



異世界譚

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TATEMATSURI

イラスト / ミユキルリア

2

OVERLAP

Shinwa Densetsu no Eiyuu no Isekaitan

—Otherworldly Tales of a Mythological, Legendary Hero—

- Volume 2 - The Birth of the One Eyed Dragon

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[EGSN]



神話伝説の
英雄の
異世界譚 ②

奉 / イラスト ミユキルリア

「ヒロがないの」

リズ



「……珍しい人がいる」

アウラ



「あなたが望むなら今でもかまわないが」

ローザ

奥黒比呂
おうぐろひろ



神話伝説の英雄の異世界譚 2

奉



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Chapter 0

Prologue

As long as you continue to shine brightly, I will depend on your light and chase after it.

—Just like the sun and the moon.



A number of screams were ringing out throughout the desert exposed to the blazing sun.

The scene is a battlefield mixed with various emotions, where jeers, cries of agony, and the thundering of hooves can be heard.

There are a countless number of corpses scattered about the area. The cloudy eyes of the dead, which were glaring bitterly at the living, seemed like grim reapers inviting them to the other world.

Within the hellish battlefield, there was one area which exuded a different atmosphere.

There is an open circle which almost seems to exist in a different space.

In its center, stood two men squaring off against each other. In their hands, they each held their weapon of choice.

A young boy with an eyepatch and a silver sword.

A man with slightly purple skin and a large sword.

“So after coming this far, someone appears to get in my way... It seems I have no luck whatsoever.”

The man with the large sword smirked in a self-deprecating manner.

His bangs were stuck on his head with sweat. Annoyed, he brushes it up.

When he does, his previously hidden forehead appears and exposes a small, purple crystal embedded there.

In contrast, the young boy's body is relaxed and standing naturally. He is full of openings and his manner implies that his guard is down.

But the man sensed it. He sensed the powerful fighting spirit with which the young boy was clad.

It is a vigorous spirit which one obtains through many years of battle and self devotion.

For a boy this young to exude such spirit is certainly praiseworthy.

He laughs at the fact that a warrior so fierce is so much younger than himself.

“Hehe, hahahaha... Is this what you call naturally gifted?!”

The man took his large sword, which was almost as tall as him, and swung it up as if it were a small twig.

The large sword which kicks up a cloud of dust, causes the wind to howl, then makes its way toward the young boy with the eye patch.

The young boy responds with a small motion of lifting his silver sword up.

As the blades met and gave off sparks, the large sword slid along the top of the young boy's drawn blade.

“Ohh— Not bad!”

After being pushed aside, it looks like the man will be left wide open.

However, the man used the force of the sword's swing and unleashed a palm strike toward the young boy with the eye patch.

It should have been in the young boy's blindspot, but...

“That's not a blindspot. I can see it.”

The young boy says, as he twists his body and successfully avoids it.

However, that large movement by the young boy left him open.

If his opponent were an average person, they may have rushed in to this opportune chance.

But the man realized it was a trap.

He dug his toes into the sand and swung his leg up.

A large mass of sand flew towards the young boy with the eyepatch.

As it does, the man kicks the earth below him and jumps back to create some distance.

Then, he feels a strange sensation in his right arm so he looks down.

A gaping wound was split open with blood dripping down.

(Maybe it was a good thing I didn't fall for his trap...)

As he returns his gaze, the cloud of dust which was covering the young boy's field of view was shaken off with a flash.

The sweat slipping off the man's forehead travels down his cheeks. After he lifts his shoulders and wipes it off, the corners of his mouth turn up.

"I admire you, even though you're an enemy. It makes me wonder how it is that you've reached such lofty heights of martial arts at such a young age. But I can't just stand here in admiration. I have to change the flow of this battle."

Their gazes cross.

They try to read one, two moves ahead. The one who successfully reads their opponent's next move will be the victor.

And so, they cannot make any careless movements. A nervous wreck, the man focuses only on taking the initiative.

He trembles with excitement— His body shakes in utter delight. Deep down, he's welling up with joy.

He's enjoying this life or death battle so much that he can't contain himself.

"Why don't we battle this out until one of us dies— right, "one-eyed dragon"?! The last man standing is the victor! Nice and simple, right?"

The man's dry lips split into a crescent shape. As he twisted his body and readied his sword, a cloud of dust surrounded the tip of his sword.

"That's fine with me."

Again, the young boy raised his right arm to chest height, held his silver sword horizontally, and pointed it at the man.

Chapter 1

Departure

Imperial Year 1023, July 13.

Fort Belk, Central Tower. A young girl's shrill voice echoed out.

"Hiro~! Where are you~?"

A crimsoned haired young girl was running around the third floor of the central tower with concern in her voice, like a mother looking for her lost child.

Seeing the Imperial Princess running around before their eyes, the patrol soldiers hold back laughter.

With this, the Sixth Imperial Princess's dignity is out the window, but her popularity with the soldiers is currently going up as a friendly member of the Imperial family.

The crimson sword, "Laevateinn", was hanging by her waist, and in her long, slender, beautiful hand was an envelope.

It can be surmised from the gold and red colors that the envelope was once dazzling. Unfortunately, it had transformed into something that was hard to distinguish as a result of her grip.

"Hi~ro~! Geez, where did you go?!"

Having newly been appointed the commanding officer not too long ago, this fort is like a maze to her.

And so, it's difficult for her to search for one person. She has no choice but to look for him while shouting out.

"Grr... It's Hiro we're talking about, so I thought he'd be on the third floor."

The third floor of the tower has mainly been turned into a storage area. Because it's spacious with few rooms, books and tools are stored on this floor. It also currently serves as Cerberus's den, so it has become a problem where soldiers who come unannounced are threatened by his presence.

"I wonder if I should try going back to Hiro's room..."

As she thought this, a door opened to a dimly lit room further in. From there, Cerberus came out, and behind him was Hiro, stifling a yawn.

"Hiro!"

"Liz?"

Hiro's face turns towards Liz. It's rather difficult to make out his expression because of the eyepatch covering half his face.

Liz rushed over to the approaching young boy.



"I was looking for you."

"Oh, sorry. There was something I wanted to look up over there."

Hiro turned back and looked towards the room which was filled with material on the fort's history.

Hmm~ Liz takes a glance at the door over Hiro's shoulder, then places her hands on her waist.



“It’s nice that you’re passionate about your studies, but make sure you tell me where you’re going.”

After Hiro complained about the abnormality of his eye, Liz had become a bit overprotective.

Unsure of whether or not to consider her a worrywort now, Hiro smiled slightly.

“I’ll be careful next time. So what’s wrong?”

“Oh, right. This.”

Liz held out an object that could be considered trash.

Hiro took the long, thin, crumpled item and opened it cautiously.

Although it was obviously a letter, you could hardly tell because it didn’t maintain the shape of one.

“This is a letter, right?”

“It’s a letter from father.”

“...A letter from the emperor?”

“That’s right...”

“Why does it look— like a piece of trash?”

“Ahh, I did that.”

Hiro dropped his shoulders and sighed. It was a sigh filled with a deep sadness.

“Was there something bad written in it?”

“I didn’t read the contents. It’s addressed to you.”

“...To me?”

“Remember? Me, Aura, and my uncle sent out a letter of protest about my brother’s actions, right?”

“Now that you mention it, you guys did stay up all night writing that.”

“A reply finally came for it.”

Liz is enraged that it came at nearly a snail's pace. Even now, she looks about ready to stomp her feet.

Hiro looked at the letter and tilted his head.

Liz and the others were the ones who sent the protest letter.

So he had no idea why the reply came to him.

Since Aura probably hasn't arrived in the west yet, it should have come to Margrave Grinda or Liz.

"Well, I'll find out once I open it."

He undid the seal while praying the contents were harmless.

There was a single sheet of white paper. There are creases, but it isn't as bad as the envelope.

He opens the folded up paper...

I have learned the gist of the situation from my beloved daughter.

I have also heard of the battle with Lichtein.

I would like to praise you for your deeds, but there is something that lies heavier on my mind.

I wish to ascertain the credibility of your being a descendant of the Second Emperor.

After doing so, I will hand down an appropriate punishment unto the First Imperial Prince.

And so, I would like for you to come to the Imperial capital.

48th Emperor, Greiheit.

"Hmm..."

"What did it say?"

"It says to come to the Imperial capital because he wants to praise me for my deeds."

“What about my brother?”

“That he’ll hand down an appropriate punishment.”

“Yes! Well, think about what he did to you. That’s to be expected!”

The corners of Hiro’s eyes softened at the sight of Liz jumping up and down for joy. Hiro goes into thought after reading over the letter once more.

(The Imperial capital, huh...)

He doesn’t know what awaits him there. He will likely have to be cautious when he goes.

As Hiro watches Liz jump up and down, he shakes his head and decides he can’t possibly take her with him.

(But, she’ll probably tag along...)

Looking back at how she’s been treating Hiro lately, it’s likely she’ll tag along with him no matter what.

As he was thinking of how to convince her not to, she stopped jumping.

She turned around, and her eyes were twinkling.

“Hiro, we have to hurry and get ready.”

Just as he thought. She’s just bursting at the seams to go with him.

“You can’t. You’re the commanding officer here. Besides, it wasn’t written here for you to come, too.”

Liz— If he takes the Sixth Imperial Princess with him, it’ll turn into a big deal.

Unlike before, it’s no doubt safe because the Emperor is there, but just in case, he has to have her stay.

Plus, Hiro would feel better if she stayed because the Fourth Imperial Army has their watchful eyes on Margrave Grinda's territory.

"Eh—... I want to go with you."

It made him want to take her after she puffed her cheeks in protest, but regardless, she still can't go... is what Hiro tells himself.

"We can't say the area around Fort Belk is safe yet. It would mean trouble if you, the commanding officer, weren't here if there was a problem, right? And there are a bunch of documents piled up. There are some that need your signature."

"Hmm..."

He was thinking she just needed one more push... But Hiro came up with a bright idea.

"All right, fine. If you really want to come with me, you have to finish your work."

"Eh—... Tris will do it for me."

"Tris is... you know, he has muscles for brains, so, it's hard to say this, but paperwork doesn't suit him."

"It doesn't suit me either, you know."

"Right... That's true, but you're better off than Tris. You can do it."

Hiro wanted to cry. He prayed for an exceptional administrative officer to become one of her subordinates.

For now, he'll try asking the emperor after he arrives in the Imperial capital.

"...I can go with you if I finish my work?"

Hiro cleared his throat at Liz, who was looking at him with upturned eyes.

As he restrains his urge to hold her, Hiro opens his mouth.

“O-Of course. So hurry up and go.”

“Alright! It’s a promise! I’ll go finish up that paperwork and be right back!”

“...It’s not an amount you can finish in one day though.”

Hiro muttered to himself as he gazed at her leaving while waving her hand.

As he tried to head to his room to prepare to leave for the capital, he noticed Cerberus by his feet, looking at him with accusing eyes.

“I-I’m not lying... I’ll really take her with me if she finishes her work today.”

It’s just simply not an amount of work that can be done in one day.

Hiro ran off as if he were escaping.

Cerberus let out a yawn and began to drift off.



It was around the time when all but the night watchmen were asleep.

There was a suspicious person in the hallway of the second floor of Fort Belk’s central tower.

The man, who was moving quietly while sticking to the wall, reached a faintly lit room.

As he holds his breath and peeps in through the opening of the door, he sees a girl sleeping on a work desk piled with documents.

The man’s lips form a smile and he places his hand on the door knob.

“What are you doing?”

The suspicious person hears a voice come from behind him, and in a panic, he distances himself from the speaker.

The face of the large man holding a lamp in one hand completely changed from one of puzzlement to indignation.

“You bastard... Were you planning to attack the princess?!”

“N-No! That’s not it, so be quiet! Liz is going to wake up!”

“...Not just once, not twice, not even thrice, but a fourth time now?”

“They’re all misunderstandings.”

The suspicious person— Hiro is angry at the false accusation.

Tris drew his sword and approached Hiro.

“Hmph, well... I’ll listen to your excuse at least.”

Unlike before, just the fact that he’s willing to listen shows that he may have mellowed out.

Hiro let out a sigh of relief and explained the situation.

“Hmm. You were trying to make sure the princess was asleep before you left?”

“That’s right. I can’t possible take Liz with me, right?”

“That is true. I would also like the princess to remain here. Putting that aside, you’re a descendant of the Second Emperor, boy. You should be allowed a small escort.”

“Even if you and Liz believe me, there are probably more people who doubt me, the Emperor included. An escort might cause unnecessary provocation, so I think it’s better not to take one.”

Until he is acknowledged by the Emperor, he is less than a commoner. He should be as submissive as possible.

If Liz is to fulfill her dream, they need make more friends than foes.

Keeping the future in mind, he wants to avoid making any bad impressions.

“Aren’t you worrying too much? Besides, you’re the only one with black hair and black eyes, boy. That alone might serve as proof.”

“Anyone can make themselves out to look like they have black hair and black eyes.”

If push comes to shove, he’s even thinking of taking out “Excalibur”, but he’s going to

save that for when he has no other options.

An audience with the Emperor. There's a high chance that First Prince Schtobel will be there as well.

If he took out "Excalibur" before the Emperor, there would be an uproar about an assassination no doubt.

That man would likely come attacking, no questions asked. That would lead to a worst case scenario.

Schtobel would become a hero who protected the Emperor, and Liz would be executed as one who sent an assassin.

The place which Hiro is heading for, is the Imperial Palace, a whirlpool of various desires.

There's no harm in worrying too much.

"Okay, I'll be leaving now."

"All right. Are you sure you don't need an escort?"

"Yes, it's okay."

"But you can't ride a horse, can you, boy? What are you planning to do?"

"I'm planning to go meet Margrave Grinda by foot."

He's pretty certain there was a stagecoach in Links.

Hiro was thinking of riding that to the Imperial capital.

"Then I'll give you something nice. Follow me."

Tris smirked in a menacing way. After turning his back to Hiro, he briskly walked into the darkness.

Though Hiro tilted his head in confusion, he followed after him.

Chapter 2

Village

It's a clear day without a cloud in sight. The sun hanging in the sky beats down relentlessly on the earth.

There were animals running across a lush plain, and the scent of the flora was riding a gentle breeze.

A creature smaller than a horse, but incomparably faster, is dashing along while kicking the ground beneath it.

Riding on its back, was a young boy clad in black.

(Even I can ride this... Amazing! And it's fast!)

The wind beating on his cheeks feels good. It's almost as if he's become one with nature.

Hiro was riding a creature he received from Tris called a "shiryu"*.

(TL note: Kanji is "swift dragon".)

It is a foreign species which is naturally found on an archipelago called Shaitan, east of the central continent.

An adventurer captured and brought a number of them from the Shaitan archipelago about 300 years ago, but they escaped and multiplied.

"I can just race straight past Margrave Grinda at this rate!"

He has a rough map in his head which he drew from his memories from a 1,000 years ago, and the current maps which were in Fort Belk.

But because his familiarity with the land had become dull and he thought there was a chance of getting lost, he decided it would be better to use the stagecoach.

Although there was no time limit written in the Emperor's summons, it was probably best to get there as quickly as possible.

And so, he is currently heading for Links.

He will likely reach the town by tomorrow morning at this pace.

However, a journey is such because things don't go as planned.

Hiro sensed the faint scent of blood mixed into the air.

(Over there, huh...)

It was drifting over from a small village a little ways away from the highway.

Hiro dismounted from the "shiryu" at the village entrance.

There is a board attached to a pole pierced into the ground.

It's probably the name of the village. On it, was written "Haltzna".

Hiro took one step into the village, noticed something unusual, and stopped in his tracks.

Even though it wasn't noon yet, there weren't any villagers in sight.

There were about eight log houses erected around a well in the center.

There was a noticeably large building to Hiro's right with smoke coming out from a chimney. He gathered it was some sort of work cabin.

(I wonder if something happened.)

As he walked forward, he saw there were baskets with books carelessly scattered about, and what seemed like farm tools which had fallen onto the ground.

The signs suggested that the people here ran away from something in a hurry.

Something caught his attention as he was walking, so he stooped down and narrowed his eyes.

He saw bloodstains on the ground.

(Bandits? No, that doesn't seem right...)

There's too little blood for a bandit attack.

Based on the scale of the village, there should be at least 20 people living here.

(And it looks too undisturbed.)

A bandit's main goal is to pillage. They force themselves into houses to steal food and valuables.

But there wasn't a single house that was destroyed.

There's the chance that it was a kidnapping, but if the villagers resisted and caused a commotion, the Fourth Imperial Army would have caught wind of it and come right away.

Bandits wouldn't do something so dangerous.

(There has to be another reason for this.)

Hiro lifted his face, and he saw a sturdy looking mansion built atop a foundation of rocks ahead.

He felt a strong presence of people coming from there. As he started heading there, the door of the mansion swung open.

A man came rushing out looking fraught.

[Hey, boy! It's dangerous there! Hurry and get over here!]

As Hiro looked suspiciously at the man who seemed to be a villager, a large shadow soon fell down from above.

A giant bird had appeared overhead. A pair of ominous eyes were glaring down on Hiro.

Its giant wings sent a rush of wind to the earth causing clouds of dust to rise up. Its grim talons shimmered in the light of the sun, locked onto Hiro like a predator to its prey.

[What are you doing?! You're going to die if you freeze up! Hurry and run for it!]

The villager's face turned pale, perhaps because he thought Hiro's legs had frozen in fear.

The man would have known this if he were closer to him, but Hiro's face was calm.

The space around his waist split open, and "Excalibur's" handle flew out.

"You want a piece of me?"

[GURAAAH!!]

It let out an ear splitting roar, and its talons swooped down on Hiro.

However, the sharp claws simply pierced into the ground. Hiro leapt right in front of the giant bird's eyes.

In his hand, was "Excalibur". He lightly brandished it to the side, cleaving through the air as it whizzed by.

[GOAH?!]

A single, thin line appeared across the large bird's neck, and soon thereafter, a flower of blood bloomed in the sky.

With its head severed from its body, the giant bird swirled down as it scattered blood all about.

(...Something's off.)

Hiro looked at it with skeptical eyes.

(That was too shallow of a response.)

"Excalibur" began to disappear as it fell towards the ground, dissolving into the air.

As Hiro looked on quizzically at the giant bird's dead body, the villager from earlier had run over to him.

“Hey! Are you okay?!”

“I’m okay. More importantly, there’s something I’d like to ask you—”

As he turned around, there was a sight that concerned him more so than the man.

The mansion that was visible beyond the man’s shoulders— from its door, out came about ten people all at once, without any sign of life in their faces.

After “seeing” that, Hiro felt like throwing up, and at the same time, a sharp pain traveled up to his left eye.

“Ugh!”

He pressed his left hand above his eyepatch in an attempt to lessen the pain.

“H-Hey, boy. What’s wrong all of a sudden?”

The villager reached out to touch Hiro’s shoulder, who was now kneeling on the ground.

“D-Don’t touch me!”

He vehemently shook him off with his right hand.

BAM—

A loud sound rang out throughout the village.

“Eek!”

“Ah, I-I’m sorry!”

Hiro apologized in a fluster.

The villager shook his head and smiled.

“No need to worry about it. You’re the village savior. You’re not looking too good there. —How about it, won’t you rest in our village? “

“You should listen to Father. We would also like to thank you for saving us from that monster.”

A beautiful girl appeared from behind the man.

(There’s something about this girl, too...)

The pain in his left eye begins to intensify. His “eye” is telling him that it’s dangerous here.

“No... I’m in a hurry.”

Hiro stood up while enduring the pain, and was about to turn around.

However, the girl grabbed his arm, and he was unable to do so.

“At least for just a little while...”

His arm is guided by her grip, and his hand is buried in her voluptuous breasts.

He wasn’t sure why she did this, but this was clearly an invitation.

If he was an ordinary man, he might have jumped at this beautiful woman.

But Hiro felt a chill down his spine. This was because he detected a madness in her eyes which she was unable to completely conceal.

He somewhat forcefully frees his hand.

“I’m in a hurry, really!”

Hiro turns his back to her and runs off.

The young boy leaps onto the shiryu and disappears far out of sight.

The girl who saw him off smiled silently.

“He got away.”

Jingle—

The sound of bells suddenly ring out from nowhere.

The villagers who were behind the woman disappeared.

“*Uranus*” really is troublesome.”

Jingle—

The sound of bells rippled through the air louder than before.

The village falls apart like confetti and gets carried off by the wind.

The giant bird drowning in a pool of blood also disappeared.

“I know. It’s okay. I doubt he realized who I was.”

Every single blade of grass around her completely withered away as if the life was sucked out of them.

“Well, I wanted to see him. But, was it enough for you to be scared?”

The woman stretched her hand out into the empty space. There is a blue crystal embedded into the back of her hand.

The crystal steadily became wrapped in a soft glow. Then, as it let off a remarkably large blast of light, it dispersed into the surrounding area.

“...Hehe, you’re right. I was so happy that I forgot.”

The light converged and a staff appeared in her hand, which she thrust it into the ground.

“Welcome back— *“Desperation”*.”

Jingle—

The sound of bells shook the world.

The woman’s figure disappeared, and only a wasteland remained.



Meanwhile— Fort Belk, central tower.

First floor, officer dining hall. There was a man in a space reserved for high grade officers.

Although he is an old, muscular soldier, the manly atmosphere emitting from his body would not lose to any youth.

Fearing soldiers both old and young, the elderly soldier was well known as an ogre of an instructor. On his face, he wore an inexplicable expression.

“Hmm~... Hooooow?!”

It seemed like he was quietly groaning, but the old soldier suddenly began to scream— The gaze of the soldiers around Tris all focused on him.

However, he was so troubled about something that it didn’t bother him.

Then, a ghastly young girl with drooped shoulders came along.

It was the Sixth Imperial Princess, the one to whom Tris had pledged his allegiance.

“I was abandoned... I was abandoned by Hiro.”

She muttered while she sat across from Tris at a long table.

Liz, who Tris adored to no end, currently looked about ready to die.

Obviously, Tris couldn’t keep quiet.

“Mm, did something happen?”

“Hiro’s gone.”

“...Is that so?”

Knowing the reason why, Tris could only wear a complicated expression on his face.

“I think he probably went to Uncle’s place. He can’t ride a horse, so I think he’ll use the stagecoach.”

Horses excel in reading the emotions of humans.

If they don’t like someone, they make a fool of them. If they sense fear in the rider, they try to throw them off.

However, if you pour your love into them, they are reliable partners who will do as you wish.

In Hiro’s case, he has no problems in terms of technique.

He was able to ride a horse well enough to show that he had practiced a considerable amount.

It was just that the horse would not listen to his commands. Once he was thrown off, the horse would run away.

“Ahh, speaking of horses...”

Tris thought this was the perfect chance and decided to open up about his quandary.

It concerns both horses and Hiro.

“Princess, have you ever ridden a *“shiryu”*?”

“Of course not. They’re of the dragon bloodline. They’re moody and I doubt their pride would allow a human to ride on their back. Even among the Anthros*, who are able to communicate with dragons, I hear only a limited few are able to ride them.”

(TL note: Kanji is “beasts/ beast tribe”.)

“...That is true.”

But Hiro rode one right before Tris's eyes.

Actually, the shiryu lowered its head on its own, and made it easy for Hiro to get on.

"Speaking of which, wasn't there one in this fort? I think I heard that they caught one that was running amok through a village before."

"There was one, but the boy rode off on it."

"Wow~ so you tell jokes too, Tris."

"I saw it with my own two eyes. Before the sun came up, I clearly saw the boy straddle the "shiryu" and take off from here! It was no dream!"

After blurting it out in his excitement, Tris realized his gaffe.

Right in front of him, the ends of Liz's lips turned up smugly.

"I want you to tell me more about that in detail."

She said it in a kind tone, but her voice was filled with rage.

Chapter 3

Zorosta

Imperial Year 1023, July 14.

Having arrived in Links, Hiro visited Margrave Grinda's mansion.

This is Hiro's second visit here. This time, he is shown to a guest room on the first floor.

The room is surrounded by walls on all four sides, and from the window on the west side, you can look down on the north district where the upper class citizens reside.

It can be gathered from the figures of people that those who evacuated have returned.

Now that the flames of war have been extinguished, it seems the town is slowly gaining back its prosperity.

Looking back into the room, Hiro is sitting on a soft, springy sofa.

Sitting across across a table from him, is Margrave Grinda with his impressive beard. Standing behind him is Kult von Tarmie, the man who took care of Hiro during his last visit.

He regularly serves as Margrave Grinda's aide, and is also the steward of the mansion who supervises all its employees.

"Going to the Imperial capital by stagecoach you say..."

Said Margrave Grinda.

After gulping down some black tea brought by a maid, he smiles.

"I'll prepare one right away. When do you plan to leave?"

"I'd like to leave today if possible..."

"Are you in that much of a hurry? I don't think there's a problem with you resting for one day."

"There's something else I'd like to do quickly, too..."

It's best to gain some distance from that woman, even if only a little.
If she's coming after him, there's a chance that Margrave Grinda might get involved.

(...But that was a presence I've felt somewhere before.)

Seeing Hiro lost in thought, Margrave Grinda narrows his eyes and looks as if he's probing for something.

But he soon smiled and lightly clapped his hands.

"Kult, bring me a pen and parchment."

"Understood."

Kult bows, exits the door to the hallway, and turns back around.

After bowing once more, he quietly closed the door and disappeared.

After watching him leave, Margrave Grinda began to rummage through his breast pocket.

"Now... even if you use an express coach, it takes five days to reach the Imperial capital. You can't possibly go that long without any food or drink, now can you?"

Margrave Grinda placed a plain bag on the table.

"Use this to buy food and water."

"No, I can't have you do all this for me..."

He received just a small amount of funds from Tris for his journey.

Eight silver dratz coins.

It's not enough to keep him in luxury, but it's plenty for him to reach the Imperial capital.

No matter how you look at it, you can tell the small bag which Margrave Grinda pulled

out was even more than that.

As he tried to refuse politely, Margrave Grinda reached his hands out.

“No, no, there’s no need to hold back. You’ve done a lot for us. And most of all, I also owe you a debt for saving my precious niece. I don’t think this is enough to repay you, but how about it? Won’t you accept it?”

Though Margrave Grinda wore a kind expression, his eyes showed that he had no intention whatsoever of giving in.

It seems it will turn into an argument otherwise, so he decides it’s best to just accept his good will.

“...Thank you very much.”

Hiro bowed his head, then put the small bag into the pocket of his uniform.

Margrave Grinda watched him looking pleased, but then...

“And if I consider how you’ll be climbing the social ladder, it’s not a bad idea to take care of you while I can.”

Unbecoming of a gentleman, he wore an expression which clearly exposed his ulterior motive.

Seeing that, Hiro strains a smile.

“I will do my best to meet your expectations.”

“Haha, I’ll be waiting with high hopes.”

At that moment, Kult returned. He places a pen, ink, and parchment before Margrave Grinda.

Margrave Grinda smoothly moves his pen in a way to suggest he is not new to this.

“Hand this to the stagecoach attendant.”

Because the ink was not yet dry, he handed him the parchment as is.

“I’ll prepare the fastest coach. The ride will be that much more uncomfortable though.”

The road which the stagecoach runs on is mainly managed by the country and is called the Imperial Way.

Other than being regularly maintained, there are rest areas at fixed distances, and there are stalls at each one which sell food and water.

There are forts in the vicinity of each rest stop and guards are constantly on patrol so that they are not attacked by bandits or monsters. This allows for safe journeys, which the citizens appreciate.

“Be careful out there.”

Hiro heads for the station after being seen off by Margrave Grinda.

Although the sun is glaring down and baking his skin, a cool, refreshing breeze gently caresses him.

While walking away from the mansion, he spots the shiryu which brought him this far. It looks like it’s cooling off in the shade, so he leaves without calling out to it.

He must rely on the shiryu’s aid once more when he returns from the Imperial capital.

(I need it to rest up until then.)

After passing through a metal gate with white walls on either side, he climbs down a slope and enters the north district where the upper class resides.

From there, he passes by the relay station, turns the corner at the bar which is bustling with excitement from the victory the other day, and heads north.

He comes out into an open area, and a tall fence surrounding a lawn comes flying into view.

Within the fence were dozens of sturdy horses being raised for use with the coaches.

A short distance from there is a large station with a roof of logs painted red.

(The Imperial capital, huh... I'm sure a lot has changed from a 1,000 years ago.)

A visit to the Imperial capital after a 1,000 years.

Back then, it was still called the royal capital. He's excited to see how it's changed since then.

Hiro felt his heart racing from the anticipation.



Territory of the Lichtein Dukedom.

There is a port city called Ilnis at its southern tip.

It's a port city bustling with fishermen from the large bounty of seafood harvested there. However, there is also bloodlust mixed in the atmosphere.

Reason being that there are boats with slaves from various countries which come to Ilnis.

A little ways off from the port where many of the slave ships drop anchor, there is a coast where the fishermen land their boats.

In front of a rest area set up on a rocky space, there were some fishermen having a conversation with gloomy faces.

"That's what I thought. You can't pick a fight with the Grantz Grand Empire."

"That's right. Sure enough, the heir to the duke family and their third son ended up dying."

"Even if we're at the southern tip, if the Grantz Grand Empire comes for revenge, we might be in danger."

"Even after having his first and third sons die, it seems like the duke is still planning to attack the empire."

"How stupid. Does he have to die to learn...?"

A voice interrupted the fishermen who were dejected about their futures.

“Someone, grab that girl!”

A plump, well dressed man dripping with sweat is running across the beach.

The man had his sights on a dark-skinned young girl.

“Again,” the fishermen said as they dropped their shoulders and sighed to each other as they shook their heads.

This isn’t an unusual scene at all.

This is because slaves who are sold off, or citizens who are stripped of their citizenship, run away from slave traders from time to time.

That dark-skinned young girl is probably another one of those cases.

“Want to grab her?”

“All those slave traders do is argue. They won’t give us any money.”

“Forget it. Let’s get some booze for now and watch the show.”

“Then my money’s on her getting away—”

As they began to place their bets, the slave trader yelled out.

“I-If you catch her, I’ll give you 20 silver dratz coins! But don’t hurt her!”

The expressions on the fishermen change.

“Alright, I’ll catch her and buy you guys some drinks.”

“My wife wants new clothes.”

“Anyway, let’s go catch her.”

As each man said their piece, they scrambled to be the first to grab her. They soon catch up to the young girl.

Being used to the beach and moving quickly, the three fishermen soon surrounded the young girl.

The young girl spoke while her face twisted in fear.

“P-Please... step aside.”

“Sorry. Our livelihood’s are on the line here, too.”

“What a waste. You probably would’ve grown into quite a fine woman, too.”

Having become a slave, the young girl would not see adulthood.

This is because most are unable to withstand their cruel lives and they die before they do.

But they’re still treated the same way.

In the end, they’re slaves. If they die, the owner simply buys another one.

“Haa... Haa... Haa... Damn slave, giving me all this trouble!”

The frog-faced slave trader finally caught up.

He recklessly grabs the young girl’s hair.

“Ahh!”

He pushes her onto the beach and stomps down on her head.

The beach with the sun blazing down on it is not a place to run on bare feet.

Even the fishermen are wearing sandals.

Without a doubt, anyone would struggle if they had their face pressed against that sand.

But with the slave trader who was five times her size, there was no way the powerless young girl could escape the heat.

“Ugh!”

“The next time you run away, I’ll kill you! Remember that!”

“Hey, hey, weren’t you the one who told us not to hurt her...?”

The fishermen stare at the slave trader with shocked faces.

“Hmph, it’s fine if it’s me. Just me.”

“If you say so. We caught her, so hand over the reward.”

One of the fishermen holds his hand out.

The edges of the slave trader’s mouth broadened into a grin.

“I’m the one who caught her, so there should be no reward, right?”

“Wha, you bastard! You tricked us!”

“I didn’t trick you. The deal was if you caught her.”

“Don’t give us that!”

“Stop!”

The fisherman tried to grab the slave trader’s collar, but his friend stopped him.

“His mercenaries are here.”

A number of figures appeared in the direction of the rocky area from which the slave trader came.

They are likely mercenaries under his employ. There are seven of them.

In their hands were weapons such as axes, swords and spears, and they had on light armor which was rusted in a number of spots.

Seeing the fisherman’s anger die out, the slave trader wore a victorious expression on his face.

“What happened to all that vigor you just had? Hmm?”

There are many instances for a slave trader where problems must be settled with violence.

Except for one group of slave traders, most employed mercenaries.

“Damn it...”

The fisherman who tried to grab him grit his teeth in frustration.

The mercenaries, who give off the impression that they're familiar with battle, intimidate the fishermen from behind the slave trader.

Among them, one man wore an expensive looking armor. He looked at each fisherman one by one and sneered.

Then, he glanced at the young girl with the foot on her head and spoke to the slave trader.

“Looks like you caught the escaped slave.”

“Yeah, though if you bastards chased after her, I wouldn't have had to get involved with these petty fisherman.”

“Hey, hey, our job is to guard you, right bossman? Chasing slaves is outside of our agreement.”

“That's why I hate you bastards. You never do anything that isn't written on the contract.”

“But that's why we're here. To do our jobs according to the contract.”

“What?”

Ignoring the puzzled slave trader, three of the mercenaries shot off a sharp gaze toward the fishermen.

“We just need to kill these sturdy looking guys here, right?”

The faces of the fishermen instantly turned pale, but the slave trader smacked the mercenaries and stopped them.

“Don't be stupid. How much do you think it would cost me to kill these three? I don't mind if you're okay with a lower pay though.”

“Don't say that. Not a single problem's come up until now. Honestly speaking, it's

disappointing. Our skills are going to become dull at this rate.”

The mercenary wraps a thick arm around the slave trader and smirks.

“You want this cheeky lot to die too, don’t you?”

“Well... I do, but...”

“If you get a reputation for being looked down on by commoners, it may be difficult for you to conduct your business in the future. Let’s kill them.”

“...Hmm...”

“And you can hardly say the soldiers in Ilnis are passionate about their work. If you let them get their hands on some money, they’ll probably overlook it.”

“...Then in exchange, put on a show for me.”

“Hahaha, I like you bossman. Leave it to me. What do you want me to lop off first?”

“Start with the arms.”

After the slave trader’s last statement, the mercenary unsheathed the sword hanging off his waist.

The other mercenaries also ready their weapons in their hands.

“So, that’s the request from our client. Guess I’ll be taking your arms.”

“G-Get out of here!”

As one of the fishermen yelled out, a shadow suddenly appeared from behind him.

“Ah?”

The mercenary said in a befuddled voice. Apparently, the fishermen notice him too and turned around startled.

“He’s huge...”

“Hey, move it.”

The mercenary pushed the bewildered fisherman away and approached the large man who suddenly appeared.

“Who are you, bastard?”

[...Hmm... That’s a meager body. Are you human?]

The large man who appeared was even taller than the mercenary, who was looking up at him.

“What are you saying? What language is that?”

[So— this really is Soleil*.]

(TL note: I’m not sure if this is what the author was going for, but this is apparently the Japanese pronunciation for the French word “soleil”, meaning “sun”.)

The man brushed his bangs up in an irritated manner to assuage the heat.

A small, purple crystal shows itself, and reflects the light from the sun.

[The Grantz language was commonplace on the central continent, if I remember correctly.]

“...Hey, big boy, are you listening?”

[Sorry. How is this? Do you understand me?]

The large man spoke the Grantz language with a heavy accent.

“Are you from the Empire, you bastard?”

[Do I look human to you?]

The mercenary furrows his brows and observes the man. After a while, his lips stiffen.

“...Don’t tell me...”

A race with light purple skin, and bodies well endowed beyond humans.

He comes to an answer derived from seeing the small, purple crystal embedded in his forehead.

“Are you a zorosta?!”

[Correct, human.]

“What did you say?!”

The one who spoke up in surprise was the slave trader.

“Hey, I’ll raise your pay threefold, so capture him!”

A 1,000 years ago, there was a country of zorostas which conquered the central continent.

In order to oppose the zorostas who were increasing their sphere of influence, the four races of humans, dwarves, elves, and anthros created an alliance. At the end of an intense war, they succeeded in destroying the zorostas’ country.

However, although the country fell, they were unable to eradicate the zorostas.

After the war, it is said that they crossed over to Ambyssion, an archipelago located south of the central continent, in order to escape persecution.

Because an angry sea doesn’t allow anyone to enter that place, there is no way to confirm whether or not that is true as of now.

However, it’s not that all the zorostas crossed over to the archipelago. A considerable number of them still exist on the central continent.

“Currently, they’re under the protection of the Empire, so it’s hard to see them on the slave market. Even if they do, they’re mixed dregs whose zorosta blood is weak. Its questionable whether they can even be considered zorostas. But looking at this guy, I think the zorosta blood is strong in him. If I sold him off as a slave, I’d more than make a fortune!”

To the northeast of the Grantz Grand Empire, there is a country called the Revering Kingdom.

Although it's a country which was founded by zorostas in order to save their brethren from persecution, currently, they are a vassal state of the Grantz Grand Empire under the pretext of being under its protection.

“Bossman, now that I know that, threefold is too little. There's a chance this guy's a pure blood who isn't mixed with any other race. Unless we get at least five times the pay—”

Before the mercenary is able to finish speaking, his body split right in two.

His entrails scatter all over the beach and a grating sound jolts the eardrums of the humans.

“Eek!” A quiet scream flies out from the throats of the fishermen.

The large man had a large sword gripped in his hand.

[Really now... talking about slaves and money so arbitrarily. I guess all countries are the same. Do you think you lot can capture me when you don't even understand the difference in our strengths?]

“B-Boss?!”

“You bastard!”

After seeing their comrade murdered, the other mercenaries each lunge at the large man with their weapons.

With one swing, three mercenaries went flying and their guts splattered all over the beach as their lives came to an end.

Seeing this, perhaps the remaining three mercenaries gathered they were no match for him, because they exchanged glances and turned their backs.

“H-Hey, wait! Don't you bastards want your pay?!”

The slave trader yelled toward their backs as the mercenaries race across the beach.

“Our lives are more important than money! We’re not going up against a monster like that!”

“Wha, and you bastards call yourselves mercenaries?!”

[You’re not getting away.]

The large man put one knee on the ground and clapped his hands together.

The sand rose up, entwined the legs of the mercenaries, and toppled them over.

“Gah!”

“What is this?!”

“There’s something on our legs...”

Thud—

The mercenaries fell, and a cloud of sand rose up before their eyes.

A large sword cut through the cloud and beheaded two mercenaries.

A vast amount of blood paints the beach red.

[Humans... truly are weak.]

“Eek!”

The large man crushed the head of the last mercenary with his foot.

“S-Someone save us!”

The fishermen run away, but the zorosta does not chase after them.

He trampled over the corpses of the mercenaries, placed his large sword on his back, and walked toward the slave trader.

“I’ll give you ten times their pay. Won’t you become my merce-ahh!”

His disgusting face is covered by the large man’s hand, and the slave trader’s legs were dangling in midair.

Below his feet is the dark-skinned young girl. Her face is bright red and she’s unconscious.

The zorosta took a glance at her, then turned his cold eyes towards the slave trader writhing in agony.

[... An irredeemable fool.]

“Urgh!”

Blood came gushing out from the slave trader’s eyes, nose, mouth, ears, basically every hole he had.

Even though the blood which flew out from between his fingers landed on his face, the zorosta’s expression did not change.

He gropes around the slave trader’s breast pocket, takes out a number of small bags, and tosses them away.

He kneels beside the dark-skinned young girl.



[Starting over again doesn't seem like a bad idea...]

The large man sympathetically touched her red, swollen cheek, and affectionately lifted the young girl up.

[It's a life that was once lost. It doesn't sound bad to test my powers here and see to what extent they're effective.]

With the young girl in his arms, the zorosta began to walk aimlessly along the beach.

Chapter 4

Farmers

Baum— Frieden.

A country represented by a female elf who is called the princess maiden.

She is currently in an area in which only the princess maiden is allowed entry— the palace of baptism.

Past a thick forest, there is a spring filled with ultramarine water and a faint mist floating about it.

There, the princess maiden who was submerged to her waist, quietly opened her eyes.

A light bluer than the color of ultramarine floats to her eyes, disperses into specks, then disappears.

“...Might you be the one who arranged for the landing of the zorosta?”

The princess maiden’s gaze was fixed on a sparkling orb situated between two bronze statues.

[...]

There is no reply. As always, it does not say a word.

“Then I will have you allow me to do what I can.”

A large ripple begins to spread out from the spring.

As she stood up, water flowed down from the princess maiden’s collarbone* and was absorbed into her bountiful breasts.

*(*TL note: We realize it says she was submerged to her waist before. We think it might be an oversight on the author’s part.)*

A light cloth clings to her, and her elegant body has a bewitching air about it.

She grabs the clothes she placed along the waterside, gently puts them on, and begins to walk.

She quickly walks through thickly growing trees and comes across a familiar passage.

She continued to walk silently down the hallway surrounded by white walls for a bit, then arrived at a hall where a group of female maiden knights were waiting.

“Please bring me ink, pen, and paper immediately.”

With her hair still wet, there seems to be anger hiding somewhere in the princess maiden’s expression. It makes the maiden knights nervous.

“Right away.”

A maiden knight signals with her hand to a subordinate knight apprentice.

“Immediately!”

She quickly disappears into the darkness of the passageway.

“Princess... what exactly happened for you to look this way?”

The maiden knight commander asks frankly.

“It’s an urgent matter...”

“Did you “see” something?”

“Yes. I must report it to his Majesty the emperor immediately.”

The apprentice knight returned at that moment short of breath.

“I’ve brought them! Haa... Haa... Haa...”

The princess maiden takes the ink, pen, and white paper.

“Hehe, thank you.”

Perhaps because she ran with all her might, the apprentice knight was leaning against the wall. The princess maiden smiled at her.

One of the maiden knights swelled with rage.

“Hey, that’s unseemly. That’s why you’re still an apprentice!”

“E-Even if you say that...”

“I don’t mind. Let her take her time and rest.”

After saying that, the princess maiden looked around the area. A maiden knight took that as a cue and presented her with a wooden chair.

The princess maiden places the white paper there, moves her pen, and opens her mouth to speak.

“Listen well. Once you give this to the spirit knight, tell him to depart for the Imperial capital immediately.”

The princess maiden bit her thumb, made sure there was a bead of blood, then pressed it against the white paper.

The white paper transforms from the blood blotting it. It gives off a faint light and spontaneously balls itself up.

She hands it to a maiden knight, who then takes her leave and runs off into the hallway.

The princess maiden muttered softly after seeing her off.

“There is no more which I can do. The rest... is up to you, your Majesty, Schwarz.”



Imperial year 1023, July 19.

Hiro wakes up due to a sharp pain.

“Oww...”

His head is in pain. He strokes the spot where he was hit and sits up.

Hiro lets out a deep sigh and looks around the room.

It's wide enough for four adults to sleep side by side in, and there are books strewn about. Hiro tosses off an old blanket, stretches his arms, and lets out a yawn.

Currently, Hiro is in an express carriage which was prepared and reserved for him by Margrave Grinda.

There are six horses drawing the carriage. Perhaps because speed was being stressed, the ride itself was the worst.

Each time they went over a bump, his body would float in midair, and his head would always bump into something.

Even Hiro couldn't get used to it, thickheaded as he was. It wasn't a comfortable journey, just as Margrave Grinda said.

(...I wasn't able to get any proper sleep.)

As he looked out the window half asleep, he saw a grassy plain stretching out.

The window opened from the outside, and the coachman driving the carriage peeked in.

“Young sir, we're almost at our destination.”

He answers by raising his hand to the friendly coachman. It would have been better if he had knocked.

As he closed the window, the carriage shook with a bang. Hiro gets up and prepares to alight.

The stagecoach does not heard directly for the Imperial capital of Zeitral. It stops at a station closeby, three sels (9 km) away.

“Thank you very much.”

Hiro gives his thanks to the coachman and alights from the carriage.

“I see... This really is a big city.”

He was taken aback by the large number of people.

Nobles, commoners, mercenaries, adventurers, the station was bustling with people of various backgrounds.

Leaving the crowded station, a nice breeze and the scent of fresh leaves tickled the nose.

A carriage bound for the Imperial capital left the station, but Hiro decided to go by foot because something was bothering him.

(I'm being followed by someone.)

If they plan to attack him here, it would be a bit troublesome.

He wants to avoid involving in any innocent bystanders to his utmost abilities.

As he quickly walks along a shallow walkway carved into the side of the road, he counts the presence of the people following behind him at the same speed.

(Three... six... eight people, huh.)

He gets the feelings they're amateurs, but it may be too soon to decide that.

He strokes the eyepatch covering half his face and smiles smugly.

(Should I go with the “first strike wins” strategy?)

He doesn't mind waiting for them to attack him, but if he does that, the guards will hear the commotion and come over.

Not having any form of identification on him, Hiro would likely be taken in if he were questioned.

Even if he did have one, if the guards were working under someone's influence, who knows how long he would be kept restrained.

He's in no situation to waste time on something like that right now.

(Now... who should I go with?)

After he probes for the closest presence to him, Hiro turns around assertively.

The space before his hand split open, and one short sword—the handle of a spirit weapon came flying out.

After pulling it out, he goes around to the back of the suspicious man, who is noticeably shaken, in an instant.

He pressed the point of his sword to his back and spoke quietly.

"I'll kill you if you struggle. If you understand, I'd like it if you would tell your friends, too."

"A-Alright. I got it, so don't kill me."

The suspicious man gave a look to his friend nearby who was pretending to be a traveler.

As he does, his friend raises his arms above his head and crosses them over and over. After sensing the presence of a number of people growing distant, Hiro pushes the back of the suspicious man and urges him to walk forward.

"I'm going to ask you a number of questions. You don't have to answer them if you don't want to. I'll just kill you and ask someone else."

He moves the point pressed against him below.

His slightly dirty clothes split apart, and the suspicious man's face goes pale.

“I-I’ll tell you anything, so spare me.”

It was just a threat, but it looks like it was extremely effective.

(He’s an amateur after all...)

Hiro mutters in his head, then questions the man.

“Who was it that hired you, I wonder.”

“I don’t know. He suddenly gave us money... and told us to attack you.”

“Ohh, think you can tell me what happened in detail? “

“A-A strange man appeared before me when I finished my field work.”

“A strange man?”

“He wore a robe and I couldn’t see his face, but it was a man’s voice.”

Hiro quickly turns the short sword around in his hand and presses the pommel against the man to urge him forward.

“He told me to pick a fight with you and hand you over to the guards. I wasn’t planning to take him up on it, but he gave me two Grantz gold coins. Two Grantz gold coins is enough to make you pick a fight with your own kid. Anyone would accept that offer, right?”

“I see.”

Hiro goes into thought. He probably won’t get any more information even if he presses this man any further.

It looks like he’s just a farmer who was blinded by money. His friends in the area are probably villagers like him, too.

“You can go. But if you act strangely, I’ll kill you. And don’t ever appear before me again.

If I see you somewhere, I'll kill you without hesitation. Got it?"

"G-Got it. I'll never appear before you again."

The man furiously nodded his head over and over, then ran off into the plains away from the footpath without once looking back.

Seven men followed after him.

After watching them leave, Hiro continued on to the Imperial capital.

(...There's a chance they'll be killed by their client, though.)

The reward was exceptional compared to how simple the job was— In other words, it means they're supposed to succeed no matter what.

Not realizing that and failing, they'll be killed by their client, even if it is their just desserts.

(But still, the fact that he use farmers bothers me.)

If he hired someone skilled, Hiro would surely have had to fight. If he caused a commotion, there's no doubt he would have been captured by the guards.

While Hiro was walking lost in thought, he realized that he had arrived right before the Imperial capital's main gate.

Chapter 5

The Imperial Capital

Looking above head, a colossal castle wall glares down, giving off a sense of intimidation.

The water in the deep moat surrounding the castle walls is drawn in from the Kendall River to the north, and in the clear water, lives various underwater creatures.

There are large crowds of people coming and going across the bridge which is suspended from the other side.

The main gate beyond it is open, and soldiers are inspecting luggage.

Hiro blended in with the flow of people and crossed the bridge. After having his belongings inspected, he passed through the main gate.

“Ohh...”

