then the crown prince's troop finally opened a gap through the enemy and the entire group surged through it. Just when the enemy was about to start off in pursuit, Odyne quickly raised his arm overhead.

“Fiiire!”

Under shooting so intense that the area around them was filled with white smoke through which it was almost impossible to see, the platoons and companies of the Spear of Flames Division collapsed.

“Bastards! Come back, come back!” – Some of the units broke up into small groups of fleeing soldiers, while others once more turned around and lunged towards the riflemen. But before they had run even halfway towards their objective, a hail of lead bullets pierced through their entire bodies.

“Bring the cannons here!” The company commander who had earlier issued the order to give chase shouted as he lay flat to the ground. The shooting was so relentless that, if he lifted his head even a fraction, he would probably have his brains blown out.

Dragged on rattling wheels, the cannons finally arrived, but by that time Odyne had already pulled back. After that, his men spread out by company and took up positions that had been determined beforehand, from where they

continued shooting, dulling the Spear of Flames Division's pursuit as much as possible.

The effect they achieved was steady, but Odyne was unable to find 'the right opportunity'. They had lost their base and in their current situation of being without protection from cavalry or infantry, the riflemen were fragile. They would eventually be crushed.

Actually, several units had already been annihilated. That was because there were many among the enemy troops who had turned and fought back, fearless of bullets. It showed that, although Zaas himself might be lacking in experience, the Spear of Flames Division itself was highly skilled.

"Withdraw."

Odyne gathered his men at the point in the forest which had also been fixed in advance as their last line of defence.

*How much time have we been able to gain with this?*

Since the crown prince was at the front line, no matter how long they were able to hold them in check, it could never be long enough.

As he quickly reorganised his men between the trees, Odyne watched for the chance to move forward. It went without saying that if ever Gil Mephius were killed, then no matter how bravely they fought or how hard they struggled, their defeat would already have been set. And so, Odyne could not afford to fear the destruction of his troops. When it came down to it, he was determined that they too would attack without worrying about the future.

## Part 3

Orba and the others charged like thunder, thrusting their spears and brandishing their swords. At each step forward, enemy swords and spears flew through the air to prevent them from taking yet another step. Orba himself had taken blows from spears to his shoulders and legs. Not that he minded them. From his expression, it was as though he had himself turned into a dragon unconcerned with human weapons, and he continued to urge the Baian onwards as he unleashed his spear only on the soldiers who one after another tried to block his way.

A third or more of their troops had already fallen. There were those who had tumbled when their horses had been deliberately shot, those who had been pierced by the foot soldiers' spears, those who had been knocked unconscious when their horses violently collided with each other...

But their energy did not abate.

To stop was the same as losing their lives, and the entire group intently pushed forward, wrapped in a haze of blood.

In the sky, the fight also continued.

Under Rogue Saian's command, the Reinus' surprise attack was a success, but Yuriah's side still had their flagship. The airships on both sides competed fiercely, moving continuously while releasing restraining fire to try and seize even the slightest advantage.

Gunshots and the roar of cannon fire intersected ceaselessly, fragments from fallen airships and cannon balls that shattered into the ground fell like endless rain, and amidst it all, Gil Mephius' troops kicked their horses' bellies and raised clouds of dust as they slaughtered enemies to move relentlessly forward.

At their head, Orba's entire body was so covered in the blood of his fallen opponents that at glance, it looked as though his very facial features had

changed. Blood and flesh went flying as soldiers were crushed under the Baian's forepaws. From the back of his neck to his face, Orba was covered in darkish gore. The Baian roared and seemed about to devour the corpses when Orba pulled on the reins with all his might and kept it in restraint.

In a moment, and from both sides, black lightning bolts streaked upwards. Twisting his torso and dodging the spear, Orba stabbed the enemy's neck with his own spear.

While he was doing so, a group of foot soldiers came rushing to the front of him, so he kicked the Baian's flanks even harder than before.

The dragon's roar seemed to shatter the earth. It started surging forward, half leaping as it did, and several soldiers faltered in fear at its onrush. With only a backwards glance, Orba and his men pushed further and further on.