Hiro is overwhelmed by the scenery expanding before him.

Stretching out from the entrance of the city, is a wide road paved with stone.

Along the road on each side stood bronze statues at fixed intervals, all large enough to pierce the heavens.

The large, elaborately carved statues of the Twelve Great Gods of Grantz looked down and welcomed the people who visited.

There are people crowding the areas around their feet.

Each space was bustling with people, with stallholders vigorously shouting and interacting with customers.

“...There are definitely much more people now compared to a 1,000 years ago.”

But he can't stay there staring at the sights all day. Hiro began to walk.

He walks along as he restlessly surveys the area.

He looks much like a country bumpkin lost in a big city.

There is a group standing in front of a stall serving alcohol, already making merry with a bottle in hand in the afternoon.

“Our longstanding enemy, Forzen, has fallen to ruin! Drinks, bring out the drinks! We can’t stand here and not celebrate this!”

“Shouldn’t we be celebrating the Sixth Imperial Princess who repelled that countryside dukedom instead?!”

“And apparently, a descendant of the Second Emperor was there!”

As he passes the lively street looked down upon by the gods, he is welcomed by a grand fountain garden.

Quite in contrast from the entrance, this place has a relatively calm air about it.

One thing that remains the same though, is that every single person has a smile on their face.

Every citizen, not just the drunkards, must still be feeling the lingering joy from last month’s victory.

The fountain garden is crowded with all sorts of people who are there for various reasons. There’s a woman with her child, a drunken man, a mummy-like man with bandages wrapped all around his body, and a young man who appeared to be a student reading a book.

There are children gathered around the fountain, the centerpiece of the garden.

The pillar of water which rises into the sky, together with the clouds behind it, gives off a mysterious air of refinement. The sprays of water glimmer, and the sound of water which hits the ears gives off a sense of elegance.

“Huh...”

Hiro, who was peacefully viewing the scenery, turns his gaze around once more.

This was because he got the feeling that he saw someone he recognized.

He finds him right away. The man whose body is completely wrapped in bandages— It’s Alfred.

Even if this is the Imperial capital, he's probably the only one to have such an odd appearance.

Actually, the palace guards are currently pointing at him suspiciously.

"Alfred!"

Hiro waved his hands in an exaggerated manner.

"..."

After first giving him a sidelong glance, he then fixed his gaze on Hiro.

Once he had his sights set on Hiro, Alfred began to approach him.

"...Why are you here?"

He said, with displeasure in his voice.

"His Majesty, the emperor called for me."

"Ahh, I see. Indeed, there's no reason for you not to be called for."

"What about you, Alfred? What are you doing here?"

"My superior was summoned by his Majesty, so I am here as an escort."

"Aura was?"

"No, no, someone higher up— Third Imperial Prince Brutar."

Alfred begins to walk after saying this, so Hiro naturally follows him.

"The Third Imperial Army— It was found out that the Imperial Black Knights were mobilized for personal use. Well, there's no way it wouldn't have been, but it was during the time his Majesty was on his military expedition. That would certainly call for questioning."

"I feel like he deserves it though. Plus, he tried to capture Liz."

“But in terms of results, we ended up fighting alongside each other, so his punishment will likely be relatively light.”

Alfred adds that the problem is probably how the First Imperial Prince will be dealt with.

“There’s a huge uproar in the Imperial Palace. People are talking about him targeting the Sixth Imperial Princess’s life, and that he almost killed the Second Emperor’s descendant. It’s complete chaos right now.”

“Wow...”

“But still, he possesses “Mjölfnir”, and most importantly, behind the First Imperial Prince stands the Krone house of the Five Great Nobles. Because he has the support of the greatest faction, the First Imperial Prince must be dealt with carefully. His Majesty himself may be troubled.”

Alfred sighs.

“They say ill weeds grow apace in these situations, don’t they...”

It’s difficult to surmise his expression due to the bandages, but there’s no doubt it’s one of distress.

“And the fact that you’ve appeared here, Sir Descendant... that will cause yet another commotion. I wonder what will happen.”

Hiro questions Alfred, who gazes at the sky with a distant look in his eyes.

“So, where are you heading?”

“Were you following me without knowing anything?”

Alfred shrugs his shoulders in shock.

“What would you do if I were an assassin.”

“There aren’t any assassins who stand out as much as you.”

Hiro was currently walking along the eastern main street.

Unlike the central street, this road has a number of stores lining its sides, like blacksmiths, weapon shops, and curio stores.

Perhaps because it was such a place, those who could be seen in the area were adventurers, mercenaries, and the like.

It is a street with a violent atmosphere flowing through it.

Alfred enters a small path between the guard house and an inn.

After walking the dimly lit path for a while, they were welcomed by blinding sunlight, and there stood an old temple.

“Lady Aura is here.”

Alfred said and pointed towards the shade of a tree where Aura was sitting.

Beyond her, were a number of knights clad in black armor with a large group of children surrounding them.

Unbefitting their stern appearance, the knights were holding large quantities of snacks in their arms.

It seems the children are swarming around them with that in sight.

“They’re war orphans. Those children were taken in by the spirit temple. “

“Why is there a temple in a place like this?”

There are likely many people of the central continent— especially those of the Grantz Grand Empire, who believe in the spirit king.

So why is there a temple erected beyond an alley like this?

“It’s because spirits favor this place.”

Hiro understood after hearing Alfred's answer.

As if isolated from the developed town, this place is overflowing with nature.

The area around the temple was covered in grass, with flowers of red, white and various other colors. They all seemed to be enjoying the breeze.

Simply looking at the temple bathed in the sun's light, it felt as if your soul were being washed clean.

"With the development of the town, at some point, the east side became a dangerous place flooded with adventurers and mercenaries. They tried to take a number of measures to change it, but it seems like they didn't go well."

"Yeah, I don't think you can chase out adventurers and mercenaries from the east side at this point."

If you tried to destroy something that had already taken root, the resistance would likely be great.

"Exactly. That's why they built the guard house to protect the children."

Alfred says it was probably built before they came.

"It also happens to be where the Imperial Black Knights are currently stationed. The man who was previously in charge could hardly be considered to have been passionate about his work. Lady Aura chased him out and came to be in charge of maintaining the public order of the eastern area."

It looks like Aura noticed them as Alfred spoke boastfully.

She left the shade of the tree and approached the two.

"...What an unexpected guest."

"It's been a while... Actually, I guess it hasn't really."

"What business do you have here?"

"I was called for by his Majesty the emperor."

Hiro dropped the jute bag that was on his back onto the ground and carelessly thrust his hand into it.

When he pulled his hand out, in it was a single sheet of paper which looked like a piece of trash.

“This.”

“...It looks like garbage no matter how you look at it.”

Indeed. Hiro thinks so, too. It looks even worse than when Liz handed it to him.

After being handed the letter and reading it, Aura tilted her head.

“I understand the gist, but how do you intend on entering the Imperial Palace?”

“...With my black hair and eyes.”

“That won’t work right now. It seems there is currently a dispute among the different factions in the Imperial Palace... I doubt the palace guards will give you the time of day.”

“If I show them this letter...”

Aura sighs and shakes her head with her hand on her forehead as if she were troubled.

“...Do you think anyone would believe this garbage-like letter to be from his Majesty the emperor?”

While calling it garbage, Aura deftly folded the letter with one hand and handed it to Hiro.

“A letter from his Majesty the emperor is something one may never receive in their entire lifetime. To treat such a thing so crudely like garbage is unheard of. Even if you were allowed passage with this, you’ll be executed for lese majeste.”

“That’s true, huh...”

“There’s no choice. I will go along with you.”

“Eh?”

“If I go with you, you will be allowed entrance.”

“I would be grateful for that, but...”

As he looks behind her, it seemed the children had gathered around them at some point.

Further behind her, the Imperial Black Knights, who are known as the elite of the Third Imperial Army, have been knocked down by the children.

“Big thith Aura! Where are you going?”

A young girl with a lisp tugged at Aura’s sleeve.

Aura pats the young girl’s head and smiles.

“I am going to the Imperial Palace. While I’m gone, this bandaged man here, Alfred-man, will play with you.”

Hiro is certain that Alfred had a startled look on his face.

Aura ignored him, said to Hiro, “shall we go,” and began to walk ahead of him.

“P-Please wait a moment! Lady Aura, whaaaaa!”

Not knowing what you would call restraint, the children rush Alfred. In no time at all, you could no longer see his figure.

“S-Stop that. I am a noble! Do you think it fine to do this?!”

“I am his Majesty Schwarz, and I will defeat the mummy man! “

“Then, I’m general Celia!”

“Then I’m his Majesty Altius!”

“Wh-What are you... stop that! Don’t touch me there!”

Alfred tries to speak, but the children simply ignore him.

Children are fearsome... thought Hiro.

They walk back the path they came and head north up the central street. Along the way, Aura speaks to Hiro.

“Listen, the place to which we are heading is thought of as a brilliant place where only the chosen people of this world live, and that is not incorrect. However, please do not forget that it is also a haunt of wicked men, swirling with jealousy and desire. You absolutely must not let your guard down.”

“Okay.”

“Be careful of those who come in contact with you. You can not go carelessly to those who call out to you. Be especially careful of the women. There is even a case of an emperor in the past falling to ruin because of a woman.”

“Are you worried about me?”

She glared at him sternly after he said that.

“Please listen silently.”

“Okay...”

“Unfortunately, I can not follow you all the way in. The one his Majesty called for is you after all.”

“You’re right. Well, I’m a bit iffy on the etiquette, but I think it’ll work out somehow.”

“I hope it does...”

After that, they both fall silent and simply move their feet along.

After they climbed over a gentle slope, an iron gate about five times Hiro’s height came into view.

The end points are sharpened like spears, and it gives off a solemn air.

Seeing Aura, a soldier runs over.

“Brigadier general. What brings you here today?”

“I was commanded by his highness the emperor to guide this person to the Imperial

Palace.”

Aura pointed at Hiro.

The palace guard opened his mouth to speak as he stared at Hiro to evaluate him.

“...I have not been given such notice. I apologize, but I cannot allow entrance.”

A large crease appears between Hiro’s brows. That’s impossible.

The emperor personally sent him a letter.

There’s no way the palace guards weren’t told that Hiro would be coming.

(I wonder if someone’s behind this...)

There’s a high possibility of someone preventing Hiro’s visit.

It’s also possible that the palace guard may be under someone’s control.

Aura spoke quietly.

“Is that so? Then give me your name and affiliation.”

“I’m sorry?”

“You doubted me, a close aide of Third Imperial Prince Brutar. I will have you receive a fitting punishment.”

In other words, this is a threat on his position if he doesn’t allow him entrance.

“Th-That’s...”

The palace guard’s face twists in mortification. You can see from his expression that he is conflicted by something.

After a while, the palace guard hung his head.

“Please, pass through.”

He felt just a bit sorry for the dejected soldier, but Aura passed through the gate indignantly, so he followed after her.

There were many soldiers placed throughout the large grounds as security, with a small platoon constantly on patrol.

Hiro walks along a wide path surrounded by a rose garden as guards glare at him, watching for any suspicious movements.

Moving directly ahead, there is a large fountain and a four way split.

On the west side is an area lined with mansions of prominent nobles, and to the east, is the housing and training grounds for the elite “Golden Lion Knights” of the First Imperial Army.

On the north side, is the center of the Grantz Grant Empire, the Imperial Palace Wenezein.

As he comes abreast to Aura, she speaks to him.

“That palace guard earlier, he’s under the patronage of the Krone house of the Five Great Nobles. They support the First Imperial Prince, so please be careful. They do whatever it takes to get what they want. Do you know the incident regarding the death of the head of the Kelheit house of the Five Great Nobles?”

The Kelheit house is the house of great nobles who oversee the east.

Because they lost the head of their house about three months ago, his wife is currently acting as his deputy.

Publicly, it is said to be due to an accident from falling off a horse. In actuality, it seems the theory of an assassination is plausible.

“I assume that it is the work of the Krone house. I don’t have proof... but they’re going as far as proposing marriage to Duchess Kelheit, who only just recently lost her husband. They’re likely aiming to take over the Kelheit house. Because they’re such a shameless bunch, I doubt they would hesitate to poison you in the Imperial Palace.”

“I understand. I’ll be careful of the Krone house.”

After Hiro gives his thanks to Aura, they arrive at the Imperial Palace and he catches his breath.

It was not because of the beauty of the Imperial Palace, but the sense of nostalgia welling up from within his chest.

It looks like it's been reconstructed a number of times, but it still has the vestiges of the Imperial Palace from a 1,000 years ago.

(...It almost feels like I've come back home.)

This was the first place he visited when he was summoned to this world.

This is where everything began.

He exchanged vows to be blood brothers with Altius, welcomed many friends, and made it through a world of wars.

It is also the place of ending, where the kingdom became an empire, the wars came to an end, and where he said his farewell to Altius.

The place of beginning and ending.

(No matter what awaits me ahead of here, I won't stop.)

While embracing the premonition of a new beginning, a new tale, the "hero" from a 1,000 years in the past steps into the Imperial Palace once more.

Chapter 6

The Imperial Palace

The moment they entered the Imperial Palace, they were surrounded by a large number of soldiers.

It wasn't to capture them though. Hiro's body was searched by a palace guard, and Aura's, by a court lady.

Afterwards, Aura turns back to Hiro.

"It seems someone has come to greet us."

Hiro looks behind Aura and notices that a young man in his prime had arrived.

"You have come a very long way. I am the prime minister of the Grantz Grand Empire, Bizan Gillish von Charme. I am relieved to see that it seems like you've arrived to the Imperial Palace unharmed."

The man bows his head, looks up with a refreshing smile, then begins to speak.

"Am I correct in presuming you are Master Hiro?"

"Ah, yes. My name is Hiro Ouguro."

"...I hear you claimed to be a descendant of his Majesty the Second Emperor."

"Yes, that's right."

Gillish narrows his eyes in response to Hiro's answer.

"First, we will have you prove that. May I have you come with me?"

He turns his back to the two and begins to walk, and so, Hiro and Aura began to follow

after him.

Click, click, the sound of their shoes rings throughout the hallway.

The upper portion of the wall on the right had windows adorned with gorgeous ornaments, and they were lined along the wall all the way down the pathway as a display of fortune and power.

Rays of sunlight shine through those windows and light up every corner of the hallway.

From the windows, you can look down on the beautiful town streets, and you also get the perk of being glared at by the soldiers standing guard by them.

On the ceiling is a grand drawing of the Spirit King and the Twelve Great Gods of Grantz. Hiro found an image of a warrior in black facing his enemies, which seems to be the Hiro of the past.

Hanging from the ceiling was a beautiful and exquisite chandelier.

“There have been many until now who have claimed to be a descendant of his Majesty the Second Emperor.”

The voice of Prime Minister Gillish travels through his back and hits Hiro’s eardrums.

“However, not a single one of them truly were. Regardless, there is a neverending line of those who still pretend to be.”

Prime Minister Gillish turns right at the end of the hallway.

“Which is why, even though they were the words of her Highness Celia Estreya, unless we have proof that you are a descendant of his Majesty the Second Emperor, we are unable to trust you. Honestly speaking, I am currently overcome with this feeling of, “not another one”.”

It can’t be helped that he is annoyed, with so many imposters showing up.

“The Grantz Grand Empire is a militaristic nation. There are many who worship “Mars”. Myself included of course. If someone claimed to be his descendant, and it turned out to be a lie, it wouldn’t end in mere disappointment. I would not be able to

hold back my explosive anger.”

Prime Minister Gillish stopped in front of a certain room and looked back.

“I pray that you are telling the truth, Master Hiro. For her Highness Celia Estrya’s sake as well, I truly do.”

Prime Minister Gillish unlocks the door and enters the room.

Hiro and Aura follow after him.

There were walls painted white on all four sides of the room and no windows.

In the center of the square room was a coat hanger, and on that hanger, was a black mantle.

There is nothing more in this room.

Prime Minister Gillish continues walking, then waves Hiro over once he arrives at the hanger.

“There have been 2,089 people who have claimed to be a descendant of “*Mars*” until now. Every single one of them have died as soon as they put this on.”

Prime Minister Gillish carefully grabbed the black mantle and spread it across his arms.

“This is the “*Black Camellia*” which “*Mars*” once wore. A spirit dwells within here, and like the Five Imperial Spirit Swords, it chooses its master— If one who is not acknowledged by the spirit uses it, they will likely fall under the curse of the spirit and be visited upon by death. However, even if you are not acknowledged by it, if you are a descendant with the protection of the Spirit King, you will not die. We will verify your claim through this means.”

Finally, Prime Minister Gillish quietly asks Hiro if he is ready.

Hiro nods. There is no tension in his face.

(This brings back memories...)

This black cloth ran alongside him through numerous battlefields. Without thinking, his cheeks loosen from nostalgia.

He stretched his hands out to try to grab it, but “Black Camellia” slipped away from Prime Minister Gillish’s arms and fell to the ground.

The fact that the black cloth fell despite there being no wind caused creases to form between Prime Minister Gillish’s brows.

Prime Minister Gillish did not drop it on purpose.

Hiro knew that as well.

(It’s probably sulking.)

The spirit which dwells within “Black Camellia” is a moody one of darkness, and compared to other spirits, it is honest with its emotions and difficult to handle.

Hiro sighed. It can’t be helped that it’s angry, seeing as how it was left alone for a 1,000 years.

(I’m sorry. I made you wait for such a long time.)

He apologizes to “Black Camellia” on the floor and stretches his hand out.

However, the black cloth slips through Hiro’s hand, then gently floats up.

Hiro seemed troubled as he looked at “Black Camellia”, wondering if it wouldn’t forgive him after all.

Seeing the cloth float in midair, Prime Minister Gillish’s eyes were opened wide in wonder, and Aura was looking on with great interest.

In an instant, darkness swells up and coils around Hiro’s four limbs. It wrapped around his entire body in the blink of an eye, as if it were swallowing him whole.

“What...”

“This is...”

Prime Minister Gillish and Aura's eyes widen in surprise at the sudden occurrence.

Hiro disappeared into the darkness, then when he reappeared, he was no longer in his school uniform.

He is wearing the old military uniform of the Empire. On top, he has on a jet black mantle with a golden dragon design at his shoulders.

A black cloth blessed by a spirit. A relic left behind by "Mars".

"Black Camellia", with its air of mystery and elegance, is known thusly in one particular country...

— "Regalia".

The overwhelmed Prime Minister Gillish laughed unconsciously.

"Haha, this... truly is..."

Prime Minister Gillish kneels right on the spot and bows his head.

"Please forgive me for my insolence. I am extremely delighted to be able to meet the descendant of his Majesty the Second Emperor."

"Well, I'm just a descendant, so it would be a problem for me if you humble yourself to me. I'm not the man himself."

The truth is, he actually is the man himself, but based on Prime Minister Gillish's behavior, he'd probably faint if he knew that.

Either way, having someone older than you humble themselves before you like this would leave anyone at a loss.

As he looked towards Aura in an attempt to seek help, he saw that she was staring at him intently.

Concluding that she was going to be of no help, Hiro speaks to Prime Minister Gillish, whose head continues to hang down.

"...Umm, will this serve as proof?"

“Ah, no, now we will have you go to Frieden.”

Perhaps to pull himself together, Prime Minister Gillish took a few breaths before opening his mouth to speak.

“If one who claims to be a descendant of Schwarz appears, confirm it at Frieden. If it be true, grant unto him a befitting status. Those who do not adhere to this last testament will fall to the Spirit King’s curse. Are you familiar with this last testament?”

Prime Minister Gillish stands as Hiro nods.

“Originally, we would have had you go to Frieden first, but we can not have one whose status as a descendant is uncertain to meet with the Princess Maiden. If something were to happen to her, we would draw criticism both domestically and internationally. And so, in consideration for her safety as well, we have come to confirm the validity of those who claim to be a descendant with *“Black Camellia”*.”

“This way,” said Prime Minister Gillish, after which he urged Hiro out into the hallway.

“And so... we will have you go to Frieden next, and once the Princess Maiden acknowledges you—”

Prime Minister Gillish noticed a palace guard running towards them from ahead and stopped speaking.

“Lord Charme! A spirit knight has just arrived who appears to have been entrusted with a letter from the Princess Maiden to his Majesty!”

“From the Princess Maiden to his Majesty... All right. I will go immediately. You go on ahead and let the spirit knight through.”

“Yes, sir!”

The palace guard salutes, then returns the way he came. Prime Minister Gillish turns back.

“My apologies. There is an urgent matter. May I ask that you wait a while?”

“I don’t mind... Should I wait here?”

“No, please wait in the nobles’ room. The one to show you there will be—”

After hearing Hiro’s reply, Prime Minister Gillish was about to call out to a nearby maid, but...

“I will show him.”

Aura cut in.

“Then I will leave it to you, Brigadier General Aura. I will return right away!”

Prime Minister Gillish rushed off.

While keeping her eyes on his back, Aura muttered.

“From the Princess Maiden... And directly to his Majesty the emperor at that. That’s rare.”

“Really?”

“Yes. When the Princess Maiden receives an oracle, it usually goes to the prime minister. But the fact that this is addressed to his Majesty, she likely received an important oracle.”

“So that’s why Prime Minister Gillish looked panicked.”

“Because if it happens to concern the fate of a country— it’s a serious matter. The letter will be delivered to his Majesty immediately.”

Once they came to a pause in the conversation, Hiro and Aura noticed something. There were maids staring at them with puzzled expressions.

“We are going to be in the way of their work if we speak here. Shall we go?”

“You’re right. The nobles’ room, was it?”

“Yes. It’s right over there.”

After walking down the hallway a bit, a double door entrance with detailed ornaments appears.

Aura pushes them open in a familiar manner, then sinks into a sofa after entering the room.

Hiro sits on a sofa across from her while she grabs a bell placed on the desk between them and rings it.

Immediately, there are three knocks at the door, then a maid enters.

“You called?”

Aura looks in her direction.

“Please bring us two black teas.”

“Understood. Please wait a moment.”

The maid bends at the waist and bows, then exits.

“For now, shall we relax and drink some black tea while we wait?”

“Sounds good. I wonder how long Prime Minister Gillish will take.”

“I don’t believe he will keep you waiting too long... But it depends on the contents of the Princess Maiden’s letter.”

“I hope nothing’s wrong.”

An hour goes by as they chat idly.

The one who appeared in the noble’s room, was not Prime Minister Gillish, but a high official.

“Master Hiro, I apologize, but may I have you come to the throne room right away?”

“Third Imperial Prince Brutar and First Imperial Prince Schtobel should currently be in the middle of an interrogation in the throne room... Are they done?”

The high official nods his head to Aura’s question.

“Yes, it has ended without any problems. All that’s left is to await his Majesty’s decision, but I was told to show Master Hiro there first.”

“...Do you mind if I go as well?”

“Prime Minister Gillish said he doesn’t mind, but if you do, Master Hiro will enter from the front entrance, while Lady Aura will enter from the rear.”

“Understood. Alright, shall we go, Aura?”

Aura got up at the urging of Hiro who was already up.

They left the room, being rushed along by the high official.

The throne room—

On the inside, the ceiling is blown out, and stretched straight across the center of the marble floor is a red carpet.

A row of pillars are lined up on either side of the room all the way to the throne, and filling the spaces in between are influential nobles wearing flashy clothes and standing in neat rows.

Among them, a familiar face— First Prince Schtobel is there, too.

Sitting on the throne is a youthful emperor who could hardly be thought to be past his sixties. Standing next to him is Prime Minister Gillish.

The throne room is filled with an oppressive air, enough to make an average person faint.

However, Hiro does not waver. He slowly walks down the red carpet as he swings “Black Camellia’s” hem.

“...Is that the supposed descendant of his Majesty the Second Emperor?”

“He’s young. He’s still but a child.”

“Could that be...” *Black Camellia*?”

“Ohh— He carries the appearance of a king at his young age.”

“He looks neither nervous nor roused in this tense atmosphere... He’s either an impressive character or thickheaded.”

The room fills with murmuring from the nobles.

From a short distance away from the emperor, Hiro strikes the left side of his chest with his right hand and kneels down.

His mantle gently floats in the air from the wind caused by his movement, then falls to the floor.

The emperor spreads his arms before his chest.

“—Let us begin.”

“Yes.”

Prime Minister Gillish takes one step forward, then unrolls a sheet of parchment.

“First Imperial Prince Schtobel, Third Imperial Prince Brutar, your verdicts have been decided. Step forward.”

First Imperial Prince Schtobel, with his large frame, knelt to the right of Hiro and bowed his head.

Following him, was Third Imperial Prince Brutar. He was a bald man with a nasty look in his eyes.

He knelt to the left of Hiro.

“First, Third Imperial Prince Brutar. I judge your case to be trivial.”

You could hear the surprise from the nobles who support Third Imperial Prince Brutar.

“Continuing, First Imperial Prince Schtobel, your merits at Forzen will be repealed, and you will be under house arrest for three months.”

A sigh of relief escaped the lips of the nobles who support him after hearing the light sentence.

At the same time, there is no displeasure voiced by their opposition, Third Imperial Prince Brutar's faction.

This is because, although the punishment is light, there is a chance it may be retracted if they voiced any disapproval.

However, there is a stir among the nonpartisan factions.

"Absurd... Did he not target the Sixth Imperial Princess's life?"

"Is it because he possesses *"Mjölfnir"* after all?"

"His position to the throne should be demoted or taken away."

Prime Minister Gillish raised his voice as the voices of dissatisfaction steadily grew.

"Silence!"

It suddenly fell silent, but the throne room swells with animosity and rage.

(Now... what might they be thinking? At this rate, the nobles are going to be left feeling great dissatisfaction.)

The punishment for both Imperial princes are too light. It can't be helped that the nonpartisan factions have negative thoughts.

These were not embers that could easily be put out.

"Moving on, Sir Hiro. For your merits in the battle against the Lichtein Dukedom, I will make you a 3rd class enlisted officer."

Prime Minister Gillish did not stop speaking there.

"Furthermore, in accordance with the last testament of his Majesty the First Emperor,

you will be welcomed as the Fourth Imperial Prince of the Grantz royal family, and will be fifth in line to the throne. According to your merits hereafter, promoting your place in line to the throne will be placed under consideration.”

Hiro almost lifted his head without thinking because of the extraordinary reception. He thought he would only be welcomed as a distant member of the royal family and be given a piece of land in a remote region.

The throne room fills with silence. No one is able to say a word.

While everyone was taken aback, Prime Minister Gillish took out a piece of parchment. There are letter skillfully written on the white paper shining brilliantly without even bathing in the sun.

“We have received verification from the Princess Maiden that he is a descendant of his Majesty the Second Emperor. If I were to add further proof to that, it would be that *“Black Camellia”* acknowledged him as well.”

The gaze of the nobles restlessly alternate between the Princess Maiden’s letter and Hiro.

“Sir Hiro. Henceforth, you shall be known as Hiro Schwarz von Grantz.”

The prime minister claps his hands twice. As he does, a number of maids appear and unfurl an enormous flag.

It is a flag with a crest of a dragon holding a silver sword on black soil.

“You are allowed to use the crest of his majesty the Second Emperor. Do not bring shame unto your ancestor.”

Almost all the items he once possessed have returned to him.

Hiro couldn’t help but smile.

(They got me...)

If the Imperial Princes' positions in line to the throne were demoted or taken away, there may have been an internal war between the nobles who support each of them. However, the unexpected light sentences removed the possibility of such intentions. Furthermore, the birth of a new Imperial Prince throws their thoughts into chaos.

The one thing all the nobles had on their minds was probably the question of whether or not to switch their interest to the new Imperial Prince or to see how things played out.

Reason being, the new Imperial prince even has the title of being his majesty the Second Emperor's descendant.

If they raised the young boy up, it could be said that they would possibly receive tremendous support from the citizens.

(So all the spears are pointed at me, huh...)

At that point, the nonpartisan factions who were dissatisfied with the sentences were able to easily approach Hiro.

They may be able to jump the gun on the influential nobles who are tied down by the obligations of their factions.

Their minds are likely filled with thoughts of how to outwit the other nobles rather than revolting against the emperor.

(But... This is a good opportunity for me, too.)

It's utterly impossible for one person alone to fulfill Liz's dream.

Besides, becoming the Fourth Imperial Prince will probably make it easier for him to take various actions.

Those with different intentions will likely approach Hiro from here on out in an attempt to use him.

(In which case, I'll use them as much as I want, too.)

The corners of Hiro's mouth turned up cheerfully.



There is a place called the Emperor's Room.

There is an enormous painting on the wall, and there are furnishings collected from all around the world adorning it.

They are all works of art, no matter which you choose. It can be said that a luxurious and extravagant room is a symbol of power.

In that room, is Prime Minister Gillish, and sitting before him, is 48th Emperor Greiheit.

“Is there something you want to say?”

With wine in hand, the emperor looked at Prime Minister Gillish with eyes as sharp as a hawk's.

“Was it all right to hand down that sentence for the First Imperial Prince? If you are going to use Master Hiro, I don't believe there would have been a problem in demoting his position to the throne.”

“That would create an obstacle for the future plan.”

“As preparation for that— are you first weakening the Krone house?”

“Longstanding nobles only think of protecting themselves. The corrupted Krone house is a perfect example of that. However, even if a dog maybe be old, you wouldn't simply get off with a wound if one bit at you. In which case, you have to throw them in a cage, take away their food, weaken them as much as you wish to, and keep them tied down.”

“If only they would quietly go into that cage...”

“Which is why you make them think they have the initiative. Without letting them know what we're planning, you slowly entice them to the abyss of death. If you make the outdated nobles fall in that manner, new nobles will stand out, and the Grantz Grand Empire will likely be revitalized more and more.”

The emperor sniffed the scent of the wine, then dropped the glass on the floor.

The glass smashed with a burst, and the red liquid began to stain the expensive rug. Watching this, the emperor's smile broadens.

"I hate stagnation."

The emperor stopped Prime Minister Gillish with his hands as he tried to clean up the broken glass.

"It's fine. Leave it. More importantly, how skilled is my new son?"

"Regarding that... This one here is likely more knowledgeable."

As Prime Minister Gillish claps his hands, a man who appeared to be a traveler quietly appeared from behind him.

The man kneels and begins to speak.

"...Speaking honestly, one as lowly as myself was unable to gauge him."

Prime Minister Gillish's brows twitch.

Even within the underground organization "Fang" which the Charme house employed, this man who was dressed as a traveler was one of the strongest.

To think that such a man was unable to gauge him. Prime Minister Gillish spit out this words in disappointment.

"Was there that much of a difference in strength?"

"My apologies."

He hangs his head in regret.

This man did nothing but train while straddling the line between life and death, and devoted everything to polishing his skills.

He was acknowledged for his abilities and received this mission directly from his master.

And this first job of his was simply to gauge the strength of a young boy. For this man who survived so much carnage, it was supposed to have been a simple enough of a request to disappoint him even.

“Just when I thought the young boy disappeared, he had captured the farmer I hired. That is all I was able to learn.”

“That’s enough. I will decide on what measures to take later. Rest for now.”

“Yes...”

The man disappeared as if becoming one with the shadows.

After letting out a sigh, Prime Minister Gillish looked toward the emperor and bowed his head.

“It seems I chose the wrong person. My apologies.”

“Don’t worry about it. I too know the abilities of *“Fang”* well.”

The emperor closed his eyes and let out a short exhale.

“Have *“Fang”* sneak into Fort Belk. Make sure they do not fail this time.”

“Understood.”

With that as his final word, Prime Minister Gillish exited the Emperor’s Room.

Chapter 7

Noble's Wife

Nobles' Room—.

On the other side of the window, the evening sun was hidden behind clouds while preparing to set.

The red sunlight dyes the inside of the room where a young boy and girl were sitting facing each other.

“...Have you experienced something like this before?”

A young girl with lead-colored eyes— Aura was shooting her gaze towards Hiro as if probing for something.

Sitting across from her, Hiro strokes the eyepatch covering half his face and smiles stiffly.

“Eh, what do you mean?”

Hiro was so confident in the throne room, but now, his eyes were darting about and he was acting suspiciously.

It's understandable that Aura would stare at him with an exasperated look on her face.

“...I don't know where you spent your days or what you did until now. However, I think anyone would have been nervous walking in that tense of an atmosphere while exposed to the gazes of influential nobles of the Grantz Grand Empire. But the way you were walking... it was as if you had the same experience in the past— as if you were accustomed to it.”

“No... I was pretty nervous. M-Maybe it's because of my eyepatch that it was hard to read my expression.”

The way Hiro didn't show a single sign of nerves in the throne room, he wasn't fooling anyone.

"If you insist, I won't press you any further..."

"..."

It was the same at Fort Belk. Maybe this is just what you'd expect from this wise young girl. It seems she's caught on to Hiro's true identity.

Hiro let out a small exhale, and opened his mouth slightly.

"If... and this is only if, someone from the past suddenly appeared in the future, what do you think would happen?"

If... He could have exposed everything to her, but this is a haunt of wicked men where various desires swirl about.

Even if it's only those two in the nobles' room, he can't let his guard down here.

He can't say for sure that someone might be listening in on them, but just in case, it would probably be best to tread carefully.

Aura narrows her eyes, takes a beat, then opens her mouth to speak in a way to imply she was choosing her words carefully.

"...Is it all right if I speak hypothetically?"

"Yeah. Hypothetically, what do you think, Aura?"

"If... by chance, the "hero" from "a 1,000 years ago" appeared in the present time, there's no doubt that many people would see his existence as a nuisance."

Her hypothetical pierced deep into Hiro's chest.

"...They would, huh."

Aura continues to speak monotonously in a detached manner towards Hiro who wore a bitter smile.

“Of course. The people would likely rejoice, but for those with power, he would be nothing but a nuisance. They would likely join together to crush such a dangerous existence. If he were to avoid that, either hiding his powers— or claiming to be his descendent would probably be appropriate. With that, people would still “understand”.”

“Understand, huh...”

“But having said that, even if he told people he was a “god”, hardly anyone would believe him.”

“That is true.”

“It’s nothing to fret much about really. You’ve already been accepted as a “descendant”, so if anyone tried to make a racket about you being a “god”, people would probably think them crazy and not take them seriously.”

Aura grabbed a cup from the table and wet her mouth with some black tea.

“However, we don’t know what will happen from here on. It would likely be wise to prepare yourself as if your true identity may be discovered at any moment.”

“Yeah. You’re right.”

As Hiro hangs his head, Aura’s eyes turn into those of a prankster.

“This is a hypothetical, yes? Is there a need to look so serious?”

“...R-Right? Haha...”

Aura smiles at Hiro who scratches his head and tries to play it cool.

Hiro decided to change the topic so as not to make any more slip ups.

“B-By the way, there were so many nobles, but no one’s coming to the nobles’ room.”

“That’s because this is a place where nobles without a residence within the grounds of the Imperial Palace come. However, the middle and lower class nobles refrain from using this room and return to their mansions in town or to an inn, so this room is

hardly used.”

“You don’t have a residence here, Aura?”

“I do have one on the grounds. Though, I stay at the guard house lately when I come to the Imperial capital so I don’t use it.”

Aura offered to give it to him if he wanted it.

As Hiro politely declines, there’s a knock at the door.

“Excuse me.”

A maid appeared from the shadow of the now open door.

“The preparations for the banquet have been completed. Everyone has already gathered. Your Highness Hiro... are you ready?”

The maid said to Hiro. But there is no reply from his blank face.

For a short while, it was silent in the nobles’ room... Then, Hiro finally realizes.

“Ahh— You’re talking to me!”

The maid nods with a gentle smile.

“Are you ready?”

This is the reason Hiro and Aura have stayed at the Imperial Palace until now.

It was decided to hold a banquet in order to celebrate the birth of a new Imperial prince and the victory of the battle from the other day.

After Hiro nods, the maid turns her body to the side.

“Then, I shall show you the way.”

Hiro and Aura pass in front of the maid, then stop in the hallway.

The maid quietly closes the door. She says, “this way,” after bowing, then begins to walk ahead of them.

(...For now, I have to memorize faces and names. I have to figure out who's trustworthy and who's not.)

Considering the future as well, it would probably be a good idea to come in contact with the Krone house.

(But still, I have to wait for them to come to me.)

If he approached them, there's a chance it may cause groundless rumors to spread.

It would be a disaster if rumors went around that the descendant of the Second Emperor supported the Krone house.

(Well, I don't expect they'll be participating in the banquet though.)

The faction for the First Imperial Prince, which heads the Krone house, couldn't possibly leave Imperial Prince Schtobel to participate in the banquet while he's under house arrest.

Plus, the foundation they thought to be solid had begun to sway.

I doubt this is the time for them to get drunk on alcohol during such a state of emergency.

If they don't take the best measures possible, they will collapse in the blink of an eye. There's no doubt they're desperately racking their brains right about now.

Also—.

(Third Imperial Prince Brutar will probably participate. His matter was deemed trivial so he'll probably get wasted.)

At that moment, something pulled at his sleeve.

“Hiro... Are you ready?”

“Huh?”

Hiro pauses his thoughts and looks at Aura who is walking next to him.

“Please walk into the hall alone, okay?”

“...You’re right.”

Hiro nods, understanding the meaning behind her words.

Aura is affiliated with Third Imperial Prince Brutar’s faction. She is a staff officer, so this should be a given.

If she appeared at the hall together with the Fourth Imperial Prince...

(A lot of speculation would probably start flying around. I want to avoid putting Aura in a bad position.)

She may be suspected of changing factions.

That would be a perfect chance for those who are not pleased with her position.

It would definitely attract criticism.

When he saw Third Imperial Prince Brutar in the throne room, his impression was that he was an extremely distrusting person.

(Someone like that would easily be misled by the words of their retainers. You could even say he would be easy to manipulate. That’s probably why his faction grew so large though.)

But in a way, it’s actually not a bad situation for Hiro.

If Hiro can choose his words carefully, he can have him act in his favor.

If there’s a chance of anything getting in his way, it would probably be the influential nobles who support him.

(...There's no point in thinking about it now. First, I'll etch faces and names into my head.)

He avoided such troublesome affairs a 1,000 years ago.

He was always standing on the front lines and only returned to the castle a few times.

The consequences for continuously evading such situations was great. Which is why he abandoned everything and returned to "Earth".

But now, he can run no longer. He made his bed, and now he has to lie in it.

There's a chance he may make a severe mistake due to his lack of experience.

(Even still, I swore to continue moving forward.)

Hiro stopped before a set of large doors. There was a light of determination burning in his eyes.

He passes through the double doors flanked by heavy infantry as the noise from the crowds leak through.

It let him know that there were many nobles within.

"I will enter from the eastern entrance. I will see you later..."

Aura said in a small voice. She then continues to walk the hallway pretending not to know Hiro.

"..."

He looks away from the now Aura who had disappeared and shifts his gaze to a maid waiting nearby.

"I will enter first. Thereafter, the doors will open from within, so please wait here until then, your Highness Hiro."

“Alright.”

The maid disappears to the other side of the doors, after which, majestic music began to play.

There’s a beautiful voice singing along to the music. Perhaps it’s the maid that was just there with Hiro.

[If everyone would please be quiet. The person who will now be entering, is a descendant of his Majesty the Second Emperor who was once praised as the “*Twin Black Hero King*”, who also laid the foundation of the Empire as one of the Twelve Great Gods of Grantz, Fourth Imperial Prince Hiro Schwarz von Grantz.]

The doors open. Along with a bright light, a lively and elegant melody floods the hall and wraps itself around Hiro.

Hiro squinted his eyes, took one step forward, then entered the hall with a light stride.

Hiro is welcomed by a grand applause and is exposed to inquisitive glances, but none of them call out to him.

(I guess I’ll wait and see what happens first.)

So he grabbed a glass of water and walked towards a large table lined with extravagant food.

A number of nobles approach him once he gets there.

Every single one of them has on gorgeous jewelry and flashy clothing.

Hiro pretends not to notice as he goes into thought...

(Hmm~... They’re really assertive, aren’t they?)

That’s basically the first impression he got from them.

Their smiles somehow look superficial. They probably can’t be trusted.

One person from the group approached Hiro as their representative and bowed.

“Your Highness Hiro Schwarz, it is a pleasure to meet you.”

“Yeah, nice to meet you.”

They exchange a handshake.

“I—”

The man began to introduce himself. It was long and winded, like a gloomy speech.

“—. I hope to see you again in the future.”

To briefly summarize, he is a noble who has territory in the western region.

The western nobles are supporters of Third Imperial Prince Brutar.

Although there were no problems this time around because his case was dismissed, no one knows what might happen in the future.

This is likely why they approached him, just in case.

“Alright. I’ll be sure to remember your name and face.”

‘As someone I can’t trust,’ he said in his mind.

That was just the beginning. Nobles gather around him one after another.

Hiro becomes overwhelmed dealing with this.

He was surrounded by nobles brimming with various desires, receiving offers of daughters’ hands in marriage and recommendations for sons as subordinates.

He was able to get away from this half an hour later. While straining not to show his fatigue in his expression, he leaned against a sofa by the wall.

(There are a lot more people crowding around me than I expected...)

He throws back the glass of water in his hand in one gulp, then pokes his throat with his finger to release a suffocating feeling there.

He looks around the hall and sees there are still nobles waiting and watching. It seems he still has to go through some more greetings.

Hiro recalls the scene from earlier and let's out a deep sigh.

(But... just as I thought, none of the central nobles under the Krone house are participating.)

He isn't surprised because it was as he predicted, but he was disappointed at the same time.

Of the nobles who called out to him, the ones who caught his attention the most were the ones from the eastern region.

(Having lost their head of the house, they were divided.)

What he could sense from various things they said, was that they were dissatisfied with their acting head of the house, Duchess Kelheit.

However, there are many who side with Duchess Kelheit, and it looks like those two groups are about to split apart from disputes.

(The ones who took advantage of this is the Krone house...)

It seems the Krone house is extending their evil influence in an attempt to take control of the entire eastern region.

Having lost their solidarity, there is a chance the Krone house will take over the Kelheit house in the near future.

If that's allowed to happen... First Imperial Prince Schtobel will likely get his hands on the throne.

(...Now, what should I do from here on out?)

A shadow falls from overhead as Hiro is in thought.

He notices this, and when he looked up, there stood a woman in a scarlet dress.

“Excuse me, do you mind if I sit next to you?”

She had golden, wavy hair which was tied behind her head which flowed down in front of her right shoulder. Her bewitching blue eyes were looking down at Hiro.

Her symmetrical and voluptuous body could probably draw anyone’s gaze.

Boldly enough, her dress has slits up her thighs— Her beautiful legs peeking out from them are seductively charming and quite suggestive.

Actually, there is now a commotion starting from the nobles around her.

(But... I get the feeling that’s not the only reason.)

Hiro thinks the reaction around them is suspicious.

“Ahh, sorry. My name— is Miste Kariara Rosa von Kelheit. I was the former Third Imperial Princess, and I’m currently the acting head of the Kelheit house. It’s nice to make your acquaintance.”

After finishing her concise self introduction, the duchess put on a bewitching smile.

“I see. I can see why Liz is so worked up. There’s the color of your hair and eyes too, but... you have an unusual face for someone of the Grantz Grand Empire.”

Hiro didn’t let his surprise show on his face, but there was an uncomfortable feeling pressing down on his heart.

Chapter 8

The Widow's Trap

(Why— did she show up now?)

He did expect her to come in contact with him eventually.

But not now. It should have been at a later time.

(Could it be that she's that cornered right now? No, even if she were, it's still too soon for her to come in contact with me.)

He doesn't have time to think about it for too long. He can't let her know that he's analyzing the situation right now.

Even if she is Liz's older sister, currently, she is the acting head of the Kelheit house.

It's almost certain that she approached Hiro with the intention of using him.

The more he wavers, the more the situation will be in her favor.

He absolutely does not want to give her the initiative, so Hiro puts on a calm face and points his hand to the space beside him.

"Please. No one is sitting here, so go ahead."

"Thank you. I appreciate that."

Rosa was holding a glass in each hand. She placed one filled with a red liquid on the table before Hiro.

It's likely wine or something similar, but because Hiro had never drunk alcohol before, he decided to decline the drink.

"Umm, I can't drink alcohol..."

"Oh, I didn't realize. Well, this one's water, so don't worry."

She says as she switches the glass with the one filled with the clear liquid— the water. As she sat down next to him, the fragrance of roses tickled his nose.

“What business might Liz’s sister have with me?”

“Well, my little sister wrote about you in a letter. You’ve done a lot for her and all, so I thought I should come greet you.”

“I see... Liz actually did a lot for me too, so it’s an honor to meet her sister.”

“Ahh, your Highness Hiro, there’s no need to be so formal. Let’s be comfortable with each other. Besides, you’re in a higher position than I am. You’re going to set a bad example for the others.”

“I understand— Yeah, alright. Is this okay?”

“Yeah, that’s good. You should understand your position a little better.”

She laughs cheerfully and takes a sip of her wine.

She drank her wine slowly to savor the taste. She then smiled broadly and tilted her glass.

“It’s tragic that you can’t drink such delicious wine.”

“I can’t do alcohol.”

Hiro shrugs his shoulders.

He can’t say that he’s underage— This is because you’re considered an adult at 15 in this world.

“What a waste. Considering the future, it would be beneficial in various ways for you to drink.”

“There are a lot of dangers lately, so I think it’s better that I can’t drink for now.”

“Heh, I can’t tell if you’re cautious or a coward. I wonder which you are.”

“It’s because I’m a coward.”

“I can’t imagine a man who was so dignified in the throne room would say that. Do you

mind if I ask why?"

Hiro put on an indifferent expression towards the woman staring at the side of his face with great interest.

"I'm afraid of regretting. So— no matter how much my opponent screams or begs for their life, I get an urge to kill them."

"..."

"Although the boundary for that "regret" is ambiguous."

It's unsure whether she looks befuddled because the young boy changed his expression, or because she became aware of the madness sleeping deep within him.

Rosa takes a gulp from her glass and empties it. She then calls for a server and requests another glass of wine.

She enjoyed the fragrance of the white wine brought by the server before speaking again.

"How old will you be this year?"

"Seventeen. Why do you ask?"

"You're terribly twisted for your age. I would even call you haughty. Hehe, I'm curious about your past now."

"My past isn't anything special. I just survived a number of hellish battles."

"Is that so? Then— if I happened to become your enemy here and now, what would happen?"

He doesn't know what she's trying to probe for, but Hiro decides to answer honestly.

"I wouldn't do anything. I would draw a line though— If you crossed that line, I'd go after your head eventually."

"You wouldn't kill me right away?"

"If I did that, wouldn't that just make me a savage? I'm not that thoughtless."

"So you act after thinking things through."

“If you lose your reason, you’re no different from a beast. That would only increase the number of your enemies and you would gain nothing. You would cause trouble for your allies too, and most of all, you would only be left with regrets.”

He speaks almost as if he’s saying this to himself.

There was an obscure color of regret in Hiro’s distant eyes, but it was only for a moment and it didn’t seem like Rosa noticed.

As if scrutinizing Hiro’s words, Rosa nods a number of times. She then crosses her arms, emphasizing her chest.

“Hmm. Do you mean like my brother, Schtobel?”

Hiro broods over Rosa’s words, but he couldn’t come up with a precise answer.

“I can’t say for sure. But... I think he’s more twisted than I am.”

“Hehe, that’s correct. Though, he was once a man with a soul befitting an emperor.”

“What happened?”

“Schtobel earned the favor of “Mjöltnir” when he was 18. That’s when he started to change. He became unable to think about the feelings of the weak. He seriously thinks that the strong are just and the weak are wicked. That’s why he’s extremely afraid of someone stronger than himself appearing.”

“...He really is twisted.”

“There are no bounds to the desires of man. If one obtained a mighty power, that would make them needlessly stand out. It even changes your personality. You should be careful, too.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

After hearing Hiro’s reply, Rosa nodded as if satisfied, then spoke once more.

“—I’m running short on time. I guess I’ll cut to the chase now.”

She licks her lips and her mouth forms into a smile.

(So, this is where we really get started...)

Unless he prepares himself, this leopardess will likely take his head.

He doesn't want to allow her the initiative. He wants to take this in a direction that is advantageous for him.

(There's no need for us to probe each other.)

After collecting his thoughts, Hiro decides to boldly cut in to make the first move.