*This is unexpected* – Orba thought fleetingly as he clung to the Baian's heaving back.

The charge was proceeding unexpectedly smoothly.

The Spear of Flames Division should have been a wall obstructing their advance, yet that wall was weaker than expected. Of course, the enemy was desperately trying to halt their charge, but their movements were disorganised. Although their brave and fearsome warriors were assembled, each was acting individually, disconnected from the others, and they were being overwhelmed by the force of the charge.

*Perhaps* – Orba thought, perhaps the enemy general Zaas Sidious had been killed in the melee, or had been wounded and fallen back from the front.

Mowing down his enemies left and right, Orba had the Baian charge onwards. The suicide unit, Gilliam in the lead, followed behind him. He did not have the luxury to be able to look behind him, so he did not know who was still alive and who had already been lost.

News of the current battle progress had, of course, reached the Mephian commander, Folker Baran.

Again and again, messengers to the rear guard came from all over to announce that the front line had been broken through.

*Right.*

Folker Baran would start to stand up but – *No.*

This man who never lost his composure would change his mind every time. There was no doubt that the enemy had a detached force. If he sent out his soldiers now, they would probably seize that chance to swoop in and attack.

So instead, Folker had his own Black Steel Sword Division align themselves in ranks and take up position to defend against the enemy's suicidal charge.

Although they had been divided lengthwise, the Spear of Flames Division would surely be in hot pursuit at the enemy's back. And with that, the enemy force that had broken through would be caught in a pincer attack from the front and rear.

Furthermore, the rifle units had been moved to either side of the headquarters. Since both the enemy and the allies who were chasing after them would be coming from the front, guns could not be used. That being the case, he had chosen to have them ready for the enemy's detached force that would be appearing from their flank. In place of soldiers with guns at the ready, the heavily armoured Black Steel Sword Division were aligned in rows before the headquarters.

If Folker could be lured into stirring even slightly, an opening might yet be found, but seen from Orba's side, his defence was literally impregnable.

And at that point, the charge led by Orba gradually started losing its vigour. Not unexpectedly, exhaustion was setting in and also, and as Folker had speculated, the raised battle cries of the Spear of Flames Division could be heard from behind them. Zaas Sidious himself was not taking command but his officers of long military standing had brought the troops together.

“Uwaah!”

“Faster!”

Orba could hear the voices coming from behind him. The ones who had not already been shaken off were nipping at their heels.

Orba's unit collapsed.



The formation which had pushed its way through as sharply as an arrowhead, was falling into chaos left and right; which meant that it was losing the strength and vigour of its charge rather than being pushed back by the enemy approaching from the front. From behind them, the foot soldiers of the Spear of Flames Division, seeing a chance for revenge, raised their spears, hammers, and axes.

“Fight!” Orba yelled as he fended off the sword of a mounted warrior while the screams of his own allies resounded. “Don’t disperse, stand firm! Fight your way out!”

At that moment –

“Im-, po-, ssible.”

Impossible, an enemy rider had said from in front of him, but it sounded strangely slow.

Orba felt a violent blow from below.

He wondered if he had been pierced by a spear.

In fact, while his attention was taken by the rider, a foot soldier had seized the chance to slice into the Baian’s leg with an axe. As the dragon writhed furiously in agony, he soon found himself on the verge of being shaken off. Orba’s hands grasped the reins with the strength of a vice and his thighs held tightly to the Baian’s trunk.

*If I fall now –*

He would die, his instinct told him.

The instant that the Baian lowered its head, he felt a portent of violent death and a spear aimed straight at Orba’s head came flying. He bent his torso and returned a stroke that pierced the enemy soldier’s chest.

But by that time, new enemies were already approaching.

He could no longer deal with them with a spear. He drew the sword from at his waist and repelled the swarm of steel in one movement. In an attempt to charge again, he kicked the Baian’s belly, but this was this dragon’s first battle. Driven to a frenzy by the blood and the pain, it did not readily obey.