"Did you come to talk to me because the Kelheit house is backed into a corner right now?"

Her eyes became frighteningly sharp for a moment in response to Hiro's words.

"So you realized... How diligent of you. No, maybe it's because my abilities are lacking."

"I probably wouldn't have noticed if the eastern nobles were united though."

"I guess there's no need to hide the fact if you already know that much. As you've guessed, the eastern nobles are on the brink of splitting. In an age where men have the power, there are a lot of small inconveniences to being a female acting head."

"Well, the Grantz Grand Empire is set up to have male successors. So even the Five Great Nobles can't exist without heirs."

"That's right. Which is why I have the problem of a number of men courting me."

"Well, it's the perfect chance to raise their family name. They would gain all the reputation the Kelheit house has built up until now."

Rosa nodded in response, as if satisfied with Hiro's words.

"You sure know your stuff. However, I don't want to take in any dreg-like second sons from other houses."

“I’m sure there are fine men among them, too.”

“There probably are if I looked. But I need someone without any ties.”

“...But even if you take me as your husband for that purpose, you won’t get the result you’re hoping for.”

Rosa shakes her head and refutes Hiro’s words.

“I won’t tell you to be my groom. I doubt you have such intentions anyway.”

“Then do you plan to use the position of the Fourth Imperial Prince? I’m sorry, but as I am now, I don’t have the right to meddle in the matters of your house.”

“...You’re right. But there is one way to solve this problem.”

“Which is?”

“Before I get to that, is it okay if I take that water?”

Perhaps it was because she drank too much, but the flushed Rosa pointed at the glass in front of Hiro.

Although Rosa placed it there for Hiro, he didn’t drink it because of the possibility of something being mixed into it.

“Sure.”

“Thanks.”

As Rosa holds the water in her mouth, she grabs Hiro’s collar.

He looks at her puzzled while she has a devilish smile on her face.

“What are you doing all of a— mmgh?!”

Hiro’s mouth was closed shut by her soft lips.

He’s confused by this sudden move.

Her tongue pries his mouth open and then slides in.

“Mmgh?!”

Hiro grabbed Rosa’s shoulders and tried to pushed her away.

However, refusing to be separated, she wraps her arms around Hiro’s neck and glues her body even closer to him.

His mouth fills with a lukewarm liquid, and it eventually travels down his throat.

A man who had just become an Imperial Prince, and a young widow who gave off a unique allure, together.

As if a beehive were being jostled, the hall is engulfed in a clamor from the bold act occurring before everyone’s watching eyes.

Hiro moved his arms to Rosa’s hips and stood up, finally managing to tear her off.

“Gah... wh-what are you...”

“...”

After letting Hiro go, Rosa took in a mouthful of wine from the other glass, rinsed her mouth out, then took out a cloth to spit it out.

“Sorry, I took the liberty of being a bit forceful.”

“...Huh?”

He realized what she meant when his body became unsteady.

“Don’t worry. It’s not poison.”

“What did you...”

Hiro stumbled a few steps, but he put his strength into his legs and refused to fall.

Seeing this, Rosa’s eyes were wide with disbelief.

“I’m surprised... The average person can’t even stay standing.”

Hiro glares at Rosa.

(It's my fault for letting my guard down... But what goal does she have in mind to do something like this?)

Hiro felt an urge to vomit from the sensation of his feet floating off the ground, but he held it back as he spoke.

“Drugging someone in front of all these watching eyes... I think this is just going to make your position worse.”

“I simple have a drunk in front of me. How would that make my position worse?”

Rosa clapped her hands.

“Can someone come over here? It seems his Highness Hiro is drunk. I’m going to have him rest in my mansion, so someone come give me a hand.”

Two ladies and three male nobles responded to her.

They approach without hesitation, as if they talked this out beforehand.

There’s no doubt that they’re under Rosa’s influence.

“Come quietly with us. This is for the sake of your future, too.”

Rosa whispers into Hiro’s ears as he was restrained by the men.

To the others, it looks like they’re helping out a drunk.

(If I scream for help right now... I would give off a bad impression.)

If Hiro started screaming, it would just turn into a drunk causing a scene.

That could become a problem in the future, and would also be seen as weakness.

“So, shall we go?”

Said Rosa, but someone called out to their group as they tried to leave.

“...Wait.”

“Hmm?”

Rosa looks back, and there stood Aura.

“Well, well... If it isn't the famous Countess Branadara. What can I do for you?”

“I will not allow you to take him with you.”

“I'm sorry, but... I'll have a leisurely talk with you at a future time.”

As Rosa snaps her fingers, three ladies surround Aura.

“Now, now, let us chat over there.”

“L-Let me go.”

“You mustn't struggle.”

Without the possession of her spirit weapon, she was easily taken away by the ladies.

“Let's head for my mansion before the drug's effects wear off.”

Her beautiful fingertips slid down Hiro's eyepatch.



Hiro was taken out from the hall and tossed into Rosa's mansion on the Imperial palace grounds.

The two are alone in a room where the moon's light is shining in.

Rosa was sitting on a chair with fine ornaments, and Hiro was lying down on a bed

large enough to fit five adults.

“Sorry for all this rough treatment.”

“I don’t mind that, but I want you to explain.”

“I know. But now that we’ve come to this point, you should understand by now, right?”

“...More or less.”

Not only did they kiss in public, but a widow was looking after a drunk Imperial prince and disappeared with him to her mansion.

At this point, anyone would come to the conclusion that they would end up becoming more than just acquaintances.

“I’m sure other houses will think twice before bringing a marriage proposal to a mistress of an Imperial prince.”

“You’re probably right, but this is so rash. This won’t resolve anything.”

“Is that really true? Why do you think that?”

“In the end, this will only buy you time. Eventually, you’ll take in a husband from another house.”

“That’s only if this was just to buy time, right?”

The light from the moon floating in the dark night sky shines through a window, illuminating the gorgeous woman, making her even more alluring.

“I wonder what would happen— if I conceived your child in this body of mine.”

“What...?”

“I was brooding over how to escape from the evil influence of the Krone house, and the conclusion I came to— was to become your lover. The Fourth Imperial Prince, descendant of the Second Emperor. Using that title, I’ll unite the eastern nobles. Then, I will receive your offspring and make that child the head of the Kelheit house. I told you— I need someone who isn’t under anyone’s influence.”

“That’s...”

“You’re so innocent. Did you not think that far ahead?”

“But... the people of the Kelheit house won't accept that. If you gave birth to my child, it would be like the Kelheit house was taken over.”

“They'll have no choice but to accept it. His Majesty the Second Emperor's blood will enter the Kelheit house.”

“I'm trying to tell you, that's—”

Hiro couldn't finish his sentence. This was because he saw Rosa's smug face.

“There's no need to worry about the bloodline being cut off. I'll supply a girl from an extended family of the Kelheit house for the child that's born. The blood of the Kelheit house will continue on, and we will obtain the blood of his Majesty the Second Emperor. Who could complain about that?”

“...”

“Your reward is huge, too. You can have your way with my body, and the eastern nobles will become your allies. I think it's a good deal.”

It's true. Considering the future, this isn't a bad deal. What Hiro lacks right now, is connections and capital.

The Kelheit house could probably resolve both these problems.

The only downside is having a child.

Rosa throws out a lifeline to the conflicted Hiro.

“It's not like I want a child right away. Despite all that I've done, it's not like I don't have my integrity. I'd be grateful if you could give me just a bit of time. But that's only because of my own convenience and has nothing to do with you. So if you want, I don't mind having one now.”

She asks what he wants to do, but he's troubled by her response.

“I don't mind joining forces with you, but... the child issue is a bit...”

“Hehe, you really are innocent. But I don't mind that for now. I'm sure you have to consider Liz's standpoint, too.”

She stands up and climbs onto the bed.

She causes the bed to creak as she slowly closes the distance between them.

“That takes care of that. It’s late into the night, so let’s go to sleep for today.”

“I don’t think there’s really a need for us to sleep together in the same bed... If you want to sleep here, I’ll sleep on the sofa.”

“That would make this meaningless. Even if we don’t have intercourse, I want it to be true that we slept together.”

She smiles a sinister smile, moves next to Hiro and holds him.

“I don’t have such intentions, but if you can’t control yourself and try to have your way with me, I don’t mind. I won’t resist.”

“Can’t we sleep apart from each other?”

“Zzz—... Mm...”

“You fall asleep so quickly, just like your little sister.”

Hiro falls into a deep sleep as he thinks about how he experienced the same thing once before.

Hiro’s breathing slows as he falls deeper into his slumber with his body wrapped in the warm sensation you can only get from a woman.

Chapter 9

The Black Imperial Prince

Imperial Year 1023, July 20.

Hiro is in a room in a certain section of Duchess Kelheit's mansion.

There is a large bed and a chair for one. Nothing more.

Hiro, who was asleep on the bed, awoke from the morning sun shining down on his face.

He sits himself up and squints at the sunlight coming in through the window.

After stifling a yawn, he crawled to the edge of the bed, placed his feet on the ground, and looked around the room.

It seems the master of the room woke up before the sun even came up and went out somewhere.

(I wonder where I can wash my face...)

As he approached the door to head into the hallway and look for a place to wash up, it opens from the other side.

Rosa came in wearing a military uniform which looked tight around her chest. There was a bewitching air about her.

"Hmm, so you're up."

"I just woke up. I wanted to wash my face a bit—"

As Hiro was about to ask where he could do so, Rosa pointed her thumb behind her.

"Before that, you have a visitor here for you."

Although Hiro tilts his head in confusion at the woman wearing a mysterious expression, he moves his gaze to the space behind Rosa.

Standing in front of the door was a neatly dressed man with a long and narrow face—It was Prime Minister Gillish.

“I apologize for visiting so early in the morning.”

Hiro looks at him puzzled as he bows.

“What are you doing here, Prime Minister Gillish?”

“I have come to deliver a letter from his Majesty the emperor. I didn’t think I could possibly entrust this to anyone else, so I brought it here while knowing it would be an inconvenience.”

“A letter from his Majesty?”

“Here it is. Please read it alone.”

Prime Minister Gillish hands the letter over. He takes one glance at Hiro who looks puzzled, bows, then takes his leave.

After watching him leave, Hiro noticed Rosa glancing at the letter.

“You want to see it?”

“If you deem the contents to be something I can see.”

Rosa shrugs her shoulders and begins to walk the hallway, then soon looks back.

“Can you come to the dining hall once you’re done reading it? Breakfast is ready. Also, if you want to wash your face, the well is in the garden.”

She waves her hand behind her saying “I’ll be waiting in the dining hall,” before she turns a corner in the hallway and goes off.

Hiro looks down at the letter and yawns.

He already guessed what the contents of the letter basically are.

(...I'll wash my face first.)

Hiro goes out into the mansion's garden, arrives at the well, and washes his face.

However, he realizes he doesn't have a towel.

While thinking how annoying it would be to have water get in his eyes, he wonders what he should do.

(I guess I'll be fine...)

As he gave up and started heading for the dining hall, something soft plopped onto his head.

He grabs it and it turns out to be a towel. Before checking to see who gave it to him, he wipes off the drops of water on his face.

"Thanks, you really helped—"

He tried to give his thanks, but he couldn't finish saying it.

This was because Aura was standing there with an imposing stance and seemed to be seething with rage.



“...Did you enjoy yourself last night, Black Imperial Prince?”

Each syllable she spoke was oozing with disgust.

He had a lot of questions for Aura, such as why she was here, but he decided to ask her about a term in particular that caught his attention.

“—What do you mean, Black Imperial Prince?”

“That’s what many of the nobles are calling you.”

“Calling me?”

“Yes, and that the Black Imperial Prince took advantage of a young widow and took her to her mansion.”

“Th-That’s nonsense...”

“Don’t worry, I just made that up right now.”

“...Don’t scare me like that.”

“The truth is, they are calling you the Black Imperial Prince who won the heart of the woman of steel.”

“Th-The woman of steel?”

“That is Duchess Kelheit’s “nickname”. She is called that because she has continued to refuse marriage proposals from other houses using various means.”

Aura looks at him disdainfully.

“I suppose it’s a given that word spread because you won her heart in a short time and disappeared to her mansion. There are more than just a few nobles who wish to learn your way with words.”

“So that’s what it’s come to...”

Well, they did something so bold with so many nobles gathered, so it’s not like he didn’t predict that would happen.

But he didn’t think it would get to a point where people wanted to be taught his way with words.

Hiro buries his head into his hands thinking about what a mess he’d gotten into.

At that moment, Aura approached Hiro and looked up at him with her lead colored eyes.

“Didn’t I stress that you should be careful of women yesterday?”

“That’s right, you did... I’m sorry.”

“It’s probably thanks to the Kelheit house that the rumors spread so quickly. The other houses wouldn’t say things to praise you. If it were me, I would have spread rumors that you were a foolish Imperial prince who was seduced by a widow to lower your standing.”

“I think I would’ve done that, too.”

“But she did the opposite and spread rumors to raise your standing. I almost want to praise her for her abilities— However, you are going to be on the receiving end of contempt.”

“...I can’t help it if I am.”

“Please really be careful from here on out.”

Aura sighed and looked at “Black Camellia”.

“Also, what was “*Black Camellia*” doing? Does it not take action when its master’s virtue is in jeopardy?”

“Hmm~... It doesn’t seem like it’s going to listen to me for a while.”

“If I remember correctly, there was a spirit dwelling in “*Black Camellia*”, wasn’t there?”

“Yeah. I’m sure it would protect me if it sensed a threat to my life though...”

“That’s quite a twisted spirit.”

“...It is.”

A 1,000 years ago— up until the time he received the blessing of “Excalibur”, it listened to him pretty well.

However, starting around the time “Excalibur” appeared before Hiro, he feels “Black Camellia” became disobedient.

(And I left it alone for a 1,000 years on top of that.)

Considering all that, it wouldn't be strange for it to strangle him to death. You might be able to say that it's a miracle that he's even able to wear it right now.

As Hiro looked down at Aura's military uniform, she noticed the letter in his hand.

"What is that?"

"Ahh, it's a letter from his Majesty the emperor."

"Have you not read it yet?"

"I wanted to wake up, so I thought I'd read it after I washed my face first. Besides, I can pretty much guess what's in the letter."

Aura nodded at Hiro's words.

"It probably says something to the effect of attacking the Lichtein Dukedom."

"The citizens will call us weak if we don't get revenge, and the nobles might express discontent, too. The worst case scenario would be countries coming out and sympathizing with the Lichtein Dukedom."

Hiro finished speaking Aura's thoughts for her, then took out the letter from the envelope.

What he predicted was written on a single sheet of parchment.

"...Hmm..."

"Was it as we suspected after all?"

"Yeah. It's probably his way of telling me to build up my merits, though."

"I believe they're an adequate opponent for your first battle."

After the Lichtein Dukedom's loss the other day, you could say they were at death's door steps.

While having mobilized 15,000 soldiers, they were unable to accomplish a single thing.

As a result, Duke Lichtein's ability to keep his nation united has no doubt declined. The Dukedom's nobles will surely choose the path of surrender if threatened even slightly.

"Apparently, General Kielo, the new commanding officer of the Fourth Imperial Army, is leading 10,000 men and advancing on the Lichtein Dukedom. It seems Liz is with them, too."

Due to an error in judgment the other day, as with First Imperial Prince Schtobel, General Loring was placed under house arrest and a different commanding officer replaced him.

"And you?"

"It says to hurry and return so I can meet with them and join the staff officers. I guess it's my role to gain merits from the weakened Lichtein Dukedom and its even more weakened general."

"So that means the preparations are set."

"Guess so. It also says to take control of the northern region of Lichtein's territory and use that as a bargaining chip to create a peace treaty with them."

"That sounds about right. If we destroy the Lichtein Dukedom, there will no longer be any country dealing in slave trade."

"I pity the Lichtein Dukedom, only being kept alive for such a reason."

Hiro shrugs his shoulders and looks over the letter one more time.

What bothers him, are the final words which he didn't tell Aura about.

(That's probably why Prime Minister Gillish told me to read it alone.)

He doesn't think Aura would tell anyone, but you never know how information may leak out.

Hiro puts the letter away while trying not to give off any signs of his inner thoughts.

Then, he looked at Aura and asked what he'd been wondering this whole time.

“By the way, why are you here, Aura?”

She is the chief of staff for Third Imperial Prince Brutar.

For her to come to the Kelheit mansion, there's a chance it may cause groundless rumors.

“What you're thinking of will not happen.”

“Did you come here in secret or something?”

“Such tricks were not necessary either.”

Aura replies to Hiro who tilted his head confused.

“It's because you are the hot topic in the Imperial Palace right now. There will be no problems arising from my visiting Duchess Kelheit's mansion.”

“So you're telling me they have no time to worry about such things.”

“You could say that as well, but even if there were rumors that I moved to your side, everyone would have no choice but to defend me and say that that's impossible, at least in my case. Otherwise, it may cause nobles to start moving over to the Kelheit house.”

Aura's clout is strong.

Even more so than her achievement of cornering Ferzen, her military career as a whole dazzles brilliantly in the eyes of the nobles.

And so, they can not make any rumors about her right now, because that may lead to a change of heart for the nobles who are carefully watching for a shift in the current situation.

“It's a delicate time right now, so no one will try to stir up any trouble.”

“Yeah, you're right. So... what business do you have here, Aura?”

“I will be departing in half an hour, so I thought I would come say goodbye.”

“...To the west?”

“Yes, there are survivors causing riots in various provinces of Ferzen. I have received orders from his Majesty to suppress them.”

“I see. I wanted to have you show me around the Imperial capital, but it looks like we’re both too busy for that.”

“Unfortunately, you will have to allow me to do that another time.”

Aura bowed, saying “I will write to you at a future date,” and took her leave.

He wanted to say goodbye to Alfred too, but he probably had his own preparations to take care of before departing. Besides, Hiro had to head for Fort Belk right away, too.

Hiro returned inside the mansion, asked a maid where the dining hall was and started walking in that direction.

There is a servant standing before a large door. He bows and opens the door.

“Sorry, I ended up making you wait.”

“I don’t mind. Sit here.”

Rosa tilted her head to the side and pointed her hand to the chair beside her.

After making sure Hiro seated himself, she clapped her hands.

As she does, from a door on the west side— which is connected to the kitchen— a servant comes out carrying food in his hands.

A maid lines up the tableware without making a noise. Before Hiro reaches for the food, he turns to Rosa.

“I’ve decided to leave right after eating.”

After he explained the same details which he told Aura, Rosa smiled in a way which somehow made him uneasy.

“Then I’ll have to give you a grand farewell.”



After finishing his breakfast, Hiro went outside the mansion. There was a large crowd of nobles there to greet him.

The moment Hiro showed himself, the nobles who were standing in neat lines all knelt.

Anyone would be taken aback to see all these famous nobles bowing their heads to a young boy.

The garrison watching from afar exhaled in astonishment.

So as not to appear confused, Hiro turns to look at Rosa in her military uniform.

Her smile was brimming with charm as she spoke.

“I just assembled the eastern nobles who were staying in the Imperial capital.”

“But still, I feel like there are too many of them.”

She probably wouldn't have been able to assemble these numbers unless they were told beforehand.

How long has Rosa been preparing for this exactly? You can't help but be impressed by her commendable skills in moving this many nobles without letting on to the other houses.

As this sense of awe wells up in him, Rosa placed a hand on Hiro's shoulder.

“Now, let us depart, Black Imperial Prince.”

Hiro's face stiffened at that term he heard once before.

As he does, a finely decorated, extravagant carriage appears before him.

One of the nobles stood up and opened the door for him.

“Your Highness, please get in.”

Rosa pushes Hiro's back and he gets in. As soon as he sat on the sofa, he sighed and spit out—

“There’s something I want to ask you.”

There is only one person to set his gaze on— Rosa, with her voluptuous body wrapped in her military uniform.

She’s sitting opposite him, and with a cool face, she crosses her legs and tilts her head. No matter what sort of gesture she makes, her movements are refined and beautiful. It’s enough to remind you that she really was the Third Imperial Princess.

“What might that be?”

The carriage moves steadily and the nobles follow behind on horses that were prepared for them.

“When did you start setting up such a large scale plan?”

Hiro’s eyes give off a sharp light letting her know tricks and lies won’t work. Seeing this, Rosa made a bitter face and shrugged her shoulders.

“Since the day I got the letter from Liz. I thought it was a good opportunity. The annoying marriage proposals would stop, and the Kelheit house would be saved as well.”

“What were you going to do if I weren’t a descendant?”

“I had arrangements made to support Liz once more if that were the case.”

“And what about the matter of finding a groom?”

“I was planning to take in an orphan while pretending he was my husband’s illegitimate child. I told you right, that I’m not without my integrity.”

“So your decision to support me wasn’t just because of the reason you told me yesterday, is it?”

“You realized?”

“Of course. Seeing how you’ve carefully prepared things this far, I can tell you have

another reason.”

“...”

They both fell silent, so Hiro looked out the window. The view outside had completely changed.

This was because the private army of the eastern nobles which was standing by on Rosa’s orders had joined with them after they passed through the gate.

Every single soldier has the crest of their master on their armor, and there are many flags with coats of arms flying in the wind.

But the largest and the one which stood out the most was Hiro’s— the flag with a crest of black soil and a dragon grasping a silver sword.

The flag of the dragon floating in the clear sky without a cloud in sight can be summed up as a masterpiece.

Perhaps it was because the soldiers holding them were nervous, but their faces were shaking slightly.

But at the same time there’s also inspiration mixed in their expressions and they look proud.

Back in the carriage, there was a change.

Rosa, who was quiet for a moment, tightened her expression and opened her mouth to speak.

“What do you think of the current Grantz Grand Empire?”

“...I think it’s powerful. I just think maybe it’s extended its territory a bit too much.”

“Exactly. However— his Majesty has his eyes set on uniting the central continent, which is why our territory will likely continue to expand.”

“I think it’s big enough as it is, though. If it spreads any further, there’s the chance that the emperor’s influence won’t reach the remote regions.”

“The previous emperor— my grandfather emphasized that, too. But the current emperor is passionate about becoming the 13th Great God of Grantz.”

“You’re saying he wants to be deified?”

“History is created by the hands of man. Gods are the same. But you won’t be deified with half hearted achievements. That’s even if you are an emperor.”

“And you’re saying he has to unify the central continent for that?”

“The First Emperor founded the empire and became the *“first god”*, and the Second Emperor ended the turbulent times and became *“Mars”* through that achievement. There are various reasons for the others, but they were all emperors who contributed greatly to the empire.”

Rosa added that there was an exception of one who became a goddess though.

“A great enterprise which the past emperors could not achieve. By achieving that, the current emperor is trying to become a *“god”*.”

“So, are you saying that’s connected to why you’re supporting me?”

“That’s right. Even if you are an emperor, your life is not eternal. There’s a chance of collapsing partway through your dream. No one knows what might happen when that time comes. I’m currently preparing for that right now.”

Rosa spreads out both arms, then put to words the foundation of her reason for supporting Hiro.

“The empire has a vast amount of land which is more than enough. Even if we expand our territory from here on out, it’ll likely become difficult to maintain. We should not want more than this. A seam will open somewhere eventually. That will become the embers which start a civil war within the empire.”

Maybe it was because she was feeling stuffy, but Rosa undid the first button of her military uniform.

“What this country needs right now is stability. It needs someone who will look, not out, but in. That’s why my late husband had his eyes on Liz. She’s still young, and you can hardly say she’s mature, but he saw the future of the empire in her pure and untainted heart. There will be dangers, but it should be no problem with sturdy allies by her side— He was just at the point of coming to that decision. My husband was assassinated.”

She clenched her fists in frustration and glared out the window.

She was looking at the Imperial Palace as the carriage ran along the central road.

Rosa points her blue eyes at Hiro once more.

“While we were silently watching other factions fall, they took that chance to get Liz demoted. I’m disgusted by my own shortcomings. That’s why I’m grateful to you. You saved my sister who was cornered. I was so overjoyed when I read Liz’s letter that it brought me to tears. And then— I came up with the idea of using you.”

“To make Liz the empress, right?”

Rosa lowered her head.

“I do feel apologetic towards you.”

“No, that might work out for me, too.”

This is because he never had the ambition of becoming the emperor from the beginning.

There’s also the chance he’ll be sent back to “earth”.

If such a person were placed on the throne, that would likely invite chaos.

Rosa strained a smile at the perceptive Hiro.

“But aside from whether they want to be or not, emperors are created by the hands of man, too.”

She points a white finger at Hiro.

“When that time comes— be prepared.”

At the same time, the carriage window made a sound and shook.

Eyes wide in surprise, Rosa looks out the window to check the situation.

Smiling citizens were waving their hands while shouting, “Black Imperial Prince!”

People were lined up along both sides of the central road, and there were flower petals dancing in the air everywhere.

Even the stallholders abandoned their work for this special occasion and were waving their hands at the carriage.

They were all jumping up and down and waving their hands and shouting with all their might with the hopes of getting a glimpse at Hiro.

“Hehe, this is the popularity of “Mars”. Even if you are a descendant, that does nothing to lessen that popularity.”

Rosa said proudly as she gazed outside.

More so than the large crowds of citizens that had gathered, Hiro was more surprised at the fact that the term “Black Imperial Prince” had already permeated to the people.

(Man, was this set up? But either way, once one person says that name, others will follow suit.)

As Hiro predicted, in no time at all, a large chorus of “Black Imperial Prince” began.

But this cheering doesn’t have a hint of ill will and makes him feel good. Hiro thinks about how that’s one thing that doesn’t change no matter the era.

Hiro smiled at the high he felt welling up from the depths of his soul.

“Isn’t it wonderful? That’s all you get to take in though.”

Rosa looks at him with a serious expression on her face.

“Let’s talk about what’s going to happen from here on out.”

“...Well me, I’d like to separate from your group and return to Fort Belk.”

“Are you worried about Liz?”

“There’s that too, but there’s something bothering else me.”

“Hmm, then you should head for Fort Belk from the east. You probably can’t employ personal soldiers yet. I can attach an escort to you. What do you say?”

Although Hiro has become the Fourth Imperial Prince, he doesn't have territory, the source of income.

He'll likely be granted territory depending on his achievements, but until then, he doesn't have the funds required to pay enlisted officers.

Although he needs to employ a private army, he can't even pay the salary for a third grade officer at this point.

If he spoke with Prime Minister Gillish, he could probably get a loan from the national treasury, but owing a debt is the one thing he wants to avoid.

And so, he decided to use Rosa— to use the Kelheit house.

"I don't need an escort. It's fine if you can just prepare a stagecoach for me."

"It's true that there's public order in the east, but that doesn't mean bandits or monsters never appear. If you're worried about money, we'll take care of everything."

"It'll take me longer to return to Fort Belk with an escort. I want to catch up to Liz and quickly as possible."

"If you want to go that far, then I guess there's no choice. I'll prepare the fastest stagecoach for you."

"Thanks. I'll pay this debt back one day."

"I don't really mind. More importantly, what are you going to do after this?"

After attacking the Lichtein Dukedom— that's probably what she means.

"I'll gather those who are trustworthy and establish my social standing here."

"Hmm, then when you're in need of money or soldiers, don't hesitate to ask."

Hiro sees Rosa hold her hand out. He smiles and grabs it.

"We're in this together now. Don't go dying on your own."

Hiro strained a smile in response to Rosa's words and nodded.

“Changing the subject...”

He said casually.

“What do you think of this attack on the Lichtein Dukedom, Rosa?”

“I think it’ll be an easy battle... Why?”

Just as he thought. Hiro sighed.

No doubt anyone would reply as such if asked this question.

“You’ve already repelled 15,000 enemies once. I’m sure anyone would think the same.”

“Probably.”

“But don’t let your guard down. For the sake of what’s to come, you can’t struggle with this battle.”

Rosa spoke on behalf of what Hiro was feeling.

—This is absolutely a winnable battle.

Those who think this and let their guard down end up being taken down by surprise. Hiro saw this happen many times in the past.

(Which is why there’s no harm to being overly cautious.)

Hiro thinks about an event that is occurring far, far away.

You never know what might happen on a battlefield.

The Grantz Grand Empire has many enemies. In order to prevent other countries from taking advantage of them, they have to avoid a difficult battle no matter what.

(There isn’t much time. And I don’t have many options, either— In which case...)

After gathering his thoughts, Hiro opened his mouth to speak.

“There’s something I want you to help me with, Rosa.”

Hiro began to take action to ensure certain victory.

Chapter 10

Advance

Imperial Year 1023, July 23.

It's early morning and the morning mist is yet to clear.

Before the main gate of Fort Belk, there are a large number of cavalry and foot soldiers standing in rows.

The neighing of the horses cut through the mist and shake the air, and a deep note rings out from the armor of the throngs of soldiers.

Grantz Grand Empire, the Fourth Imperial Army, guardians of the south— 10,000 of their 20,000 men are present.

Every single one of them is brimming with energy from every inch of their body. Their expressions are a mix of tension and excitement.

Their heroic figures look even more so with their well maintained, state of the art armor.

On the right flank are 2,000 soldiers under the command of the Sixth Imperial Princess of the Grantz Grand Empire— the possessor of “Laevateinn”.

— Celia Estreya Elizabeth von Grantz.

The young girl, who is lovingly called Liz by those close to her and her family, brings her horse to a large man.

“Tris, I haven't heard much about that General Kielo. How competent is he?”

Tris, his brown hair spotted with white, brushed his similarly colored beard and mumbled calmly.

“It's only natural that you do not know of him, Princess, because General Kielo is a man of the shadows. You do not hear his name in the capital”

“Shadows?”

“There was a monster during the same period as General Kielo. He was always on the

same battlefield as him, and General Kielo was unable to look into the eyes of the sun.”

“Do you mean...”

“Commander in Chief Loring. Because of the prodigal Commander in Chief Loring, General Kielo had all his most important achievements taken away from him. Regardless, he still built up his merits steadily and rose through the ranks, but now, he is called the shadow general, among other things.”

“That’s so... But, if he’s someone who worked that hard, I don’t see a problem with him taking command.”

Tris groaned at Liz’s words.

“...I wonder.”

“Is there something bothering you?”

“Because he was driven away into the shadows, I’ve heard General Kielo has a tendency to hate those brimming with talent.”

“Does that mean he prefers those who put in effort rather than prodigies?”

“I suppose that would be looking at it in a positive way. In the negative sense, he keeps those who are gifted at a distance.”

“But if he came this far the way he is, I don’t think there should be a problem. You don’t think so?”

“To keep those who are gifted at a distance means to narrow your strategic options. It’s only natural because insight which is superior to your own does not present itself.”

Tris looked at Liz with what seemed like worried eyes.

“Also, Princess... have you forgotten?”

“Hmm?”

“Princess, you are of the prodigal type which General Kielo despises. That is what weighs heaviest on my mind.”

“Haha, no way. If I were a prodigy, I wouldn’t be training every day.”

Though she waves her hand and denies his claim, she might have been happy about

being called a prodigal type, as her cheeks softened.

After letting out a deep sigh, he pointed at “Laevateinn” resting on her waist.

“What might that be?”

“Well, it’s “*Laevateinn*”...”

“How many spirit swords are there in the world?”

“Five. But one was lost so— four now.”

“Among the only four spirit swords in the world, one of them is there on your waist.”

“Eh, but possessing “*Laevateinn*” has nothing to do with me being a prodigy, does it?”

“There has to be a reason “*Laevateinn*” chose you, Princess. You likely have a gift which even you are not aware of. And so, General Kielo will probably see you as an enemy.”

“He’s the commanding officer of the Fourth Imperial Army. I don’t think he’d show such childish emotions...”

“Regardless, there is no loss in being cautious. Please take care.”

“...Alright.”

Liz takes to the heart the warning from the grim faced Tris.

(Hiro said the same thing, too.)

She recalls the young boy with half his face covered by an eyepatch.

He left that place ten days ago— This happened two days before his departure.

This was when he was holed up in the study at Fort Belk as usual.

Liz went to get Hiro, who was engrossed in his books without even eating breakfast.

As soon as Liz entered the room, Hiro looked up from his book. He throws his gaze at Liz and speaks.

[Liz, what do you think is essential in a war?]

After hesitating at the sudden question...

“Soldiers, food provisions... Ahh, and intelligence!”

Hiro nodded at Liz’s answer.

[It’s true, those three are important. But people are able to start wars because of a just cause.]

Hiro looks directly at Liz.

[I think I’ll save the the cause for later and talk about intelligence right now—]

The child like nature in Hiro’s expression which was there until just a minute ago was now gone.

(This face again.)

This young boy has a number of faces.

For the most part, he has a frail expression appropriate for his age, but on the battlefield, he wears a ruthless expression, not letting on to his thoughts.

And like now, when he works his ingenuity, he wears a dignified expression.

Which of these is his true face exactly? If possible, she wants it to be the one Hiro usually shows, the one appropriate for his age.

As she prays that it is, she leans her ear in to listen to his words.

[—Before the war begins, you hide a spy in the enemy nation for years, decades beforehand. Comparing the intelligence they accumulate with current reports, you prepare to start your war.]

Hiro closes the book in his hand.

[With a just cause, you gain the support of the citizens, and you couldn’t ask for more

in terms of fueling the morale of your soldiers and their training. Once you've prepared adequate provisions and obtained intelligence on the enemy country, all that's left, is to simply start the war—]

[However,] Hiro says with a pause before speaking again.

[It's still possible to lose with all these elements. This happens when your commander is unable to make use of the intelligence.]

Liz tilts her head in confusion in response to his words.

“Isn't that why you have staff officers?”

[Those who keep staff officers who would admonish them nearby is proof that they are aware of their own shortcomings. I think consider those people competent. But you know, not every commander is like that. You can't forget that there are people who keep those superior to themselves at a distance, and assemble those who are inferior.]

No matter the place or time, there are commanders who are such in name alone.

There are often many leaders who envy the talents of others. And so, if those with talent are not blessed with a good superior, they will be nipped in the bud and disappear before they're able to take center stage.

Having received the blessing of “Laevateinn” and been born into the Imperial family on top of that, those people would not find Liz amusing one bit.

[Because you're a major general, it's possible for you to be put in command, but it's also possible for you to be assigned someone's staff officer. When that happens, you need to be careful not to refute the commander in front of the other staff officers, even if they're wrong. Because if the commander's pride is hurt, he'll give you many ordeals.]

“But wouldn't it turn into a problem if you don't point out their mistakes?”

[That's why you prepare. So that you can deal with any situation that might arise. Stay in close contact with each unit's leader.]

“But will they listen to me?”

[You should use your title as the Sixth Imperial Princess as much as you can. You have “*Laevateinn*” too, so I’m sure a letter from you would send them on an emotional roller coaster.]

Hiro quietly stretched out both hands and his black eye was shining.

[Having received the favor of “*Laevateinn*”, the soldiers will surely lend their ears to you. When the time comes, I’m sure you’ll see for yourself.]

“When the time comes?”

Hiro simply smiled and didn’t answer her.

Then, Hiro smirked in a way that looked like he just thought up a prank.

[I guess I’ll talk about the just cause now.]

Hiro said, as he begins to move his mouth quickly—

(We finished talking around the time the sun set...)

Just thinking back on it gives her a headache. Liz shook her head and focused her attention in front of her.

The mist had already cleared, and the vast horizon was expanding. Liz called out to Tris while maneuvering her horse.

“Tris.”

“Yes, what is it?”

“Look into the names of all the unit leaders.”

Tris tilts his head confused. She should know the names of all the unit leaders for the 2,000 men she’s leading.

After pondering for a moment, Tris finally looked to Liz with an expression that

suggested he understood.

“Could you mean, for the entire army?”

“That’s right.”

Liz looks up at the now clear sky.

Though it’s early morning and cool now, soon the sun’s light will heat the surface and they will likely soon be assaulted by a boiling heat.

“We have to prepare for the possibility of when General Kielo slips up, right?”

It would be fine if all this effort were for naught, but you never know what might happen on a battlefield.

As Liz prays that her worries are unwarranted, she says to him gravely...

“Please, Tris.”

“Yes, understood. I will look into them right away.”

He bows respectfully from atop his horse, spins his horse’s head around, then disappears into the wave of soldiers.

After watching him go off, Liz grabbed the handle of “Laevateinn”.

At that moment, a number of drums begin to beat, and the sound races through the crevices between the soldiers.

Once they flew the flag in the center of the army where General Kielo was, Liz raised her hand and signaled to her flag bearer.

Liz’s flag with a crest of red soil and lilies goes up and dances in the wind. At the same time, a flag with the Grantz Imperial family’s crest of golden soil and a lion is raised as well.

And so, the entire army quickly begins their advance towards the Lichtein Dukedom.



General Kielo, the new commander entrusted with the Fourth Imperial Army of the Grantz Grand Empire.

This man, who will be 54 this year, shows no sign of physical decline, but is rather brimming with vitality and exudes a spirit as strong as any youth.

Having been granted command over the Fourth Imperial Army as a result of General Loring's mishap, he appeals to them in high spirits.

"We will make them pay for the grievous crime of trespassing on the holy land in which the spirit king resides!"

As General Kielo unsheathes his sword and raises it to the sky, the sound of drums ring out.

As this happens, the soldiers raise their war cry, shaking the eardrums pleasantly.

"All units, advance!"

As he scans the advancing army, General Kielo snickered at this opportunity which had finally come around to him.

His aide riding beside him also wears a relaxed expression.

"The time has finally come for your name to roar throughout the continent, your Excellency."

General Kielo nods at his statement.

"Which is why we need a complete victory."

General Kielo looks afar with a loathsome look in his face.

Thirty six years have gone by since his first battle.

Until now, he had his most important achievements taken from him by Commander in

Chief Loring, and he was constantly forced to experience hardships.

He had even given up on ever being able to look into the eyes of the sun until the day he died.

“Even though there wasn’t much of a difference between us at first...”

Mutters General Kielo.

He took the heads of three enemies in his first magnificent battle and steadily rose through the ranks.

He reached the rank of general after his late forties, while General Loring did so in his late thirties, and rose to commander in chief around forty.

“Steadily, the gap began to grow wider, and by the time I realized, I was the shadow general. Is there a more pitiful life than that?”

He was unable to catch up to General Loring whether it was in terms of ingenuity or military prowess.

You could say that that’s why General Kielo came to be jealous of those with talent and turn a blind eye to them.

When he welcomed his staff officers, he screened for those who had similar situations as himself.

His aide riding alongside him was also a man who had his path to success cut off and forced to a remote region by one more superior than himself— by Count Bunadara— by Aura.

“But a fine opportunity has finally arrived. We can not let this slip by.”

“I’m aware.”

“And so, what do you plan to do, your Excellency? His Majesty’s orders were to bring the northern region of the Lichtein Dukedom under our control.”

“I won’t be called to the central government with that. I need to leave a result that would astonish anyone.”

“...Could it be...”

“We will use this chance to launch an assault on Lichtein’s capital— Azbakal.”

His aide’s mouth was frozen agape in shock.

Because there’s the fact that 10,000 men is too small a force. There’s also the question of whether or not their morale will hold.

It’s true that Azbakal is near the Grantz Grand Empire in distance, but it is still over 80 sels (240 km) away.

The aide sank into silence, looking as if he were debating whether or not to advise the general to reconsider.

General Kielo placed a massive hand on the aide’s shoulder as he was hesitating.

“The Lichtein Dukedom’s numbers have diminished from their loss last month. They have less than 6,000 men to mobilize right now. I also hear that that foolish duke’s is losing more and more of his ability to keep his country united with each passing day. The intuition I’ve cultivated through these many years tells me we should attack.”

The aide lifted his face and stared at General Kielo.

General Kielo’s smile broadened as he declared with conviction.

“Let us rise to the central government together. We’ll show those high officials of the goverment who look down on the nobles of the remote regions. We will launch an assault on Azbakal. If we do, you will likely be able redeem yourself for your failure in Ferzen.”

Seeing him speak so assuredly and his overflowing ambition, the hesitation in the aide’s eyes disappeared.

General Kielo takes a quick glance at this with satisfaction, then quickly begins to construct a plan moving forward in his head.

(As long as we can maintain the supply trains to a certain extent, that’s fine. There’s no problem with provisions if we pillage them from the Lichtein Dukedom. No need to let our conscience get in the way. If we distribute them freely to the soldiers their morale will rise greatly. This is what they mean by two birds with one stone. If we use that

momentum to utterly destroy the Lichtein Dukedom... it won't be a dream for me to replace Loring as commander in chief.)

You couldn't ask for more from the Fourth Imperial Army in terms of experience.

If this were a private army, he probably would have been satisfied with the northern region.

However, he is currently commanding the Fourth Imperial Army.

These are powerful soldiers which General Loring trained and polished through blood, sweat, and combat.

(I'll use the troops you raised to steal the position of commander in chief from you.)

General Kielo faced the sun shining radiantly on him with an unseemly smile.

Chapter 11

Anticipation

The Lichtein territory, which lies on the southern part of the central continent, is a barren land covered by the Zigur Desert. However, many people have desired that land since ancient times.

The biggest reason for that, is the many beautiful oases which dot the Zigur Desert.

Spirits don't approach oases in which people gather and live, but another way to look at it, is that they do approach oases as long as people are not there.

If one is able to get a hold of these oases, it may be possible for spirits to gather there and for that person to get their hands on spirit stones.

However, the neighboring countries have been unable to carelessly lay their hands on that land. This is because the Lichtein Dukedom had strong ties with the Grantz Grand Empire through their slave trade.

That was just until last month, but at the moment, you could say the relationship between the two countries has gone cold.

The dissatisfaction among the people towards the duke grows with each day, and just as this was happening, there was a revolt to emancipate the slaves.

The Dukedom of Lichtein, 50 sels (150 km) south of the capital Azbakal.

A liberation army of 2,000 calling for the emancipation of the slaves clashes with the duke's army of 4,000.

This is the Imperial year 1023, July 19.

The area is stacked high with an immense number of corpses, and a deep red flow of blood dyes the golden dust-like sand.

The hot air is mixed with cheering. It is the emaciated slaves who raise a cry of victory.

The shabby looking slaves race to beat each other to the losers— to the corpses to steal their armor and swords and such.

Although the outcome has been decided, the fighting continues. The nobles and soldiers who think it a disgrace to surrender to slaves are still fighting.

But at this point, it is nothing but trivial resistance. This is because their commander

had already taken his last breath.

A snake without its head can be brought down by any means. Without its fangs or poison, it is no different from a piece of rope.

The head of the snake being Duke Lichtein, and his head was in the hands of one large man.

The large man straddled atop a camel is not one of this continent. His skin is light purple, and he has a powerful face on which sweat drips down.

“How disappointing. When did the central continent become this weak? Were the stories of the *“Black Book”* handed down in Abyssion lies?”

The man, a member of a race called the Zorostras, sighs in disappointment.

As he looks around the area after shaking his head, the scene of Lichtein’s soldiers being killed off captures his attention.

He’s not a fan of mass killings, but they wouldn’t agree to surrender even when offered the opportunity to.

If they happened to gather forces somewhere later on and launch a surprise attack, nothing could be done about it. Considering the future, there was no choice but to kill them.

“What a foolish country, to place one who knows not a thing about the art of war at its helm. The people of a country unable to defeat a rebel army can not be called anything but misfortunate.”

The Duke’s army used the advantage of their numbers to disperse their forces and surround their enemy, but each of the divided forces were pretty much crushed.

“Even if they knew to split their forces, it looks like they did not know how to focus.”

It’s good that they had a strategy, but even when they saw it was disadvantageous, they were unable to come up with another plan.

All they did was rely on brute strength to try and push through.

Their downfall was underestimating their enemy simply because they were a rebel

army.

“Battles can not be won with numbers alone, even if your opponent is a rebel army.”

After conveying this to the head in his grip, he called out to a guard.

“Have this head sent to the capital, along with a letter.”

After handing over the head, the large man pulled the reins of his camel and withdrew to headquarters.



Imperial year 1023, July 21, the Fourth Imperial Army departs for the frontline — Two days earlier...

The Dukedom of Lichtein’s capital, Azkabar. Within the golden palace which could be said to be a symbol of power, nobles were bustling about in a flurry while whispering their discontent towards the duke.

They suffered a harsh loss the month before in which the eldest and third sons were lost. Furthermore, there is a man in the south who has united the slaves and mercenaries and using a former slave girl as the leader to run wild under the pretext of emancipation for the slaves, and they can do nothing about him.

No one took the initiative to set out to suppress them, but sensing that the rebel army was heading for the capital, the duke himself who had grown impatient set out with 2,000 camel cavalrymen, 1,000 light infantrymen, and 1,000 slave foot soldiers four days ago.

The golden palace— The hall in which the throne sits was packed with nobles with worried faces.

This was because the news of the outcome of the clash between the rebel army and the duke’s army was to arrive at any moment.

Then, a lone messenger came rushing in out of breath.

“Reporting! The duke’s army has been annihilated by the rebel army! Duke Lichtein

has been killed in battle!”

Groans rose up from the nobles. This was because they were certain it would be news of victory.

One of the nobles stepped forward and approached the messenger.

His face was pale and he kept shaking his head side to side in disbelief.

“A-Absurd... You must be lying. That’s just impossible.”

He grabbed the shoulders of the messenger and drew his desperate face in.

It’s only natural that he is in disbelief. The rebel army which was running rampant in the south numbered less than 2,000.

In contrast, the duke’s army was a collection of the country’s most elite, and though it couldn’t be said that their morale was high due to last month’s loss, it should have been high enough with the duke leading them himself.

What’s more, the ones reinforcing the army were senior nobles with battle experience, so there shouldn’t have been any problems with the chain of command.

“What exactly happened?”

“The slave foot soldiers turned sides to the rebel army and every single one of the senior nobles were slain. The duke fought hard, but he was unable to prevail!”

The noble drew away from the messenger who was twisted in mortification, dropped to his knees, placed his forehead on the ground, and began to weep.

Some of the nobles around him even fainted. Some were muttering that the country was done for, while others were devising plans to flee.

Everyone surmised that the Lichtein Dukedom would soon fall to ruin, but there was one person who checked the despair spreading throughout the hall.

“Silence. We do not have time to be sad. We must discuss what we will do from here on out. We can not allow the rebel army to do as they please, now can we?”

Someone steps into the hall, and the gaze of all the nobles focus on him.

The man stopped walking momentarily, perhaps because he was withdrawing from the rude stares, but he soon began to walk along the red carpet.

His body is feeble and you can hardly say he looks sturdy. His pale face makes it seem like he may collapse at any moment.

This young man is the second son of Duke Lichtein's house. No one wished for him to be an heir due to his weak constitution.

His name is Karl Olk Lichtein. He is a count.

Having walked into the heart of the group of nobles, Karl lift his arm which was white, even without the sun light, and pointed it towards the entrance.

“Besides, he has finally come.”

The one who haughtily entered the hall was Marquis Ranquil, the one who protects the northwestern border.

He laughs scornfully at the nobles who are in fear, and his attitude is a bit ill mannered.

This man will be 34 this year. He is a hero of the Lichtein Dukedom who drove away an attack by the neighboring country of Schteizen and their army of 30,000 two years ago.

However, although he is talented, because of his problematic character, he was sent away from the central government to protect the northwestern border.

Marquis Ranquil knelt without bowing, and looked up at Karl as his smile broadened.

“Though it is truly a shame that Duke Lichtein has passed, we do not have time to be sad. You must immediately take the title of duke, Count Karl.”

The nobles around him shout with rage at Marquis Ranquil, who brazenly started saying whatever he pleased as soon as he walked in.

“Who are you to decide that on your own, bastard?! Count Karl's body is weak, and he is in no condition to—”

“What are you saying? Though I do not wish to speak ill of the departed— the duke was a man who thought of nothing but his own gains without consideration for the

country, and he doled out rewards and punishment in accordance to the wishes of the senior nobles. Furthermore, the eldest son was a foolish man with a wild temperament and easily fell to the wiles of his enemies. And there was nothing special about the third son. He was merely a parasite.”

Marquis Ranquil added that he forgot the names of such foolish men.

The nobles’ faces turned red in anger as they shouted.

“You bastard! There’s a limit to how rude one can be!”

“Haha, all I did was state the truth. Besides, aren’t you all happy on the inside?”

“Wh-What did you say...?”