Orba was also starting to be pressed back. If he could not match his movements to the dragon's breathing, his sword would not reach the enemy soldiers on the ground. His focus spontaneously turned to defence only.

He considered whether he should instead jump down from the dragon and run on foot. However, if he lost the pressure that came from the Baian, he would only fall victim to a line of readied spears.

And then, a rider rushed up from behind and a soldier who was lunging at him from in front with a spear had his head fly off.

Gilliam.

He plucked the spear from the hands of the headless corpse as it slumped and threw it towards Orba.

“Use this.”

This was no time for being courteous.

As they spurred horse and dragon onward, the two of them unleashed certain death at a single stroke against the enemy soldiers who rushed towards them.

Thinking about it, it was the first time he and Gilliam had fought side by side like this. Both of them displayed peerless strength on this battlefield, but in a situation in which they could neither advance nor retreat, their stamina was necessarily consumed at a violent rate. The way before them did not open, nor did the one behind them, and the enemy gradually approached even as they dealt with each row of them.

Around half should already have been defeated.

With no time to obey orders from his brain, Orba acted on instinct, jabbing with the spear and riding the dragon, but his heart was screaming from his having pushed himself beyond his limits and the veins in entire body no longer seemed to have blood coursing through them but fire. It felt as though that fire would burn his life away before he ever fell to an enemy sword.

Every person there was but one warrior, so there were none who had not thought of death. One had to be prepared for it. Orba alone however could not resign himself to death.

If 'Gil Mephius' allowed the shadow of death to coil about him now, the soldiers still fighting would lose their morale. So as to survive to the end, he had to fight to win.

Spears clashed in mid-air. Orba's spearhead stabbed the enemy soldier in the neck, the tip of the enemy soldier's spear struck Orba on the forehead.

With no time to even grimace from the pain, he drew out his spear and prepared for the next attack.

A new cloud of dust rose to his side. Another group was charging forward.

*New enemy troops*, he thought.

For one split second, he stopped moving.

Sweat was running down his face. Even though he had not been conscious of it until now, he watched a drop trickle down and mingle with his opponents' blood.

It stung to the point of being painful.

He closed his eyes.

'Death', which he had been shaking off right until this moment crept up from the darkness behind his eyelids.

The next instant, he opened his eyes.

"Pashir!"

The name of the mounted warrior leading the charge escaped from Orba's mouth when he realised who it was. Pashir's detached force was soaring from within the trees at the side.

Having sensed that the plan would have been modified, he had changed his route and remained on standby, holding his breath, for an opportunity to join up with Gil's dash.

In a sense, this was the moment in which the army that Orba was leading achieved its greatest coordination. Leaning forward, Pashir, in his relentless charge, mowed down the enemy soldiers before Orba. He could well be described as a gale.

Seizing the moment, and all but begging it, Orba kicked the Baian's belly. Go – rider and dragon were connected in way that went beyond words and at Orba's kick, the beast seemed to turn into a fearless warrior. With a roar, it starting running again.

The Black Steel Sword Division had been solely focused on what was in front of them, so the unexpected attack threw their ranks into disarray. With the accuracy of a needle drawing thread, Gil Mephius tore through that open seam, Pashir to his right, Gilliam to his left.

The mounted soldiers following behind them had recovered their vigour. More than half of them were already unable to fight, having either fallen from their horse or lost their lives, but the remaining braves, their hunger sharper than ever, steadily pulled the enemy soldiers apart, tearing the open seam into a gaping hole.

In no time at all, the defence formation that Folker Baran had established was engulfed in the dust of melee fighting.

“Don't do it!” Folker shouted instinctively.

Although he had accepted that some sacrifices would be necessary, that was when he had not believed that the enemy would be able to draw this close. At this time, Folker Baran did not follow in Nabarl Metti's footsteps and do as he had during the battle with Taúlia.

He had 'eyes' that could evaluate the situation. He did not underestimate the enemy simply because their numbers were lower. *We'll concede this one to them* – he decided.