“Do I have to spell it all out for you? You should know what I mean.”

Many of the senior nobles, who could be said to be the cause of the country’s decline, had accompanied the duke and his army which left for the suppression.

The fact that they were now gone, meant the remaining nobles could supplant them.

(Though I won’t let you have your way.)

The time has finally come to normalize the country.

Even if the duke had not died, this country was fated to fall to ruin from a civil war.

The signs were there for a while now. The duke simply held it back by sheer force.

You could even say the birth of this rebel army was inevitable.

(But... it’s amazing that the situation has changed two, three times in this short period of time.)

The eldest and third sons who fell to cajolery fell in battle, and the duke was also slain by the rebel army.

Though no one says it out loud, they almost want to give the rebel army a reward for saving the country.

“However, perhaps it is a silver lining, but there is an outstanding member in the house of the duke. He loves the people, respects his soldiers, and is considerate of his subordinates. He is Lord Karl Olk Lichtein.”

After scratching his head as if embarrassed, Count Karl creates a fist against his chest.

“But as you can see, my body is weak. I do not know how long this body of mine will last. Can one such as myself unite the Lichtein Dukedom?”

Marquis Ranquil smiles and nods emphatically.

“Because I am not a doctor, I do not know much about the body, but in this age, you never know when you will die. In fact, it is as if those who are in good health are the ones who seem to be dying first.”

Both the eldest son with his high prospects and the robust duke died before the weak son.

Though it was ironic that his father and brothers died before him, Count Karl showed no anger, only a bitter face.

“Then maybe it’s not a bad idea for me to act as duke until my life gives out. But will the people accept me?”

“There is no need for such worries. If you are able to suppress the rebels who defeated the duke, the people will have no choice but to accept you.”

“Then I will become the duke after we suppress the rebels.”

After muttering how seriously he was taking this, Marquis Ranquil nodded placidly and looked around at the nobles.

“Now, it seems Lord Karl has made his decision. What will you all do?”

“If Lord Karl has decided, we have no choice. But how do you plan to face the rebel

army who defeated the elite of our country?”

Those around the speaker voice their agreement.

He sneers at the nobles who seemed to have forgotten how to even think for themselves, disappointed in realizing that they’ve fallen so.

(I want to just kill them right now, but I can still use them. First, I have to wring out all the wealth they’ve accumulated.)

Marquis Ranquil shrugs his shoulders and opens his mouth to speak.

“There’s no need to face the rebel army head on necessarily.”

“Marquis Ranquil... can you explain in detail?”

Count Karl asks, to which Marquis Ranquil responds, “please wait just a moment”.

Then, a man came running into the hall.

“Reporting! The Fourth Imperial Army is assembled at Fort Belk, and is believed to be preparing to assault this location.”

This report was what he was waiting for. This is when Marquis Ranquil was certain of victory.

A man from a foreign country who is said to have a unique military power which surpasses Lichtein.

His ingenuity, which the duke feigned respect for, was thinking up a number of strategies as he smiled pleased.

But that wasn’t the case for the other lords. The lion which reigns supreme on the central continent is coming for an attack.

A commotion stirs, and the hall fills with fear.

Marquis Ranquil raised his voice to reassure them.

“Calm yourselves! I have a plan!”

Hopeful gazes focus on Marquis Ranquil.

Marquis Ranquil was proficient in grabbing the hearts of people. Had there been any senior nobles present, they would have opposed him, but unfortunately, they had all accompanied the duke and fallen in battle.

And so, the only nobles left were the ones who ended up just waiting to see what would happen.

No one wants to lose their current position. And more so than that, they fear for their lives.

Which is why, even though they were voicing their discontent until a moment ago, they have no choice but to abide by Marquis Ranquil’s words.

With a smirk on his face, Marquis Ranquil spoke in a resounding voice.

“Lord Karl, what do you think of having the rebel army take care of themselves?”

“...Do you mean to have the rebel army clash with the Fourth Imperial Army?”

“That would be it. There is nothing difficult about it. The one leading the Fourth Imperial Army is the famed shadow general. He is nothing more than the dregs of Commander in Chief Loring. He is simply a general in name alone and is a mediocre leader.”

He fished through his breast pocket, took out a sheet of paper, and spread it out on the red carpet. It is a map of the Lichtein Dukedom.

“Now, what I would first like to request of the lords, is to assemble their soldiers from the forts and towns. We can not start anything without soldiers.”

After hearing this, the nobles rush out the hall to call for their private soldiers stationed in their own territories.

In a time like this, those who act first have more to gain. Those who are slow to act will end up with fewer rewards.

They understood this having dealt with the senior nobles. By acting quickly, they are trying to attract the interest of Count Karl.

Conversely, those who brought their soldiers but did not accompany the duke, and those who did not have soldiers to begin with, are to offer their wealth.

The hall emptied out in the blink of an eye and silence fell upon it.

The only ones left were two nobles and guards.

“Now, the nuisances have disappeared. I ask that what we are about to speak of not be leaked to anyone else.”

“All right.”

“This is a plan for an important victory. Are you ready?”

Marquis Ranquil throws a sharp gaze at Count Karl. He gulps, then nods silently.



Imperial year 1023, July 26.

Hiro safely arrived in the border town of Links without incidence.

With his black clothes fluttering in the wind, Hiro hurries to Margrave Grinda’s mansion from the station— He arrives at the iron gate.

He had a jute bag on his back and a long pole at his side. The gatekeeper looked confused, but it seemed he recognized Hiro’s face, so he immediately opened the gate for him after greeting him.

But there’s no way he would forget this young boy with half his face covered by an eye patch so quickly. Hiro realized this after the gates were opened all the way.

Hiro stops after taking a few steps in. This was because the “shiryu” appeared right before him.

He thought it came to greet him, but it was acting strangely.

He felt that it somehow seemed to be in a bad mood. Hiro looks behind it with a puzzled look on his face.

“Oh, I’ve been waiting.”

Margrave Grinda was standing there with a kindly smile on his face.

Hiro can guess at why the “shiryu” is in a bad mood.

He may be in a bad mood because he was forcefully dragged here.

He's probably mad for having been awoken early in the morning, too.

But there was one thing that's even more surprising. The fact that Margrave Grinda is here.

"Were you waiting for me this early in the morning?"

It hasn't even been an hour since sunrise.

And for starters, Hiro didn't even tell him when he'd be arriving, so it's only natural that he's surprised.

Hiro feels extremely apologetic when he thinks about how long he might have been waiting

But Margrave Grinda shakes his head side to side telling him not to worry about it.

"No, no, a member of the Imperial family was coming, so it's only natural. I even sent someone to the station to pick you up, but it seems you missed each other."

"Thank you very much."

Giving a wry smile to the grateful Hiro, Margrave Grinda fishes through his breast pocket, then takes out a letter.

It was one Hiro sent out with a Kelheit messenger.

"I've sent out instructions as you wrote in your letter. But was this alone enough?"

"Yes, it's plenty. Thank you so much."

"I'm going to feel awkward if you keep thanking me like that. You're an Imperial prince now, so you should be telling me to be grateful to be receiving orders from you."

"I don't know if I can do that..."

Hiro replies with a stiff face, to which Margrave Grinda nods understandingly.

As if to tell him that this is precisely what makes Hiro Hiro, he pats his shoulders.

Hiro was a bit surprised to see Margrave Grinda so full of energy first thing in the

morning.

Noticing this, Margrave Grinda scratched his head embarrassed.

“Ahh... sorry. There’s the fact that I was up all night too, but I was so happy that you were acknowledged as a descendant. Was I bit too over familiar? I may be charged of lese majeste if I act like this towards an Imperial prince.”

It’s probably Hiro’s fault that he stayed up all night.

Which is why he can’t say anything. And because Margrave Grinda is a good natured person, there’s no reason to be offended from having him pat his shoulders.

Though, if it were First Imperial Prince Schtobel, he probably would have been upset. Silence falls between the two, so Hiro decides to change the subject.

“Has Liz set out for the frontline?”

“She did. A letter came just two days ago. She may already have entered Lichtein territory.”

“Then I’ll be excusing myself and...”

Margrave Grinda stopped Hiro in a fluster as he tried to straddle the “shiryu”.

“Are you going without even eating breakfast?”

“Yes. There’s something bothering me, too...”

It was one of the items written in the letter from the emperor— The appearance of a Zorosta.

Although there are those who are called Zorostas on the central continent, it can’t be said that they are pure blooded.

The Revering Kingdom, which is located northeast of the Grantz Grand Empire, is a country of Zorostras, but they can’t be considered pure blooded.

So there’s no reason to specifically mention that a Zorosta had appeared.

In which case, there’s a high possibility that the Zorosta who appeared in the southern part of the Lichtein Dukedom is a pure blood.

He's fought them before a 1,000 years ago for dominance on the central continent, so he knows their strength firsthand.

(Liz can probably handle him if he's a regular Zorosta, but it'll be dangerous if he has a magic stone.)

The Zorostas possess a mysterious power called magic.

There are those with weak magic powers, and those whose magic powers are unimaginable.

The way to distinguish between them, is to see whether or not there is a crystal somewhere on their body.

The magic powers which can not be contained within their body accumulate outside of it and crystallize.

Because it exhibits powers similar to that of a spirit stone, it has come to be known as a "magic stone".

If Liz happens to encounter one of these Zorostas, it isn't difficult to imagine a dangerous situation.

He probably wasn't trying to guess at what was on Hiro's mind, but Margrave Grinda smiles wryly at his noble features.

"Then you should buy food provisions and water in town. When you take breaks along the way—"

As Margrave Grinda begins to fish through his breast pocket once more, Hiro called out to him and stopped him.

"It's okay. I have food provisions and water in here."

He says, as he twists his body around to show him the jute bag on his back.

"I see. Then be careful out there. I'll be here waiting to hear good news."

"I'll be back."

He turns his back to Margrave Grinda who is smiling like a mother would, straddles the “shiryu”, and pulls on the reins. The “shiryu” jumps, steps firmly onto the earth, then runs off.

The mansion grows distant in an instant while strong winds struck his face and made his black clothes flutter behind him.

Chapter 12

Bandits

Imperial year 1023, July 27.

The brilliant sun which rose from the eastern sky sinks into the west as it lights up the ground.

A black curtain will soon fall, and it will be the time when night reigns over the surface.

Running across a desert with hot winds violently blowing is a lone dragon.

Not allowing the sand to hold its feet down, it sprints along, graceful at times, and rough at others.

On its back rides a young boy— Hiro.

Though he's unable to ride a pony even, he's somehow able to straddle a "shiryu" and ride him without being thrown off.

He wants to keep riding, but for the "shiryu's" sake, they need to rest.

"There should've been a village around here..."

He gently tapped the "shiryu's" neck. It dropped its speed to a walk in response.

Then, he pulls a piece of paper— a map of the Lichtein Dukedom from his breast pocket.

Hiro surveyed far ahead of him and saw a small silhouette on the horizon.

"Can you hold out for a little while longer?"

The "shiryu" lowered its head as if to nod, and started running once more.

The silhouette began to grow steadily, and eventually, rows of houses made of clay came into view.

Hiro immediately sensed something unusual. No, even if it were anyone else, there's no doubt they would have noticed something was off about the small village.

Hiro jumps off the "shiryu" and examines the village as he walks in.

There was only a strange silence in the village, and every single one of the villagers looked anxious.

Hiro immediately asked "Black Camelia" to make a hood, which he pulled low over his eyes.

"Umm, excuse me. Did something happen?"

Hiro calls out to a nearby farmer.

At first, the farmer was startled at seeing Hiro. Then, he cast his gaze on the boy as if to evaluate him and opened his mouth to speak as he looked extremely cautious.

"...You a traveler?"

"Yes. Earlier—"

It's not hard to image the response he would get if he said he entered the country from the Grantz Grand Empire.

And so, he introduced himself as a traveler from the neighboring Republic of Schteizen. Originally, the Lichtein Dukedom was a part of Schteizen. That was until 200 years ago. Maybe that was the reason why, but the apprehension in the farmer's expression slightly faded.

"I see... I'm surprised you came here from such a distant land. But you sure did come at a troublesome time."

He's probably referring to the fact that the Grantz Grand Empire had come for an attack.

There's another possibility too, but... Hiro wanted to gather information so he decided to ask him.

“It looks like the Grantz Grand Empire has come to launch an attack.”

“That’s not all. The slaves are rioting in the south. The duke led soldiers there to suppress them, but he lost. So the country might not even last much longer.”

“...The duke’s army lost?”

“But Lord Karl of the duke house took action. He began to gather soldiers again to suppress the rebel army, so we’re completely shorthanded while there are bandits running amok here and there. And that’s not all. Even the monsters have begun to form groups. And the Imperial army’s here on top of all that... Who knows what’s going to happen to this country now?”

The farmer finishes off defeated and cradles his head. Then, he looks at Hiro once more.

“You should hurry and leave this country soon.”

“Are all of you not escaping?”

He thought it was a foolish question to ask, but he couldn’t help but ask it.

“What’s the point of leaving our families and escaping? We don’t have anything saved up. Even if we did escape, the only thing waiting for us would be death from starvation. Besides, once the war is over, the soldiers will come back.”

The farmer picks up a rusty sword by his feet and shrugs.

“Other countries call us a slave nation, a barren land. But still, this is the land we were born and raised in. No matter what crisis we’re forced to face, we’ll endure until the soldiers come back.”

He's acting confident, but looking down, you can tell his knees are shaking. The nobles could probably flee the country with their accumulated wealth. But these people don't have such luxury.

It's only a handful of people who can survive away from the land in which they were born and raised.

Hiro was about to open his mouth to offer the brave farmer some advice. But then, one of the villagers shouted at them from the village entrance.

"We've got trouble! A group of bandits is heading this way!"

The man pointed— There's a line of dust clouds rising up. It was slowly closing in as the villagers fell into a panic.

"Aren't those the guys who came and attacked us last time?"

"Damn it, looking down on us like that... We'll fight back this time!"

"That's right! We're ready to fight this time! This is the perfect chance to get back the children who were kidnapped!"

After listening to the villagers, Hiro called out to the farmer in front of him.

"You were attacked before?"

"Yeah. Remember when the duke invaded the Grantz Grand Empire? That's when the bandits saw their chance. With the garrison unable to come rushing over, the village is a fine feeding ground for them. Every village is in a similar state, and a lot of women and children have been kidnapped."

"Even my kid..." he said regretfully, but he slapped his face with both hands as his expression stiffened.

“Have the women and children take refuge in my house! The men grab your weapons! Don’t let them have their way any longer!”

After raising his voice, the farmer had a look of resolution on his face.

“You hurry and escape.”

Hiro shook his head a number of times and refused.

The Lichtein Dukedom is the main cause of the current situation, but the Grantz Grand Empire coming for an attack is likely a factor as well.

He can’t let the people of a foreign country be hurt needlessly.

Even though they aren’t a direct cause of this, because they are at least partially responsible, he must fight.

“...I want you to leave this to me.”

“H-Hey, what are you—”

The farmer tried to question him, but Hiro walked away as he summoned “Excalibur”.

The farmer squinted at the blinding light and watched Hiro walk off while overcome with surprise.

Hiro began to walk slowly outside the village.



There are three bandits straddled atop camels.

Unlike the others, the man in the center— the leader of the bandits has a silver armor on which is especially eye catching, glittering in the light of the setting sun.

The equipment of the men beside him is lower in quality, but it’s worth more money than that of the underlings running around them.

There are a total of 26 bandits. Their objective is obviously to attack the village.

“Last time, the garrison came back just when it was getting good, so today, we’ll make

sure we steal everything you have!”

As the leader shouted out cheerfully, the faces of the men to his sides twist in joy.

“Hehe, the women we had our eyes on got away the last time we attacked them.”

“They’ll be on guard this time. Won’t it be a problem if the men of the village resist?”

After laughing down the worries of his underling, the leader focused his gaze ahead of him.

“They’re just farmers. Their brains are only capable of waving around a hoe or digging a well! Boys! Don’t be afraid just because they put up some resistance!”

“Got it!”replied his underlings in unison.

In their hands, they held axes, swords, spears, and bows.

“Don’t kill the women and children. They’re valuable products!”

“Boss, there’s some strange person up there!”

“Huh? Who is that...?”

There was a male in black standing alone in the desert.

Thinking this to be odd, the leader skillfully maneuvered his camel’s reins and approached the young boy’s side.

“Are you the village representative?”

This happens sometimes. There are people who petition a group not to attack their village in exchange for food.

Most bandits attack without hesitation because they’re going to steal everything anyway, but sometimes, there are villages who hire mercenaries, so they sometimes change their minds depending on the negotiations.

It's rare for poor villages to hire mercenaries, and it's not likely that the village they're about to attack right now has that much money saved up.

What's more, the leader of these bandits was a cautious man.

He sent out a few of his underlings a number of times for preliminary investigations, and the village right before him had been completely analyzed.

He brought his underlings with him because he had determined it would be safe. The leader unsheathed his sword from his waist and spoke.

"I'm not negotiating. We'll be stealing everything there is from your village."

Said the leader, but then he suddenly noticed.

He couldn't tell because of the hood and eye patch, but upon closer inspection, he noticed a young face.

The leader thought he could probably sell him for a high price to those with that sort of preference.

"Kid, don't make a fuss. You won't get hurt if you don't resist. Hey, tie this guy up."

The leader instructs his underlings to capture the young boy.

— *The young boy laughed fearlessly.*



After looking around at the bandits surrounding him, Hiro laughs at them scornfully.

He pierced "Excalibur" in the ground and stretched out both arms.

The wind blew through his black clothes, making the hem flutter in the wind.

"Now, who wants to die first?"

After hearing those words, the bandits around him suddenly started to laugh.

“This kid’s pretty funny!”

“I think I just heard the funniest joke of the year!”

“Wait, it might be some new form of negotiating. Hey, kid! I’ll die first—”

A man who was holding his stomach with tears in his eyes came forward.

From the point of view of the men, Hiro didn’t show any signs of having moved.

The wind didn’t make a sound and the silver sword was still pierced into the ground.

And yet, the head of the man who was approaching Hiro disappeared, and a spray of blood redder than the setting sun painted the sky.

“Ah?”

“...”

“What’s this...?”

Despite being showered by their friend’s blood, they were unable to grasp what had happened.

The specks of blood floating down paint the desert red, and the body of the now headless man raises a cloud of dust as it collapses.

And once more, while still in the same position as before, Hiro ruthlessly says aloud with both arms extended.

“Who wants to die next?”

“Eek...”

A timid looking bandit in the rear let out a sound from deep inside his throat which couldn’t even be considered a scream.

He turned his back in an attempt to retreat, but his head goes rolling across the sand.

His corpse collapses with a thud, and everyone focuses their gaze in that direction.

“Next. Who wants to die?”

Hiro lets out a spine tingling voice. The faces of the bandits stiffen up.

A sudden gust assails them. It swirls the sand up and covers everyone’s field of view.

It was just for a short moment.

When the cloud of dust cleared, the hood was removed from Hiro’s head, and his black hair and black eyes were exposed.

The bandits grow tense with his black, gem-like eyes fixated on them.

They all gasped as they saw his black hair fluttering in the wind.

“~!!”

In order to break the silence, one of the bandits atop a camel yells silently and raises his sword up.

But his arm never swings down. Again, this man’s head disappears.

However— Hiro hasn’t done a thing. That’s how it appears to the bandits.

“...Shall I begin the hunt?”

Hiro pronounces. He grips the handle of “Excalibur” and twists his body.

His black clothes expand before the bandits’ eyes. Jet black— The symbol of fear, and the emblem of darkness.

It’s a sight that would leave anyone dumbfounded and their body’s petrified.

In a flash, one bandit was slashed and felled, while the one next to him was pierced flamboyantly and kicked away.

Immediately after that, Hiro, who had been in the center of the group of bandits, disappeared, and a silver line smoothly passed through the bodies of the bandits.

It was as if they weren’t even wearing armor. As if cutting through silk, the bandits

were easily sliced apart one at a time.

The desert absorbed the blood of the bandits as the flames of each of their lives were extinguished with a single flash of light.

“Waaahhhh!”

As they watched their friends lose their lives, the group of bandits fell into a panic. It's understandable, seeing as how they didn't even know how they were being attacked.

Some ran. Some stood boldly. Some were frozen in fear.

The group of bandits displayed different reactions, but those who turned their backs had their torsos cut into pieces, those who stood boldly had their heads cut off, and those who were frozed in fear died by the blade of an assassin.

“...What is this?!”

He can't think of any other words. That's what the leader's expression is saying.

“A-Am I seeing a dream or something...?”

The leader stares in amazement at the number of dead bodies which still had life in them just a moment ago.

Then, a pale faced underling approached him.

“Boss! This guy's a mon—”

Unable to finish his sentence, his body was buried in the sand like an offering.

Fear takes over the scene as the screams of the bandits spread throughout the quiet space.

“Damn it, we’re running away!”

The leader turned the head of his camel and tried to withdraw.

Hiro propelled himself off the ground to dash over to the leader, grabbing his head to make sure he didn’t get away.

“Ugh!”

Hiro forces him down off the camel’s back by sheer force and swung his fist down at his face.

“Agh, urgh! Ah!”

After swinging his fist down a few more times, finally, he stomped on the leader’s face and knocked him out.

Hiro takes “Excalibur”, which he was holding with an underhanded grip, deftly turns the handle around and holds it perfectly level.

The bandits, to which its tip was pointed, drop their weapons as their eyes welled up with tears.

It looks as if they tried to slash him from behind and failed.

“S-Spare us! Just spare our lives... We won’t attacked the village anymore!”

“I don’t mind.”

“R-Really?!”

“If you’re able to run away that is.”

“Eh— agh!”

I’m saved— The man’s face lit up with hope initially. But his neck gets pierced through with a blade and his life comes to an end.

A large amount of blood overflows from his mouth and his body collapses at the same time. The bandits throw down their weapons and run like headless chickens in all directions.

Hiro, who was coldly looking at their backs, disappeared with a silver flash.

The villagers who were watching what was transpiring were dumbfounded.

A group of over twenty bandits were annihilated in the blink of an eye without having a chance to attack the village.

This reality left the villagers speechless.

Then, Hiro approaches them with the leader's head in his grasp.

Hiro threw the passed out leader with his limbs sprawled out before the feet of the villagers.

Hiro and the leader— The villagers shift their gaze back and forth between the two.

“He's the leader of the group that raided your village. I'll let you deal with him.”

Hiro turns his back to the confused villagers and approaches the “shiryu” who is resting in a shade.

His powers were clearly not those of an ordinary person.

Even if he did save the village, to be shown this clear display of such extraordinary powers, it's only natural they would hold some reservation towards him.

That's what Hiro was thinking, but then...

“Wait a second. Where are you going?”

The farmer he first met called out to Hiro and stopped him.

Hiro turned back confused.

“I don't have to spell it all out for you, do I? Desert nights are freezing cold. Do you have a place to stay the night?”

“I don't... but I was just going to look for a rocky area and—”

“Then stay the night at my place. Don't underestimate desert nights. And looking at

your belongings, it doesn't look like you have any blankets or heavy clothing."

"No, but..."

The villagers behind the farmer look at Hiro with mixed expressions.

They're probably afraid that the strength which annihilated the bandits may be pointed towards them.

Most of all, his ominous black hair and black eye made the villagers wary.

There's no way the farmer doesn't realize this... But the farmer patted the shoulders of the hesitant Hiro.

"Don't worry about it. Everyone in the village is grateful, too. It's just taking them a while to take in the what happened."

The farmer turned around and asks, "right?"

The villagers nodded while wearing mixed expression.

"There you have it. My house isn't grand enough to accommodate people, but it's more comfortable than a night in the desert."

After telling the villagers to, "have him tell you where the kidnapped people are," he then patted Hiro on the back and urged him to walk forward.

"Ahh, also, I'm the village chief. But don't expect too much in terms of food because of that. I can't really serve you anything special."

Hiro's not exactly sure how to respond, so he just forces a smile.

But to think he was the village chief. Now he understands why the villagers reacted the way they did earlier.

They probably don't want to get involved with a strange young boy, but if the village chief feels like it, they can't refuse.

—*Maybe that's how much the villagers adore him.*

As Hiro was thinking this, the village chief had stopped in front of his residence.

It's likely his house— On the outside, it looked dirty and had noticeable cracks. You couldn't call it a nice house by any standards.

But its size maintained the dignity of a village chief's residence.

From the entrance, he caught sight of the women and children who had taken refuge there.

Hiro feels relieved. Deep down, he was glad the children weren't forced to watch such a cruel scene.

After watching the people return to their houses, Hiro stepped into the large residence and was taken to a spacious area.

"This is my dining hall."

It was a simple dining hall with nothing but a long table and wooden chairs placed along it.

Hiro was offered a seat so he settled into a chair. After a short while, some bread and warm soup appeared before him.

"I'm sorry this is all I can offer for the person who saved the village."

"Not at all... It looks very good."

"I appreciate you saying that. I'll send something for your *"shiryu"* later, too."

"Thank you very much."

"No, no, it's no problem. But aside from that, you're able to ride a *"shiryu"?*"

"I raised it since it was little. It's like a sibling to me. I think maybe that's why I can ride it."

He lied on the spur of the moment, but it probably won't make him wary.

It was a harmless response, and it seemed like he accepted it.

“Wow~ that’s amazing. If anyone, I thought it would just be the anthros who could ride such a temperamental dragon.”

The village chief’s voice bounces cheerfully as he carries a piece of bread to his mouth.

“Based on your appearance... I’d say you’re about 14? And yet, you were able to annihilate the entire group of bandits by yourself. Are you an elf by any chance? They don’t let on to their age.”

“— Yes, one of my ancestors was an elf... Apparently that blood is thick in me. Though I look the way I do, I’ll be over 50 this year.”

He could’ve corrected him, but just the thought of how much time it would take to convince him of the truth made Hiro shrink back.

If he can fool him into believing he’s a descendant of an elf, there’s nothing to lose in that.

— *All I do is lie lately.*

Hiro smirks as he mocks himself.

“I knew it. I hear there are many highly skilled elves. I’m sure you’re one of them. But I’m surprised you’re a traveler.”

He waits a beat after bemoaning that it’s such a waste, then opened his mouth to speak again.

“There’s a ton of stuff I’d like to ask you, but I won’t pry. I’m sure you have various circumstances if you live long enough.”

“That would help me out.”

Afterwards, Hiro ate silently, taking a sip of his soup after his stomach was satisfied.

Then he began to chat with the village chief.

“Do you know where the Grantz Grand Empire headed?”

“I’ve heard a number of forts have fallen. It seems like they’ve forced their way south to the capital. Well, it’s right after a third summoning. It’s only natural that the forts are empty. What is the government thinking...? This is a huge burden for us.”

“To the capital, huh...”

The Imperial command from the emperor should have been to suppress the northern region and force the Lichtein Dukedom to sit down for negotiations.

Why did they arbitrarily decide to go all the way to the capital?

(Did they get carried away?)

The Fourth Imperial Army’s role is to gain control over the oasis city in the north, then watch over the activities of the other countries that border the south.

The Grantz Grand Empire doesn’t have the time to get involved with the Lichtein Dukedom right now.

The emperor currently has his eyes set on the Ferzen Province, and the nobles of the capital are trying to feel each other out for the benefit of their own interests.

If they received such unprofitable news as to the destruction of the Lichtein Dukedom during this time, they might lament the fact, but they would not likely be pleased.

(...Besides, what’s going to happen if they lose?)

No matter how powerful the Fourth Imperial Army is, it’s not going to be that simple. If you fail to annihilate a country, their resistance becomes intense, and there’s the possibility of the war being drawn out.

This would mean the southern region would become impoverished, and that would lead to a drop in the country’s power.

Furthermore, munitions and goods aren't free. Even if you gain supplies from the enemy country, there's a limit to that.

(...I hope Liz doesn't clash with the commander.)

Hiro makes a gloomy face and sighs. Then, a villager came in from the entrance of the residence.

"Mr. Kukuri, the leader of the bandits has his lips sealed tight. Everyone in the village is seething and they're about to beat him to death. I can't stop them. You need come, Mr. Kukuri."

The village chief, Mr. Kukuri, stood up.

"Alright. I'll be there soon so don't let them rush into anything."

The villager left and Chief Kukuri shot his gaze at Hiro.

"I'm going to go see the leader that was captured earlier. What are you going to do?"

"I'd like to rest."

He wondered if it would be better to help them, but the villagers reacted the way they did to him.

He'd probably be nothing but a hindrance if he went.

"You're right... that may be better."

Chief Kukuri headed towards the north side of the dining hall and opened a wooden door.

"You can rest in this room. Use it however you'd like."

After leaving him with those words, Chief Kukuri ran out of the residence.

After watching him go off, Hiro stands up from his chair and heads for the room which he was offered.

He'll leave early tomorrow morning. Considering what's to come, he must recuperate his spirits.

Hiro threw himself on the bed, and perhaps because it had been a while since he was able to get any proper sleep, he quickly fell into a deep sleep.

Chapter 13

Struggle

The Fourth Imperial Army had set up a camp about a three day's distance away from the village in which Hiro was staying.

The tents were set up in various geometric formations and there were three layers of fences around their perimeter. Many campfires were burning throughout the site.

In the center of the camp site was headquarters, and the commander and his staff officers were right in the middle of a war council.

General Kielo sat at the head of the table and Liz could be seen slightly to his right.

One of the staff officers raises his hand amidst the tense air.

"May we move on to the next agenda?"

"Hmm. That's fine. Begin."

After receiving General Kielo's confirmation to go ahead, he stood up with a scout's report in hand.

"A rebel army has appeared in the southern part of the Lichtein Dukedom. They are currently moving north and it seems they are heading towards our direction."

The aide turned his head and looked at General Kielo.

"What would you have us do? We can not avoid a clash at this rate."

General Kielo snorted uninterested.

There is a map spread across the table. He glances at a piece placed atop it.

"How big is the rebel army?"

“Approximately 4,000 men. They routed the Lichtein Dukedom’s defense forces. It seems they’ve employed mercenaries and are continuously taking in slaves from surrounding areas. They may have over 6,000 men by the time they encounter us.”

“Hmm. What is the Lichtein Dukedom doing?”

“According to an informant, it seems they’ve gathered soldiers and are holed up in the capital. We’ve received the same report from a spy, so the information is likely accurate. We believe they are preparing to hold their castle.”

“Have they lost their nerves? But it’s decided then.”

“Your decision?”

General Kielo calmly held his hand over the map.

“First, we destroy the bothersome rebel army. Let us add them to our own army. But all the slaves will be executed. After that, let us assault the capital, then have a grand and triumphant return to our country.”

There is no objection to be heard from the staff officers. General Kielo nodded satisfied.

But Liz was not satisfied as she glared at the map.

Noticing this, General Kielo decided to call out to her, maybe because he was being considerate of the fact that she was an Imperial princess.

“Was there perhaps something not to your liking?”

“The soldiers and horses are exhausted after all these blitzes.”

They fell a number of forts. You could even say they were easily brought down.

Thus far, it’s been victory after victory. It’s almost scary how smoothly things are going. And thanks to that, the morale of the soldiers is high.

However, even if the forts were brought down easily, they did in fact put up a resistance, even if slight.

Riding their momentum, they advanced thus far at a startling speed.

The battles will still continue. Even if they do defeat the rebel army, if they are to take

down the enemy nation's capital, they need rest.

It's fearsome just thinking about what could result from the accumulated fatigue.

"If we can't rest, we should capture the oasis city of Bruno in the north and negotiate, as initially planned."

General Kielo shrugged his shoulders and spoke.

"You don't understand, do you, Princess?"

There was a hint of contempt in the tone of his voice. Although Liz noticed this, she kept quiet and continued to listen.

"You can not treat the Fourth Imperial Army as the soldiers of another country. It is for times like this, that they train all day, every day, and build their endurance. They will not tire from any lukewarm campaigns."

"But they're still human. It's impossible to continue fighting to no end."

"According to our plans, we will only fight two more times. After that, we won't just have the northern region, but half of the Lichtein Dukedom's territory."

"His Majesty the emperor does not wish to destroy the Lichtein Dukedom."

"The downfall of a capital does not necessarily mean the downfall of the country. Do not worry. We will leave the south for them."

With hatred in her voice, Liz voiced her rebuttal to General Kielo who was acting victorious.

"If we do that, the Fourth Imperial Army will be forced to stay here. If the defense in the south thins out, who knows what the Schteizen Republic will do? Also, the Lichtein Dukedom will become desperate to reclaim their capital. If stability crumbles in the south, things will turn disastrous."

"If that time comes, we can destroy the Lichtein Dukedom. Am I wrong?"

Then, as if he remembered something, the corners of the mouth rose up and he shot his gaze at Liz.

“It seems you’re tired, Princess. That must be why you keep making such timid statements. The war council will be over soon, so go rest. We will be departing early in the morning.”

Liz wanted to tell him off, but she clenched her fists and restrained herself.

But anger does not subside so quickly. The aide saw it on her face and chastised her.

“You are currently a staff officer. Here, your position as the Imperial princess is irrelevant. I do not approve of you showing your emotions. You should be careful with your words so as not to cause his Excellency any concern. Tread carefully.”

“Enough. Her Highness is still young and she hasn’t been a soldier for long. It would be cruel of us to tell her to know the ways of a war council. It’s fine if she learns slowly from here on out.”

The staff officers nodded in agreement to General Kielo’s words.

“Rest at ease, your Highness. I will be sure to give you a place to play a role.”

General Kielo smiled slightly and turned his gaze to the map.

It was probably his way of showing that he was done talking to her.

“I see... Then I’ll take you up on your offer and get some rest.”

If she lost her patience here, it would only put her in a worse position.

She has no allies here. There are only staff officers aiming to please their commander. After looking around at each of the staff officers, Liz stood from her chair and left the tent in long strides.

A cold wind hits her cheeks and quickly drops her body temperature.

After blowing into her hands, she starts towards her own tent.

As she does, a large man— Tris came over with an escort in tow.

“Princess. Is the war council over?”

He’s smiling like a good-natured old man. He thinks of Liz as his granddaughter.

Liz voiced her complaints in a way so as not to seem like she was venting her anger on him.

“General Kielo isn’t thinking ahead at all. It’s like his head’s full of nothing but gaining merits.”

“Hmm... As I thought, he won’t change his mind, will he?”

“Yeah, he said he’s going to move forward and destroy the rebel army then attack Azbakal.”

Tris furrowed his brows and began to walk beside Liz.

“He’s just brimming with ambition, isn’t he? And I thought he was a cautious man.”

Liz laughed sarcastically at Tris’s words and let out a sigh.

“More importantly, how are the preparations going?”

“I’d say about 60% complete.”

“I see. I’ll write more letters, so hand them to each unit’s leader.”

“Understood.”

Liz parted ways with Tris in front of her tent. She goes inside, looks at the open space, and sighs.

She did not bring Cerberus along for this battle because he’s unable to handle the heat.

And of course, Hiro isn’t here either. She doesn’t even know where he is right now.

She hopes he completed the “contract” without incident and was acknowledged as a descendant.

“I wonder where he is right now...”

Her body shivers in the cold so she covers herself with a blanket. Liz closed her eyes while seated.

She has “Laevateinn” by her hand so she can fight at a moment’s notice.



A two days distance from the Lichtein Dukedom’s capital of Azbakal is a fort called Azba.

There are currently 2,000 camel cavalrymen and 3,000 infantrymen here.

There’s a possibility the Fourth Imperial Army has taken notice of the soldiers assembling in the capital.

Having come to this conclusion, Marquis Ranquil decided to gather soldiers from various areas and summoned them to Fort Azba.

Marquis Ranquil watched the final unit walk through the gate from atop a tower.

From behind him appeared Count Karl with his teeth chattering.

He had his guards stand down, then stood next to Marquis Ranquil.

“Marquis Ranquil, what are we going to do now?”

“They are both moving as planned.”

Marquis Ranquil smiles.

His eyes were burning so hot with passion that it made you forget about the cold.

He spread his arms out towards the empty night sky. Below him, the soldiers were keeping themselves warm.

“First, we lead the rebel army and have them clash with the Fourth Imperial Army— Do you remember me explaining this part?”

“Yes. I received word as well. I was relieved that it went well. But even if we were able to lead the rebel army, do you think it will be so simple to do so with the Fourth Imperial Army?”

“That is why we are making a path for them. If we show them that it’s safe to advance this way by thinning out the defenses of our forts, I’m sure the merit hungry shadow general will bite. Then, we just have to lead them deep into our territory.”

Even with those confident words, Count Karl’s face still looks worried.

Count Karl voiced his concern as he rubbed his arms.

“Will it work out like that? Even if only in name, he’s a general of the great empire. Won’t he see through a plan like this?”

“People are like lumps of avarice. If you dangle bait in front of them, they will bite. We just need to make him think he’s steadily advancing. An enemy who creates their own momentum is fearsome, but an enemy army which you provide momentum for can be dealt with in any number of ways.”

“Is that so...?”

“Because the avarice of man has no bounds.”

Marquis Ranquil sneered and let out a white puff of air.

“After we watch the outcome of the battle, we will attack the exhausted victor.”

“Okay.”

“I’m sure we will succeed in getting this far. After that, it will depend on the soldiers whether or not we can win, but... there is one thing that bothers me more than that.”

“What is it?”

“It seems the Schteizen Republic and the Grand Duchy of Doral have called for a truce. Part of it may be due to the fall of Ferzen, but the passing of the grand duke is likely a cause as well.”

“...That too is problematic.”

“The fight for the heir has already begun in Schteizen. I can’t say that there is zero possibility of them coming to attack us in order to gain merits.”

They lost many soldiers with their last two losses.

Even now, they forcibly gathered soldiers from various areas, and their defense is

thinned out in nonessential places.

“The rebel army, the Grantz Grand Empire, the Schteizen Republic... Despite the fact that they normally despise us as a slave nation and keep their distance, only at times like this do they swarm and try to use us. Our country really is so popular.”

After hearing Count Karl’s self deprecating remark, Marquis Ranquil laughed in return saying, “you’re absolutely right”.

Then, he looked earnestly at Count Karl.

“This battle will be settled quickly.”

Bandits and monsters are attacking villages.

If the building resentment of the people bursts, there will be a second and third rebel army.

It would be hard to maintain their statehood if it came to that.

Whether it’s an invasion from the outside, or a collapse from within, if either happens, the Lichtein Dukedom will likely be erased from the maps.

In order to avoid that, they must have a short decisive battle and avoid dragging it out.

“Can we do it?”

“It’s possible, so I’d like you to leave everything to me.”

“...All right.”

“Now, it’s cold out here. Please head back inside.”

He pats Count Karl’s shoulders and urges him to return.

It seems his anxiety is still there, but Count Karl nods and turns around.

After watching him disappear into the darkness, Marquis Ranquil hangs his head low.

There were two reasons why he did this.

One was that he did not mention the zorosta.

The other was that he did not mention “Valdite”.

(This is an extremely difficult situation for battle.)

He looked down below at the assembled soldiers.

There are 5,000 of them. Half the number of the Fourth Imperial Army. It's even less than that of the marching rebel army which is increasing its numbers as it passes through different areas.

"I'll draw in a victory no matter what."

Though it is a barren land, it is the country in which he was born and raised, and so owes a great debt to.

He wants to do whatever it takes for it's survival. Marquis Ranquil looked up at the night sky and muttered.

"The stars seem close today... This is the one thing that hasn't changed."

Even if the country falls to ruin, the stars will likely shine on for all eternity.

Even if all of mankind on the surface die out, they will continue to look down undisturbed.

"I've taken every measure I can. Only the gods know if we will succeed or not."

With those as his final words, Marquis Ranquil goes back inside the tower.

All that was left were the strong, freezing winds grating the air.



Imperial year 1023, August 3.

Twelve sels (36 km) away from the Lichtein Dukedom's capital of Azbakal.

The winds are strong today. Clouds of dust impair the vision and it is impossible to see far into the distance.

Within such conditions, the Fourth Imperial Army of 10,000 encountered the rebel army's advance unit of 1,000.

The Fourth Imperial Army had sent out patrols numerous times and were aware of the advance unit.

It seemed that was not the case for the opposing advance unit. Unrest could be felt from the enemy soldiers.

Seeing this, General Kielo sneered at them saying, "I suppose they're just a rebel army after all".

"We have no obligation to let them go."

"You are correct."

"Are the preparations in order?"

"There is no need to worry about the supply unit. It has been entrusted to someone who is reliable, and the members of the escort are all elites."

After finishing his statement, the aide turned his gaze. He was looking towards the right flank where a flag with a crest of red soil and a lily was fluttering. It was a unit of slightly disarrayed ranks of soldiers entrusted to Liz.

They were in disarray because she had the riders marching on foot to allow the horses to rest.

"It looks like the right flank will reach them soon."

As General Kielo turns his gaze in the same direction, a staff officer shouts.

"The rebel army is charging!"

"What?!"

General Kielo turned back to look at the rebel army and there was a large cloud of dust rising up.

The advance unit— 1,000 camel cavalrymen are heading towards the right flank where the Sixth Imperial Princess is attached.

The aide spoke in a shaky voice.

“Absurd. Without waiting for their main unit, the advance unit alone is...”

“Compose yourself. We far outnumber them. Don’t neglect the security on our perimeters.”

Said General Kielo, but it wasn’t that he didn’t have his own misgivings in his mind.

If they lose “Laevateinn” here, his head would go flying for sure.

He doesn’t think the Sixth Imperial Princess, a possessor of a spirit sword, would be defeated by the likes of a rebel army, but he needed insurance just in case.

General Kielo turns to the flag bearer and raises his hand.

“Have the reserve cavalry head to the right flank and the archers provide cover fire.”

The flag was waved from side to side and the drums were beat.

The thousand reserve cavalrymen standing behind the right flank sortied.

“Let’s have a look at her Highness’s skills.”

General Kielo’s nasty gaze was directed towards the right flank where the soldiers were getting into formation.

Spreading before Liz, who stood in the middle of those soldiers, was an army of camel cavalrymen.

Seeing the charging camel cavalry, Liz removes “Laevateinn” from her sheath and shouted.

“Here comes the enemy! Tris!”

“Yes!”

“Can we move out right away?”

“The 2nd cavalry battalion can move out at any time. The 1st cavalry battalion may take a while longer.”

“Alright! Send out the 2nd cavalry battalion!”

“Understood.”

Liz kicks her horse’s sides and moves to the front.

Tris said outloud in a surprised voice...

“Princess! Where do you think you’re going?!”

“I have to make sure we have at least a little more of an advantage before we fight!”

She weaves through the cavalry and stops her horse after gaining a bit of distance.

A large cloud of dust is rising up. It approached Liz like a wave.

It’s about 90 rus (270 m) away.

Liz keeps a strong grip on “Laevateinn’s” handle while focusing on the camel cavalry.

As they come 37 rus (111 m) away from her...

“No need to hold back. Set everything ablaze!”

In an instant— flames came spewing out from “Laevateinn’s” blade.

The flames scorch the air, and the dry heat spreads out around the area.

The flames, which were spreading to the sides, became a large wall and completely separated the two armies.

The cavalry in the rear burst out into cheers at the magical scene.

Liz turns her horse’s head around and rides to the front row of the 2nd battalion, who had switched places with the 1st battalion.

“The enemy will avoid the flames as they approach us! We’ll strike where the enemy’s ranks are in disorder! Second battalion, follow me!”

“Princess!”

Tris comes rushing over on his horse.

“What’s wrong?”

“The 1st battalion is ready to move out!”

“Then attack the enemy’s flank! Send word to the reserve cavalry to move around to the back! We’ll surround the enemy and annihilate them!”

“Understood! May the Twelve Great Gods of Grantz be with you!”

“You too, Tris! Second battalion, we’re moving—?!”

When Liz turned forward, she saw the wall of flames being attacked by a wave of sand.

“No way... How?!”

While she stood surprised, the wall of flames was swallowed by the sand.

Flying out from the cloud of sand soaring high into the sky, were a large number of camel cavalrymen.

After regaining her composure, Liz swung down “Laevateinn” in front of her and yelled...

“We’ll crush the enemy’s spirit! Second battalion, follow me!”

She pulled on the horse’s reins and kicked its sides.

Liz rushed out past the vanguard. A thousand cavalrymen behind roar out “follow her Highness!” as they chase after her.

The enemy’s lead group comes in contact with Liz. As Liz flattened her body, a spear passed over her head.

Without delay, she swings “Laevateinn” and severs the enemy’s body.

“Goh...!”

After glancing for a moment at the enemy who raised a spray of blood and fell from his camel, Liz created a mass of flames from “Laevateinn’s” blade and shot it out in front of her.

“Fire?!”

“Again?!”

“This isn’t the time to be surprised! Dodge it!”

Many of the camel cavalrymen are unable to evade it, and dozens of them have their flesh burned off.

The hideously burned enemy soldiers gave off an awful stench as they fell onto the desert floor. Hooves stomp over the corpses as the battlefield is covered in sprays of blood.

Having lost their riders, the camels started to get scared from the heat wave, and the ranks of soldiers began to break.

Then, with great force, the Fourth Imperial Army’s cavalry attacked, the tips of their spears sparkling in the sun and piercing through the enemy soldiers.

Nearby, Liz is hacking away at enemy soldiers whose faces are tense with fear.

At times, she was as beautiful as “Palladiana*”, and at others, fiercely gallant.

(T/N: The Kaniji reads valkyrie.)

The smell of death encroaches the air and coils around the nose. The number of corpses kept growing and made the offensive smell even thicker.

“We’ll keep this momentum and crush the enemy!”

As Liz swung “Laevateinn” up, someone came charging past the corpses.

He effortlessly carried a greatsword almost as tall as him in one hand as he was cutting any cavalrymen who stood in his path in two.

Liz could feel her nerves building up in her face when she saw the large man with slightly purple skin.

“...What’s a zorosta doing here?!”

The large man jumped off from atop his camel.

BOOM—

the dust of battle mixed with blood rises up before Liz.

The greatsword picks up wind and howls.

Liz immediately drew out “Laevateinn” and got into a defensive position.

In an instant, a flashy show of fireworks go off as the greatsword hits her.

“Ugh!”

Liz floats in mid air along with her horse.

Although the man had unbelievable strength from an average person’s perspective, Liz, who undauntedly pushes him back is not normal either.

“Haa!”

“Hmm?!”

There’s the fact that she stopped his greatsword, but something else made the large man’s express change after he was pushed back.

Once he created some distance between them, he turned his gaze to “Laevateinn” and opened his mouth to speak.

“...A spirit sword, is it?”

“Maybe it is, maybe it isn’t.”

Liz hides the fact that her hand is numb, and smiles so as not to let on.

“It’s impossible for the dainty body of a little girl like yours to have such power.”

“Isn’t it too soon to come to a conclusion just based on that?”

“There’s no use in hiding it.”

The large man thrust his greatsword into the ground.

“This is one of the Five Deadly Swords of the Demon Emperor, *“Beben Slave”*. There

are only so many swords in Aletia which can stop a Demon Emperor Sword.”

The Five Deadly Swords of the Demon Emperor.

They are five treasured swords which the zorostas refined a 1,000 years ago in order to stand up against the Five Imperial Spirit Swords.

The Demon Emperor Swords have the soul of a zorosta residing in them and they have a will of their own.

They each have a different method of selecting their owners, and if one is chosen, they are granted an enormous amount of magical powers.

There are times non-zorostas are chosen as well, but it’s said that in those cases, some form of a curse befalls them.

“And you feel it too, right? How they’re resonating after meeting their longstanding foe of so many long years.”

Liz looked down at “Laevateinn”.

There is heat emanating from the crimson blade. It was hot enough to distort space.

It’s urging her— to hurry and fight.

As Liz calms “Laevateinn”, she glared at the zorosta before her.

“...As you said, this is one of the Five Imperial Spirit Swords, “*Laevateinn*”.”

“Ohh, the First Emperor’s beloved “*Laevateinn*”, is it? It’s even written about in many legends. It is an honor. Its krall* was “*superhuman strength*” if I’m not mistaken.”

(*TL note: Kanji is heaven’s blessing.)

The large man swings his greatsword around, causing strong winds to sweep around him.

““*Beben Slave’s*” krall is “*impact*”. Since we’re both being urged on, let us cross blades!”