First and foremost, there was no need for Folker to consider this their final battle. Said otherwise, the reason why the enemy fought so desperately was because they had nothing left after this. The enemy knew that if they let slip the chance – not to say the golden opportunity – of victory at their fingertips, the initiative in this war would pass entirely to the Mephan army.

*And besides, there's no need to play along with them in taking huge losses.* If they temporarily withdrew to Birac and reorganised their troops, it would be easy next time to repel the enemy. The detached force that Folker had been the most vigilant against had already appeared. Their greatest gain from this battle

was that they now knew the enemy's entire strength. As they had moreover crushed two of their bases, the next time that Folker led his troops, he would be aiming straight for Apta.

There was no longer anything blocking them.

Folker decided to temporarily retreat from the front lines.

First, as there was no longer any need to watch out for a surprise attack, he called back the rifle units from either side of the camp and informed their captains about the paths of retreat that the main body of the troops would be using.

“Find suitable locations to conceal yourselves in. Divide yourselves up by company. Prevent the enemy from chasing after us.”

Once the riflemen understood their orders and had left, he hurriedly sent messengers to Generals Zaas and Yuriah.

Folker was an able commander who was good at assessing a situation. But he did not have a nose that could smell the atmosphere on the battlefield. Unlike Orba, he had never learned the viewpoint of a regular soldier.

At this point in time, Folker's judgement could be said to be correct.

But the very fact that he had made the correct decision was most certainly the ultimate piece of good luck brought forth by Orba's charge.

Having received their orders, first Yuriah's flagship – struggling to disperse the airship force as it did so – drew back, then the scattered Spear of Flames Division withdrew. Intending to join up with them, Folker pulled up their headquarters.

The enemy were still hot on their heels but, “Ignore them,” Folker shouted in an unusually resonant voice. “Right now, their desperation and resolve is greater than ours. We pull back in order to win.”

If the enemies got lured into closing the distance with them, the riflemen spread out beforehand would deal with them. The one opening the vanguard was Gil Mephius' impostor. Which meant that they might be able to shoot

down the enemy commander-in-chief.

However –

“Halt the horses,” he suddenly raised his arm. He himself brought the Baian to a stop. One after another, his men did the same.

As they were wondering why it was that he was throwing away such a good chance of pursuit, he said –

“Raise a victory shout.”

The riders who had halted their horses, the foot soldiers who had paused their footsteps did as they were ordered, each raising swords, spears or guns, and roared.

Since they came from the same country, it was quite natural, but this was the same victory shout as that of the Mephian army. There could be no greater humiliation for Folker’s troops than to hear it at their backs.

But wanting the enemy to taste nothing but disgrace, Orba did nothing to check his troops.

He waited until just before Folker, having put some distance between them, was about to set up another camp, then gave a new order. He finally brought out the three cruisers that they had snatched from Jozu Fortress. The ships, which had abundant reserves of ether as they had not been used in the battle line-up until then, started out and advanced whilst bombarding the enemy.

Their effectiveness was greater now that Yuriah's air force was in shambles. The riflemen lying in ambush along the path of retreat were smoked out by the flames, and Folker was furthermore unable to establish a new camp.

*That man* – even Folker could not help but shiver. The enemy had anticipated this pursuit right from the start. In a situation in which they were clearly at a disadvantage, he had expected to undoubtedly receive a chance at victory and had kept resources in reserve.

He was no ordinary person.

Or perhaps he was just an utter idiot.

*And here I was going to make myself into a great fool, but the enemy was*

*better at it.* He did not however have the luxury to stay and gnash his teeth in frustration.

"Retreat, retreat," Folker reluctantly repeated.

And in response to that, Orba cried out –

"Pursue, pursue."

Under his lead, the cavalry units, infantry units, as well as Odyne's riflemen who had joined up with them once more, advanced.

But there was one other person who considered that this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Not Orba, who was on the offensive, but rather Walt, the former commander of Jozu Fortress, who was now on the defending side. He and his men had volunteered to be the rear guard for Folker's troops.

Having watched his fortress burn down before his very eyes, Walt's ardour was considerable. Having borrowed some riflemen, he had initially been going to have them shoot from the hill on which the headquarters was established. Under their protective fire, he had then attempted to clash with the enemy forces, but –

*What?* Walt was left dumbfounded.

Leading in the vanguard, the figure of Gil Mephius – or rather of the man that he wasn't sure was Gil Mephius – loomed large. Before he had even noticed that the man was approaching faster than expected, Walt's horse was frightened by the Baian's suicide attack and was preparing to flee.

"Eei!" Giving up on the horse, Walt dismounted and grabbed a spear with an especially long shaft from one of his men. The enemy was already so close that he could smell the stench particular to dragons. "Now – "

*Come* – he was just about to launch a jab for Gil's chest with the spear.

When the tip was sliced off and sent flying with lightning speed. As it had simply been too quick, the astounded Walt followed the spearhead as it flew through the air until he could see it no longer.

From atop the saddle, and instead of returning the blow he had stopped, Orba for some reason started heaping jeers on Walt.

"Do you still not get it, you utter fool?"

"F-Fool?"

"It's praiseworthy of you to face me. Still, I wouldn't have thought that there could be man with eyes as clouded as yours. Come! I'll show you the fight of a true king."

There was no reason for Walt to obey when told to come. But he was simply stunned. And while he was stunned, Orba quickly drove the Baian onwards.

How to best explain Orba and Walt's emotions at that point in time? You could say that Orba had liked this man at first glance, while Walt would have to admit that he was increasingly wondering if this might not, in fact, be the real Crown Prince; although he would have been unable to put that into words or to formulate any reasons as to why.

In conclusion, Walt had, by that point, given up on giving chase.

And Folker was forced to retreat further. If they pulled back one step, the enemy was a step and a half behind them, and so they steadily continued to withdraw.

As evening drew near, the enemy air carriers were at long last unable to maintain flight capability any further and landed, but they then launched several airships that threatened Folker from overhead.

*This isn't good.* Morale was being whittled away minute by minute. Folker decided that it would be simpler to head straight for Birac. Since it had turned into a forced march, they resolutely abandoned their cumbersome packs and cannons. Without sparing the time to sleep, they continued their retreat.

Similarly, Orba was continuing the chase even though night was falling. He was now on horseback. Horses were better suited to long-distance pursuits than dragons. The dragon unit, the Baian included, had been left with Ran at the back.

"Don't rest," he called out to his utterly exhausted men. "You can rest once we've taken Birac."

This was more than repelling the enemy offensive. He was claiming that they



would seize the enemy base, Birac. If Folker had been able to hear him, he would not have been able to take him seriously, but Orba himself was entirely in earnest.

When Birac was finally close at hand, Folker dispatched his adjutant to the city and meanwhile spread out a defence line, temporary and impromptu though it was, to cover his men's evacuation.

*If we can just hold out here* – victory was assured. That thought kept Folker energetic. As he was a man whose expression never changed, he was hard to understand from the outside, but at least there was none of the wretchedness of a defeated army. He raised his reedy voice and vigorously encouraged his men.

And yet it was, in that moment, that Folker Baran's iron nerve was shattered.

"Impossible," when he received the report from his adjutant, who had returned in a panic, his expression turned incredulous.

The gates of Birac were shut.

Maybe its lord, Fedom Aulin, had realised that Folker's army had taken flight and had chosen to let neither them nor the enemy in; but at any rate, no matter how much they beat on the gate, they received no answer. And, as they were doing so, Gil Mephius' troops were drawing closer.

As though to flaunt their overwhelming resources, cavalry and artillery units, accompanied by airships overhead, were approaching left and right like messengers of death.

*Curse you, Fedom!* Folker's expression turned into one that even his long-time subordinates had never seen before. He had finally realised that he had been lured into retreating. The fake Gil and Fedom had been colluding from the start.

Once they lost their path of retreat, they were helpless. Having come to this, there was even the fear that Birac's garrison might ambush them.