The man’s lips twisted in joy.

“My name is Gahda Obunano. I serve as aide in the slave liberation army.”

“I’m Celia Estreya Elizabeth von Grantz.”

Liz jumped off from her horse and readied “Laevateinn”.

During this time, the rebel army was being annihilated.

There’s the fact that they were outnumbered, but in addition to that, the First battalion was digging into their flank and the reserve cavalry was moving around to their rear.

Gahda should have noticed this. After looking about, he turned to look at Liz.

“It looks like we don’t have much time. Let us settle this quickly.”

“There’s no need to be in such a rush. I have plenty of time!”

“Laevateinn’s” blade comes down on Gahda but is easily stopped.

However, there was no hint of surprise in Liz’s face. He’s a Demon Emperor Sword user, so she knows she won’t land the first hit that easily.

“I know, that’s why I’m bringing out the flames, too.”

“Ohh!”

A red wave rose up, and a snake of flames attacked Gahda.

Gahda repels the crimson blade, turns his body around, and places his hands on the ground.

Under the control of magic, sand piled up to become a wall and defended against the flame snake.

Liz strikes the wall of sand with her fist.

“Haa!”

It’s a fearsome, superhuman strength. Liz’s arm pierced through the wall.

“Wha— goh!”

Caught off guard, the fist makes contact with Gahda’s face, and the immense force blew him away.

Gahda rolled once, twice, before coming to a stop. Liz steps into the spot where the wall crumbled.

“Oh, did you forget *“Laevateinn’s”* krall?”

Gahda stood up calmly.

“An average man would have probably lost consciousness.”

He wiped the blood from the corner of his mouth as his smile broadened.

“Now, it’s my turn!”

“Beben Slave”, standing almost as tall as his body, effortlessly swings down from above Liz’s head.

“Ugh!”

Liz raises “Laevateinn” and stops it. The overwhelming force digs her ankle deep into the sand.

“Haa!”

Liz immediately kicked her right leg out. However, Gahda easily stops it with one hand. While still in that position, Liz lifted her body and using her left leg for a front kick, the sole of her foot drives into the pit of Gahda’s stomach.

“Ugh!”

Gahda holds his stomach as he steps back and tosses Liz with the hand gripping her right leg.

Liz beautifully repositioned her body while in midair and landed with her left hand on the ground.

However, she ended up dropping “Laevateinn”. With a grimace, Liz looked down at her shaking right hand.

It’s numb from “Beben Slave’s” “impact”.

“...That ridiculous power of yours is troublesome.”

“It’s rude to say a weak little girl has ridiculous power.”

“That is true. I was a bit forgetful in my manners towards one who has received the favor of a spirit sword.”

“How about you apologize with your loss?”

“Hmph, how valiant of you. Do you think you can win?”

“Of course.”

They both glare at each other for a short while.

Suddenly, Gahda turns away to look around at the surrounding area.

There are gloomy voices echoing out amidst screams and roars.

Many of his comrades had become corpses, mere objects painting the desert.

Gahda furrows his brows displeased. He placed his greatsword on his shoulder, turned to Liz, then opened his mouth to speak.

“Let us continue... is what I’d like to say, but let’s settle this another time.”

“You think I’ll let you get away?”

“Don’t push yourself. Do you plan to fight with your hand like that?”

As Gahda said, the numbness from Liz’s hand was still there.

After jumping onto his camel, Gahda looked down at her.

“You have talent. If you keep training for another five years, you’ll likely surpass me.”

One camel cavalryman from the rebel army comes rushing over.

“Boss! We’re going to be surrounded at this rate!”

“I know. We’ve accomplished our objective. We’re pulling out.”

“Yes!”

“H-Hold it!”

Behind Gahda was Liz, pointing “Laevateinn” at him.

After just a glance, Gahda rode off on his camel without a word.

Tris came up beside her as Liz was glaring at his back in frustration.

“Princess! Are you all right?!”

“Yes, I’m not hurt. More importantly, how are the casualties?”

“I can’t say without hearing the report, but I don’t believe there were too many casualties. It’s thanks to you drawing the attention of the zorosta, Princess. Should we pursue them?”

“No. No need for a pursuit. Let’s leave the rest to General Kielo. The horses and soldiers are tired from the blitzes so let them rest.”

“Understood.”

“Haa...”

Liz lets out a deep sigh and the strength drains from her body.

“Guess I still have a long way to go...”

She thinks how she still falls behind Hiro as she smiles weakly.

Chapter 14

The Battle begins

There stand ruins of a fort 21 sels (63 km) away from the location of Liz's battle with the rebel army's advance unit.

It was an imposing fort until just the other day, but now lies destroyed by the Fourth Imperial Army's attack.

There, was Hiro. He walks inside the fort while having the "shiryu" wait at the entrance.

"Your Highness. I have been waiting for you."

A soldier appeared before him, struck his chest, then knelt.

He is one of Margrave Grinda's private soldiers.

Hiro had Margrave Grinda send out a letter to have a unit of soldiers arrive here ahead of him. This was the leader of that unit.

"Is everything set?"

"Yes. Everything has been prepared as you ordered. This way please."

Hiro walks after the soldier who began to walk ahead of him. Hiro spoke to the man's back.

"What about the other soldiers?"

"They are lying hidden in this fort."

The soldier stopped at the waiting area and opened a door.

After a low bow, he pointed his hand inward to urge Hiro in.

In the waiting area were five soldiers in armor.

All together, they rose from their seats and saluted.

After pointing his hand to them telling them to be, “at ease,” he walked toward the center of the long table.

After looking down at a spread out map, he asked a question.

“Whereabouts of the Fourth Imperial Army now?”

“I can’t accurately say until the scout returns, but they’re probably around this area. It’s about a day’s distance from here.”

“And the rebel army?”

“According to intel from four days ago, they are here.”

One of the soldiers placed a piece on top of the map of the Lichtein Dukedom.

It is a location 32 sels (96 km) away from the current fort.

“What about the Lichtein Dukedom’s activities?”

“They haven’t moved from their capital. I’m not sure if they’re planning to focus on defense, but they’ve summoned soldiers from different areas, and the number of nobles’ flags on the castle walls increase with each passing day.”

“Flags on the castle wall, is it...”

“Is there something bothering you?”

“Yes, just a little.”

Hiro grabs a piece from the table and places it on the map.

That location steals the gaze of the soldiers, and the unit leader muttered...

“Fort Azba...”

“Did you investigate this place?”

“Not in detail...”

“Do you know how many soldiers are stationed here?”

“I believe around 2,000. It seems they did not reduce the number of soldiers here because it is a vital strategic point which has influence in all directions.”

“...”

Hiro silently glares at the map.

He puts himself in the shoes of Lichtein's officers and soldiers and hammers out strategy after strategy in his head.

(Draw them into an inescapable situation and cut off their supply lines for water and food provisions. You don't know what the enemy army might do in such a situation. In which case, either corner them into an appropriate fort and force them to starve to death with a protracted battle, or force them to disperse and crush them individually. But the Lichtein Dukedom doesn't have the time to take things slowly.)

And so their options are limited.

(Without time, you can't have enough soldiers. The activities of other countries is a concern, too. Considering what may lie in the future, a short decisive battle would be desirable. If they're able to force the Grantz Grand Empire to withdraw, other countries would hesitate to attack. In which case, for that to be possible with limited forces, throw the Fourth Imperial Army at the rebel army and crush them while their formation is in disarray. That sounds about right.)

If it came to that, where would the battles begin, and how will the terrain look?

(Only Fort Azba's has the optimal location to monitor both armies while being close enough to the capital to race there in case anything happens. The flags on the castle walls of the capital are probably fake.)

Hiro lifted his face.

"Do you know who the prominent leaders of the Lichtein Dukedom are?"

"Most of them died in the battle against the rebel army."

"So are you saying there aren't any noteworthy leaders left?"

"No, there is just one. There is one called Ranquil Caligula Jilberist."

"And his combat history?"

“His name became known about two years ago. During that time, the Republic of Schteizen invaded the Lichtein Dukedom with an army of 30,000, but he managed to drive them away with less than 3,000 soldiers. He came to be called the “*Wild Eagle of Change*” for overturning that disadvantageous situation and achieving victory.”

“So they shunned that talent of his and demoted him...”

“It is as you say. It seems they placed blame on him for various things. As a result, he apparently became the commanding officer of the national border regiment at the Republic of Schteizen’s border. But having said that, it is an important location, so you can also say he was suitable for the position.”

(Although he’s popular with the people and soldiers, he’s hated by the nobles.)

There might be a way to take advantage of that. It may be possible to make the Lichtein Dukedom fall.

Hiro pounded all the information currently available into his head and looked at the unit leader.

“Do you have parchment and a pen?”

“Here, please use these.”

Ink, pen, and a bundle of parchment are placed in front of Hiro.

Hiro dips the pen in the ink and moves it across the parchment.

“Here are instructions moving forward.”

“Understood.”

The unit leader confirmed the contents of the two pieces of parchments, wrapped it up, then handed them to a subordinate.

“Will your Highness be joining with the Fourth Imperial Army now?”

Hiro strokes his eyepatch and thinks.

If he rode the “shiryu” and headed in their direction now, he could probably reach Liz by tomorrow afternoon.

The strategy moving forward is written on the parchments. It won't be a problem if he's not here.

“Yes, I'll be departing immediately. Can I leave the rest to you?”

“Please rest assured. I will execute your orders without fail.”

“Then I'll trust the rest to you.”

“Yes. Please give my regards to her Highness Celia Estreya.”

The soldiers see Hiro off as he goes outside.

Hiro squinted at the dazzling sunlight and walked towards the “shiryu”.



Imperial year 1023, August 4.

Under a blazing sun, a slave liberation army of 6,000 faces off against the Fourth Imperial Army.

The slave liberation army is in a spear formation.

The vanguard is composed of slave infantrymen, while the second battalion, headquarters, and rear guard are composed of camel cavalrymen— mercenaries. It is a formation resembling the tip of a spear.

The army's second-in-command, Gahda Obunano, was in the second battalion.

Gahda turned around and stared at headquarters.

He, a man who fears not even death, had a weakness, and it was there.

A young girl who had become their leader was in headquarters.

“What's wrong, boss?”

“...I wasn't able to persuade Milieu.”

“Don't worry. If push comes to shove, I gave out orders for the men to escape with the miss, even if they have to carry her.”

“If possible, I wanted her to return to her hometown.”

“The miss is strong willed. There’s no way she would just nod her head yes if we told her to escape.”

“...If it looks like we’re about to be surrounded, take Milieu and escape immediately.”

“Huh? Boss, I’m gonna stay with you until—”

“You can’t. You go back to headquarters and protect Milieu. If the situation gets dangerous, take Milieu and break away from the battlefield. After you do, take her back to her home for me.”

It’s not that he’s planning to lose, but you never know what might happen on a battlefield.

He can’t bring himself to allow such a young life to disappear here.

To maintain a sense of mystique, her face is kept hidden, and only those who are close to her know who she is.

So even if she were returned to her home, no one would be able to pursue her.

“Understand? Do me this favor.”

Gahda tightly grips his subordinate’s shoulders and looks at him sternly.

“All right... May fortune be with you.”

“You too.”

The subordinate returned to headquarters, and Gahda looked out ahead.

The Fourth Imperial Army has taken a dragon wings formation, and he can see that both flanks come back around like bows.

He would like to crush the tips of the flanks, but all he has are untrained slaves.

But even if they are amateurs, he has no complaints, so he decided to break through the center.

They’ll take the commander’s head, disturb the chain of command, and annihilate them.

“...Even if we kill him, the Sixth Imperial Princess is a problem.”

He didn't see any shortcomings in her as a leader based on their fight yesterday.

If she's able to fight to that point against Gahda, she's likely competent as a military leader as well.

Even if they're able to defeat the commanding officer, he's not sure what would happen if she were to take command...

After shaking his head to dispel his anxiety, he let out a voice loud enough for the entire army to hear.

"Now, let the drums roar out! Let the enemy hear your war cry and shake in fear! Advance forward! It is time for the weak to devour the strong!"

He raises "Beben Slave" with one hand. A battle cry rises up from the mercenaries and slaves.

"Follow meeee!"

[[[Ooohhhh!]]]

Although they were not all in step, the entire army commenced their assault on the center of the Fourth Imperial Army.

Ready to meet them was the Fourth Imperial Army with their dragon wings formation. Behind the vanguard unit of 500, are 2,000 units on the right flank, and 2,000 on the left flank. They have the crucial role of surrounding their enemy.

In the center was headquarters with 1,000 units, and in front of them was the second battalion with 2,000 units. To the sides of headquarters were the third and fourth battalions, each with 500 units. The remaining 1,500 are reserves.

In headquarters, General Kielo sneered.

"...So they can't think of anything except plunging forward, can they? Well, that is a

formation befitting a rebel army.”

“I’m sure the enemy will continue as they are and head for our center. Would you like us to move forward with the strategy of surrounding and annihilating them as planned?”

One of the staff officers asked, to which General Kielo nodded satisfied.

“There will be no changes. Just surround the enemy slowly and annihilate them.”

General Kielo, who was watching the approaching cloud of dust, raised his hand.

“Give the starving slaves some arrows to eat.”

“Yes!”

The staff officer waved his arm and signaled to the standard bearer.

A large flag rises up from headquarters. At the same time, the sound of drums ring out. At these signals, the archery unit of the second battalion let loose their arrows, which rained down on the enemies.

The enemy soldiers begin to fall, but their momentum does not stop.

Arrows come flying back in response.

Shots while in motion lack force, so the soldiers defended against the insignificant attack with their shields.

“Ohh... they counterattacked. It seems even slaves have what they called mettle.”

“Our right flank has raised their flag. It seems the left flank also raised their flag simultaneously and have begun to move.”

“...But I haven’t given out any instructions.”

“The rebel army is faster than expected. Her Highness likely decided that it was better to act before it was too late. That’s impressive coordi—”

The staff officer was about to praise her, but he shut his mouth because of the rage

emanating from General Kielo.

“For her to disregard the commanding officer and make a decision of her own accord... I would have had her head were she not of the Imperial family.”

The right and left flanks began to open their wings. If things continue to go smoothly, they'll like succeed in surrounding the enemy.

General Kielo glared at Liz's coat of arms unamused.

Completely unaware of General Kielo's discomfort, Liz was currently near headquarters with Tris.

There were a number of reasons for this.

First of all, although she reported to General Kielo about the zorosta, she was brushed aside and told that it wasn't a problem.

Knowing well the strength of the zorosta, Liz was waiting on the right end so she could race to the second battalion in case the enemy broke through.

“With *“Laevateinn”* in my possession, I'm the only one who can face that man.”

“But, if something were to happen to you, Princess...”

Riding alongside her, Tris tried to give his honest opinion, but Liz shook her head.

“But I have to do it. If General Kielo happens to be defeated, the rebel army will gain momentum.”

“That is true, but—”

Before Tris is able to finish his sentence, the rebel army's vanguard collided with the second battalion.

Angry voices shake their eardrums, and the wind carries the sound of clashing weapons.

With just a single clash, somewhere between dozens and hundreds of men left this world.

Stepping over their corpses, the slave infantrymen come swinging towards the heavy infantrymen.

From where Liz and Tris are, they can only see a large cloud of dust rising up.

“It’s begun. Tris!”

“Yes!”

“We’ll drive into their flank and separate them! Make everyone pick up the pace!”

“Understood!”

Right when Liz tried to drive into the flank, a new development began to unfold in the center.

The slave infantrymen are no match for the Fourth Imperial Army with their shabby equipment.

They’re slaughtered one after another by the swords of the far better trained soldiers. But still, they were obstinate.

They don’t want to go back to being slaves. Their drive allows them to push through and open up the center of the second battalion.

At this rate, the camel cavalry will likely come rushing in.

“Don’t let these lowly slaves get the better of you!”

The man who shouted out was the commander of the second battalion of the Fourth Imperial Army.

He is General Kielo’s aide, and his name is Kigui Merkel von Schlarke.

His face was pale as he watched the center get pried open.

“Stop them at any cost!”

But Kigui’s voice didn’t reach the front row of soldiers.

This was because there were so many camel cavalrymen rushing in.

The brawny heavy infantrymen are slowly crushed by the camel cavalrymen, and the

war cries of the slaves get closer and closer.

Kigui took out a bundle of spirit charms from his uniform pocket and kicked the sides of his horse.

“If it’s come to this, I’ll stop them myself!”

One camel cavalryman comes rushing towards him as he swings his sword up above his head.

Straddled atop the camel is a large man with slightly purple skin— It’s the zorosta.

“So you’re the zorosta her Highness spoke of!”

The fact that he was holding spirit charms made him have a lapse in judgement.

He should have run away immediately. He should have withdrawn.

But he stood up against him. He threw out a red spirit charm, causing a mass of fire appear.

“Hah, what is that?”

The large man— Gahda laughed and crushed it with his hand.

“Absurd...”

Despite being stunned, Kigui continues to throw out spirit charms.

A mass of water rushes out, wind rises up, and lightning falls down from the sky.

After defending against it all with “Beben Slave”, Gahda spoke.

“Is that all?”

“What? Absurd... Are you a monster?!”

Gahda closed the distance between them and swung his greatsword to the side.

“I’m a zorosta.”

Those became the last words which Kigui heard.

Kigui’s head flies high into the sky. Perhaps Gahda was uninterested, as he didn’t even look.

The now headless body slipped down from the horse’s back.

“We’ll continue to break through the center and take the commander’s head!”

As he was about to ride off on his camel, a large number of Grantz cavalymen blocked his way.

They all wore angry expressions as they attacked from every direction.

“Orahh!”

“Heh.”

He swung “Beben Slave” as easily and lightly as if he were simply breathing.

He swings right, thrusts forward, swings back to the left, then slashes vertically.

Five cavalymen lost their lives in the blink of an eye.

Though the Grantz cavalymen were unable to hide their trembling, they still did not withdraw.

This was due to their arrogance as the elite of the Grantz Grand Empire.

A number of camel cavalymen rush the Grantz cavalry to cover Gahda.

“...Now, let’s go grab hold of victory! Follow me!”

Right as Gahda shouted, a woman with crimson hair flapping in the wind came racing in from his right.

Her blade, a deeper crimson than blood, spews out flames and scatters the rebel army.

No one’s able to stop the girl who seems to be rushing in like a bullet wrapped in

flames.

Gahda sighed.

“...Little girl. I can’t hold back like I did yesterday.”

“Right back at you.”

“How courageous. I have no interest in killing children. I can still let you go if you—”

Before Gahda is able to finish speaking, Liz disappeared from her horse and floated up into the air while drawing a spiral.

As she flies above head, she unleashes a slash attack, which Gahda repels with his greatsword.

Fireworks scatter between the two then disappear. Gahda turned his body around and kicked the back of his camel.

He leapt right before Liz the moment she hit the ground and swept his greatsword to the side.

Liz barely managed to stop it, but she was blown away and a gap was created between them.

“...You’re stronger than you were yesterday.”

“I told you, I was holding back.”

“So does that mean this you being serious?”

“If I were serious, your head would’ve been gone by now.”

Gahda shrugs his shoulders and speaks quickly.

“You still have time. If you want to run, then run. I won’t chase after you. It’s not your wish to die in a place like this, is it?”

“You’re right. That’s why I don’t plan on dying.”

Gahda stood there with his eyes on Liz while she smiled in a way that almost seemed haughty.

That which was being conveyed from her was neither fear nor contempt.

It was simply an expression of a determination which was akin to a sense of duty.

“...There’s no way you’re unable to assume the difference in strength between us. I believe you to be a clever child, little girl... Was I mistaken?”

“It’s not so bad being praised, but if I ran away, there’d be no one to stop you.”

Liz brushed the crimson hair on her shoulder behind her back and readied “Laevateinn” once more.

“If I run away here, I’ll become someone who runs every time I come upon a big wall. That’s why I won’t run. I’ll fight until the end, find an opening, and grab hold of victory.”

“Is that so? I see... I feel like I understand why you were chosen by a spirit sword at your age.”

She is noble and possesses a beautifully pure heart. Even when colliding against a difficult situation, she does not consider running as an option.

Which is exactly why it’s such a waste. Hers is not a life that should disappear in a place like this.

But Gahda had his reason for not being able to withdraw as well.

“Then let us settle this.”

“I won’t hold back!”

The crimson blade attacks Gahda, but he deflects it with his greatsword, scattering fireworks.

Liz digs her toes into the sand and swings her leg up, causing a cloud of sand to fly in the air and cover Gahda’s face.

Sand got in Gahda’s eyes, forcing him to back away and groan.

“Trying to blind me are you?”

“I’ve got you!”

Not about to let this chance slip by, Liz aimed for his neck and swung her sword.

“I won’t call you a coward. But little girls who have bad habits with their legs deserve a fitting punishment!”

Said Gahda, before dropping his head and evading the blade.

Liz was shocked at the way he evaded her attack. It was almost as if he could see.

While she stood there in shock, Gahda placed his hands on the ground and released his magic.

Sand coiled around Liz’s legs. This threw her off balance and she fell face forward.

Liz tried to get up, but because her legs were buried in sand, she was unable to move freely.

“Ugh?!”

A large shadow looms down from above Liz’s head.

As she looked up, Gahda with his eyes now open, had his greatsword up in the air.

“This is the end.”

The Grantz cavalrymen try to race to the Imperial princess to save her from peril, but the camel cavalrymen block their way.

A scream that doesn’t quiet come out rises up from the soldiers in the area. They try to race over to help her, but slave infantrymen and camel cavalrymen get in their way and prevent them from doing so.

Without asking for any help, Liz stares at the greatsword with the light of resolution in her eyes.

But it’s not from resignation. They are the eyes of one who is watching for a chance to counterattack.

The greatsword comes swinging down. Everyone has a look of despair on their face.

As Liz tightly grips “Laevateinn’s” handle—

— A darkness appeared in their world.

A shining silver sword stopped the blade of the greatsword.

Its owner wore black clothes which fluttered in the air, and an eye patch which covered half his face.

Liz saw the back of this figure and was speechless. Gahda was also wide eyed with surprise.

“...I’m glad I made it.”

The young boy— Hiro muttered, then kicked Gahda in the stomach to open up some distance.

“Ugh?! Wh-Who are you...?”

“Wow~ you’re sturdy.”

The hem of his black clothes, which seem to embody darkness itself, dances in the air as he rushes to attack Gahda while his stance is still broken.

“So fast!”

“Ugh!”

The silver blade relentlessly splits open Gahda’s skin and causes blood to flow out. Gahda was unable to defend against the fearsome speed.

“I’m asking who you are!”

Gahda counterattacks. Hiro turned his body to the side.

The greatsword came swinging down vertically and simply passed by his nose.

“Ah!”

Hiro twisted half his body and got ready to strike with “Excalibur’s” blade using all his might.

He moves slower than before. Gahda had plenty of time to stop it.

Once, twice, thrice they cross blades. Each time, a show of red fireworks is scattered about.

Gahda gradually becomes unable to keep up with Hiro’s speed.

He could tell he was being toyed with by Hiro’s quick paced attacks.

Gahda desperately chased after Hiro, but Hiro let loose a kick and struck Gahda in the face.

“Gah!”

Gahda goes rolling off along the desert floor which is exposed to the blazing sun. Hiro watches him with an icy stare.

A number of screams could be heard ringing out around the area.

Jeers, cries of death, and the roaring of hooves mix together with various emotions, then disappear.

The countless number of corpses glare bitterly at the living.

Their cloudy eyes are like grim reapers inviting you to the other world.

After crashing into a pile of corpses, Gahda stood up.

“So an interloper would appear at this stage... I really don’t have any luck, do I?”

After laughing at himself, he pulled back his bangs which were annoyingly stuck to him with his sweat.

His previously hidden forehead becomes visible, and a small, purple crystal embedded there is exposed.

Seeing this, Hiro muttered.

“I knew it. A magic stone possessor.”

Hiro released the tension in his body and stood in a natural, daunting pose. He stands in a way to suggest he’s let his guard down and is full of openings.

“That sword, and the way you speak of magic stones as if you’re familiar with them... You’re no ordinary person, are you, boy?”

Gahda sensed it. He sensed the mighty fighting spirit in which Hiro was clad.

It is a dominant spirit which one can only obtain through years of fighting and tireless effort.

And for this young lad to emit that, it certainly is awe inspiring.

The reality of such a fierce warrior being so much younger than him ends up making him laugh.

“Hehe, hahahaha... Is this what they call natural talent?!”

He placed the greatsword, which was almost as tall as him, on his shoulder and kicked the ground beneath him.

“It seems I can fight you seriously!”

Gahda instantly closed the distance between them coming right in front of Hiro and swung “Beben Slave”, causing the air to howl.

Hiro simple lifted his silver sword and responded with a small movement.

As blade met blade and fireworks went flying, the greatsword slid up over the white blade.

“Ohh— You’re good!”

Using the momentum of his greatsword, he unleashed a palm strike to Hiro’s eyepatch.

That should have been a blind spot for Hiro, but...

“That’s not a blind spot. I can see.”

He said, bending his body backwards and successfully avoiding the attack.

But this large movement created an opening.

If it were an average person, they may have jumped in at this chance.

But it seems Gahda realized this was an invitation.

He sunk his toes into the sand and swung his leg up throwing sand at Hiro.

A large cloud of sand flew up in front of Hiro’s eyes.

Gahda leapt behind him and closed the gap. But he felt something off about his right arm and looked down.

There’s blood dripping down from a gaping wound.

“I guess it was good that I didn’t take your invitation...”

As he looks back at Hiro, the cloud of sand which was covering his field of view was shaken off with a single flash.

Gahda lifted his shoulder to wipe off the sweat which fell from his forehead and slid down his cheek. Then, the corners of his mouth lifted up.

“Even though you’re my enemy, I applaud you. How can one reach such extreme limits in the art of war at such a young age I wonder. But I can’t just stand here being impressed. I have to change the flow of this battle.”



Their gazes intersect.

They read one, two moves ahead. The one who successfully reads the other's move will become the victor, so they can not do anything carelessly. A bundle of nerves, Gahda focuses solely on taking the initiative.

Excitement of the battle— His body ends up shaking with joy. Pure joy is welling up from deep in his heart.

This battle of life and death is so fun he can't contain himself.

“Let us fight to the bitter end, until one of us is dead— How about it *“one-eyed dragon”*?! The one still standing in the end is the victor! Nice and simple, right?”

Gahda's dry lips are cracked open in a crescent shape. He twists his body, readies his greatsword, and digs the tip into the sand.

“That's fine with me.”

Again, Hiro raised his right arm in front of his chest holding his silver sword perfectly level and pointed at Gahda.

Chapter 15

Joining the Battle

The sun was high in the eastern sky, hidden by a haze of sand.

The sun was barely visible, but rather than cooling the earth, it created a humid heat, draining the energy of those who were fighting below it.

And that wasn't the only thing taking away from everyone's stamina.

There were lumps of flesh covered in the dust of war littering the ground.

They were the remains of what used to be humans.

Some corpses are so severely damaged that it can not be discerned whether they were friend or foe.

"We are soldiers of the glorious Grantz Grand Empire! Do not allow a mere rebel army best you!"

Although they are surrounded by a countless number of corpses, there is no room for complaint.

They must step over their comrades and continue to fight.

All for the sake of fulfilling their duties as warriors, as soldiers.

"We are superior to them in numbers! Surround them and slaughter them all!"

A voice filled with bloodlust flies across the battlefield.

"Urahh!"

As the soldiers in the area raise a war cry, they begin to cut down the enemy soldiers.

They drag their enemies off their camels, surround them in groups, and end their lives.

Then, they rush to the next enemy.

“Don’t let them overwhelm you! We have the protection of “*Mars*”with us!”

These men in heavy armor possess the bravery of many— They are the men of the Fourth Imperial Army who oversee the defense of the southern end of the Grantz Grand Empire.

Kigui, the commander of these men— of the second battalion— died in battle at the hands of the zorosta.

But having built up as much experience as they have until now, they did not lose their composure.

In fact, it seems as if they are now making an extra strenuous effort to push the rebel army back to dispel the dismal air.

Why is that—? There are a number reason for it.

The one who took over command, was their original commander and was very skilled.

The presence of the Sixth Imperial Princess is uplifting their morale.

And the Zorosta who was the cause of the rebel army’s momentum, has been stopped by the young boy in black.

The key figure who was responsible for stopping their collapse was, a young boy— Hiro. He was currently at the center of the second battalion.

Behind him, is a young girl with crimson hair.

Her name is Celia Estreya Elizabeth von Grantz.

She is affectionately called [Liz] by those close to her, and she is usually an innocent young girl as brilliant as the sun.

But now, she is showing signs of fatigue and shock as she stares at Hiro’s back.

In front of the speechless Liz was Hiro, and on the other side of him, was a large man with light, purple skin.

He is a Zorosta who incited the liberation of the slaves in the Lichtein Dukedom and led a revolt— He is Gahda.

His well trained body is brimming with magic powers. His eyes were focused on Hiro with a glint that almost seemed like it would pierce through his heart.

“What is “that”? You’re cleverly trying to hide it, but I can see that torrent of immense power. But that sword isn’t written of in any literature or stories. At least in any stories that I’ve read... I ask you once more, “*one-eyed dragon*”. What is “that” in your possession?”

Gahda’s gaze is focused on “Excalibur”.

But there came no response from Hiro, so Gahda snorted displeased.

“Hmph. That’s fine. I’ll find out naturally if I fight you.”

Those words infused with bloodlust would plant fear in any whose ears they hit.

Any powerful warrior would have every strand of hair on their body standing on end before this man.

But there are exceptions for any case.

Hiro would be a prime example of that. He stood facing Gahda fearlessly.

“ .. ”

His thick, pitch black hair which seemed to be an embodiment of darkness, and his eyes of the same color, could be likened to obsidian. And despite the humid desert heat, shining deep in his eyes, is a frosty clarity as cold as the Grauzarm mountain range.

After smiling slightly, with a gentle movement, Hiro pointed at “Beben Slave” in Gahda’s hand.

““*Beben Slave’s*” krall is “*impact*”. “*Laevateinn’s*” is “*superhuman strength*”. Each of the five treasure swords of the world capitalizes on a special trait for its krall. There are no two kralls that are the same. In which case, you should naturally be able to deduce it.”

He maintained the same natural pose he usually takes, though he showed no opening. He wore a shrewd expression as he continued.

“So I’ll show you.”

After inhaling softly, Hiro held “Excalibur” in the air, then kicked the ground beneath him.

“What?!”

Gahda only had a moment to be surprised— A godly slash of light attacked him.

Liege Grazart— A super high speed flurry of violent attacks.

Gahda placed “Beben Slave” in front of him to stave off the attacks, but his right arm spouted blood and went flying.

Without time to even suffer from the intense pain, the next sword flash approaches. Unable to stop it or evade it, Gahda’s burly body is smeared in blood in the blink of an eye.

“Gahh!”

Though Gahda tried to counterattack, there’s no way he can land an attack on an enemy he can’t see. Even so, he swings “Beben Slave” around, desperately chasing Hiro’s after images. But as if to ridicule him, the brilliance of the afterglows grow brighter, and the number of slash wounds on Gahda’s body increases.

“Behind you.”

Hiro went around to Gahda’s rear and unleashed a powerful kick to his back.

Gahda was about to go flying— or so it seemed, but with a surge of magic, he wraps his own legs around with sand and resists the impact.

“Hmph!”

Gritting his teeth, Gahda forcefully turned his body over.

“Beben Slave’s” blade clears away the now hazy air.

But Hiro jumps away quicker than it approaches him and evades it.

As if he was waiting for this moment, Gahda spoke.

“Hah! You can’t move while in mid air!”

He thrust “Beben Slave” towards Hiro.

“Sorry. I can move.”

Immediately, he has a spirit weapon appear.

Using that as a foothold, he repositioned his body, and swung “Excalibur” down with immense force.

“Ohh?!”

Completely turning the situation around, Gahda is forced to switch to the defensive.

Again, he begins to be toyed with by Hiro’s phantasmagoric swordplay.

Even if he stops the sword, a fist comes flying towards him.

Even if he evades the fist, a kick lands on his stomach.

If he catches the kick, the sword goes aiming for the nape of his neck.

“Damn it— Pesky little fly!”

As Gahda voices his irritation, he desperately tries to get a grip of the situation.

However, there is no point in slashing in the wrong direction.

Repeating these intense movements under this blazing sun does nothing but drain your stamina.

Before long, Gahda fell to his knees, possibly because he had reached his limit due to the profuse sweating and the blood flowing out from all of his wounds.

Hiro stares at Gahda breathing heavily. He moves his shoulders slightly and points the tip of “Excalibur” to the ground.

“...Haven’t you had enough?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I can still fight!”

Hiro sighed in disappointment at his immediate response.

“I see... I wish you’d give up and surrender though.”

After wiping off the sweat dripping down the side of his face annoyed, Hiro looked around his surroundings as he caught his breath.

The two wings of the Fourth Imperial Army is completing their encirclement of the rebel army.

The sounds of angry bellows and cries of death can be heard from the enemy, and the smell of death and blood is mixed in the air as it hits his nose.

With the second battalion regrouped, there’s no doubt it will only continue to get worse for the enemy.

Taking his eyes away from the now hellish place, Hiro spoke to Gahda.

“Besides, you aren’t drawing out the power of the Demon Emperor Sword, are you?”

He once fought a “Beben Slave” user, but he wasn’t an opponent that could be toyed around with to this extent. He was a stalwart warrior who skillfully used “impact” to immobilize Hiro’s legs and counterattack.

No matter how much his physical abilities were increased with the protection of “Excalibur”, there’s no way he should be able to defeat Gahda so easily. This is because his opponent also has the protection of a Demon Emperor Sword and his abilities are increased as well.

After considering all that, Hiro came up with a hypothesis and voiced it to Gahda.

“I don’t know what attracted the Demon Emperor Sword to you, but I think it’s safe to say that you began to lose whatever that was. Though you probably know that best,

even without me telling you.”

“...It’s true. This one is trying to abandon me. And I know the reason well. But regardless, I must continue to fight.”

Gahda pours strength into all his limbs to stand, but Hiro tells him any further effort is pointless.

“Without the ability to draw out the powers of the Demon Emperor Sword, you can’t beat me. That’s why I want you to surrender. I won’t do anything bad to you.”

Which is a lie. According to the current flow of developments, he will be exploited after the enemy surrenders.

If he was completely blunt and said that outright, Gahda would no doubt become obstinate and put up more of a resistance.

It’s not certain whether or not he saw through the lie, but rather than nodding, Gahda replied with a scornful smile.

“Heh, then why don’t you make me? If you say you can defeat me, it should be simple, right?”

Hiro expected he would say that.

Which is why he already thought of his next move. It was to dampen Gahda’s fighting spirit.

And to do that, it was necessary to make him waver.

“You’ve been distracted by something behind you since earlier.”

“...”

Gahda maintained a straight face.

But Hiro didn’t overlook the small movement in his shoulders that lasted for just an instant.

“Could it be that there’s someone dear to you in headquarters?”

There were a number of times during the fight in which Gahda’s focus was interrupted. Even now, with his life in danger, Gahda has his attention directed behind him. If he kept his focus, he probably wouldn’t have ended up losing so much blood.

“Shut your mouth!”

Gahda glares, unable to hide his anger.

This was basically a confession.

Hiro reflected on that for a moment and shouted out.

“Liz! Can you stand?”

“Y-Yeah. What is it?”

“I want you to go to enemy headquarters and capture the girl who’s acting as their leader.”

As he said that, Gahda reacted to those words just as Hiro had anticipated.

“Do you think I would allow that?!”

Gahda’s fighting spirit wells up and the space around him starts to warp.

Hiro senses a fearsome flow of magic. He was assailed by a heat that made his skin feel like it was being burned to a crisp.

“Wow...”

Hiro was slightly surprised.

This was because it was rare for a zoroasta to think so dearly of someone of another race.

Fundamentally speaking, zoroastas look down on anyone other than pure blooded

zorostas as inferior races.

At the very least, the racism from the zorostas 1,000 years ago was striking.

Other races were slaves and the target of contempt.

They proclaimed that zorostas were supreme, and that they were the dominant race.

You could say it was that arrogance that created the union of the four other races and the ruin of the zorostas.

It's not impossible to think that Gahda is an eccentric.

But if he holds that young girl dear, they definitely have to hurry.

“Liz, I want you to leave this to me and go.”

The rebel army headquarters is surrounded. At this rate, the young female leader's life is in danger.

If she is Gahda's driving force, and something were to happen to her, it's doubtful that he would choose surrender.

In which case, the battle would end up continuing on until one side was completely destroyed.

Considering the big picture, that would not be favorable.

This is because the battle with the Lichtein Dukedom still awaits.

It's likely that the Lichtein Dukedom has already received word that the battle here had begun.

Even with the resilient Fourth Imperial Army, they wouldn't be able to endure an attack from the side right now.

—He has to avoid any significant loss. It would make Liz's path to becoming empress that much more difficult.

In order to prevent that, they have to secure a victory in which even the central nobles have no room for complaint.

If it came down to it, he has another option in mind, but it's not something she would want.

So first, he'll have the rebel army surrender, then attack the Lichtein Dukedom.

"Please Liz."

"Alright."

With a concise response, Liz jumps onto her horse's back and turns its head towards the enemy headquarters.

As Liz kicks her horse's sides to run off...

"Do you think I'll let you go?!"

Gahda tried to chase after her, but Hiro appeared to block his path and pointed "Excalibur's" tip towards him.

"Did you think I would allow you to chase after her? You're going to be captured here."

"Hmph, you'll have to cut off both my legs if you want to capture me!"

Hiro slipped to the side of Gahda who came charging. He was able to discover his driving force.

Liz should be able to successfully capture the young girl and bring her here.

"Let's end this."

Until they do, he wants to avoid having soldiers sustain injuries from Gahda's resistance.

"I want you to go to sleep for just a little while."

He approaches Gahda and drives his fist into his face. Gahda's head goes flying back, which Hiro grabs and pulls towards him as he sinks his knee into his stomach. Then, he forced his body around and struck his heel into Gahda's neck.

“Ah, ugh.”

He grabs the staggered Gahda by the face and drops him down. A large cloud of dust rises up.

He swings his leg clearing the dust, then drops it into the pit of Gahda’s stomach, burying him into the desert.

Hiro gives the unconscious Gahda a sidelong glance and turns towards a nearby soldier.

“Restrain him tightly so he doesn’t escape.”

He grips “Excalibur’s” handle tightly and attacks the rebel army members in the area who are still putting up a resistance.

“Ah!”

“H-He’s coming this way!”

“I-I can’t believe the boss lost.”

The rebel army is trembling in fear after seeing that Gahda had lost.

“We have no choice but to run.”

“Don’t be stupid, where are you saying we should run to?!”

Some of them did try to run, but they were surrounded and were unable to do so.

“We’re not running! We’re going to save the boss!”

If they can’t run, they have no choice but to put up a fight. But with Hiro as their opponent, who they couldn’t even see, they were cut down in the blink of an eye.

Each time his sword stirred up a gust of wind, a scream could be heard as blood went

flying.

Pools of blood began to build along the desert. Cries of joy could be heard as the soldiers saw their enemies sinking. By the time the corpses formed a mountain, a cry of victory could be heard from the front lines of the second battalion.

Perhaps the rebel army could sense their impending defeat, as the resistance in the area began to weaken.

Hiro stopped in his tracks and mumbled to himself.

“...It’s not over yet.”

For the most part, the outcome had been determined, but there are still those who will not accept defeat.

In order to have them throw down their weapons, they need Gahda and the young girl who is acting as their leader.

He cuts through the spaces between the rebel army who had begun to throw down their weapons and surrender and walks towards where Gahda is.

However, he was surrounded by a large number of soldiers and could not be seen.

They are standing guard so as not to have the rebel army take him back. But even so, there are too many.

Hiro weaves through the soldiers and moves to the center.

The scene which unfolded before him was pretty much what he had anticipated.

“Don’t think you can continue to exist in this world after going against humans, zorosta.”

What Hiro saw, was a soldier kicking Gahda.

Seeing as how he was wearing what looked like high quality armor, he was likely the son of a noble.

Following suit with the man, a couple of other soldiers are assaulting Gahda as well.

“If it weren’t for the forgiveness of *“Zeltius”**, you would have all been eradicated by

“Mars”.

(TL note: Kanji is “first god”.)

“What an ungrateful race, for you to forget that debt and point your blade towards humans!”

His feelings were understandable.

Many of his comrades were killed by him, so it can't be helped that he's emotional.

If he had thought things through before taking action, Hiro might have let him off.

But to calmly take on an action that could be a hindrance to the entire army, simply as a momentary distraction, is something that absolutely could not be allowed.

“You should leave it at that.”

Brazen stares focus on Hiro as he steps forward.

The noble's son approaches him. Being taller than Hiro, he ends up looking down on him.

“Boy, who do you think you're talking to?”

“To you, and your followers.”

“...Do you know who I am?”

“I don't so. Could you tell me? Are you a renown commander or something that's leading a unit?”

“I lead the 26th squad. Daniel von Eduart.”

Based on his attitude, it can be assumed that he did not see Hiro fighting.

It's hard to tell why he's so belligerent to begin with. Maybe he doesn't have the time to do any thinking.

He wanted to poke at the man's thought process, but Hiro laughed sarcastically and spoke.

“Umm, you seem like an idiot.”

If he had witnessed Hiro's fight, he probably wouldn't have taken this attitude.

Actually, the faces of the soldiers in the area who did see Hiro fight stiffened as they drew back.

There's no doubt Sir Daniel was in the rear of the second battalion.

He probably came this far out after receiving word that they had captured the zorosta.

Adding to that, his excessive mistreatment of a prisoner of war was a violation of military regulations.

"...You shitty brat, do you want to die or become a slave? Pick one."

Good deeds must be rewarded, and bad deeds punished. He's in high enough of a position to strictly adhere to regulations.

Considering the future, this man's life is worth even less than that of Gahda's.

After thinking it over, Hiro came to a conclusion— This man was not needed for his strategy.

"It's too bad. I'm unable to offer you any choices. If you're a squad leader, we can just replace you..."

"Ah?"

"Didn't you hear me? I said your life has no value."

"What did you—?!"

The noble tried to grab Hiro, but his head left a fresh trail of blood as it went flying in mid air.

With the angry expression remaining unchanged, the head fell on the ground as the blood spread out.

"Ahh, sorry. It did have value. In dying that is."

While everyone was left speechless, Hiro approached Gahda and stooped down.

“Are you all right?”

“It was just enough to wake me up.”

“I can’t have you die. I won’t let anyone lay a hand on you anymore. Don’t worry.”

“When I see you, I think I’d be better off with these guys.”

“Haha, I’ll take that as a compliment.”

Now— Hiro straightens up and looks around.

The soldiers who had finally regained their senses were grabbing their sword handles, ready to draw their weapons.

“Ahh, you’re better off not drawing your swords. You don’t want to commit lese majeste, now do you?”

After Hiro’s warning, a “shiryu” approached, intimidating the soldiers in its path.

Hiro takes a pole hanging from the “shiryu’s” side and thrusts it into the ground.

The wind blows, and the cloth which was wrapped around the pole unfurled under the sky.

It was a coat of arms which a certain man raised in the past.

Now, it is simply a thing of legends and can only be seen in the world of art.

That is how sacred it is to the people of the Grantz Grand Empire.

—A crest of black soil and a dragon holding a silver sword.

It was that which “Mars”, the Second Emperor and one of the Twelve Great Gods of Grantz, carried.

Everyone looks at it wide eyed.

As if seeing a legendary creature, they simple look back and forth between the flag and Hiro with mouths agape, unable to make a sound.

Silence envelops the area. The one who broke that silence was the zorosta, Gahda.

“Hahahahahahaha, it all makes sense now!”

Hiro looks at Gahda surprised after he suddenly began to laugh.

Gahda let out a roar towards the sky.

“So you used me! Are you telling me I was kept alive just for this?! Is this what you wanted?!”

“Get out of here,” Gahda finished.

It was at that moment that the Demon Emperor Sword was wrapped in light and started to dissolve into thin air.

It was only for a moment that Gahda’s face twisted in regret. But almost immediately, as if he had come to some sort of realization, he wore an exhausted smile.

“...How faithful of you.”

Hiro realizes from his expression. The Demon Emperor Sword had abandoned Gahda.

“Now, you’re a regular zorosta. But you still possess a magic stone, so you’re probably plenty strong.”

“Are you satisfied?”

“I wonder. Either way would’ve been fine with me.”

Even if Gahda is abandoned by the Demon Emperor Sword, it’s no hindrance to his future plans.

Then, Hiro looked around at the soldiers. They look suspiciously at Hiro.

It feels as if they’re at a complete loss as to what they should do. But having said that, it would be troublesome for them to stay this way forever.

After sighing, Hiro addressed the soldiers.

“My name is Hiro Schwarz von Grantz. I am a descendant of *“Mars”*, the Second

Emperor. I have become a member of the Imperial family as the Fourth Imperial Prince.”

Hiro’s voice was neither loud nor soft.

“As a member of the Imperial family, I can not overlook any offenses. Earlier, Sir Daniel showed excessive mistreatment towards a prisoner of war, for which I bestowed punishment. If there are any that are dissatisfied, can you please step forward?”

He didn’t try to sound welcoming on purpose, but there was a power in his voice which made those who hear it listen to him.

“None, right? Then capture those two.”

Hiro pointed at the two who were acting violently towards Gahda along with Sir Daniel.

The faces of the two soldier stiffened as they drew back, but other soldiers who heard Hiro’s orders immediately restrained them.

“L-Let go!”

“What did we do wrong? The zorosta killed our comrades! Don’t you guys hate him, too?!”

Since he punished Sir Daniel, he couldn’t possibly treat them as innocent.

Not only would that affect morale, it would confuse the soldiers and cause them to be disgruntled.

He must punish these two accordingly as well.

“Take them to the rear. And the rest of you, send word to each unit. Make sure they don’t use excessive mistreatment towards those who surrender.”

After saluting, the soldiers began to disperse.

As he watched the soldiers moving quickly, Hiro stooped down next to Gahda.

“The young girl that’s so important to you should be brought here soon.”

“If there’s so much as a scratch on her, I’ll kill you.”

“...Is she that important to you?”

“...”

“We have a little bit of time. Can’t you tell me why?”

Gahda showed a bit of hesitation towards Hiro’s words, but he opened his mouth and said...

“...There are many small inconveniences for a zorosta to lead humans. So I used her. She went along with me, despite my selfishness. I wanted to at least send her home safely, but look at me. I can’t even do that.”

“Then I have a proposal.”

“A proposal?”

“Right. If you listen to my orders, I’ll safely send her home.”

Hiro continues speaking to the zorosta who has his face down to the ground.

“I don’t think it’s a bad deal. Having lost your Demon Emperor Sword, it would be difficult for you to save the girl and escape from the battlefield. I don’t believe you to be so foolish as to take such thoughtless actions.”

“If what you say is true, how do you plan to prove it? There’s no proof that you’ll safely send her off.”

“I swear it on the spirit king.”

“...”

“Think about it carefully. There’s still time.”

After saying that, Hiro stood up. Gahda’s face was still pointed downward as he was deep in thought.

Hiro looked south and saw a horse running towards him at full speed.

It was Liz's horse. And riding in front of her, was a small young girl.

Hiro waves his coat of arms to show his location.

Around that area were members of the rebel army who had surrendered. They were on their knees with their hands behind their backs.

Liz dropped her horse's speed, then pulled the reins and stopped in front of Hiro.

"I brought the girl."

"Yeah, thanks. And she is...?"

"I'm Milieu of the slave liberation army."

Replied the young girl, whose body was wrapped in a black robe.

Hiro approached the young girl and looked at her face. At that moment, he was hit by a feeling of déjà vu.

But he couldn't have met this girl before...

After he shook his head to dispel the strange feeling, he took Milieu off the horse.

"Mister!"

Milieu immediately runs over to Gahda.

"Sorry. Because I wasn't strong enough..."

"No, I'm glad you're okay."

"Are you hurt?"

"No, big sis protected me."

"I see..."

Hiro looked at Liz with the other two still in his peripherals.

"Before I tell you what's going to happen now, can you tell me how the front lines look like?"