*Pathetic.* Folker trembled in anger such as he had never felt in all his life. *To be prepared to lose so many soldiers when fighting, yet to be completely at a loss as soon as someone I trusted as an ally betrayed us.*

But even anger was transient. With the enemy fast approaching, wallowing in regrets and self-pity was not his style. Folker Baran was, to the very end, composure incarnate.

After that, and with no opportunity to hear Yuriah and Zaas' opinions, Folker sent a message of surrender to the enemy side. Orba received the messenger and, along with accepting Folker's surrender, he ordered him to have his men disarm.

"If you comply, we will not needlessly take your soldiers' lives," he promised, and Folker obeyed.

Having gotten his men to prepare to follow that command, Folker rode alone to Orba's camp.

"Been a while," Orba called out to him, even though he knew neither his face nor his name.

For the first time, Folker Baran beheld the man who was their 'enemy'.

He and Gil Mephius truly were like two peas in a pod.

And standing next to Gil, on either side, were Rogue and Odyne, not looking in the slightest as though they had been ensnared by sorcery, completely unchanged from the generals he was use to meeting in Solon. In that moment, various conflicting emotions within Folker seemed to burst with a pop.

"Your Highness," he bowed just as he would when facing the crown prince. "Please let me ask you one thing."

"What is it?"

"The western army that appeared near Bafsk..."

"Did so at my instigation."

"As expected."

"I asked them to move close to the border in order to entice you to us. Don't worry, they won't be crossing into our country."

"Aye."

For Folker, hearing that alone was enough.

And thus, the battle of Tolinea came to a close.

Orba led his entire army into Birac. Fedom must have been vigorously spreading propaganda beforehand within the city, because the populace received them as though cheering the return of a victorious army.

*Finally* – still on horseback, Orba breathed a sigh while being showered in cheers.

Before entering the stronghold, he had carefully wiped all the blood from his body and had changed his armour and clothes to look tidier, but naturally he could not wipe the exhaustion from his face. It had been a fight that left him feeling that he just wanted to rest without thinking of anything for a while, but he would soon be made to realise how great the price of victory had been.

Through the death of Imperial Guard Shique.

# Epilogue

Having entered Birac, Orba did not personally see Shique until after he had shown the soldiers his gratitude for their work and had given Rogue and Odyne instructions about a temporary defence plan. Once the soldiers who had returned to the battlefield to collect the remains of the war dead had brought them to Birac, Shique was discovered amongst them.

When his corpse was carried before him, Orba watched in silence for a moment.

They were in the front courtyard of the castle, which was surrounded by a wall. The sun was already beginning to set and, with torches starting to be lit all around the garden, Shique's feminine face stood out, a contrast of light and shadows.

Orba took a step closer and knelt beside this swordsman who had been laid in rest in the garden.

"When, was he killed?" he asked.

One of the soldiers knelt down behind the crown prince and, facing his back, he explained –

"When I last saw him, he was engaged in single combat with General Zaas Sidious. That was probably how it happened."

*That man was Zaas?* Orba called to mind the figure of the warrior that Shique had drawn away. He was young, but it was true that he had that certain air of dignity which could only come from leading an army. And that man –

"He drew him away all that time, by himself?"

There was neither praise nor condemnation for Shique's actions in Orba's matter-of-fact words. But to the soldier, who had been part of the charge, it sounded like he himself was being blamed. "I am deeply sorry," he prostrated

himself.

"No," Orba shook his head. "I was the one who left him to die. He did well. You could say that it was because he held Zaas back that we were able to obtain victory."

For the time being, the three generals Folker, Zaas and Yuriah were being kept in confinement in the castle. Most of their soldiers had already been released. Although, of course, only after their ships, guns, and cannons had been seized.

"Have Zaas –"

Called here, Orba started to say, but morosely fell silent instead. Having him called would not make any difference. He could not drag him before Shique's corpse, accuse him and yell, "You did this!", then raise his sword vengefully. Zaas Sidious had fought for victory and, in so doing, he had killed an enemy soldier. That was all.

Orba remained in that same position for a short while.

"Isn't that a good face he's got there?" A voice rose up from behind him. Turning to look over his shoulder, he saw the giant Gilliam looking down at Shique's face with deep interest.

Just as he had said, Shique's expression was strangely calm. The face that he had always been so proud of, and that he would not allow anyone to injure was, even at the last, free of any obvious wounds; and he looked as though he would get up any moment now with a, "I was just kidding, Orba. Did I get you worried for a bit?" and start laughing.

However, Shique's eyes were closed forever, colour would never return to his pale, faintly parted lips, nor would his teasing voice ever come from them again.

Gilliam continued, "That's the face of someone who chose for himself the right place to die. Prince, someone as exalted as a prince might not be able to understand, but it isn't possible for gladiators to have that kind of expression when they die."

"..."

"It's only when they finally die that they can be released from hell, and even then, they probably drag their regrets to the other world. You freed us, Prince, but going from being a slave to being free doesn't mean being able to choose where to live. It means being able to decide where to die, without being forced to do so by anyone else. Shique found it. Without resenting anyone or hating anyone."

Whatever it was and whoever it was that Gilliam had intended to have hear that, he said nothing more and turned his giant back to leave.

Orba's eyes returned once more to Shique. If you looked only at his face, he really did look as though he was simply sleeping. Orba, who had always shaken Shique off when he got too close, now took him in his arms and held his head to his chest.

The contours of Birac's ramparts shone brilliantly in the setting sun. But before long, those glimmering outlines were replaced by deep shadows and the surroundings were entirely plunged into darkness.

"If the prince orders it," spoke Rogue, who had come to find him after the sun had set, "we will hold a hero's grand funeral for him. If Your Highness wishes for it, we can even hold a sky funeral, as used for us Winged Dragon officers."

"No," Orba finally stood up. An hour had passed since he had first knelt at Shique's side.

He walked around among the other corpses which had been carried nearby. "He was no more than a single swordsman. A great many others also died in this battle. If we mourn so lavishly for Shique, how much time and money would it all take?"

"Aye."

"The same goes for me."

"The same?"

"Since Father treats me as already dead, going by how His Majesty the Emperor rates me, I am currently no one. If I die, cut off my head, throw it to the side of the road, do whatever you please."

"I understand," Rogue spoke as though his throat were clogging up.  
"However, if Your Highness were to die before this is over, both Odyne and this senile old fool would already have lost our lives. I am ready to obey any of your orders, but that request alone I have no mind to fulfil."

What the old general was saying was that – *if you die, it will be at the last*. That was only natural, since if Gil died, then their goal, their cause, their future, their honour – everything would already be lost to them.

It was not only Shique; be it Rogue or Odyne, from now on, if a sword or a bullet were to approach Gil Mephius, they would give themselves as his shield and would fall as corpses at Orba's feet.

*When I die* – Orba had his soldiers carry Shique to the communal burial ground. While he saw him off for the last time, he murmured in his heart – *when I die, it will have to be at the summit of that mountain of corpses*.

Gilliam had said it. For a slave, being freed meant being able to choose their own death.

Which meant that Orba had yet to be freed.

No, he who should have been released once, had come back of his own accord to be bound by invisible chains.

*I can't choose how I die anymore. I can't just die at my own convenience anymore.*

"I really did something stupid."

While Orba muttered to no one in particular, his gaze happened to fall to where some of the corpses were lined up.

A boyish face covered in pockmarks.

The rifleman who was the same age as Roan, the one Orba had spoken to. A member of Odyne's division had just stooped down to take the gun from the hand which would no longer move. Not because he was organising mementos, but because he was tearing from the dead the weapons and armour that still seemed usable.

Instinctively, Orba was about to go and stop him.

In the end however, he neither called out to the soldier nor ran up to him. The soldier who had wrested the gun away knelt beside the next corpse and started stripping off its armour. Tears were trailing down his withered-looking cheeks.

A few minutes later, Orba entered Birac castle. The lord of Birac, Fedom Aulin, immediately came rushing up to him, his breath ragged. His face bright red, he offered his greetings to the Imperial Crown Prince.