“By the time I reached enemy headquarters, their main unit was all that was left.”

“Just the main unit?”

“Yeah, it looks like the rear guard withdrew as soon as the battle began.”

“...”

Hiro put a hand to his chin and fell silent.

Liz tilts her head confused, but she continues her explanation.

“It looked like a number of units from their headquarters escaped right away, too. That’s why there was little resistance and I was able to capture Milieu so easily.”

“Did you hear which way they ran?”

“I heard it was to the east.”

“Got it. Thanks.”

After thanking her, he looks to the east. The rear guard ran away in the direction of Fort Azba.

There is a gentle slope and he’s unable to see beyond it.

Hiro turned back to Gahda and opened his mouth to speak.

“Gahda, was the rear guard made up of mercenaries?”

“It was. With just a few slave infantrymen attached to them.”

“I see.”

It’s decided. It’s pretty much certain that the rear guard was bought off by the Lichtein Dukedom.

This isn’t the time to think about when and where.

It’s a fact that the rear guard has disappeared, so they need a countermeasure.

“Liz, tell me how many men you’re leading right now.”

“Two thousand, the right flank.”

“Did you leave Tris in command?”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“You there, come here.”

He called out to two soldiers atop horses.

“Yes? Your orders?”

“I want you to go to the right flank and deliver a message to Sir Tris for me. Tell him to deploy a unit to the east. He’ll understand if you tell him they’re orders from her Highness Celia Estreya. Go right away.”

“Yes!”

“And you, I want you to go to headquarters and deliver a message to General Kielo. Tell him that the Lichtein Dukedom has appeared in the east, so I want him to send the reserve unit there. You can tell him these are orders from the Fourth Imperial Prince.”

Then Hiro spoke up again as if he just remembered something.

“If he’s reluctant, tell him he’ll be dismissed for the crime of treason against the nation.”

“Understood!”

After watching the soldiers run off, he jumped onto the “shiryu” and grabbed his flag.

“Liz, you hurry and regroup with Tris. Take command of the right flank.”

“What are you going to do, Hiro?”

“Well, the enemy’s going to charge, so I’m going to go take the wind out of their sails. I think I can buy a little bit of time at least.”

“What should Milieu and I do?”

Said Gahda, as he cut into the conversation.

“Milieu will stay with Liz, and you can follow behind them on a camel.”

Hiro took out his silver sword and cut the ropes which were keeping Gahda bound.

“Is it okay to free me? I might kill that little girl and run away.”

“Now that you’ve lost the Demon Emperor Sword, you can’t win against Liz. I said it earlier too, but it’s impossible for you to take Milieu and escape from here.”

And if he left him here, there’s no telling what might happen.

It would be a problem if he escaped, but it would also be a problem if he were killed. This is his only option.

Besides, Hiro doesn’t think Gahda will run.

This is because of Milieu. If he leaves her with Liz, even Gahda can’t make any careless moves. He’ll probably follow them quietly.

“Okay, I’m off.”

At the top of the gentle slope, a large cloud of dust could be seen rising into the air on the other side.

Hiro’s expression stiffened as he kicked the sides of the “shiryu” and ran across the sandy plain.

Chapter 16

Black God

Imperial year 1023, August 24th.

The Lichtein Dukedom's army had finally arrived a stone's throw away from where the rebel army and the Fourth Imperial Army were engaged in battle.

They were 5,000 strong. A 1,000 camel cavalymen were positioned on each flank, a 1,000 slave infantrymen in the vanguard, and the rearguard and headquarters together were fortified by 2,000 light infantrymen.

The man leading this army is Karl Olivara* Lichtein, the second son of the duke house.

*(*TL note: the author change the name.)*

Supporting him as his aide is Ranquil Caligula Jilberist.

They both wore dark expressions as they rode abreast in headquarters.

"...I didn't think the nobles would grow scared after all this."

Said General Ranquil, displeased.

At the last minute, a report had come in the day before.

It stated that a detached force from the Fourth Imperial Army was going around burning down villages.

It's only natural seeing as how they've invaded deep into their territory.

But the nobles who want to protect their land have lost their nerves.

They began to shout that they should surrender to the Grantz Grand Empire, that they should negotiate.

Because of the time these nobles took to persuade others of this, the speed of the army's advance dropped drastically.

"Cowards... When they brought this on themselves."

But having said that, all the nobles who decided to start a war with the Grantz Grand Empire died in the battle against the rebel army.

How fortunate for them that they would go without taking any responsibility and pushing everything onto those who remain.

It makes you want to curse that lot, being selfish until the very end.

“If they were brave, exemplary warriors, they would welcome death with open arms.”

But in reality, things don't work out the way you want it to.

At any rate, surrender is out of the question. But if they wish to negotiate, they must crush the Fourth Imperial Army.

In order to maintain their status as a country, they must draw out the best possible conditions.

Losing without fighting. If they took this option, the other countries would mock them.

“Lord Karl. We are about to enter a critical moment.”

“Yes. I leave everything to you.”

Ranquil was about to give his frank opinion about Karl passing over his responsibilities as usual, but he noticed a scout running towards them.

“Your Excellency Ranquil! A group from the rebel army is heading this way!”

First, he thanked the scout.

“Thank you for the report. It seems the mercenaries were able to withdraw successfully.”

“Will you have them join with us?”

“No, I'll have them move out as our vanguard.”

If they wish to regain their momentum, they can not have the mercenaries join them and slow them down.

Also, Ranquil doesn't trust those bunch who call themselves mercenaries to begin with.

What drives them to fight isn't country or people.

It all comes down to money. You never know when they'll betray you or even turn tail. Having such people join them would be nothing but a hindrance.

"I'm concerned about the situation of the battle over there as well. Summon the leader of the mercenaries."

"As you wish!"

Shortly thereafter, a man in light armor appeared.

There is dried blood clinging to his armor, and his dirty face shows no sign of intelligence. He looks no different from a bandit or the like.

Ranquil observed the man's appearance, then suddenly knit his brows.

Taking a closer look, the armor the mercenary was wearing turned out to be one from the Lichtein Dukedom.

Looking at the dried blood, he could tell that it had been on there for quite some time. Considering recent events, it's likely a spoil of war he obtained when the duke suffered his crushing defeat in the war.

Ranquil's heart could not remain calm. It was apparent that there was rage building inside him.

"Nice to meet you, and thank you for your patronage."

Without noticing he had offended Ranquil, the man faked a smile and scratched the back of his head as he bowed from atop his horse.

Ranquil wanted to cut down the uncouth man right there on the spot, but he decided to act prudently and took a deep breath to suppress his anger.

Next to him, Karl noticed this and replied in his stead.

"Thank you for your hard work. My name is Karl Olivara Lichtein. I am glad that you are fighting with us."

“Hehe, I’m the one who’s glad, getting a huge pay and all. I’ll be working that money’s worth.”

The mercenary leader extended his hand, but Karl did not take it.

He hesitated partly due to the bloodlust emanating from Ranquil next to him, but also because the man before him was not of the sort he wanted to be get along with.

As one who is to take over the duke house, he needs to grow accustomed to such things, but he probably couldn’t help but let his emotions take over at this particular moment.

Without taking any offense at Karl’s negative aura, the mercenary withdraws his hand.

It’s unsure whether he’s used to being hated because of the nature of his job, or simply that he’s ignorant, but you can say there was no point in worrying about it. Once this battle was over, he would not be getting involved with this man.

“So, how is the battle progressing?”

“Well, the rebel army is being pushed back. I’d say it’s only a matter of time before they surrender.”

“That’s not good. General Ranquil, we must hurry.”

Karl turned to Ranquil. It seemed as if he was able to gather himself as he nodded and answered.

“You are correct. Hey, mercenary.”

“Yes?”

“Lead us to the battlefield. Our scout hasn’t investigated that far out. Take us to the Fourth Imperial Army’s flank.”

Karl tilted his head at these words.

This was because he found this odd. Scout reports were being sent without pause.

They’ve also obtained intelligence on where the Fourth Imperial Army and the rebel army are fighting.

Karl racked his brain thinking it strange, but the conversation ended before he was

able to come up with an answer.

“Then, if you would”

“Sure, leave it to me. Let’s go show them what for!”

Once the mercenary had gone, Karl spoke out to Ranquil.

“Why did you say that?”

“Are you referring to my lie?”

“Yes. I’m certain that mercenary was laughing on the inside. Laughing that the Lichtein Dukedom’s scouts are incompetent.”

“He wouldn’t lead us there if I hadn’t said that.”

“Even if that would bring us shame?”

“The fate of our country rests on this war which is about to begin. There is no greater shame than a nation falling to ruin. If any wish to laugh at us, let them do so. “

“Hmm... I see. As expected of you, Sir Ranquil. You excel in controlling your emotions as well. But I don’t think I’m capable of making such clear cut decisions.”

After groaning at Karl who still looked displeased, Ranquil uttered.

“More importantly... did you notice that that mercenary was wearing armor from our country?”

“Well, of course. It was dirty... but there’s no way I would mistake it. He likely bought it from some merchant.”

“No, he probably stripped it off a corpse from the time the duke was defeated.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“It was made from a high quality metal. It likely belonged to a prominent noble. I was unable to discern the crest though because it was slightly dirty.”

“Unforgivable. They must be punished once this war is over.”

Karl snorts wildly with rage.

He gripped his reins tightly and glared at the now gone mercenary.

Seeing this, Ranquil spoke to Karl to calm him.

“That is why I had him lead us there.”

“What?”

“The mercenaries will surely be the first to fight. So why not use them as shields against arrows and dispose of them? If they survive, we can simply give them formal punishment.”

“Hmm. That’s a fine idea!”

“And you are misunderstanding something, Lord Karl.”

“Misunderstanding?”

“Indeed. Earlier, you praised me, but I am not such a noble person.”

Ranquil shrugged his shoulders and continued.

“It’s not that I am without anger. I wanted to smash his head on the spot, but considering things in a broader sense, even trash have their uses. So I thought it would be a bit entertaining if we put them on the frontline.”

Karl was taken aback at Ranquil’s evil smile.

He was surprised that even this man could succumb to violent emotions.

“But still, I would expect no less of you, the way you would cleverly use them for your strategy. I would be incapable of such things. I’m sure I would have killed that man.”

“This makes me feel uneasy. I wish you would not praise me any further. Please at least wait until we emerge from this war victorious.”

Ranquil rubbed his neck while looking uncomfortable.

His anger finally subsided and Karl nodded slightly.

“That is true. We must first win.”

With determination in his heart, Karl lifted his head and looked ahead. Ranquil nodded pleased, and they both moved their horses forward.

But that relief only lasted a brief moment. There was a change occurring in the group of mercenaries who were leading the way.

There were violent sounds of swords clashing. Screaming war cries shook the atmosphere.

When mercenaries threaten their opponents, they slam their swords on their shield and shout in a loud voice.

But the location of the battle which the Lichtein Dukedom assumed was still further ahead.

As Karl was thinking something was off, a messenger arrived from the vanguard.

“We have engaged in battle!”

“What?!”

Karl’s face was in disbelief.

Next to him, Ranquil’s brows formed deep creases. He stared out ahead of him, but clouds of dust were in the way and he was unable to get a grasp of the details.

“How many are there?”

“...One man.”

“...Huh?”

Without thinking, Ranquil let out a befuddled voice lacking any dignity.

Thinking he had misheard, the corners of his mouth stiffened as he asked once more.

“I’m asking how many there are.”

“There is only one. He suddenly appeared on our route and rushed the mercenary vanguard!”

“Are you saying one man is charging 1,000?”

Even if it is to buy time, it's just idiotic. What can one single man do?

"No, wait."

Ranquil crossed his arms.

There may be an ambush of soldiers lying in wait somewhere. It's possible they had one man recklessly charge in to divert their attention.

After coming to this point, Ranquil smiled.

"No, impossible."

If there were any strange activities from the Fourth Imperial Army, the scouts would have sensed it.

It's not easy to slip through the eyes of surveillance. Even more so in a desert which offers such an open view.

Though his mind was confused at the incomprehensible situation, Ranquil slapped his cheeks and regained his senses.

It may be their objective to confuse him like this.

If it's their aim to buy time and slow the advance of the army, the opponent has quite the strategist as well, thought Ranquil as he smiled.

"Not bad. If it were anyone else, most commanders may have grown wary and stopped the army's advance. No, maybe I should say that it's because I'm cautious that this is concerning me..."

"Are you all right?"

Karl asks, looking concerned.

Ranquil nodded and spread out his arms in an exaggerated manner to assure him.

No matter what the opponent's objective may be, he will see through it.

Above all else, what can a single cavalryman do?

“There is no problem. Let us continue to advance the army. There is no need to worry about an ambush, either.”

But Ranquil’s confidence was to be crushed. After a short while, the vanguard stopped moving.

Ranquil had Karl wait at headquarters as he took an escort to join with the vanguard.

“What are you doing? We have no time to rest! Continue forward!”

Ranquil shouted, but he notices the air in the vanguard is strange. Every single one of the slaves are pale in the face and look like they may collapse at any moment.

Ranquil moves his horse towards a nearby slave and asks in a loud voice.

“What happened?!”

A slave from the frontline answered in a shivering voice.

“...*Desperation.*”

Ranquil felt his heart grow cold at the ominous word.

“Desperation” is from a folktale which parents read to their children when they scold them for staying up late.

No one knows when this story appeared in this world. By the time people realized, it had spread everywhere, from nobles, to commoners, to even slaves.

Some say that it was spread by a nameless minstrel, while others say it derived from fairy myth from the knight kingdom of Nahra in the southwestern edge of the central continent.

“Ridiculous. What do you mean, “*Desperation*”? That’s obviously nothing but a superstition.”

Ranquil laughed it off, but there was an alarm going off deep in his heart.

Although it was supposed to be hot, his sweat went cold and he felt his body temperature dropping.

After groaning, Ranquil timidly shifted his gaze to the frontline and gulped.

There is something there fluttering about in the twisted heat of the battlefield.

It looked like it was inviting you over, drawing you in—

— *“Valatil”* had its wings outstretched.*

(TL note: Kanji is “black raven”.)

“Valatil” is the name of a god which appears in the fairy myth. Also known as “Zero”*, he rules over death and destruction, and is also said to be the god which guides the world to its end.

(TL note: Kanji is “black god”, same as the episode title.)

“Absurd...”

One of the mercenaries is mowed down by the raging wings, and another shoots a spray of fresh blood high into the air as he collapses, spreading buckets of his blood onto the sand.

Grief stricken cries from the mercenaries reach Ranquil’s ears.

There were likely well known ruffians among them, too. There were also highly skilled swordsmen no doubt.

However, before those black wings, simply put, they were merely helpless children.

“Am I truly awake right now...? Is this reality?”

Mercenaries swing their swords and stand up against it, but their efforts are fruitless and their lives come to an end.

It’s true he planned to use them, but seeing them being murdered so atrociously, he couldn’t help but feel for them.

But he didn't feel the urge to help them.

After witnessing this unknown creature, his body was paralyzed in fear and unable to move.

A head flies in front of the speechless Ranquil's feet.

It was the head of the loathsome mercenary leader whom he wished to kill.

“ ... ”

But Ranquil's gaze is drawn to one spot.

If he gets distracted, he will die. That nagging thought was one of the reasons for this, but... the main reason was that the young boy who cut off the mercenary leader's head was looking in his direction.

From this distance, he's unable to determine that he is a young boy, so he obviously can't make out his expression, either.

Maybe his mind was playing tricks on him. Maybe he had gone mad from fear.

But Ranquil definitely saw it.

— *He saw that the young boy was laughing.*

The mercenaries began to scurry in an attempt to escape. They run towards Ranquil seeking help.

Ranquil raised his voice.

“Fire your arrows! Don't let those mercenaries get near us!”

He was afraid. If the mercenaries escaped, the blade of the black clothes would point his way.

Though they were sparse, the archers faithfully responded to Ranquil's orders.

Over a 1,000 arrows tore through the air, arcing through the sky and attacking the mercenaries.

Exposed to a downpour of arrows, the mercenaries writhe in pain as they take their last breaths.

Of course, the arrows flood before the young boy in black clothes as well, but he is surprisingly unscathed.

“A-Absurd!”

You can't help but think that he truly is “Zero” from the fairy myth.

How would you explain this otherwise? They were ready to land the final blow, but one man single handedly buried 1,000 enemies. How can you call this person human?

There were more than a few slaves who grabbed their heads and got down on their knees. Some of them were even repenting.

The vanguard began to lose their will to fight.

“...No. At this rate...”

Ranquil focused his strength into his stomach and opened his mouth wide to reinvigorate his men with a speech.

But he would soon shut it. This is because the young boy turned his black clothes over and showed his back.

He felt this was their chance. He thought with his back turned, they could land at least one arrow.

There's no such thing as a human with eyes on their back. More importantly, with this, he should be able to get positive proof whether he is man or monster.

“Fire your arrows!”

He vigorously swung his arm down in front of him. Soon, an onslaught of arrows once again dominated the sky.

It was so dense not even a single mouse could escape, but the young boy's black clothes repelled every single arrow.

Ranquil looked on astonished, but the sound of heavy thuds reach his ears, causing him to looking around his surroundings.

A number of slaves were on the ground face up with gaping holes in their chest. There were about thirty of them, and based on the expressions of the dead, it looked like they didn't even know what happened.

There were various expressions— fear, despair, awe— but not a single one of them showed any sign of pain.

Thinking about it, maybe it was fortunate that they were able to go without feeling pain.

Ranquil was dumbfounded, but he pinched his cheeks and forced himself to return to reality.

He runs his hand along his cheek, and he feels something slippery.

“...Why am I bleeding?”

He looked at the blood on his fingertips, then the surprised Ranquil moved his gaze to the young boy.

But the young boy was not there. All he saw were the miserable corpses of mercenaries scattered about.

As a hot wind blew through, his body temperature began to return.

His heart is beating quickly. He pressed his fist against his chest to calm his thumping pulse.

“Kuhahaha... I see. So that's the man in black that was in the report.”

It's not that he didn't know about him.

The report which informed them of the duke's third son's death in battle also mentioned a man in black.

A young boy single handedly killed 600-800 soldiers. He concluded that something so preposterous was simply a lie meant to avoid taking responsibility for the loss.

Though there's no point in bringing that up now, it most definitely was not a lie, and he should keep this in the corner of his mind.

This is because it will be necessary to have a countermeasure for the man in black.

He took a few deep breaths to reorganize his thoughts, then looked around his surroundings again.

The slaves are repeating the names of gods as they shake in fear. Full grown adults are offering prayers to gods with tears in their eyes.

Seeing this, it's clear as day that this will be a problem moving forward.

"A raid won't do us any good with this."

Ranquil decided to withdraw for the moment.

"First... let's seal him. A war isn't something you fight alone."

The situation is futile unless he does something about the flustered slaves.

How you begin a war is crucial. If they stumble here, it will be more than just an ill omen.

No— The other side has already taken the initiative. You could say they've already stumbled.

But, even still—

"I will not lose."

Ranquil instructed the entire army to retreat for the time being and returned to headquarters.

Chapter 17

Commander

Although the right flank of the Fourth Imperial Army had finished deploying to the left, the morale of the soldiers was extremely low from the marching thus far and the battle with the rebel army. But regardless, not a single complaint is heard, and the ranks of troops are neatly aligned. Had these men been conscripted citizens, they never would have been able to deploy this quickly, and there likely would have been a large number of deserters running in fear.

In that tense atmosphere flowing throughout the right flank, was the Sixth Imperial Princess, entrusted with its command.

Her crimson hair as radiant as the sun, is covered in dust. But that did nothing to take away from her beauty, and her bewitching figure, which was reminiscent of Palladiana, kept morale from falling further.

In front of her, is a young girl. She has dark skin, but it is hidden by a large robe. Furthermore, the hood of her robe hides her entire face in a shadow, keeping you from even guessing at her expression.

The young girl was acting as the leader of the rebel army— the slave liberation army. And so, there are likely many who resent her. For the Lichtein Dukedom, she is someone who they loathe to the point of wanting to kill her, and it's no different for the Fourth Imperial Army. This is why Liz, the Sixth Imperial Princess, is with her to protect her from any who would cross a line that should not be.

Adding to that scene, the nearby knights were gazing in slight wonderment at Valdite atop her horse.

It probably wasn't due to their rude stares, but Liz let out a troubled sigh.

“Haa...”

Her sigh was filled with affection, like a wife waiting for her husband to return from the battlefield— or a mother eagerly awaiting her child to come home. Her mind was occupied by the thoughts of one young boy.

“Hiro... I wonder if he’s okay.”

“There no need to worry about that boy.”

Tris responded to Liz, his words full of spirit. Though he’s an old soldier, he’s not too old to still actively serve. But considering his age, he doesn’t show a single sign of decline, and he maintains his youthfully muscular body.

Next to him, there was a zorosta with an even more impressive build. He has light, purple skin which is particular to zorostas. He appears to be in his early twenties, but he is slightly past 100, and like the young girl, he is also under the protection of the Sixth Imperial Princess.

The zorosta named Gahda nodded in agreement to Tris’s words.

“I would also say there is no need to worry. Though I leave it to you whether or not to believe the words of a former enemy...”

“See, you know!”

Tris enthusiastically patted the zorosta’s shoulder. Knowing how strong Gahda was, Liz was surprised to see this— or at least she was for a bit, but she was more surprised at the change in Tris. Despite everything he says, Tris has also acknowledged Hiro.

Liz realized this, but she didn’t say anything sarcastic about it.

“But to stop an army’s advance by himself. It’s just reckless, no matter how you look at it.”

She wasn’t able to finish her thought and express how worried she was. This was because the cause of her worries, the young boy, had returned on his “shiryu”. He’s still a distance away, but it looks like his face is heavily tinted with fatigue. Liz grabbed a water pouch and spoke out.

“Open a path. Let him through!”

Before long, Hiro arrives before Liz.

Liz silently hands him the water pouch. Hiro thanked her, then placed the tip of the water pouch to his mouth. After watching Hiro gulp the water dry, Liz gasped.



The water pouch Hiro is holding right now belongs to her, and she's placed her lips on it many times.

After realizing what that meant, she blushed and her face turned the same color as her hair.

"~?!"

After letting out a silent cry, she held her head in embarrassment.

Hiro looked confused after seeing the Imperial princess's strange reaction.

But he soon senses a bloodlust and looks to the side of her.

Tris was glaring at Hiro, clearly displeased.

Confused, Hiro gulps. After wiping the water from the edge of his mouth, he looks around in an attempt to move past the situation.

"O-Oh, is this all?"

"Eh?"

It seems Liz didn't understand what he meant by that.

"Ah, there isn't enough water, is there?! I'll go draw some right now!"

She voices her misunderstanding and tries to get more water.

Hiro called out to her and rushes to stop her.

"No, no, wait, wait! That's not what I meant. There's still some left, so there's plenty."

"...I-I knew that. I was just joking."

Liz released the grip on her reins and began to stroke Milieu's head in front of her.

Milieu let her stroke her head quietly, but her head was turned in an uncomfortable direction. She probably reached her limit, as she spoke out in protest.

“Big sis, that hurts.”

“S-Sorry! But it looked like your head was itchy!”

“It’s not really itchy.”

“Of course it is!”

As usual, Liz doesn’t listen and scratches her head through the hood. You couldn’t make out the girl’s expression hidden behind the cowl, but based on how roughly she was being handled, Hiro could easily guess what she was thinking.

The soldiers in the area stare blankly at the sudden change in Liz.

Maybe it was because he couldn’t stand to see the Sixth Imperial Princess acting so shamefully, but...

“Ahem! Princess, the boy is likely asking if we are only left with these soldiers here.”

Tris came in for the rescue.

“R-Right. I knew that.”

Liz released Milieu’s head and thrust her finger at Hiro.

“It looks like I spaced out because of the heat! Sorry!”

Hiro forced a smile and shook his head.

“It’s okay, I don’t mind. It was my fault for not being clear.”

“...This sure is a carefree lot.”

Hiro pretends not to have heard Gahda’s scathing words and asked his question once more.

“So... were you only able to gather these numbers? What happened to the reserve

unit?”

It was only the right flank which was assembled in a horizontal formation and prepared for an assault.

Hiro is certain he sent a messenger to General Kielo before leaving to inform him that he wanted the reserve unit, but he doesn't see any sign of them. Behind the right flank, he only caught sight of a few prisoners of war who had taken up arms, and a few soldiers here and there. There were also many among them who were sitting and taking a break.

“I don't mind this though... if he has some sort of plan.”

It's not impossible that he wants to feign carelessness... but the men look too unmotivated to have received such instructions.

Hiro looks confused. Liz hesitantly opened her mouth.

“Umm... We received a reply saying, “Because I am the commanding officer, I can not listen to the instructions of the supposed Fourth Imperial Prince”...”

Liz touched her fingertips together and looked apologetic.

“I sent a number of messengers too, but he said things like, 2,000 cavalrymen are plenty against the weak soldiers of the Lichtein Dukedom. We couldn't convince him... Sorry.”

“I see. You didn't do anything wrong, Liz. You don't have to worry about it.”

Maybe it was because of his curt response, but Liz hung her head and looked dejected.

Hiro senses Tris's anger. It feels like he might draw his sword any second now.

He didn't have the courage to confirm whether it was towards Hiro's reply, or General Kielo's rude response.

“...Liz, for now, let's go to headquarters. It's probably best to meet with General Kielo.

Plus, it might be difficult to see him without you there with me. I'm counting on you."

It seems this made her happy.

"Yeah, leave it to me!"

Liz smiled like a blooming flower. Hiro stroked his chest relieved.

"Then, I know this is sudden, but let's get going."

"We have to tell him all the good things about you, Hiro."

"No, a light introduction is fine."

"Are we taking Milieu, too?"

The wind carried Gahda's dissatisfied voice.

"Based on what I've heard, this General Kielo doesn't seem like a trustworthy character. Isn't it dangerous to take Milieu to him?"

"But if we don't take her with us, you might take her and run."

Liz glared sidelong at Gahda with hatred emanating from her cold eyes.

"I'll never forgive you for using a young little girl, so we're taking her with us. So that you won't be able to start another war."

Gahda muttered how harsh she was and shrugged his shoulders.

Then, Hiro took notice of Milieu. He could see her mouth from his angle. Her lips are turned down in a frown as if unhappy, but perhaps she feels Liz has a point as she doesn't say a word.

It made Hiro think she was a clever girl for her age.

Hiro decides to move things along so as not to let the atmosphere get any darker.

“Tris.”

“What is it?”

“Please instruct the soldiers to rest.”

“You don’t mind? The Lichtein Dukedom might come attack us.”

“It’s the opposite. If everyone else is resting and only the right flank is on alert, they’ll realize there’s a break in the chain of command and attack.”

Tris tilted his head.

“Hmm... But if we’re not on alert, won’t they attack us all the more?”

“If the enemy general were daring, they probably would’ve charged already. I actually would’ve been grateful if they did... Anyway, it seems our opponent is very cautious, so if we increase our vigilance, that will actually increase his suspicions. So I think it should be fine as long as we’re able to mobilize at a moment’s notice if something should happen.”

Hiro paused and looked to the east.

His feint attack was a success. As long as they don’t do anything rash, the opponent likely won’t do anything careless either.

“Let’s take advantage of them as much as we can. There are the soldiers, too— but please let the horses rest at least for a bit also.”

It was a miscalculation that General Kielo was reluctant to send out the reserve unit, but it was actually effective in fanning the opponent’s vigilance.

Once Tris was convinced, Hiro lightly patted the “shiryu” on the neck.

“I’ll leave the rest to you.”

Tris approached the now moving “shiryu” with his horse.

“Mm, leave this to me. Go let that General Kielo have it!”

He gives Hiro a hard slap on the back.

This old style of encouragement left Hiro coughing violently as he headed for headquarters.



Hot rays of sunlight are blazing down on the Fourth Imperial Army. But the atmosphere around them is relative calm.

It's such a carefree scene, with soldiers chatting away, that it would hardly suggest the enemy presence was detected nearby.

There was a tent set up in the center to ward off the dust. Inside was a simple table with a map spread atop it, and around it was General Kielo and his staff officers.

“According to the scout report, it seems the Lichtein Dukedom’s army has retreated—”

One of the staff officers places a piece on the map.

“And is surveying the situation here. It seems the opponent has sent out scouts as well, and we believe they are sending back detailed information on our situation.”

The staff officer lifted his face and looked at General Kielo.

“Was that truly the right decision? The orders from the Fourth Imperial Prince were to send out the reserve unit...”

“I don’t care. There’s no need to listen to the instructions of one whose position is questionable. What would you do if that was the work of an enemy spy?”

“But it’s a fact that the Lichtein Dukedom’s army is at this location. No matter how you look at it, do you not think the situation to be worrisome with just 2,000 cavalrymen?”

“You worry too much. Kigui wouldn’t have said such a thing.”

Kigui— The name of the aide who assisted General Kielo.

He recklessly stood against the zorosta and died in battle.

When he found out about his death, General Kielo was about to lose himself in rage, but the staff officers made desperate attempts to pacify him and managed to avoid any problems.

“Besides, wasn’t that so called Fourth Imperial Prince flying the crest of the Second Emperor?”

“That is what I heard.”

“If he truly is a descendant of the Second Emperor, he should be able to live up to the legends.”

“With 10,000 men, none in heaven can stand against him. With a 1,000 men, none on earth can stand against him. The stratagems of “*Mars*” rule the entire universe— was it?”

“Indeed. That story is nonsense, but if he is a descendant, 2,000 should be plenty for him. None on earth should be able to stand against him.”

General Kielo stifled a laugh. It’s clear he’s making a fool of him.

The staff officer felt it to be in bad taste, but he didn’t show that in his expression as he spoke indifferently.

“That is myth. We do not know what the reality was. More importantly, what will you do if he really is a descendant of “*Mars*”? The citizens are a given, but there are many in the Fourth Imperial Army who worship him. If they found out, your position would be in jeopardy, General Kielo.”

The fact that this staff officer is also a worshipper is clearly conveyed in each of his words.

General Kielo’s smile disappeared and his anger swelled.

“Silence. What’s your rank?”

“Second grade enlisted officer.”

“Good, then you may stand down.”

General Kielo waved his hand in an exaggerated manner, prompting him to leave.

“Go cool your head. It seems the air in here is a bit heavy for you.”

“Understood... Excuse me.”

The other staff officers watch him with pitiful eyes as he heads out.

General Kielo huffed and puffed, then glared at the staff officers around him.

“Does anyone else have any objections? If not, regarding our strategy moving forward—”

General Kielo came to a pause. His gaze was fixated on the staff officer who was prompted to leave, who was now standing still at the entrance.

“Hey, what are you—”

He swallowed his last word.

Reason being—

“I have an objection.”

There was a young girl standing at the entrance of the tent.

She was a crimson haired young girl. With the appearance of “Valadite”, all the staff officers bowed. Even General Kielo nodded slightly. Then, after clucking his tongue, he constructed a fake smile.

“What brings you here...? I’m pretty sure you mobilized the right flank of your own accord to prepare for the Lichtein Dukedom’s assault.”

Liz scowled angrily at his sarcastic words.

“I want to talk to you regarding that. Why won’t you hand over the reserve unit despite

repeated requests?”

“You are not the commanding officer of the Fourth Imperial Army. There is no reason other than that.”

General Kielo snorted slightly to belittle her, then noticed the presence of a young boy next to the Sixth Imperial Princess.

“It is problematic if you bring in outsiders to this place.”

Looking closer, there was still another person behind the Sixth Imperial Princess.

He couldn't tell if they were male or female because of the hood, but based on their height, he guessed they were a child or a woman.

He glares at the three displeased.

“If you were a common soldier, you would have been severely punished. But unfortunately, you're a member of the Imperial family and I can not lay a hand on you. We'll just say it never happened. Please be careful from now on.”

General Kielo sighed forcefully, then waved his hand as if shooing away a dog.

“If you understand, return to your command of the right flank. This is not a playground.”

“General Kielo, you're—”

“Liz, wait.”

Liz starts to approach him, but the young boy next to her placed his hand on her shoulder and stopped her.

Hearing the young boy call the Sixth Imperial Princess by her nickname, General Kielo looks at him questioningly.

But before he's able to come up with an answer, with a somewhat cold smile, the young boy had come right before him.

“It's nice to meet you. Are you General Kielo?”

Black hair and black eyes. They call this “twin black” in the Grantz Grand Empire, and no human in this world possesses these colors. What’s even stranger, is that an eyepatch is covering half the young boy’s face, and his figure wrapped in black clothes stirs the image of “Mars” from the legends.

“My name is Hiro Schwarz von Grantz. I am the Fourth Imperial Prince of the Grantz Grand Empire.”

Hiro extended his right hand for a handshake.

“Ahh... right. Even if I am the Fourth Imperial Prince, my rank is a third grade enlisted officer.”

He said pleasantly after taking a quick glance at the staff officer who was urged to leave, then returning his gaze to General Kielo.

“Are you unable to shake my hand because I’m of a lower rank?”

“N-No, not... at all.”

He maintained his distrustful gaze, but General Kielo took his hand.

After a light introduction, they finish shaking hands. A tense silence fell between the two.

General Kielo was the first to open his mouth.

“Pardon me, but do you have any proof of your identity?”

If he allows any time to pass, his doubt will likely grow stronger. Hiro spoke up without a moment’s hesitation.

“I want to offer my hair and eyes as proof, but that becomes meaningless once I’m accused of wearing a disguise... So, these black clothes will serve as proof.”

As Hiro struck his chest— as he struck “Cameilla”, the hem became as sharp as an arrow and flicked itself toward General Kielo.

He’s unable to defend himself at the sudden action. General Kielo’s body fell hard onto the ground.

He gasps out loud as saliva flies out of his mouth. But as might be expected from all his training, General Kielo stood right up. But perhaps because he couldn’t catch his breath, his body was staggering and his face twisted in pain.

“Wh-What are you doing?!”

As General Kielo unleashes his wrath, the staff officers around him regained their senses. They reached their hands out to the handles of the swords on their waists, but a calm voice makes them stay their ground.

“My apologies. It seems it’s in a bad mood and so acted belligerently. Also, “Camellia” here scares easily. If you draw your swords, nothing will keep it calm. Even as her master, I won’t be able to stop it if it acts out.”

Hiro smiled quietly and looked around at the staff officers.

“Would you like to test it?”

Not a single person nods. Rather, perhaps because they recall hearing the name “Camellia” before, everyone except Hiro is spellbound by the black cloth. It seems they are dumbfounded from seeing the “regalia” which only the Second Emperor was allowed to wear from such a close distance.

Hiro waited until the bloodlust in the air disappeared, then fished through his breast pocket to take out a single parchment and called General Kielo.

“If you won’t believe me even with “*Camellia*”, I think reading this should do it.”

General Kielo steps carefully as he approaches. It was comical how he fell silent so

suddenly when he was just so tyrannical. But considering the attack he received, his behavior is only natural.

General Kielo took the parchment in hand and grimaced. He probably realized it was a letter from the emperor. He quickly scanned through the letter, and as he did, his face grew pale.

General Kielo slowly lifted his face and looked at Hiro bewildered.

“...This is...”

He didn't know how to put his thoughts into words... General Kielo's eyes looked disturbed.

Hiro lightly patted General Kielo's shoulders. Then, he took back the letter from the emperor, rolled the parchment up, and spoke with an apathetic expression.

“These are orders from his majesty to transfer the right of command if you are deemed worthless. I'm thinking of making Sixth Imperial Princess Celia Estreya the new commanding officer and myself her aide...”

“D-Don't be ridiculous!”

General Kielo's body shook in rage as he interrupted Hiro.

“Are you telling me to relinquish the right of command to a greenhorn like you?!”

“Not me, but Sixth Imperial Princess Celia Estreya.”

“That's the same thing!”

The air was already hot and muggy, but with General Kielo getting roused up, it added to the heat in the surrounding air. He was more enraged than when he received the attack from “Camellia”.

The staff officers were huddled up nervously looking at the two.

Hiro shrugged his shoulders, then put his right pointer finger to his mouth.

“Silence.”

“What...? Wh-Who do you think you’re...”

“Shouting isn’t going to change anything. Be quiet and accept it.”

“S-Such humiliation...! I absolutely can not accept this!”

“I told you to shut your mouth.”

“Ugh...”

All you could see was a glittering white light. By the time he noticed, it was already too late. There was a blade drawn along General Kielo’s neck.

“I gave you numerous chances. But all you did was take on foolish actions which only dragged us down. Someone as incompetent as you shouldn’t be talking back.”

“Ah, wh...”

“You’ll be dealt with later. Now isn’t the time for that.”

Hiro returned “Excalibur” and turned his back to General Kielo. He turned towards the staff officers.

“By simply obeying your commander and not challenging him, you all are guilty of the same offenses. If you’re just going to nod your head yes, there’s no need for staff officers.”

Hiro placed his hands on the table.

“If you understand what I’m saying, I’ll have you all listen to what I’m about to say.”

There was an intensity in him that didn’t allow anyone to say a word.

He is a boy much younger than themselves. But the sense of intimidation emanating from him is that of a heroic god. The staff officers all gulped and nodded with fear in their faces.

General Kielo stood in a stupor. There’s the fact that his plans to move up in society went awry, but he was also completely told off by Hiro, who could be considered a young novice. That’s when Hiro went in for the final blow.

“I don’t mind if you want to go outside to cool your head.”

General Kielo crumbled right there on the spot in silence.

Chapter 18

Stratagem

As soon as the war council ends and Hiro steps out, he's struck by bright rays of sunlight.

Hiro puts his hand up to shade his squinted eye and looks around the area.

Outside, a large number of soldiers are moving about in a hurry. With people stepping all over the ground, dust is carried about by the wind and mixed into the air.

The wind toys with the hem of Hiro's black clothes as it shakes it about. The flag in the standard bearer's hands also dances gracefully in the air as if spreading its wings.

That's when Hiro noticed the new coat of arms.

"They sure work fast."

All of General Kielo's coat of arms which were raised in headquarters were taken down, and in their place were ones of red soil and lilies— the crest of the Sixth Imperial Princess.

In other words, it means Liz had taken the right of command from General Kielo. However, even if she has snatched that right from him, it has no meaning unless she wins this war.

First, she has to establish her command— but...

"It doesn't seem like that'll be a problem."

Hiro looked at the young girl with crimson hair. Liz is working alongside the soldiers. Though confused, Milieu is also next to her helping out. The girls were filling bags with sand.

"I'm sure you're all tired, but let's work hard just a little longer!"

"Princess, we can handle these odd jobs on our own..."

“It’s fine. I’m doing this because I want to. Don’t worry and just continue your work.”

“Understood...”

The unit leader was so moved, his body shook as he let out a loud voice.

“All right boys, don’t cause the princess anymore trouble! We’re going to hurry up and finish this work!”

All the soldiers around him replied with an enthusiastic, vigorous shout. At the same time, a panicked voice could be heard from the tent behind them.

“General, comport yourself!”

“How did this happen...? Hurry and take him to the medic!”

General Kielo is carried off on the shoulders of two staff officers. Hiro glanced at him through the corner of his eye and smiled wryly. He’ll probably return to his old self after some time passes. He didn’t think he would be stunned to the point of passing out, but he shouldn’t be completely broken.

“But maybe it would be best to think of what to do in case I can’t use him anymore...”

There’s a reason Hiro let General Kielo live, but Hiro sighed at the fact that things don’t always go as planned. Then, he approached the last man to come out from the tent and called out to him.

“Do you have a second?”

“D-Do you mean me?!”

The man whose back straightened up, was the man who protested against General Kielo and was chased out. He ended up being saved by the appearance of Liz just as he was about to leave.

It looked like he was nervous, being called out to by an Imperial family member— or

rather, because he got to meet a descendant of the the Second Emperor. Hiro smiled brightly, patted him on the back, and approached him in a relaxed manner.

“Aside from what I just talked about earlier, there’s something I want you to do for me.”

“What might that be?”

Just earlier at the war council, Hiro gave instructions to quickly retreat. That was what Liz and the others were preparing for. They decided to retreat after preparing a few strategies for the possibility of an enemy attack.

There are strategies where they could win without retreating, but at the very least, there will be some casualties on their end. What Hiro wants is a complete victory—He wants to make the enemy surrender with no hope of winning, as this will tie into future plans.

“It’s fine if it’s just the latest one, but can you bring me any recent reports addressed only to General Kielo?”

Maybe it was because the staff officer sensed what Hiro was trying to say, but his expression became tense. After pretending to think about it for a while, the staff officer nodded quietly.

“...Understood. I shall bring it right away.”

After watching the staff officer go off, Hiro started walking. He was thinking of helping Liz and the others with their work. Not only the commander, but all those in high positions must set an example. People will not follow those who simply give out orders. When you advance deep into enemy territory like they have now, this is very important. They must eat after the soldiers, and quietly perform their duties without a word of complaint.

Although these are simple acts, it is a serious matter which will affect morale. Though it isn’t something you can see with your eyes, it will show its results in a dramatic way later on.

“Liz, I’ll help out, too.”

Liz stopped working and turned around. After she wipes the sweat forming on her forehead, she tilts her head.

“Don’t you have other things to do, Hiro?”

“Each unit leader’s been informed of the change in commanding officers, and they’ve been given instructions moving forward, too. And as far as I can “see”, there isn’t any confusion. Now I just have to wait for the scout to return.”

Based on what he’s heard, it seems Liz was in contact with each unit leader in secret. He doesn’t know what they’re thinking on the inside— but for now, there were none who protested openly. He can confirm if they’re acting as ordered starting now. All that’s left is to wait for the scout to return. Until then, Hiro has nothing but time on his hands.

But perhaps Liz was still not convinced as she seemed dissatisfied as she spoke.

“We have to rely on you moving forward. I want you to save at least a little bit of your strength... You’ve been fighting really hard, after all. Aren’t you a little tired?”

“I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t tired, but I’d feel weird being the only one not doing anything.”

Liz looks troubled as she watches Hiro shrug his shoulders.

“Hmm~... It seems like you’d go work somewhere even if I forced you to rest, so I guess I’d feel better keeping you within sight.”

“Haha, it’s not like I’m a kid...”

“Really? But you disappear as soon as I take my eyes off you, Hiro.”

“...Alright, let’s just work quietly now.”

He’s not sure what else might come up if he keeps stirring up the hornet’s nest. Hiro mixed in with the soldiers and got to work to move away from the situation.

After a while, the scout returns.

“Your Highness, Hiro. I’ve gone and checked on the enemy’s situation as ordered.”

“Thank you.”

Hiro handed him a water pouch and waited for the scout to catch his breath.

“As your Highness Hiro expected, the slaves of the enemy army are gradually losing their will to fight.”

“Did it look like they wouldn’t be able to mobilize for a while?”

“No, the slaves are in the rear guard and the camel cavalry is positioned in the front. It looked like they were prepared to charge at any moment.”

“So if we show them an opening, they’ll attack.”

“It seems so.”

“But it doesn’t seem like they have a firm plan. We’ll shake them up as we finish our preparations.”

Hiro raises his hand. It was a signal to the soldiers with the drums. They beat their drums loudly. The sound of the drums shakes the air and spreads to each unit.

The first to move was the cavalry of the right flank. They began their advance towards the east. The cavalry of the left flank, which took a detour behind them, follows on the same path.

Hiro placed the item he was working on earlier on his back. Then, he calls the “shiryu” and gets on its back.

“Liz, just do as we discussed in the war council now.”

“Got it. Be careful.”

“Yeah. I’ll leave the rest to you.”

“Everyone, we’re beginning the operation! Move quickly!”

Hiro raced off to the east on the “shiryu” as if Liz’s voice pushed him from behind.

“Yeah. The wind is blowing nicely, too.”

Hiro muttered to himself as he looked up at the sky.



Hearing the ringing of drums, the Lichtein Dukedom’s camp falls into a panic.

“Enemy attack! The enemy’s cavalry is coming!”

“Let’s send out the camel cavalry!”

“Send the slaves out front and use them as a wall! And send the archery unit out front too! Have them fire their arrows!”

After looking at the panicked nobles in disgust, General Ranquil grit his teeth annoyed.

“They took the initiative...”

They were aware about the change in commanding officers for the Fourth Imperial Army, but they became aware of that only a moment ago. So in order to learn more about the enemy general, General Ranquil sent the camel cavalry to the front to wait and see what the other side would do. Next, after learning his opponent was not on alert, he was just about to send out a small unit to gain information regarding the enemy’s position— That’s when the enemy cavalry began their advance.

“So the tides are on their side.”

They took the initiative with superb timing.

If this was the doing of the Sixth Imperial Princess, the future looks grim. Even if it wasn’t, it’s certain she has someone clever with her on her side.

As expected of the Grantz Grand Empire, which reigns supreme in this world. They have an abundance of talented people.

But this isn’t the time to be standing around impressed.

“Don’t panic! Deploy the camel cavalrymen to the sides!”

No matter what their intent, the one thing he wants to avoid is being surrounded.

“Send the archers to the front! The enemy went to the trouble of coming out. This is a perfect opportunity!”

And then he noticed. The one riding at the head of the cavalry was that man.

“So... he’s come after all.”

The wound left by the man in black is still deep. The slaves are a given, but word may have spread to the regular soldiers as well, as there is fear pasted on their faces. The only way to wipe it away is to give them confidence. General Ranquil worked himself up, convincing himself he would take advantage of this situation the best he could.

“Archery unit, at the ready!”

As Ranquil gave out his order, a mysterious scene unfolded before him.

The enemy cavalrymen spread out to the sides and dispersed. Large clouds of dust kick up and color the sky brown.

“Downwind, is it...”

Wrapped in the clouds of dust, the cavalrymen disappeared. You could only hear thundering hooves and war cries. It’s not at all a situation you would normally be happy about, but it may be in this case as the man in black disappeared from view. Because of this, many of the soldiers didn’t become aware of his presence.

“But are they planning to use the cover of dust to surround us...? If so, I’ve been taken lightly.”

After looking out in all directions, Ranquil shouted.

“Have the left and right flanks advance! First battalion, fall back!”

Ranquil gave out orders to surround them instead.

Then, after a short amount of time passed...

“...Is the enemy not coming?”

He realized something was off.

But the sound of drums, the soldiers' battle cries, and the thundering hooves still shake the ears.

“No... are they growing distant?”

The sounds grow quieter as time passes. By the time he came to think they were deceived, it was too late. When the clouds of dust cleared, the cavalrymen were nowhere to be seen. General Ranquil tried to consider what possible goal they might have had to do this, but the voice of a soldier caused him to stop mid thought.

“I-It's the man in black! He's appeared again!”

This is what it sounded like the voice from the frontline was saying.

Chaos descends upon the soldiers and quickly spreads.

“What did he say...?”

He doesn't even have time to think. By the time Ranquil lifted his face in surprise, there was an uproar around him and breaks in the ranks of soldiers. And that wasn't all. The soldiers were completely stopped in their tracks. Ranquil touched his hand to his head, feeling a headache coming on, and looked to the same spot as the soldiers.

There stood a man in black, fluttering clothes.

This brought back the image of the scene of a 1,000 men being buried. He could tell his body was shaking in fear. However, Ranquil wasn't so foolish as to let his mind go blank. He slapped his own face and regained his composure.

After taking a small breath, he opened his mouth.

“Settle down! Maintain your ranks!”

Ranquil's rough voice rang out.

“There is only one enemy after all. What is there to fear?!”

“B-But, he took on a 1,000 men by himself!”

“Don't panic. We've made preparations for him.”

As a countermeasure for the man in black, a 100 skilled men were assembled in one unit. Even if they are the elite, against a man who took on a 1,000, a 100 men may not be heartening, but all they need to do is buy some time. While they keep the man from leaving this spot, they'll rout the exhausted Fourth Imperial Army. Then, they simply have to take their time against him. He is outnumbered after all. There is no way he would be able to chase after a large number of scattered enemies on his own.

“It's time for retribution.”

Ranquil drew his sword from his waist and pointed it at the standard bearer. The 100 hand chosen camel cavalrymen move out to the vanguard. After they gain some distance, the rest of the army began their advance.

“Once the vanguard engages in battle with the man in black, we assault the Fourth Imperial Army. Until then, we will follow the vanguard so as not to let on to our plan.”