"It's been a while," Orba returned his smile and answered composedly. "Fortunately, you were willing to listen to my call. As expected, there are none more concerned about this country than Lord Fedom Aulin."

Fedom was, of course, the one who had tightly closed Birac's gates and obstructed Folker's retreat. Almost immediately after he had entered Apta, Orba had sent his page, Dinn, to Birac. The letter he had entrusted him with had contained the name 'Orba', which got Fedom to move. After all, Fedom himself was at the origin of Orba becoming the crown prince's body-double.

Fedom now thought up some pretext or another and invited Orba to his chambers. And once it was just the two of them,

"You, you bastard," Fedom drew up to him so forcefully that he was almost grasping him by the neck. His somewhat overly-plump cheeks were quivering. "What's the meaning of this? You were running away up until now, pretending to be dead? I did not give you permission for such selfish behaviour and..."

"Right, selfish behaviour is no longer permitted. But that goes for both of us."

"W-What?"

"Let's speak frankly, Lord Aulin. After I faked my own death, the emperor announced Gil Mephius' death to the whole world. Which means that the real Gil is no longer in this world. You knew about it and you were plotting to use me, not as a body-double but as Gil himself, in order to seize the real power in Mephius. Am I wrong?"

"T-That's..."



"You and I now share the same fate. I've already been prepared for this for a long time. Fedom, now that things have come to this, don't go believing that you can choose your own death."

Rather than being disadvantaged by the distance between them, Orba tossed it aside in front of Fedom.

*He resembles him.* Unable to say another word, Fedom experienced that thought for the second time. Although their facial features were absolutely identical, it was not an impression that he would ever have had regarding the real Gil Mephius.

The smile that Orba now wore on his slightly pale face was exactly the same as Emperor Guhl Mephius'.

# Afterword

Thank you for waiting. With this, we conclude the ninth volume of Rakuin.

Although I encountered various hardships while writing it, there is little avail in going into detail about that here; and if you, the readers, take pleasure in reading this work, I will be happy. Let us meet again in the next volume!

...Since you will probably be annoyed if I left the afterword at that, I had better do my poor best to add more to this.

When starting a new work, an author of course thinks about how things will develop beyond the first volume and they imagine something like an outline in their head.

But, again of course, the entire course of events from the opening to the ending are not set in stone (and besides, if the sales are bad, there are also cases in which you can forget about a series as it will be ended at a single book.)

When I started “Rakuin no Monshou”, and even though it was vague, I pictured how it would develop.

For example, something along the lines of, “If the main character, Orba’s, situation changes like this, then the next development would be this.”

And, although I did have an overview of the essential parts of the story, my mental image beyond that was no more than a great many different ideas; such as, “When this character appears, I want them to be connected to Orba in this way,” or “I want there to be a development that will make Orba say this kind of line.”

As to why I am deliberately bringing this up, that's because when I was standing at the starting line for this series; among the key points that I established then and there was one from this volume that was absolutely central. I knew that one of the things needed to push the story forward was a big event that would have Orba say those lines, or at least murmur them inwardly. Those of you who have already read this volume will understand what I mean.

I wrote this in the afterword of the first volume:

“While experiencing battle, intrigue and love, Orba, this boy who was a sword-slave – what will he gain, and what will he lose?”

The day we have an answer to that might be approaching.

--Sugihara Tomonori

# Translator's Notes and References

1. ↑ Which is the first floor by European count. Floor numbers throughout will follow the US/Japanese counting system in which the ground floor is the first floor, the first floor is the second floor, and so on.
2. ↑ Literally, like a [kijin](#) (fierce god).
3. ↑ An [abatis](#) (or abattis, or abbattis) is a field fortification consisting of an obstacle formed (in the modern era) of the branches of trees laid in a row, with the sharpened tops directed outwards, towards the enemy. The trees are usually interlaced or tied with wire. Abatis are used alone or in combination with wire entanglements and other obstacles.
4. ↑ [Manoeuvre warfare](#) is a military strategy that advocates attempting to defeat the enemy by incapacitating their decision-making through shock and disruption.