“Yes, I will notify each unit.”

“Mm, I’ll leave it to you.”

Then, Ranquil called over a messenger.

“What would you have me do?”

“Take a message to the vanguard. This will all be for naught if you die. Your objective is to keep him here. Tell them not to forget that.”

“Understood!”

However, no matter how much time passed, the battle did not begin. As Ranquil was thinking this to be strange, the messenger returned.

“It was a fake!”

Said the messenger, his face red with mortification.

“The man in black is a fake!”

“Huh...? What do you mean a fake?”

“It was just sandbags and lumber put together and covered in a black cloth.”

There was a loud thud. It was the sound of the object the messenger dropped from his back. As the messenger stated, it was some lumber covered in black cloth.

“...Ah, what is this?”

It was such a shock that he couldn’t speak. Were they so wrapped in fear that they were fooled by such a childish trick and mistake this for the actual person?

The messenger spoke to the dumbfounded Ranquil.

“And there are more of these same objects ahead.”

“...What was that?”

This was the location where the Fourth Imperial Army fought the rebel army. It had become a large cavity, and you could look down on it from all directions. Mixed with the corpses were pieces of lumber covered in black cloth— A large number of these scarecrows stood like grave markers.

“It looks like we’re being made fools of.”

But it was truly an effective strategy. As far as anyone knows of the man in black’s abilities, it’s not impossible that he is hiding in the shadows of one of the scarecrows. And there’s also the possibility that one of them is actually him. It’s likely many of the men are analyzing the situation in such a way, which is why they hesitate.

“This is all for the objective of retreating, or they have soldiers waiting in ambush in all directions. Either way, to think he would outwit us so well.”

Taking his gaze away from the graveyard and looking to the other side, he could see the Fourth Imperial Army’s rear as they were retreating. This bait is so tempting he almost wants to chase after them thoughtlessly. But if he wants to attack them, he would have to cut straight across. If this happened to be a trap, not only would they lose their advantageous position, they’d be walking into a deadly situation.

And he doesn’t even want to think of what would happen if the man in black were in hiding. Without a doubt, it would turn into a losing battle.

“Even if we make a large detour and pursue them...”

Not only would the enemy be ready to meet them in battle, there’s a chance their ranks of soldiers would still be in disarray when they engaged them. A truly well thought out plan, and a tactic to learn from.

“To control the battle so freely while in enemy territory... It seems the enemy has a monster like *“Mars”*.”

After quietly laughing at himself, Ranquil looked up at the sky. A veil of darkness is getting ready to bring down its curtain. If he fails to time his actions well on top of everything else, the only thing waiting for them is ruin. Mobilizing an army on emotions alone indicates failure as a leader.

“The sun will set soon. It seems it would be best to return to camp for now.”

There was a shadow on Ranquil’s expression. This was because his path to victory was completely closed off. The army’s will to fight is declining and morale continues to drop. They’ll end up losing if he doesn’t figure out a strategy to break through this.

He realized there was a large, invisible wall standing in his way.



The sun sets. The wind, which carried enough heat with it to burn the skin, began to cool.

There are many campfires burning in the area. Surrounding them were over a hundred tents which were assembled like a town. If you had an aerial view, you would see that they were set up in a circular formation.

This is the campground of the Fourth Imperial Army.

In the center, was a noticeably large tent flying a crest of red soil and lilies.

There is no one inside. This is because the one who sleeps here— Liz, the Sixth Imperial Princess, is currently running about and making efforts to raise the morale of the soldiers.

A short distance away from that tent, another tent was set up for a war council. Normally, the Sixth Imperial Princess who is the acting commanding officer, should be here... But rather than her, the one sitting at the head of the long table inside, is Fourth Imperial Prince Hiro.

Also sitting around the table were General Kielo and the staff officers who were aiding

him.

Hiro was the first to open his mouth.

“Regarding why I gathered you all... I think you might have a vague idea.”

Hiro struck a bundle of reports placed on the table and spoke in a lofty manner, to which the faces of the staff officers began to turn pale. No one dares to lift their face. They know what is to happen now.

“General Kielo.”

It may have been that he wasn't expecting his name to be called, as General Kielo looked at Hiro with a surprised expression.

“Have I done something?”

“It's written in these reports that you instructed a number of units to pillage provisions from nearby villages.”

“Is it not a fundamental war tactic to supply provisions from an enemy nation?”

“That's true. But that's under the assumption that there's payment. Pillaging is untactful.”

“How idealistic... This is something every country does.”

“The Grantz Grand Empire respects military regulations. Someone with the rank of general in particular needs to keep that in mind. Having gone against that, your actions are by no means forgivable.”

Hiro continued indifferently.

“And so, I will strip you of your rank of general.”

“E-Even if you are an Imperial family member, you shouldn't have such authority! What gives you the right to do that?!”

“That is true. But if I send a report to the military department, I think the result would be the same.”

“Th-That’s...”

“If you don’t want that to happen, I guess you have no choice but to poison me or attack me in the dark and kill me.”

“I wish you wouldn’t speak such nonsense.”

General Kielo’s face tensed up. His reaction made it seem like Hiro had looked into his inner thoughts and hit the mark. While thinking how easy this man was to read, Hiro held back a sneer and nodded.

“I did go a bit overboard there. I apologize. Please forget it happened.”

“You really did. I wish you wouldn’t think so little of me. There’s no way I would do something so insolent.”

“Yes, that’s true. You are a noble and distinguished person.”

Hiro stretched out both arms.

“Which is why you should have realized— That the only ones here are the staff officers who obeyed your instructions.”

He might have noticed this for the first time, as General Kielo opened his eyes wide and looked around at the faces of the staff officers.

“I-Indeed.”

“Then, you know what I want to say, yes?”

“...O-Of course.”

It looks like he doesn’t know. His eyes are darting about and he’s confused. While shocked at General Kielo’s ignorance on the inside, Hiro decided to throw out a lifeline to continue the conversation.

“You probably won’t believe it unless you hear it from my mouth.”

He smiles, lifts his hand, and extends his pointer finger.

“If you obey my instructions from here on out, I’ll pretend this never happened.”

“Wha—”

“I don’t think it’s a bad deal. It depends on your achievements hereafter, but I can try to push for you to be called to the capital. I mean, it might even be possible for me to nominate you as commander in chief.”

“...Do you mean that?”

“It’s a waste to have a distinguished general such as yourself secluded in this remote region.”

After a forced sigh, Hiro shook his head.

“However... I can’t cover up all the violations of military regulations you’ve committed here. It seems word has spread from the units you gave instructions to.”

“My word...”

“So, I’m sorry to say this, but I’d like you to lead the vanguard for tomorrow’s decisive battle, General Kielo.”

“That’s...”

General Kielo was clearly dismayed. The casualty rate of the vanguard unit is high. And if he became their commander, he would be targeted by many of the enemy soldiers. There’s no way he can simply agree to that. Which is why Hiro decided to give him a little push on the back.

“We outnumber them. There’s no need to worry. It’s not like I want to send you to the vanguard unit without a plan. I want you to build your merits.”

“Hmm...”

“I’m sure tomorrow’s decisive battle will be a guaranteed victory. But if you’re in the safety of the rear, you can’t achieve any merits. Then you wouldn’t be called to the capital.”

“That is true.”

“Please understand. I’d like for a distinguished person such as yourself to become commander in chief.”

“...Please be sure his Majesty hears well of me.”

“I promise. I’ll be sure to send a report.”

After holding back the part that it would be a report of his death in battle, Hiro put on a fake smile and extended his right hand.

General Kielo grasped it in delight.

“Then, I will give it my all.”

“I’m glad you understand. Let’s say everything until now is water under the bridge.”

“Yes, let’s.”

After sitting back in his seat, Hiro spoke to the silent staff officers.

“I’ll have all of you join the vanguard unit as well. That isn’t a problem, right?”

General Kielo is leading the vanguard unit. There’s no way they’ll say no.

“In a month or two, I’m sure everyone here will be welcomed as heroes in the Imperial capital.”

This was the clincher. After hesitating, the staff officers nod.

Hiro tried to resist, but he couldn’t help but smile a little. After stroking his eyepatch to hide it...

“Then, everyone, please rest in preparation for tomorrow.”

“Yes. We will be sure to achieve great deeds for your Highness Hiro!”

General Kielo said in lively voice before leaving the tent. The staff officers also followed suit. In the now empty space, Hiro turned towards a corner where darkness was

lurking.

A human silhouette slowly revealed itself, and then a man appeared.

It's one of General Kielo's former staff officers. He approaches Hiro and kneels.

"Our spy has successfully infiltrated the enemy camp. And as instructed, we have prepared 1,500 camels outside our encampment."

"So things are going as planned. How is our security doing?"

"Also going as planned. We have them on high alert and we've created a few openings."

"Did any enemy spies sneak in?"

"There are currently four. We've received reports confirming their infiltration."

"Then please give out instructions to have those four captured."

"Understood."

The staff officer was about to leave, but Hiro called out and stopped him.

"Is there something else?"

"Can you spread the word to the soldiers that General Kielo and his followers have turned in?"

"Surely."

His expression seems to say that he had already done so without being told. No doubt he has a considerable amount of grudge built up.

"Then, I shall excuse myself."

This time, everyone had truly gone. Hiro lets out a deep sigh and closes his eyes.

The General Kielo ill repute from turning in before the soldiers will likely spread instantly.

In contrast, Liz is caring for the soldiers without rest. With this, the number of those who are dissatisfied with Liz will surely dwindle. It will likely help raise morale as well. In short, it will mean solidarity. Everyone will continue to fight for Liz while

willing to give up their lives.

“Now, we have to drop the enemy’s numbers.”

Hiro stood up and went outside. The night breeze brushes against his cheeks as the campfires sway.

He started heading towards the place where Gahda was being held captive.

There are a large number of soldiers placed outside the camp as guards. Hiro expressed his gratitude and entered.

The zorosta— Gahda notices Hiro and lifts his face.

“Are you alone?”

“I am. Because I have something important to discuss with you. If anyone else were here, I wouldn’t be able to be completely open with you, right?”

“Hmph, even if you were completely open, there would probably be a pitch darkness hiding everything inside you.”

“So harsh.”

“More importantly, Mileu is safe, right?”

“She’s fine. She’s with Liz and pretending to be her attendant.”

“I see... It’s fine if she’s safe. So what did you want to discuss?”

Hiro stared at Gahda’s state for a bit, then cut the ropes which were binding him.

Gahda looks at the ropes on the ground, then looks at Hiro confused.

“What are you playing at?”

“I can’t talk to you comfortably like that.”

“You’re a strange one. There’s a limit to how bold you can be towards a prisoner of war.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

Hiro sat on the ground and took out a bottle of alcohol from inside his black clothes.

“Sleight of hand?”

“I’m good at stowing things away.”

He shrugs and tosses the bottle to Gahda. Gahda tilted his head and mumbled.

“Aren’t you drinking?”

“I’m underaged. Ahh, I’ll say this before you get suspicious, but there isn’t any poison in there.”

“I’m not worried about that. Even without any roundabout methods, I’m sure someone as skilled as yourself would easily be able to take my head.”

Gahda open the lid of the bottle and gulped it down. Then he tilted the bottle and held it out.

“So, are you really not going to drink?”

“I told you I’m underaged. Besides, I still have work to do.”

“Then let’s stop with the idle chit chat and just get to the point. What sort of difficulty are you thinking of forcing on me?”

“If I’m being completely blunt, I’m going to have the slave liberation army participate in tomorrow’s battle.”

Perhaps he had anticipated this, as Gahda voices his objection without showing any agitation.

“We won’t manage any coordination. I think we’d actually get in the way.”

“It won’t be a problem. I’m not thinking of any coordinated efforts.”

“What are you scheming?”

Gahda sent him a sharp gaze. Hiro calmly brushes it aside and opens his mouth.

“I want to preserve our battle power.”

“Are you planning to have the slave liberation army fight alone? If you did that, not only will there be deserters, there’s the possibility they might actually bare their fangs at all of you.”

“No, I’ll have the Fourth Imperial Army’s vanguard unit fight first. I think there are about a 1,000 men. There shouldn’t be too much complaint with that.”

“...Hmm...”

“And I’ve even prepared a reward. Once the battle’s over, we’ll free the slaves. And the mercenaries, too. We can even provide them a place to live.”

“That’s extraordinary.”

“Right?”

“The conditions are too favorable. I feel like there’s something to this.”

“Exactly. But it’s not difficult.”

“That depends on what it is.”

Gahda placed the bottle on the ground and gave Hiro a serious look, letting him know he wouldn’t be letting even the slightest of movements slip past him.

To respond in kind, Hiro didn’t show any signs of plotting any tricks as he spoke.

“I want you to blend in with the confusion of the melee and kill General Kielo, the leader of the vanguard unit, and his followers.”

“...You’re insane.”

“Though if possible, I’d like the entire vanguard unit to be annihilated. But anyway, at the very least, I want them to die.”

“Can I ask the reason for that?”

“General Kielo has committed too many crimes. That’s the reason.”

“...You mean the burning of the neighboring villages?”

“You knew about it?”

“Despite my current situation, I was in command of the slave liberation army. Such information came to be immediately.”

“Then that makes things simpler. You know—”

His lips formed a smile while his eyes did no such thing. Hiro muttered while wearing an expression frightening enough to send a chill down your spine.

“I never allow those who hurt innocent people to be forgiven.”

In the dead silent space, the sound of teeth grinding rang out.

A moment of silence falls upon them. Gahda, whose eyes were cast down, grabbed the bottle and let out a sigh.

“I think it would be more sound for you to do it yourself rather than leaving it to someone else.”

“I probably would have killed him with my own two hands if I was a fool who didn’t consider the consequences.”

“Because he’s a general, he’s a well known noble.”

“That’s right. By no means is he of low status.”

General Kielo’s Nickel house is a distinguished one which holds a high position among the nobles in the south. If he killed their current head, there’s the danger of the southern nobles becoming his enemies. But if he let him live, there’s the danger that his grudge against Hiro will be a hindrance to future endeavors.

“So whether you punish him and leave him alive or kill him with your own two hands, his existence is a nuisance... So you have him killed on the battlefield and—”

After putting words to Hiro’s thoughts, his smile deepened as if he now understood.

“— Are you planning to shift the blame to the Lichtein Dukedom?”

“That’s right. I supposed I’m thinking of using it as negotiation material.”

Gahda made a troubled face and looked like he was thinking about something. Then, he empties out the bottle in one gulp and tosses it in the air.

“...All right. I’ll be sure to take their heads.”

After voicing his resolve, he pointed at Hiro who now had the bottle.

“Bring some top quality alcohol next time.”

Gahda lied down using his arm as a pillow. This is probably his way of saying the conversation is over.

As Hiro tries to leave the tent, Gahda turned his body and looked at him as if he remembered something.

“I was about to just go to sleep, but are you okay leaving me like this?”

“It’s fine. You can stay like that and keep your spirits up. I need you to work hard for me tomorrow after all.”

“I’ll take you up on that then.”

After going outside, Hiro called out to the soldiers standing guard.

“Please don’t go inside until I come here tomorrow morning.”

“As you wish!”

Afterwards, Hiro headed towards his own tent. Along the way, a light infantryman ran to him.

After saluting and kneeling, he spoke quickly while panting.

“The enemy spies have been captured.”

“Understood. Please bring them to my tent.”

“Yes.”

After stopping suddenly, Hiro looked up at the sky.

The stars are glittering in the night sky like scattered gems. The gentle moonlight

shining on the surface offers a feeling of warmth despite the cold weather.

“It’s so pretty.”

Hiro lets out a white breath of air and smiles peacefully.

“This is the one thing that doesn’t change, even after a 1,000 years.”

He recalled a woman who once spoke passionately of the night sky.

She was a woman who was just like the crimson haired young girl.

They weren’t exactly alike in appearance, but they were almost identical in nature.

“I wonder what you would say if you saw her.”

Hiro returned to his tent as he looked up towards the night sky.

Chapter 19

Night Assault

Strong, cold winds roar like howling beasts as they shake up a tent. Hiro could feel the temperature dropping on his skin. Thinking the cold air might feel nice, he grabbed “Camellia’s” collar and lifted it up over his head.

Then, a man was brought over to him. His armor resembled that of the Fourth Imperial Army, but it was something completely different. It was an elaborate imitation. If it was daytime, you would be able to notice some odd parts, but you couldn’t make any distinctions with the sun having set.

“You’re a spy of the Lichtein Dukedom, aren’t you?”

The man didn’t answer Hiro’s question, but the soldier beside him nodded.

He puts his elbows on his chair and rests his chin on his hands.

Hiro carefully observed the man. Based on his attitude, he could tell the man had the resolve to face death— There was a profound look in his expression.

“From what I can see, you’ve pledged an oath of allegiance to the Lichtein Dukedom, haven’t you?”

There was a pile of bags sitting on a table. He took one of them and showed it to the man.

“There are Grantz gold coins in this bag. You wouldn’t have to work for three years.”

“...”

“I don’t want you to misunderstand so I’ll say this. This isn’t a bribe. I just wanted to reward you for your loyalty.”

Hiro threw the bag and it hit the man's chest. The coins make a loud noise and scatter onto the ground.

"Take that and go back to make your report. And I want you to give my regards to the general there."

Hiro stood from his chair as his smile broadened. He approached the spy and put his hand on his shoulder.

"But having said that... I doubt you'll just say yes and go off on your way, so I'll give you some information, too. There's no need for you to go out of your way to investigate the Fourth Imperial Army's encampment. I'll tell you what you want to know."

"...What are you plotting?"

"It's up to you whether you believe me or not. Do whatever you want."

Hiro sits down on the spot. Then he opened his mouth.

"We're going to make a night assault now. That's what the 1,500 camel cavalrymen outside are for. Also, the Fourth Imperial Army is more fatigued than I thought. If we were attacked during the night, I don't think we'd be able to fight. That's why our security is tight... That's actually just for show. The men are resting. And we've allowed them a bit of alcohol to raise morale."

Hiro picked up each Grantz gold coin and put them back into the bag in front of the befuddled spy. Then, he stood up and looked down on him.

"When you make your report, make sure you don't mention that you heard this from me."

Hiro stuffed the bag into the spy's breast pocket and sat back in his chair.

"Please release him."

After he gave the order, the soldier spoke up with a surprised look on his face.

“A-Are you sure? If we kill him here...”

“It’s fine. I won’t allow you to lay a hand on him even if I’m not looking. Please escort him outside our encampment.”

“...Understood.”

The soldier bowed, told the spy to follow him, then took him outside.

Hiro sinks into his chair and waits for the next spy to come.

“What might you be plotting?”

The man who appeared without so much as a sound was the staff officer who was shunned by General Kielo— Second grade enlisted officer, Doryx.

Hiro glanced at him from the side with his eye steeped in suspicion. It’s a bit difficult to comprehend why a staff officer would have this ability to erase their presence and lurk in the corners of a tent.

More so than anything, he’s too loyal. He acts on Hiro’s words without a shred of doubt. Even if you say this was because Hiro was a descendant of the Second Emperor, it’s still enough to be considered abnormal.

But Hiro answered him without revealing the suspicion he held inside.

“It would be difficult to bribe that spy. But it would also be a waste to kill him.”

“I don’t think it would necessarily be a problem if we killed him... We still have three others captured.”

“That would mean less spies. For that General Ranquil to believe their reports, it’s better to have more of them.”

“Hmm... But what will happen once he believes them? He may see this as a fine opportunity to attack.”

“We’ve made preparations for that, so we need him to attack. This is why I have to tell the remaining spies the same thing. Ahh, but— one of them will become a sacrifice... But well, ultimately they’ll all meet the same end, so it makes no difference.”

After a bit of thinking, it seemed Doryx became sure of himself.

“In other words... are you planning to plant the seeds of mistrust in General Ranquil?”

“When cautious people come across a discrepancy in information, they get a sense of discomfort and try to verify things.”

Hiro stroked his eyepatch and turned to Doryx.

“What do you think would happen if three of them said the same thing, and only one said something different?”

“...He would likely be suspected of betrayal.”

“That’s where this comes into play.”

He points to the three bags on the table.

“What would you do if a bag of coins fell out of our spy’s breast pocket?”

“I would probably take his head. But that’s if he actually had it. I’m sure there are cases where they hide it. Most importantly, what will you do if they completely wash their hands clean? Isn’t there a possibility of them throwing it away before returning to their camp?”

“That’s why I got them attached to “life”. When those who are prepared to face death are allowed to live, they get a sense of relief. That causes an attachment to this world to form... almost to a point of being unable to resist it. If you hand them coins, it’s even more effective. The amount of money is too valuable for them to hide it or throw it away, so I’m sure they’ll keep it close at hand.”

“Will the results be the same even if they don’t...?”

“Yes. Either way, the results will be the same. Besides, the Lichtein Dukedom is in a precarious state. Even if they were able to defeat us, there’s nothing but uncertainty in their future. Putting that into consideration, I’m sure they won’t throw away the

coins.”

“I see...”

Although he asks questions, he doesn't refute anything. Hiro tells him various information and he drills it into his head. It seemed like he was passionate about his work, but there had to be more to it than that.

Doryx was looking down while deep in thought.

In contrast, Hiro was completely expressionless as he muttered.

“Second grade enlisted officer Doryx.”

“Yes?”

“— Can I have you bring the next one?”

Even if he questions him now, there isn't enough time, and he wouldn't be able to obtain any proof. His only option is likely to have him move freely until the right time comes.

“Certainly.”

“Also, can I have you ask someone to bring the “shiryu”?”

“As you wish.”

Doryx saluted and went outside.

(I have an idea of who's behind the scenes. It probably won't be a problem to leave him be for now.)

Hiro let out a deep sigh and leaned against the back of his chair.

The battle during the day dropped the opponent's morale to rock bottom. There are likely deserters at this point. Now all they have to do is give the nervous soldiers a push on the back to lower the enemy's numbers and eliminate General Kielo and his followers in tomorrow's battle. Once that's done, this war will come to an end.

“Right, I have to send a messenger to the rear, too.”

They should have arrived by now.

Hiro set a plan in motion before coming here. The time to look into the eyes of the sun has finally come.

“The end is near.”

Hiro stroked his eyepatch and stared at the entrance of the tent.



The Lichtein Dukedom’s encampment— There’s a gloomy atmosphere hanging in headquarters. The faces of General Ranquil and his staff officers looked dark and sunken, and perhaps it was because of the cold, but a number of them were pale in the face and even had blue lips.

It’s not that there is no source of warmth. There are a number of heaters inside the tent. But their formation for the last battle was disadvantageous, and they see no positive signs for the future. This made the cold that much harsher. Among them, a shaking staff officer looked at Ranquil.

“Your Excellency Ranquil. Regarding the slaves, it seems most of them have escaped. At this rate, it may even affect the regular soldiers.”

“...I’m sure we put out notices of severe punishment.”

It’s clear that this is the effect of the man in black. The only thing they can do about it is alleviate the fear, but they have limited options on a battlefield like this. Their only option is pretty much to offer the men alcohol, but they can’t even do that in this situation where they don’t know when the enemy might attack during the night.

“The enemy has the same thoughts as you.”

More so than anything else, night assaults are an established war tactic. It's the ideal strategy for a small army to defeat a large one. The opposite is also true. There's no way an intelligent person who displayed such strategies as the ones from the other day would be unaware of this. Which is why although the soldiers are being allowed to rest, they are not allowed to take off their armor. This is because they don't know when the enemy might attack in the deep of night.

"How irritating..."

Even he himself is aware that he has become too cautious. But if he makes one false move, it would mean ruin for the country. He can't simply take bold actions. The same goes for deserters. Even if they sentence them to severe punishment, killing them to set an example would cause discord in the army. Even if they capture them, they would only be a hindrance, so they have no choice but to let them go. But currently, this is fanning unrest among the soldiers even more.

"...Either way, we have no choice but to wait for the spies to return."

He will decide whether or not they make a night assault depending on the spies' reports. They were able to determine the location of the enemy encampment based on the scout reports. But surprisingly, the enemy's security is on high alert, and they probably wouldn't be able to achieve much making a night assault at that location. Not only that, there's the danger of them suffering casualties.

"It's frustrating, but we have no choice but to wait."

He sent out a number of spies a few hours ago and instructed them to investigate on the state of the enemy camp. They're likely to only get a limited amount of information in this short amount of time, but it's possible they might find a light at the end of the tunnel.

"Will we be able to manage a preemptive strike?"

There are 2,000 camel cavalrymen positioned outside their camp, and they are awaiting orders. Now, they simply have to wait for the return of the spies and determine the right timing.

After suddenly recalling something, Ranquil stopped his thoughts and spoke out to the staff officers.

“What is Lord Karl doing?”

“He is more fatigued than expected, so we are having him rest.”

He is the second son of the duke house who rose in position as a result of the other successors dying off. He has a weak constitution and he hardly has the chance to venture outside. It seems he has reached his limit from the sudden deployment.

“Increase his security in case of an emergency. If something were to happen to Lord Karl, that would be the end of our country.”

“Yes!”

He wanted Karl to raise the morale of the soldiers, but he can't afford to push him too hard.

If they lost him as well, their country would be swallowed up by a foreign state.

“But why is it that the minds of humans are rendered useless when they're cornered...?”

There's a greater sense of danger than when the neighboring country of Schteizen once invaded. Back then, even if he had died, the great nobles were still be around, even if they were incompetent. He didn't feel any anxiety about the future back then. Though they may have been inept, after losing them, he realized for the first time how important they were.

“Can't have this now. If the commander loses his nerves, the soldiers will want to become deserters.”

After laughing at himself, he decided to bring that to an end and change the subject.

“Have we found the location of the Fourth Imperial Army’s supply trains?”

“No. We believe they are likely here, but... we have yet to discover them.”

The location to which the staff officer looked down and pointed was the area around the fort which the Fourth Imperial Army fell. If they can at least crush the supply trains, they can avoid a drawn out war. They’ll even be able to lower their morale and likely bring the tides of war to their side. But there is the concern the opposite will happen. There’s the chance it may actually solidify the enemy’s unity.

“...This is a difficult position, but if it will give us even the slightest bit of an advantage, we should crush the supply trains.”

Right now, he’s willing to grasp at straws. They also need this to raise morale.

“Umm, also, do you not mind if they add the rebel army to their ranks?”

“I doubt that will happen. They can’t manage any coordination with a group of slaves that don’t have any training. They’ll actually be a hindrance. If it were me, I’d probably just kill them off.”

“But the Fourth Imperial Army hasn’t done so. I’m wondering if we should consider the possibility that there may be a reason for that.”

“I’ve thought that a number of times as well. A way to use the rebel army to gain an advantage in battle... But considering the enemy’s standpoint, they outnumber us, so they have no need to take them into their ranks. Even if they were to use them as a wall, if the slaves ran off midway, it would send their formation into a disarray.”

Ranquil crossed his arms and grunted.

“A reason for them to take in a such a group that would be nothing but a hindrance... I can’t think of any possibilities.”

“They might not actually be thinking anything.”

Maybe he was trying to ease the tension, but the staff officer made an attempt at a joke.

Normally, he would be prompted to leave, but he was trying to alleviate the gloomy atmosphere. He has to be thanked for that spirit of his. Which is why Ranquil smiled and allowed this before answering the question seriously.

“That’s not likely. If their aim is to confuse us, the battle during the day was enough to do that. There’s no need for them to go out of their way to take in a dangerous group like the rebel army.”

Said Ranquil as he shrugged his shoulders.

“There’s no point in worrying about it. The more we think about it, the more we fall for the enemy’s trick. We’ll end this conversation here. For now, we wait for the spies to return to determine whether or not we make a night assault.”

There’s no need for them to take upon a problem on their own.

After a while, he received word that the spies had returned.

Ranquil told them to let them through. A man appeared at the entrance and knelt.

He thanked him for his work and asked him for his report.

“Then, I shall state my report.”

The spy bowed and spoke carefully and fluently.

“Once I infiltrated the enemy encampment, I saw that the soldiers there were given alcohol to raise morale, and they were resting with their armor removed as though they were not worried of an attack in the night. The enemy army is more fatigued than expected, and they don’t seem to be in a condition to fight. Meanwhile, there are 1,500 camel cavalrymen on standby outside their encampment preparing for a night assault.”

“So they’re also preparing after all... Did it seem like we wouldn’t encounter any

problems if we initiated a night assault?”

“Although their security is on high alert, I believe a night assault will surely be successful.”

“Hmm... All right. I’ll have food and water prepared for you. You may leave now.”

“Yes! Excuse me!”

As the spy left, the staff officer approached Ranquil with an expression of delight.

“It seems the enemy is also making preparations, so I wonder if it would be better for us to act first to make the preemptive strike.”

“There’s no need to rush so. We should wait to hear from the others before making a decision.”

They can’t begin anything until they first hear from the others. If they overlook anything, it would immediately lead to a losing battle. His reasoning told him they should proceed cautiously.

“Bring in the next one.”

“Yes.”

The staff officer didn’t look convinced, but he obediently nodded. His impatience is understandable. Considering how they were toyed with by one man in the afternoon, the fact that they are outnumbered, and the constant deserters, the spy’s report was extremely appealing. But if it happens to be a trap, it would cost them dearly. The country’s fate is on the line.

“...We still have time. It shouldn’t be too late to make a decision after hearing all the reports.”

He realized a sense of hesitation growing inside himself, but he shook his head to dispel it.

“I have brought him.”

“Good. Let’s hear your report.”

“Yes!”

The second man knelt and gave his report.

“Once I infiltrated the enemy encampment, I saw that the soldiers had spears and bows in hand in preparation for a night assault. They did seem somewhat fatigued, but their morale was high, and their commanding officer, the Sixth Imperial Princess, was encouraging them. It looks like it would be difficult to launch an attack.”

The faces of the staff officers turned pale. Some of them are even quietly muttering that the reports are different.

Ranquil placed his hand on his forehead and let out a small sigh.

“Were there camel cavalrymen outside?”

“There were, but there weren’t any riders. I believe they may be in the process of choosing elite soldiers.”

“All right. You may leave.”

“Yes!”

After making sure the spy left, Ranquil looked drained as he dropped into his chair. A staff officer brings him some water.

“Thank you.”

“But this is quite a problem now. We could have let things go if there were only slight differences, but with such significant inconsistencies in the reports, we can not make a decision so easily.”

“Mm... you’re right. Let us hear from the others as well. Then, we will all discuss it.”

After that, they ushered in the third and fourth spies, but the only report which differed was the second one.

Ranquil calls for the second spy once more and cross examines him.

“Do you know why you were called for?”

“N-No, I don’t.”

“Your report greatly differed from the others.”

There was a look of shock pasted onto the spy’s face. Not only the staff officers, but Ranquil as well, cursed the spy for his impressive acting.

“Search this man’s body. I’m sure he’s been bribed.”

The soldiers at the entrance held his arms, and all the staff officers began to search his body.

“H-Here! There’s a small bag with a large amount of Schteizen silver coins!”

“It’s settled then.”

“N-No!”

The now pale spy screamed. Ranquil questioned him with cold eyes.

“What do you mean, no?”

“I haven’t been bribed! The enemy’s security really is on high alert!”

“Then what is this? Why is this small bag— all these Schteizen silver coins in your breast pocket?”

“Th-That is...”

The spy hesitated to speak. Ranquil signaled to the soldiers.

“Off with his head.”

“P-Please, wait! That’s really not the case! Please, have mercy, General Ranquil!”

An executioner's blade fell down on the neck of the spy who was forced to the ground. In the blink of an eye, a spray of blood paints the tent red. Ranquil steps on a cooling puddle of blood and spits out annoyed...

"To be deceived by such a thing during your country's time of need!"

He throws the contents of the small bag at the corpse, and the coins scatter all about. Ranquil breathes heavily and his shoulders rise and fall as he gives out his order.

"We will launch a night assault. The enemy is resting!"

"But it seems the enemy is also prepared for a night assault..."

"I don't care. That's why the soldiers were instructed to keep their armor on. Send word to each unit to prepare for the night assault without neglecting security."

Ranquil looks down at the map and speculates on the enemy's path of advance.

"If they were to launch a night assault from our rear, they would have to make a large detour. And they have 1,500 men. It would be pointless if we noticed their presence from the sound of them coming. So I don't believe they would come from the rear, but just in case, we'll place a large number of campfires there as a screen. Set up fences to the left and right in three layers. We'll invite them straight to the front. Have the men prepare their bows and spears."

"Yes!"

The staff officers hurry off and rush out the tent. This is a critical moment. Then, Ranquil suddenly remembered the existence of the man in black.

"Wait."

Ranquil calls out to one of the staff officers and stops him.

"Yes?"

“Assign the unit prepared for the man in black to Lord Karl’s security.”

“Understood!”

For one with as much military prowess as he, he could easily rush in first to their center. If they crush the 1,500 camel cavalrymen while protecting Karl, there’s no doubt the morale of the soldiers will go up. If they succeed with the night assault, he’ll be all alone with no help, and they’ll be able to deal with him in any number of ways.

“I’ll put an end to you here.”

This is how the Lichtein Dukedom came to prepare for an all out assault.

Chapter 20

Decisive Battle at Night

“Our night assault should be succeeding soon.”

Hiro muttered under a cold sky, with the stars covered by thick clouds. Two hundred light infantrymen stand silently behind him at the ready. They all keep quiet, with dark and stillness around them.

While everyone holds their breath— a man next to Hiro, second grade enlisted officer Doryx asks a question.

“Is the enemy unit really coming this way?”

“We gave them hints of our night assault so they would. No matter what, our opponent wants to succeed in their attack— so, they probably won’t be so foolish as to directly bump heads with us. Plus, the more humans become cornered, the more hasty their thoughts become. Because they get impatient to see results, they end up choosing a short path of attack, which is why this is the only possibility.”

After Hiro finishes his explanation, Doryx lets out a sign of admiration.

“How old were you again, your Highness?”

“I’m 16 now, but I’ll be 17 soon.”

“Such prudence at such a young age... I fear to think of what is yet to come.”

“I just rummaged through some books and read about it.”

“No, no, that’s not all. It truly seems that the blood of “*Mars*” is still as strong as ever, even after a 1,000 years. I’m sure his Majesty the Second Emperor is pleased to have left behind such a impressive descendant.”

Though, he’s actually the man himself...

Unable to say anything in response, Hiro simply nods to end it at that. Then he notices

a small noise and gets down on the ground.

A shaky voice comes out from the throat of a nervous Doryx.

“According to our spy report, they have 2,000 camel cavalrymen. Even if we are under the guise of darkness, we on the other hand, have 500 light infantrymen. We can not defeat them with a direct approach.”

“There’s no need for a direct approach. Please beat the drums once I engage in battle with the camel cavalrymen. That alone will cause the enemy to fall into a panic. Afterwards, have everyone fire their arrows.”

“Understood. Please be careful.”

“I’ll leave the rest to you.”

“As you wish.”

Hiro grabbed the “shiryu’s” reins and stood him up.

As he does, Doryx speaks up surprised.

“A-Are you taking it with you? There’s a chance the arrows might...”

“It’s okay. I’m sure “*Camellia*” will protect it.”

Hiro proudly struck his chest, then disappeared into the darkness.

A short while passes. Doryx was befuddled, but he soon begins to give out orders to the soldiers.

As he does, the sound of swords clashing and angry bellows could be heard in the dark night. A battle they could not see had begun.

“Bang the drums with all your might. Don’t forget to raise your voices as well!”

A loud sound cuts through the night air and rings out. As it does, the sound of drums echoed out in concert from all directions. In addition to this location, they had a 100 soldiers lying hidden in three other positions.

It’s still too soon to fire the arrows. Doryx stared into the darkness.

A brilliant silver light draws a line in the dark night and disappears.

Doryx is bewitched by this wondrous scene which looks like shooting stars raining down from the sky.

After a soldier patted his shoulder and Doryx regained his senses, he forced his orders out from his throat in a panic.

“O-Okay, stop beating the drums. Fire the signal arrow!”

After he gives out his orders, a signal arrow lets out a whistle and rips through the wind as it disappears into the darkness. After a pause, another is let loose. With that as the signal, the soldiers fire a volley of arrows from their bows.

A number of screams could be heard from where Hiro disappeared to.

“Okay, they’re hitting. Don’t stop! Keep firing!”

They have no idea where they’re firing. The archers simply kept their hands moving. By the time they were about to run out of arrows, the enemy could be heard shouting “run for it!” If the sun were out, they would have been able to see the enemy running about trying to escape. They felt it was unfortunate that they missed out on this thrill.

Then after a while, Hiro returns straddled atop the “shiryu”.

Because he was in all black to begin with, and the fact that he’s covered in darkness, they’re unable to tell whether or not he’s hurt.

Doryx ran to him and immediately called out.

“Your Highness, are you hurt?”

“I’m all right.”

“I’m glad to hear that. So, how much of the enemy’s numbers were you able to reduce?”

“I can’t say for sure, but... they suffered friendly fire too, so I think we saw a better result than we expected.”

“That’s good news.”

“It would be nice if they just ran off somewhere instead of returning to their camp.”

“With their situation, I’m sure there will be those who won’t be able to return even if they want to.”

Running around aimlessly in the dark is like drowning in the ocean. There's no way you can tell your right from your left. Not only did they receive a surprise attack, but they're also in a state of confusion, so they're unable to think clearly. More than a few of them will likely freeze to death having lost their sense of direction. If they happen to be wounded, their chances of survival are significantly lower.

Doryx tried to figure out how many of the 2,000 men would end up surviving, but he gave up.

This is because they would find out once the sun came up.

"Let us reward the soldiers another day and return to camp now."

Hiro answered Doryx with a nod.

"You're right. Let's get some rest in preparation for tomorrow. Also, I'll allow the soldiers from this battle just enough alcohol that it doesn't affect them tomorrow."

Cheers of joy rose up. The soldiers felt light on their feet as if their fatigue had been washed away.

Hiro's lips formed into a big smile. But Doryx approached him, causing them to turn back.

"The enemy should soon be realizing they were deceived."

"Probably. They don't have enough soldiers or the time for another night assault. More importantly, I don't think they're in the position to be thinking of that."

Then, Doryx remembered something and threw out a question.

"Changing the subject, why did you only give one of the enemy spies Schteizen silver coins?"

"Ahh, that?"

"I don't mind if you don't want to tell me."

“...Second grade enlisted officer Doryx, what would you do if you were asked a string of questions?”

While thinking it strange that he changed the topic, Doryx answered honestly.

“I think I would grow tired of it. But I think I would search for answers regardless.”

“It’s like that. You throw out a number of problems and confuse the enemy. You don’t give them time to think. That’s what the Schteizen silver coins are for. They should be racking their brains about it right about now.”

“And you’re saying you give them the next problem before they find an answer?”

“That’s pretty much it.”

“Do you not think of the possibility of failure?”

“I do think about it, but you can’t accomplish anything if you fear failure. Besides, we’ve come this far without failing in executing any of our—”

Hiro broke off, looked up at the sky, then continued to speak.

“— Now, we just give them enough hope so they don’t run away, then make them taste despair.”

Hiro said smoothly, as a chill caused Doryx to come to a standstill.

— Everything is in the palm of his hand. Everyone on this battlefield is dancing atop the palm of this young boy’s hand.

“Ha, haha. Truly a *“sovereign’s pillar”*. No, I’m not sure if such a title would suffice...”

And he’s still 16. A fearsome prodigy. What’s more, his opponent is the “Wild Eagle of Change” no less, the hero of the Lichtein Dukedom who once drove away Schteizen’s army of 30,000. Against such an opponent, forget about being cautious, he continues to employ bold tactics and succeeding in executing them.

— *And like this, he deals with this hero as if it were child's play. The old veteran is no more than an infant.*

How far is this young boy able to “see” exactly? And did his distant ancestor “Mars” also have this same profound insight?

It's impossible for an ordinary person like Doryx to understand the stratagems of prodigies such as them. It's impossible to arrive at the depths of their focus or objectives.

Which is precisely why... he found him so fascinating— He wanted to see what the future held in store for this young boy.



“Give me a status report.”

Said Ranquil, as he watched the burning corpses of camels. There are camel corpses scattered throughout their camp, their lives were brought to an end by arrows. None of them had riders.

“There are minimal casualties. We have a few injured, but none dead. Some tents were set on fire from the rampaging camels, but we were able to put them out before they spread.”

Perhaps it was because they were fatigued, but the regular soldiers and the slaves sat where they were, breathing heavily. Thanks to their strenuous efforts, the enemy failed in their night assault.

No— Maybe you could say they had succeeded. They were able to drain exhaust the soldiers after all. Ranquil looks away and starts heading to the tent in which a war council is to begin. A number of staff officers follow behind him.

“Let the soldiers rest.”

“Understood.”

“Also— one more thing.”

Ranquil stopped for a moment and turned back.

They were fully prepared. But what appeared were 1,500 camels without any riders. The enemies which they desperately fought off were not people, but a group of camels tied together by ropes— Even as a joke, this is too much.

“Cut off the spies’ heads after you get them to tell you everything they know.”

“Yes!”

“So this the result of taking the bait after saying we shouldn’t rush anything.”

All the stratagems until now were like childish tricks. But they were all truly effective. Amazing insight and plotting. He is in awe of these carefully laid out plans. A person whose name is known even within the Grantz Grant Empire— or possibly the birth of a new star. A change in times, the passing on of the torch to a new generation— Ranquil is forced to realize how much he has aged.

“And I thought I still had a role to play...”

He has no more room for growth.

He doesn’t have the youth to come up with any new ideas or plans to break through this situation.

“Hah...”

It may have been that he had grown arrogant. He was once called the “Wild Eagle of Change”, but maybe that had gotten to his head.

Ranquil entered a tent and sank into a chair.

The light from his eyes was gone.

“Should we retreat?”

But if he returned to the capital, the nobles would likely betray and kill him. He roused everyone saying they could win, but all he did was get led around by the nose. He was

already shunned by the nobles to begin with, so it's unlikely he would be forgiven.

"Even if I weren't killed..."

There will surely be nobles who would double cross him. Even if he shut himself up in the capital, he would fall to an insurrection. He felt like it wouldn't matter no matter what he did, and it annoyed him just to think of anything.

"Excuse me."

Said a staff officer as he appeared at the entrance. He quickly approached Ranquil, and placed three small bags on the table. Ranquil points his icy cold eyes at the staff officer.

"What is this?"

"The spies were carrying these."

"Did they confess?"

At this point, it doesn't matter either way, but he opens the three bags.

"No, they say everything they reported was true."

"Is that so?"

After discovering the contents, Ranquil smiled bitterly.

"Are they still trying to deceive us...? Such greed."

All the bags had Grantz gold coins in them. The spy who gave the false report had Schteizen silver coins. As he tried to think of the possible intention for that...

"Your Excellency Ranquil!"

Another staff officer entered with a disturbed voice.

“The night assault has failed! Less than 600 camel cavalrymen have returned!”

“ ... ”

He predicted this.

Considering they were outwitted so well, you could say this was the obvious outcome. This just means this was an invitation from the beginning.

“It’s unfortunate.”

“In other words... with just 3,000 men, we have to drive away the Fourth Imperial Army and the rebel army’s forces of over 13,000 men?”

An invisible blade is pierced deep into his body.

Though it gave no sense of pain, it was shaving away at his life.

— *Retreat.*

It happened when this one word appeared in the back of his head.

“Your Excellency! Your Excellency Ranquil! I bring good news!”

The one who stumbled into the tent was a messenger.

Everyone’s gaze pierced into him. But he focused only on Ranquil, as if he didn’t have time to pay the others any mind.

Ranquil knit his brows suspiciously.

“Settle down. What happened? What is this good news?”

“W-We’ve discovered the enemy’s supply trains!”

“M-My word! Is this true?!”

The one who raised his voice was a staff officer.

Ranquil lifts himself up from his chair.

“Where?”

The messenger ran to the long table and pointed at a single spot. It was the fort which was felled by the Fourth Imperial Army, the location they had assumed from the beginning.

“We have discovered goods being carried in here.”

“What about security? Do you know how many there are?”

“We don’t know for certain, but we believe it to be somewhere between 800 and a 1,000.”

“A thousand, is it...”

Now that they’ve lost a large number of their camel cavalrymen, it would be difficult to spare over a 1,000 soldiers.

“How was the situation at the fort?”

“The main gate was burned down, and the rear gate was also destroyed.”

“Hmm, so the fort can’t be held down.”

Ranquil places his hand on his chin and contemplates.

“...We leave our camp as is and raid the fort with the entire army, burn their food provisions at daybreak, and attack the demoralized enemy’s flank. Can we do it...?”

The enemy is probably also aware of the fact that they don’t have any leeway. Which is why there’s no doubt an attack on the supply trains would be unexpected. They’ll take control before daybreak, and if they burn everything around the time the enemy realizes what’s going on, they can shake them up.

Ranquil placed both hands on the table, slowly gazed at the face of each staff officer,

and spoke.

“If anyone has any doubts, let’s hear it.”

“Are you absolutely sure about leaving our camp as is?”

“That’s right. Moving our encampment would take time. Most importantly, if we cleared away our camp and drew the enemy’s attention, this would all be meaningless.”

It seemed the staff officer was satisfied with this explanation as he nodded his head. Then Ranquil spoke in a lowered voice.

“However, I forbid this to be disclosed to anyone. Enemy spies may be lurking about. On the surface, we tell the soldiers we are retreating. If any spies have snuck in, that will also work towards our plan.”

In order to strike the enemy’s flank, they have to make them think they will remain where there are, without letting them catch wind of their plans. If any spies have snuck in, they’ll let them report back that they’ve run away.

Ranquil stiffened his express and spit out in a powerful voice.

“The fact that we are going to attack the fort does not leave this place. If there are no questions, move out!”

“Understood!”

His eyes which were imprisoned by darkness regained their light, and his foggy mind had become clear.

“It seems we’ll finally be able to drive nail into them.”



— *Dreams are born from illusions, and they begin to paint reality.*

Who was it that said that— He doesn't even have to try to recall. The person comes to mind immediately.

It was a wise woman. It was a woman who was like a goddess, always thinking of her people.

— *The world is full of lies, and humans likely live their lives not knowing truth.*

She lamented her beloved human race thusly, but it is this race which is now the most prosperous.

Humans, elves, dwarves, zorostas, and anthros, the five main races. Furthermore, there is a barbarian race known as the three barbarian tribes, and they are currently spreading throughout Aletia.

However, there are no sign of the wars dying out, which she so wished for.

“Because of the many foolish rulers in this world, the heavens are yet to be settled.”

Which is precisely why, although she is but a small light now— the day she becomes a brilliant one, they will raise “Valdite” to the heavens to become the sun which provides light for all the people.

As Hiro looked up, the moon, which paints the night sky, was concealed by thick clouds.

“Until then, I'll protect her so that no one discovers her.”

But he lacks the power to do so. This isn't a battle he can win on his own.

A thousand years ago, he had the “Five Heavenly Black Generals” and the “Raven Army”.

You could say he was surrounded by superbly skilled individuals. No matter what difficulties they faced, they could smash through them all.

They were like a colossal jaw, with the force to consume all the heavens, which dominated this world.

“I need to get my hands on that again.”

Timing, geographical advantage, fellowship. He’s lacking in all these aspects.

Once he obtains them all, Liz’s existence will likely shine much brighter.

Like the full moon shining brilliantly in the night sky cleared of darkness, with the stars by its side, she will stand atop the heavens with the people standing by her side.

Hiro looked towards Liz’s tent.

“It’s not too far off into the future. But... there’s no need to be tied down by unnecessary obligations yet.”

As he turns around, the hem of his black clothes hit the night air played a loud note.

Chapter 21

Pride

—The next morning.

The Fourth Imperial Army picked up camp and was heading north in a horizontal formation.

The vanguard unit of a 1,000 soldiers departed at dawn and was in formation at a site 9 sels (3 km) away. Behind them, was a slave liberation army formation composed of 3,000 slaves and mercenaries.

“So the battle’s about to intensify.”

The moment Hiro mutters that, beyond even the vanguard unit— there was a black smoke beginning to rise from a destroyed fort high up into the sky.

It’s probably their supply trains that are burning. The sound of the enemy’s war cries and drums reach all the way to Hiro. But the Fourth Imperial Army was not shaken. In fact, they find it strange that that place is burning and they don’t understand why.

This was because the Fourth Imperial Army’s actual supply trains were at a different location. Hiro simply had food provisions and weapons carried to the burning fort to lure the enemy.

“It’s almost amusing how easily they fall into these traps.”

“It’s because they were cornered. If you dangle bait in front of them, they’ll jump at it.”

Hiro shrugs his shoulders at Doryx and sits down in a simple chair prepared for him there.

Next to him, laid the “shiryu”. He looked back at Doryx and saw that he was looking out ahead with glee in his eyes. The vanguard unit and the Lichtein Dukedom’s army has clashed.

“Your Highness Hiro, the enemy believes they have burned our food provisions and their morale has gone up significantly. I doubt the vanguard unit alone will be able to win. More so than anything, there’s too big of gap in their numbers. If the vanguard unit gets annihilated, and the slave liberation army behind them is defeated as well, their morale will increase even further. Then they may use that momentum to charge here. If that were to happen, I believe it may be slightly inconvenient—”

Hiro raised his left hand to cut Doryx off.

“That won’t happen.”

“How are you so sure?”

“There will probably be casualties in the slave liberation army, but the enemy’s morale will fall before that, and they will be annihilated.”

“Ohh... Have you prepared another clever scheme?”

“Even if it is a battle you can win, you’ll get blindsided if you let your guard down. You have to adapt to situations and change them to your favor— Well, that’s only if the enemy’s strength lasts that long.”

Indeed, the Lichtein Dukedom’s army’s fatigue has accumulated. But that was all part of the plan.

They worked hard to constantly put them on alert without allowing them any rest.

“Indeed, it seems they worked hard during the night— I’m looking forward to this.”

Doryx rubbed his chin and grinned broadly.

After looking at him suspiciously, Hiro waved his left hand.

The standard bearer raises his flag. A crest of red soil and lilies— The Sixth Imperial Princess’s insignia.

After receiving the signal, the cavalry units of each flank slowly begin their advance. Without a single man falling out of line, the Fourth Imperial Army begins to change their formation.

After confirming this, the commanding officer turns her horse and rides over to Hiro.

“Are we starting?”

A beautiful young girl. Her flame-like crimson hair suits her well. None of her beauty is lost on the dirty battlefield, and she even exudes a sense of elegance. She is the Sixth Imperial Princess of the Grantz Grand Empire, and those close to her call her Liz. Hiro smiled at her and nodded.

“It’s about the right time.”

“Then—”

“You stay here. Got it?”

She doesn’t have to finish her sentence. She probably wants to head out to the frontline.

But if the commanding officer acts carelessly, there will be disorder in the chain of command.

There may possibly be situations where she’ll have to go out to the frontline— but not now.

Liz sulks and puffs her cheeks.

Hiro smiles wryly and points his hand at the maid sitting in front of her— to Mileu in disguise.

“Are you planning to take her to the frontline, too?”

“You could...”

“I can’t. It seems like she hates me.”

She started ignoring him after she found out it was Hiro who sent the slave liberation army to the frontline.

It’s probably not to the point of hating, but it’s certain that she’s grown cautious towards him.

Even if she didn’t hate him, there’s no way Hiro could look after a little girl.

He wouldn’t know what to talk about with her, and even if he tried to draw out information about Gahda and the others, she’s a sharp girl. She’d probably hold her

tongue. He doesn't want to worry about anything unnecessary on the battlefield. He also wants to avoid any awkwardness.

"Really? I think she's just nervous after hearing you're a descendant of the Second Emperor."

Said Liz to follow up, but Hiro pretended he didn't hear her and stretched his arm forward.

His finger points to large clouds of dust rising up— It's where the vanguard unit and the Lichtein Dukedom's army has engaged in battle.

"Once the slave liberation army gives the signal, have the right and left flanks move out at full speed and strike their sides."

"What about headquarters?"

"They'll advance slowly."

"What about the Lichtein Dukedom's rear? Even if we attack them from three sides, they'll probably escape in that direction."

"I've prepared for that, too. They have nowhere to run. What's more, it was checkmate to begin with."

Even before this war had begun— the moment they attacked the Grantz Grand Empire, it was over.

Land, military power, resources, population, the Grantz Grand Empire surpasses them in all aspects.

Without any allies or hopes of reinforcements, their attack was synonymous to the fall of their country.

There's no telling whether or not they thought they had any chance of winning. This is because all the people who made the decision to attack died in battle. One can sympathize with General Ranquil having been chosen only after all other options were no longer available.

(What would I have done if I were in his shoes...?)

There's no need to think about it. He probably would have chosen to resist, just like General Ranquil.

That's actually the path he chose a 1,000 years ago. To put it more accurately, you could say he didn't even have a choice. But even if they withdrew in the current situation, the only thing awaiting them would be destruction. If they're going to be destroyed either way, instead of sitting and waiting, they might as well forward and fight for survival.

(It seems things turned out completely differently for them, though.)

The foolish duke was defeated by the slave liberation army, and all the great nobles have also fallen, leaving only the parasitic, useless nobles. But regardless, the fact that Ranquil stood against them without throwing in the towel speaks well for him.

And above all else, he lured the Fourth Imperial Army deep into their territory and planned to attack them after pitting them against the slave liberation army and exhausting them— He ended up failing, but it was a magnificent plan.

If he had managed to succeed, he probably would have made a triumphant return to the capital right about now and praised as a hero once more. No doubt his name would have been known to the whole world as the one who defeated the Grantz Grand Empire.

Which is why it's a waste to kill him. It's difficult to accept the loss of a mind such as his.

(I can use him. But he has to be alive for that— In which case, I won't fixate on it.)

Capturing him alive on the battlefield would be difficult, and if he were adamant about it, it would result in casualties. If he ends up dying in this battle, that just shows he's human. If it comes to that, there's no choice but to give up. This is why he didn't tell Liz or anyone else his desire to capture him.

(Will the heavens decide to keep him alive or have him killed... Or—)

Hiro stood up and waved his right arm to the side.

A single flag rises up and shows itself on the battlefield, then flaps in large swaying

motions as if to clear the clouds of dust away.

It is the flag of a ruler, with black soil and a dragon holding a silver sword.

The soldiers cheer. It's only natural. During a long period of a 1,000 years, this coat of arms was not used even once. Until now, it was buried in history and could only be revered in books.

Seeing this actually appear before their very eyes, it made the hearts of the fervent believers dance with excitement. Hiro lets out a smile, grips "Excalibur's" handle, which he had at his waist, and draws it out vigorously.

Seeing the silver sword pointing towards the heavens, the shouting stops. The tip of the sword bathes in the light of the sun and takes on the seven colors of the rainbow.

"All troops, advance."



Without any flowery speech, he simply states the objective.

He's succinct, and his voice is barely audible— hardly enough to ring out to the entire area. But his voice had surely reached everyone. This was evident because the soldiers of the first battalion, second battalion, and headquarters all banged their spears on their shields and began to shout.

Once in the past, First Emperor Altius spoke of the young boy thusly.

He said— He is a heavensent child during our strife.

He said— His stratagems are transcendent.

Therefore— without even speaking, the very existence of Mars is able to shake the hearts of people—

“Phew...”

Hiro stuck a finger into his collar and tugged on it, releasing him from his feeling of suffocation. He was breathing a bit hard, too. It seems he was feeling tense from giving out a command after such a long time.

Even though there was nothing wrong with the way he did it, he felt like there was as he looked at Liz. She had a big grin on her face as she had “Laevateinn” raised while she gave out instructions to the soldiers.

(I wonder if this is best.)

Hiro strokes his chest. It seems he's satisfied as long as he can see her.

As he thinks this, a horn is blown. Like a rippling wave, each unit spreads out and the massive war cries of the soldiers become a melody. And like that, a roar like that of a dragon shakes the space around them, and the entire army begins their advance without a single soldier falling out of place.

Normally, this was something Liz, the commanding officer, should have done, but...

“Since this is your first battle, I’ll leave it to you, Hiro. People are watching you, so at least fix your bedhead— Come on, get over here.”

He was scolded, like a child by his mother. This was their war council before the rising sun.

“Hiro, will we continue like this and attack the enemy’s camp?”

He pauses his thoughts after Liz questioned him.

“No, we’ll wait after we close some distance. After that...”

He starts to speak, but changes his mind. This is because he noticed the large clouds of dust on the frontline rising.

“It looks like they’ve begun.”

“Yeah. The end is drawing near.”

As Hiro strokes his eyepatch, his smile broadens, implying that he’s enjoying himself.

“We’ve given them hope— Next, they’ll know despair.”

Hiro thrust his arms out and closed his fists tightly, as if enwrapping the battlefield in his hands.



At the location which would be considered the frontline, the Fourth Imperial Army—the vanguard unit was in a state of confusion.

They were surprised at the Lichtein Dukedom’s army’s vigor, but more so than that,

the dust clouds were cutting of their field of view and they were unable to get a grasp of the situation around them.

“Damn it, what’s going on?”

“Agh!”

As General Kielo swung his sword down, blood sprayed high into the sky from an enemy soldier’s chest.

After the enemy spits blood out from his mouth and collapses on the ground, General Kielo raises his sword and says in a loud voice.

“Take care not to strike your allies! Our field of view should clear shortly!”

With the enemy having penetrated so far into their lines, they should fall back for the moment to regroup, but General Kielo turned around and grit his teeth. The slave liberation army had joined the battle, so they’re unable to fall back even if they wanted to.

“If they had stayed put, this wouldn’t have happened!”

Because his failures will not be forgiven, he has to gain results in this battle in order to be called to the capital. This lot obstructs his way to no end.

General Kielo brandishes his sword to vent his rage. A scream rises and a spray of blood goes flying. His sword penetrates through an opening in his enemy’s armor. One after another, enemy soldiers are hit in vital points and buried.

“Don’t underestimate me!”

Despite his current situation, he still has his ego from having risen to the rank of general. He’s also survived many battles and scenes of carnage. He’s even wandered between the border of life and death. There’s nothing he lacks as a warrior.

“Your Excellency! The enemy has increased their numbers! I believe we should withdraw for the moment.”

“...Grr, but if we do...”

General Kielo hesitated at the staff officer’s words.

“This will all be for naught if you die here!”

“There’s no need to tell me that. But we can’t because the slaves are in the way.”

“They are lowly slaves. No one will complain if we kill them. Can we not simply cut down those in our way and create a path?”

“But... even if I escaped after abandoning my subordinates and killing the slaves, his Highness isn’t likely to forgive me.”

“It’s impossible to discern between friend and foe in this dust. All the more so with the slaves... I believe we can tell his Highness as such.”

“Hmm, is that the only option?”

“So?”

“It’s unfortunate, but I can’t even give out instructions in this sandstorm... There’s no other choice. The main unit will withdraw now.”

Said General Kielo, hardly looking disappointed.

“Understood. Then— ?!”

The body of the staff officer who was about to take action went flying. Blood dripped from an arrowhead which was pierced through the staff officer’s collapsed body as the sand absorbed it.

General Kielo was dumbfounded, but a sharp pain forced him back to reality.

“Agh... What’s this? An arrow?”

He looks at the arrow pierced through his arm and his eyes open wide in surprise. In an instant— a flurry of arrows pierced through the dust clouds and came raining

down. General Kielo's face tenses as he immediately picks up a shield and crouches down, but the soldiers and staff officers around him are unable to react and they drop like flies.

He thought it was an attack from the enemy, but oddly enough, they're flying in from the rear. It's difficult to imagine the enemy had gone around to their rear because the slave liberation army was there waiting. In which case, it's obvious who these arrows came from. They belong to the slave liberation army.

"Do slaves not even know how to fire arrows?!"

After waiting for the rain of arrows to let up, General Kielo got on his feet, threw his shield down, and pulled out the arrow which was pierced into his arm.

"Ugh— I-Is anyone here?!"

General Kielo took a step forward to start walking, but then he stopped.

This was because a large body had appeared before him. It was a large man with light purple skin which he remembers seeing before. He holds a sword smeared in blood in his right hand. In his left, he was gripping a spear of the Lichtein Dukedom.

"Why are you here?"

"..."

Silently, the large man— the zorosta approaches.

"Say something. To begin with, you should be in the rear, so why—"

He wasn't able to finish asking why his sword was smeared in blood.

This was because there was a shock running through his chest. Something hot rose up from the base of his throat. He held it back in his mouth, and as he drew his chin in to look down— there was a spear pierced through his body.

“Ugh... Wh-what?”

Fresh blood sprays out from between his fingers.

“Wh- Why...?”

The strength escaped from his legs, and General Kielo placed his hands on the ground as he fell to his knees.

A large shadow falls down from above his head. General Kielo looked up. His eyes were mostly filled with confusion, but there was also agitation seeping out from them.

“Looks like you’re in a lot of pain. Are you unable to breath?”

He couldn’t read anything from the zorosta’s expression. Without signs of any emotion, he simply looked down on General Kielo with cold eyes.

“You reap what you sow. You should have been a bit more humble.”

The zorosta presses his blade against General Kielo’s nape and speaks.

“I’ll pass on a message from the *“one-eyed dragon”*.”

“...”

“With your greed for gaining merits, you thoughtlessly took slaves incapable of coordination into your ranks, inviting confusion to the army. The responsibility for that weighs heavily on you. And if we added all your violations of military regulations, there would be no end. Consequently, you are demoted— is what he said.”

With all the stains of this war having been pushed onto General Kielo...

“Ah...”

He opens and closes his mouth, but he's unable to voice his bitterness through words, and there is only blood and foam spilling out.

"This is farewell. General— no, Second grade enlisted officer Kielo."

Unable to even beg for his life or curse anyone, a fresh trail of blood flew from General Kielo's neck, high into the sky.

After throwing down his sword, the zorosta— Gahda turns his back to the corpse and rejoins a group of mercenaries who are on standby a distance away. He grabs the reins of a camel which was prepared for him, jumped on its back, and spoke.

"We're escaping. Our role is done."

"Are you okay just running away?"

"Yes. But we have to put on a show as we run away though."

"Leave it to me!"

"All right... I will. If that's settled, beat the drums."

"Oh yeah—! All right boys, we're running for it! Follow the boss!"

"What an unpleasant command."

Gahda's camel ran off at full speed. The mercenary group follows after him so as not to fall behind. Noticing the sound of the drums, the slave infantrymen also start scrambling to save themselves.

"Don't shake your asses too much at the Lichtein Dukedom's army! They don't make any distinctions between men and women!"

With his vulgar laughs lacking even a shred of nerves, the mercenary rides beside Gahda.

"How's that? Not too shabby, right?"

"...It's befitting a mercenary group."

Gahda lets out a troubled sigh. Then, he looked towards the headquarters of the Fourth Imperial Army. He did everything he was supposed to do. All that's left is to wait for the final part.

Lichtein Dukedom's hero, Ranquil, may have realized by now, too.

"They call him the *"one-eyed dragon"*, but... hmm, *"hero eater"* might work, too."

If the neighboring countries knew the whole story of this war, no doubt they would shake in their boots.

"At any rate, I suppose we focus on escape now."

They have to escape by the time the dust clears, or else their lives will be in danger. These dust clouds were created by Gahda, but...

"If I had my demon emperor sword... I wouldn't have had to worry about exhausting my magic."

Now that he's been abandoned by his weapon, it was difficult for him to keep this up. Exhausting his magic wouldn't mean death, but he would end up losing consciousness. If he ended up falling asleep in the dead center of this battlefield, it would lead directly to his death.

"Well, I saw my assignment through. I suppose I'll take it easy now."

He recalled the young boy's face and snorted.



When the clouds of dust lifted, Ranquil noticed something was off.

The morale of the soldiers is greatly improved. Even the vanguard unit of the Fourth

Imperial Army can't stop their momentum. And yet, what is this uneasy feeling lurking inside him? He can tell his many years of experience is sounding an alarm.

"So, it's quite likely this is a trap as well..."

"What's the matter, general?"

It was Karl who responded to Ranquil's words.

Ranquil smiled in reply to put him at ease and called for a staff officer.

"Yes?"

"Assign about a 100 camel cavalrymen to Lord Karl and have them retreat."

"What are you saying? There's no need to run away, is there? We're the ones pushing them back."

Karl voiced his protest, but Ranquil placed a hand on his shoulder.

"The situation hasn't settled yet. Even if we were to annihilate the Fourth Imperial Army's vanguard unit, there are still over 8,000 enemy troops left."

"But won't we be able to win with our current momentum?"

"Perhaps, but our chances of losing may be higher."

"Hmm..."

"If it comes down to it, please escape to the capital with the 100 camel cavalrymen. I should be able to buy you a little bit of time."

"And you?"

"I will hold the enemy down here. Lord Karl, you—"

"Enemy sighting from our rear! There are about 3,000 to 5,000 men! They seem to be mainly comprised of cavalry units!"

The messenger's report sent a shock running through the main unit. Everyone held their breath and turned back.

A large cloud of dust is heading their way. It was true. They could see a large number

of flags here and there.

“Ambush soldiers from the Fourth Imperial Army?”

Ranquil asks the messenger.

“There is a group of flags with the crest of the eastern nobles of the Grantz Grand Empire.”

“The eastern nobles, you say...?”

“There are also flags of the Kelheit house. I’m certain it’s reinforcements from the eastern nobles.”

“I’m sure they were without a head of the house. Did she take in a new husband...?”

The Kelheit house keeps the eastern nobles united. When he heard its head had died, he remembers hoping for an internal rift resulting from the conflict regarding the new headship, but to his dismay, that did not happen.

“Also, I’m not sure how to put this...”

“What is it? Out with it.”

“We’ve also confirmed sighting of a crest of black soil and a dragon holding a silver sword... the crest of the Second Emperor.”

“What...!?”

Any resident of this world knows this.

Currently, he is one of the Twelve Great Gods of Grantz— He is worshipped as “Mars”, and he is the man who long ago laid the foundation for the Grantz Grand Empire. It is his sazul*.

(TL note: Kanji is god and flag.)

“...If that’s true, we’re in trouble.”

The blood flowing in his veins goes cold. The sensation in his fingers disappears and his mind starts to go blank.

He feels as if he's being assailed by some mysterious chill. Ranquil asks again with a shaky voice.

"You've made sure of this, right?"

"If the history books are true..."

"...Are you telling me the blood of the Second Emperor didn't die out?"

The man praised as the "Twin Black Hero King" left this world without taking a wife or leaving any children. Thereafter, the Second Emperor's coat of arms was never used, not once. Its use is forbidden, even if done thoughtlessly. If anyone tried to use it without permission, they would be executed without question, regardless of social status. No one knows why this is so thoroughly enforced. Maybe people fear touching on the spirit king's wrath, or they respect the hero king who became a god. Either way, it's a fact that the crest has taken center stage, and there's a high chance they've found a blood relative of the hero king.

"I suppose it's best to avoid escaping to the rear."

It's better to face the somewhat fatigued Fourth Imperial Army rather than the reinforcements who's full of energy. More importantly, it's much safer to avoid this mysterious character who suddenly appeared. They have to take the initiative before the two flanks surround them.

"There's nothing we can do staying put here. We will charge with our entire army!"

Currently, with their high morale and their momentum, even if they're unable to break through the center, they should at least be able to allow Karl to escape. It was checkmate the moment the enemy appeared to their rear. No matter how high their morale may be, if they're attacked from all sides, the only end awaiting them is total annihilation.

"This is a result of my lack of tact. This responsibility falls entirely on me."

In which case, in order to wash himself of disgrace, he will fall brilliantly. Regardless of his current position, he is still but a soldier of the army. There was even a time during his first battle when he wandered around a battlefield with a single sword... It doesn't sound bad going back to the beginning.

"Lord Karl, we will carve open a path for you! Please take it using your guards as shields and escape!"

He doesn't need an answer. More importantly, there's no need to hear it.

"Lord Karl, please listen well! I will explain the final plan!"

He'll leave the rest to Karl.

"Now that we've burned the enemy's food provisions, they can not have a drawn out battle. After this, if the Fourth Imperial Army should resort to plundering, launch a surprise attack from behind. If they should scatter, crush them all individually. If we are to hold our castle, continue to provoke the enemy and exhaust them! If you do, I'm certain they will choose a path of self destructions on their own!"

"What is this all of a sudden?! Wh-What are you saying?!"

"I leave the rest to you!"

He draws the sword from his waist and motivates the soldiers.

"Fear not! Raise your voices! Let the enemy taste defeat!"

Ranquil shouted and broke through the dust clouds.

And then— he was made to feel despair.

"...It can't be."

Every single one of the soldiers who passed through the dust clouds ahead of him were buried in the sand. There are innumerable arrows pierced into their bodies, and there wasn't a single person in Ranquil's field of view who was breathing.

His hot body quickly goes cold. He stops his camel after seeing this abnormal situation, which also meant a halt for the army.

Karl, who was riding beside him, turned pale white. The corners of his eyes wrinkled up and he held his tongue.

"...Black soil and a dragon holding a silver sword, is it."

Fourth Imperial Army headquarters— The flag floats in the air from a gentle breeze. Turning your eyes away from it, you can see cavalry units to the left and right charging with massive force. Even the clouds of dust, which were such a nuisance, were now gone. And to the rear were enemy reinforcements approaching like a giant mouth ready to swallow its prey.

"The net is complete. So we're not even able to allow Lord Karl to escape."

In the front are orderly ranks of the Fourth Imperial Army's archers, and units of heavy and light infantrymen.

Although they are the enemy, it's an admirable show of leadership. Ranquil thinks about how much of a pleasure it must be to lead such well trained soldiers into battle. In contrast, his soldiers are completely exhausted, no different from withered old dogs.

"Thinking about it... there were a number of strange things from the beginning."

When he thought he came up with a clever scheme, it was something the enemy had already predicted, and when he thought he had found an opening, it turned out he was simply acting as the enemy had anticipated. In the end, all he did was dance in the palm of their hand.

“...Then, I know what it is I have to do now.”

They can not lose Karl here.

“My apologies, Lord Karl. It seems this is the end.”

He’s fine taking all the responsibility for this loss alone.

“...Let us throw down our weapons. Wave the white flag.”

The sword which slipped out from the hand of the man called the “Wild Eagle of Change” fell to ground, spreading dust and sinking into the sand.

The soldiers feebly crumble and fall where they stand.

As if to emphasize the fact that they had lost, the light shining down on the various weapons thrown on the ground reflect a dull light.

“But I don’t understand what the purpose of all this was. What was his aim, cornering me to this extent?”

As Ranquil stroked the wound on his face, he calmly gazed at the “sazul” of “Mars” fluttering in the headquarters of the Fourth Imperial Army.

Chapter 22

Bloodlust

Not a single thing obstructs the sunlight pouring down from the now clear blue sky. Heat spreads all throughout the surface like a network of roots, draining away the vitality of all the living creatures.

The earth looks like an endless stretch of sand— You can tell anything resembling a cool breeze is nonexistent here.

This is the Lichtein Dukedom— a country dominated by a scorching hot desert.

We're yet to know what will be said of this place by future generations, but for now, it is the location of a nameless battlefield— a place where a war is about to come to an end.

There are soldiers in orderly lines with faces full of vitality. They are wearing armor tempered by the special techniques of craftsmen, and have swords and spears in hand, kept well maintained for the sole purpose of killing.

They are warriors born for battle. They are an elite group who train day in and day out for that one purpose— They are the protectors of the southern region of the Grantz Grant Empire, the Fourth Imperial Army.

At their center— At a heavily guarded headquarters was the commanding officer, Liz, and her staff officer, Hiro.

Liz lifted her hand to shade her eyes from the overwhelming glare of the sun. Her gaze was pointed at a group of flags with crests on them.

“The crest of the Kelheit house... Is that my sister? But why is she here?”

Her confusion is understandable. It would take the eastern nobles a considerable number of days to come here passing through the territory of the southern nobles. And with this number of soldiers, all the more so.

Hiro approached the bewildered Liz to answer her, but she noticed his presence and spoke up first.

“Hiro, my sister’s here.”

“Is that how it looks to you too, Liz?”

“Well, yeah. There are so many flags of the eastern nobles...”

“Hehe, that’s true. There really are a lot of the eastern nobles’ flags.”

Liz looked at Hiro, but...

“...What’s with that face?”

Seeing the young boy holding back a laughter, she knit her neatly trimmed eyebrows in response.

Hiro places his hand over his mouth to hold back his laughter.

His action only irritated Liz even more, and she puffed her cheeks a bit.

After apologizing, Hiro asked her a question.

“By the way, can you tell how many there are?”

“...Umm—, I think about 3,000.”

He seemed disappointed, but he answered her while thinking how adorable she was for replying honestly.

“Actually, there are 500.”

“What do you mean?”

“It just looks like a large army. And the reinforcements aren’t the eastern nobles.

They're the private soldiers of Margrave Grinda who I had lie in ambush beforehand."

"They're Uncle's private soldiers?"

"That's right."

"But those coats of arms belong to the eastern nobles."

"I asked them to just send us their flags ahead of time."

"So, just the flags belong to the eastern nobles, and the soldiers there are from Uncle's private army?"

"Yup. I think it went well for an improvised plahh!"

His cheeks are suddenly pinched and the end of his sentence comes out funny.

"So you were grinning like a fool while you saw I was confused, is that right?"

"Yesh."

"And were you satisfied?"

"..."

While he was searching for the right words, Liz spoke quickly.

"I'm very hurt. I request an apology."

"I'm shorry."

"Very well. Buy me something as an apology, okay?"

After poking his cheeks, she quickly removed her hands.

"If it's not too expensive..."

"Eh, don't you have a lot of money, Hiro?"

"That's... something I have to save for later."

He has to save the money he received from the widow of the Kelheit house for the future.

First of all, he has to secure a private army, and he has to be sure not to spend his money rashly so he can pay their wages. He parted with a considerable sum of money for this operation, but he plans to seek its repayment from the Lichtein Dukedom. He has to refrain from any unnecessary expenses.

“You don’t have to worry. I don’t think it was too expensive.”

“...”

There’s no telling what [too expensive] means to an Imperial family member.

So there’s no harm in having a safety net. With the mental state of a deadbeat husband, Hiro muttered.

“If it’s not some sort of jewel...”

“No, no. Jewels don’t look good on me anyway.”

Liz laughed and waved her hand side to side.

Hiro asks, “are you sure?”, and tilts his head as he observes Liz.

Although she still has a childish youth about her, her cheerful smile reminds you of a flower in full bloom, and surely anyone would sigh in admiration at her well proportioned body. There’s no doubt that if she weren’t in the military, every man in the world would be trying to draw her interest.

(Thinking about it... I guess only certain jewels would look good on her.)

There’s no need to dress her up— Anyone would agree with that point.

If she wore it, even a pebble from the fireplace would probably look like a jewel.

“Then, should we go to Links once things have settled down?”

“It’s a promise. I’ll make you swallow “*Laevateinn*” if you’re lying.”

“Haha... That would kill me.”

“It’s okay, you’ll just end up with some heartburn.”

There was someone watching these two as they have their friendly conversation—
Second grade enlisted officer Doryx.

“Watching them from afar like this, they look like a normal boy and girl...”

One of them is a young girl who was chosen by one of the Five Imperial Spirit Swords,
and the other is a descendant of the Second Emperor.

Do those two understand what that means exactly?

“At the very least, the world would probably praise this as the second coming of
“*Kerukeion*””

— Kerukeion*.

*(TL note: Kanji is twin star kings. The reading might be the Greek word for caduceus, a
staff carried by Hermes.)*

A nickname which extols both First Emperor Altius and Second Emperor Schwartz.

After a long period of a 1,000 years, these two bloodlines are about to come together
once more.

After acquiring a wise man by the name of Schwartz, First Emperor Altius was able to
gain supremacy.

Not only does Sixth Imperial Princess Liz have her own unique form of ingenuity as
well, but she’s also added a noble descendant of the Second Emperor to her ranks.

Doryx thinks to himself about how things have gotten interesting.

The fact that that First Imperial Prince added an elf to his ranks is still fresh in mind,
and after the Third Imperial Prince acquired the talented woman known as the second
coming of “Mars”, he began to gain many achievements.

“Will this lead to prosperity or decline...? I suppose it will depend on his Majesty the

Emperor's direction."

The struggle for succession will likely intensify hereafter. If he deals with it poorly, it could turn into the embers of a large uprising, which will mean division for the great empire.

"Lord Doryx."

He turned around and saw a messenger kneeling.

"What is it?"

"We have captured both the Lichtein Dukedom's commander, Count Karl, and General Ranquil."

"Well done. Be sure they are treated with care."

"Yes!"

After waiting for the messenger to take off, Doryx approaches Hiro and kneels.

"Your Highness Hiro, it seems we have captured the commander of the Lichtein Dukedom."

"Let's begin negotiations right away. Please prepare a tent."

"Understood. I will prepare one right away."

"Please do."

Doryx bowed once more, turned around, and began preparations.



When he sat in his chair, Ranquil was at the height of confusion. Karl, sitting next to him, is probably feeling the same way. He wears an inexplicable expression, but it seems he's uncomfortable.

It's only natural. No matter the time or place, being treated as a prisoner of war is obviously a miserable experience.

However, they were not abused, nor were they treated violently.

While their weapons were confiscated, they were not bound up. They were escorted like honored guests and brought to a tent that was cool, despite being in a desert that felt like it was in the middle of summer.

"Please wait a moment."

Said the two soldiers who brought them there as they politely left.

With the presence of the enemies gone in the tent, Karl opened his mouth to speak.

"What do you think is the meaning of this?"

"I believe it's best to assume they are plotting something."

Is what he said, but Ranquil rubbed his chin and groaned.

He was unable to solve this baffling mystery.

To begin with, the enemy has no need to plot anything. Because if they erase these two, the Lichtein Dukedom would collapse. Many of the nobles would betray their nation, inviting chaos to their country. That would cause thieves and bandits to rampage about, and eventually, they would be overrun with monsters.

"I wonder if they want our territory?"

"They'll probably demand it, but that isn't enough of a reason for this."

Ranquil dismisses his assumption.

If they wanted territory, all they would need to do is kill Ranquil and Karl, and just take the places that they wanted. It's sad to say, but once Ranquil is gone, there would be no nobles left with any backbone to recapture stolen territory. In fact, they probably wouldn't put up an ounce of resistance and choose a path of surrender.

“Even if we are defeated, there is no need to become servile. If they make any unreasonable demands, I don’t mind if you refuse.”

“Then...”

Karl lowered his face and his expression was twisted in anguish. He’s probably afraid of displeasing the enemy and receiving judgement. Ranquil realized this, but there was no reason to point it out.

There is the fact that he feels responsibility for their loss, but for the sake of the future, he wants Karl to grow through various experiences. Because there are still many storms to be weathered for the country, both internally and from outside forces, when he’s pressed to make an important decision, Ranquil may not be there. While it may be difficult to call this situation fortuitous, it should be a perfect chance for him grow and help him become a leader who won’t be cajoled by the nobles around him.*

“I will leave everything to you. I will abide by your decisions.”

Though hesitant, Karl nodded at Ranquil, whose eyes were burning with a powerful light.

“All right.”

It’s uncertain how much time has passed after it fell silent, but the water placed before them was now lukewarm. He tried holding the water in their mouth before drinking it to test it for poison, but there was no smell or any reactions.

He never thought there was poison in there to begin with, but because of threats like assassinations throughout many years, this has become an ingrained habit and he has grown suspicious of many things.

Right as a bitter smile forms on his face— the sound of nimble footsteps shook his eardrums.

The first to enter the tent was a young girl in a Grantz Grand Empire military uniform

and a formal coat.

It was his first time seeing her, but because she was as beautiful as the rumors portrayed her to be, he knew she was the new commanding officer of the Fourth Imperial army, the Sixth Imperial Princess.

But that's not why Ranquil knits his brows. It was because he saw the crimson sword hanging from her waist.

(An Imperial Spirit Sword, is it... It's my first time actually seeing one, but I see. I sense an extraordinary presence.)

Then, he looked back and forth between the Imperial princess and the crimson sword, and he understood the feeling of those that praised her as "Valdite".

Most of all, as expected of one who was chosen by a spirit weapon, she wears an aura of a ruler unnatural for her age.

People like this are fearsome because they begin to change without notice. But her flames are still weak, and it doesn't seem like her gifts have bloomed yet.

And so, Ranquil comes to the conclusion that she is not the one who drove him into a corner.

"..."

After seeing the young boy who entered the tent next, Ranquil was at a loss for words. Over a set of an old Grantz Grand Empire military uniform, he wears a black cloth with dragon designs on the shoulders.

He is a young boy with an eyepatch covering half his face. One of his eyes is hidden, but...

(— Uranus?!)

It is one of the world's three great hidden eyes, and it is also called "Baldick". It is a

physical characteristic of those from legends, and can also be considered an attribute of heroes.

Ranquil is a given, but there isn't a single person in this world who does not know of this.

There is only one in this world with the attribute of twin black. Or to put it accurately, there was only one.

Even if one does not know the name of this emperor of the Grantz Grant Empire, they would know the name of "Mars".

It is his first time seeing "Baldick", which only remained in folktales.

(There's no end to these surprises... To think that a descendant truly existed.)

Setting Ranquil's confusion aside, the young girl walked towards the table and smiled courteously.

"I am the commanding officer of the Fourth Imperial Army of the Grantz Grant Empire, Sixth Imperial Princess Celia Estreya Elizabeth von Grantz."

The young girl stated her name and sat in a chair.

"I am a staff officer of the Fourth Imperial Army of the Grantz Grand Empire. My name is Hiro Schwartz von Grantz, the Fourth Imperial Prince."

Ranquil gets the sense he's not being given a chance to speak. Although he is smiling, it's like he's observing them from deep within his eye, and an eerie presence comes flying out from it. His dark eye, which was encroaching on every corner of his heart, was an abyss which seemed to suggest that any form of speculation was pointless.

Karl and Ranquil also quickly introduce themselves and look away to escape Hiro's sharp, discerning eye. Ranquil comes to the realization that "Uranus" is more troublesome than he had heard it to be.

“Excuse me.”

The third person to enter, a staff officer— one who introduced himself as Second grade enlisted officer Doryx, handed them two pieces of parchment paper.

“Once you’ve looked this over, we’d like your signatures.”

The parchment paper read as follows—

The Lichtein Dukedom cedes their northern region to the Grantz Grand Empire.

Furthermore, the Lichtein Dukedom will take responsibility for the cost of munitions and other expenditures of the Grantz Grand Empire during this war.

Both the Lichtein Dukedom and Grantz Grand Empire agree to a three year pact of nonaggression hereafter.

Should any event arise which threatens the safety of the Grantz Grand Empire, the Lichtein Dukedom gives the Grantz Grand Empire the right to occupy any of their territory.

(It's not bad... There is little we reap from the northern region, and we'll lose one oasis city, but it isn't a great loss. It's troublesome that the Grantz Grand Empire is intervening under the pretext of worsening public order, but there are ways we can use this to our advantage. The reparations... we can probably sell the previous duke's personal belongings which he's accumulated to pay for that.)

After wrapping up his thoughts, Ranquil exchanges looks with Karl.

Karl's nods, as if he was thinking the same thing, and is about to open his mouth to speak, but...

“In addition to that...”

The black haired young boy— Hiro placed his hand on the table and tapped his finger.

“This will be a verbal promise, but if the Schteizen Republic tries to invade the Lichtein Dukedom after this, it would be possible for us to send you reinforcements if you take care of the military expenses.”

“...Is that true?”

Karl rises halfway to his feet from his chair and asks.

Like they say, things are easier said than done— Matters like these are not so simple.

Because if the Schteizen Republic really did come to attack them, and if the Grantz Grand Empire sent reinforcements, it may open hostilities between the two countries. But it should be true that the Grantz Grand Empire wants to avoid any troublesome affairs before Ferzen is able to regain stability.

“Yes, if you so wish.”

But the Fourth Imperial Prince of the Grantz Grand Empire is saying it's possible.

“But don't you have your hands full with Ferzen? Even if it is a verbal agreement, is it okay for you to make such promises at your own discretion?”

“It's okay. The Grantz Grand Empire will not waver due to such trivial matters.”

Hiro smiled at Karl, sending a chill down Ranquil's spine.

He can tell he's plotting something. But his thoughts are hidden in darkness, making it difficult to probe them.

“If you agree, can we have you sign?”

Hiro's extended hand points to the parchment.

There isn't enough time to search for this man's intentions. If he tries to buy time, no doubt he'll make an unreasonable demand.

After seeing Karl grab the pen in his peripherals, Ranquil let out a small sigh and

signed. As they extend the parchment after signing them, Hiro takes them and verifies the signatures. Then, after exchanging a few words with the Sixth Imperial Princess, he hands the parchment to the staff officer waiting beside them.

A brief moment of silence descends upon them, but Ranquil's voice breaks that silence.

"Do you mind if I ask you something?"

Hiro's eye points towards Ranquil.

"I don't mind. Is something bothering you?"

"Your siege battle which defeated us was magnificent. If I'm not mistaken, that was the same plan I tried to use on the Fourth Imperial Army."

Ranquil's plan was to first avoid the Fourth Imperial Army by making them think they were making a steady advance using lightly guarded forts as bait, and draw them deep into their territory. Then he was going to pit them against the slave liberation army, and surround them once they were exhausted.

In contrast, Hiro's plan was to dangle supply trains as bait, make them think they were in an advantageous position, and create a situation from which they could not escape before surrounding the exhausted Lichtein Dukedom's army.

The more he thought about it, while the conditions were different, it was the same in nature to Ranquil's plan.

"And that's when I started to question it, whether it was a plan you prepared beforehand... or if you decided to use this same plan to show me the difference in our abilities. I would like to learn from you for future reference."

After pretending to think about it, Hiro opened his mouth.

“I’m sorry if you take offense to this, but once I heard the reports regarding the activities of the Lichtein Dukedom’s army, I knew the plan you would employ. The moment I decided to apply the same plan— was after I joined with the Fourth Imperial Army.”

“After you joined...? Was that when General Kielo was still the commanding officer?”

“Exactly. Because I didn’t know the condition of the Fourth Imperial Army, I didn’t know what sort of plan would be necessary.”

“I see...”

The young boy avoided saying it outloud, but it was probably both. It was one of the plans he prepared in advance, and no doubt he also decided to use the same plan to force Ranquil to surrender.

Looking at the silent Ranquil, Hiro spoke.

“Now then, a messenger will be dispatched from the department of military affairs later. If you have any questions, you can express them then.”

Hiro and the Sixth Imperial Princess stand from their seats. The Sixth Imperial Princess goes outside first, and Hiro is about to leave as well.

In a flustered voice, Ranquil called out to him.

“May I ask why you kept me alive? It may be odd for me to say this myself, but... despite my current situation, I am called the *“Wild Eagle of Change”* and am feared by the surrounding countries.”

This man praised as a hero— Ranquil swears revenge, and attacks the Grantz Grand Empire after rebuilding his country. There’s no way this wise young boy doesn’t realize this to be a possibility.

“I did lose this time, but there is a desire in me to fight you again to regain my pride. Putting that into consideration... I think you should kill me to prevent any future problems.”

Ranquil is a clever man, but at the same time, he isn't so sensible a man as to just kneel to anyone. At this point, it may be no different from the cries of a sore loser, but even if he is to be scorned, he has to hear the reason why.

"Will you answer my question?"

Ranquil puts pressure on the throbbing wound on his face as he stares at the young boy's back.

"General Ranquil."

With a pale face, Karl rebukes him quietly.

If they offend this young boy, both their heads would immediately go flying. It's likely that he is trying to tell him not to take this second chance at life for granted. In fact, Second grade enlisted officer Doryx was staring at them displeased. If he were in the young boy's position, he might have announced Ranquil's death on the spot, but it seems the Twin Black Prince was not such a small man.

"You're a smart man. I'm sure you know what you should do."

Hiro points at his own cheek and leaves. Second grade enlisted officer Doryx followed him silently.

Karl strokes his chest relieved and looks at Ranquil.

"General Ranquil, why would you say something like that all of a—... What's the matter? You're sweating so much."

He knows even without being told. He is sweating profusely from all over his body. The moment Hiro looked back at him, he was prepared to face death. That's how

intense his bloodlust was.

He looks at Karl, who is watching him concerned, and thinks.

(...So there's only one path for the Lichtein Dukedom to survive.)

Karl is no match for Hiro. There are likely only a handful of people who can withstand that domineering aura of his.

(If he decides we're of no use...)

He's unable to forget the madness he saw through a gap in the young boy's eye.

(That boy may come to kill us.)

Ranquil traces the wound on his cheek with a shaky finger.

This is a warning— a declaration that they can be killed at any time.

It was a warning and a curse. Not for the present, but for the future.

Chapter 23

Epilogue

A prairie land on the southwestern edge of Soleil, the central continent.

There was a prosperous and glorious country which was set in this fertile land for over 400 years where they worshipped Alkitas*, the creator of elves, as their god.

(TL note: Kanji is fairy king.)

Their head temple is in the western continent of Enjambre, and like Soleil with its vast population of humans, there are scores of elves living in the nation there— It is the head nation of the Union of the Three Knight Nations, the Holy State of Ys.

Erected atop a low hill, the capital— Carlila is overflowing with people visiting to worship at the cathedral as usual. There is a long and wide stone paved road with clear water flowing through canals on either side. The people walk towards the cathedral against those streams. As they do, an enormous garden boasting a countless number of blooming flowers takes over their field of vision, then they catch sight of white buildings standing in rows.

When you step foot into the cathedral, you are welcomed by tiles with complicated designs, and if you look in all directions, there are columns supporting the ceiling. There is stained glass embedded into white walls, and the sunlight shining through not only brings in light, but almost seems to bless the visitors.

Farther inside, there is an altar for worshipping Alkitas.

Normally, this place is completely filled with worshippers, but currently, there are only two women and no one else. They made no sound. Other than the sound of their soft breathing, it was dead silent.

A woman prays before the altar— Behind her, a bishop opened her mouth to speak.

“What did you think of the person from the oracle?”

“Hmm~ let’s see~...”

“Was he as our Lord told you?”

The woman smiles wryly at the bishop’s continuous questioning and stands.

“Nope. Alkitas was vague, after all.”

The woman turns around to face the bishop, waves a hand, and laughs for some reason.

“He seemed like a good natured young boy. I have no impression other than that for now.”

“Is that so...?”

“Oh, you seem disappointed.”

After saying that, she cheerfully slanted her lips.

“Ahh... could it be that you misunderstood my reason for coming here?”

“Th-That is...”

The bishop’s face revealed that she hit the nail on the mark. Her face overflows with joy as the corners of her lips curl up.

“Not~ yet. That’s what Alkitas is saying, too.”

“Why is that? Humans are prideful and avaricious. They are a lesser race which only pollutes Aletia. They are not fit for this world. I don’t understand why our Lord allows them free rein. Is now not the time to bestow divine punishment upon them!”

“That’s easier said than done~”

“Then... when will our Lord take action?”

“I’ll tell you when the time comes, is all he’s saying.”

“Are you fine with that, Oracle?! Did you not come here because you share the same intentions as us?!”

“Of course not. I just happened to stop by.”

The woman sighed disappointed. She placed her left hand on her hip, and pointed at the bishop with her right hand.

“For starters... you say humans are prideful and avaricious, but we elves aren’t that different. Every race has greed.”

“What? Are you grouping humans and elves together?!”

“I won’t say that, but you overreact about every little thing.”

After saying that, the woman snorted, seemingly displeased.

“And humans are a lesser race? Hah, don’t make me laugh. It’s been ages since humans were called an inferior race. If you still say that now, you’re not different from the elderly people of the mother country. Look at the bigger picture. Even if it’s just for show, you bear the title of bishop.”

“Th-Then, even if only you, Oracle...!”

“Shut~ up. Give it a rest. Contempt is not allowed. Things should be carried out carefully, subtly, and soundly. That’s the way of us Four Oracles.”

Jingle. The sound of bells ring out from nowhere.

“Ah...”

The bishop’s knees gave out and she fell to the floor.

The woman stooped down and peered into the bishop’s face.

“So just wait patiently until the time comes. Puppets should hang quietly on the wall.”

The woman stood back up, and in her hand was a khakkhara*.

“Now then... Where should I go next?”

She mutters as she looks upward with a smile. Then, her face quickly turned grim.

“Fine. I just have to go back, right? Seriously, you’re so stubborn.”

Looking disappointed, she pouted and struck the tip of her khakkhara on the floor.

“Well, I guess it’s better to have a souvenir for that person.”

Jingle. The sound of bells shook the world and the woman disappeared.

The sanctuary was enveloped in silence once more, but in a brief moment, it became noisy with priests who discovered the collapsed bishop.



Under a verdant sky, columns of men and horses march along a desert painted brown. They all had bright faces, and their hearts were filled with thoughts of their distant hometown.

Imperial Year 1023, September 4. The Fourth Imperial Army was en route back home.

There were a number of different flags raised here and there, but the ones that stood out most were the ones of the Sixth Imperial Princess and the Fourth Imperial Prince. Under those battle flags, were the members of the Grantz Grand Empire’s Imperial family.

“...I wonder if Cerberus is doing okay.”

Muttered Liz, the crimson haired Imperial princess, on her horse.

“I hope he’s not sulking. I wonder if I should buy him something on the way back.”

Riding beside her is the Fourth Imperial Prince, Hiro.

“I’ve never been away from him for over a month, so I’m not sure.”

Liz looked lost for only a moment, then she immediately had on a cheerful smile.

“But I guess it’s okay. I did make sure Cerberus wouldn’t be bored.”

“Ohh~... What did you do?”

“I appointed him commanding officer of Fort Belk until I returned.”

“...Eh, the temporary commanding officer is Cerberus?”

“Yup. He was happier than I thought he’d be.”

“No, but, being a commander officer is a job, not just a title.”

“I sent Uncle a letter about that. He should be taking care of any paperwork.”

“I guess it’s okay then... Even though I don’t think that should be okay.”

There’s no end to Margrave Grinda’s compassion.

But because he adores his niece like his own daughter, maybe it’s no trouble for him.

Even so, it’s the role of those close to Liz to stop her from getting out of control. As he looked reproachfully at the old soldier Tris, wondering what he was doing while all this happened...

“Sir Cerberus is doing a splendid job as the temporary commanding officer. I know of no creature with as much spirit as he.”

“...Is that so?”

True, he’s probably overflowing with spirit. Though it could probably be considered instincts, too.

Tris has a fault of being a little too lenient when it comes to Cerberus.

“Haha, it seems you have it rough.”

Second grade enlisted officer Doryx laughed as he joined the conversation.

“Please rest as ease. I will be here from now on. I’m proficient with document work.”

Hiro opened his mouth to say something, but he saw Tris gleefully approaching.

“That’s reassuring! We’ll be counting on you!”

“Guoh!”

An intense slap fell on Doryx’s back.

“Really, it’s embarrassing, but I’m horrible with document work. His Highness Hiro did most of it and I felt bad about it.”

It’s not mostly, it’s all.

Is what Hiro wanted to scream out, but he suppressed it at the last moment.

“U-Umm, I’m a higher rank than you— Why are you acting so familiar?”

“More importantly, can you handle alcohol?”

“More importantly—?”

“Well, can you?”

Tris drew in with a stern face making Doryx draw back.

“W-Well, it’s not that I can’t.”

“Then when we return to Fort Belk, we’ll call it a welcoming party too and drink the night away.”

Tris’s laughter is carried off by the wind.

Liz looks at them while enjoying herself, and Hiro places his hand on his forehead as he feels a headache coming on.

“I want an administrative officer...”

A large shadow fell on Hiro who was looking down.

“One-eyed dragon, what’s going to happen with Milieu?”

As he lifted his face, there was Gahda.

He was a man with an enormous frame, large enough to be mistaken for a boulder.

“If it’s about that, there’s no problem. It’s a village on the way back, so we’ll send her off with an escort once we get there.”

He looked at the worried Gahda and added to that.

“Ahh, if you’re worried about her identity being discovered, there’s no need for that either. I’ll have Liz choose someone she trusts, so relax.”

“Will it really be okay?”

“Of course. After this, her village— Sures Village will become part of the Grand Empire’s territory, too. The number of bandits and monsters should dwindle, and it’s close to Fort Belk, so we can race over if anything happens.”

When he heard that Milieu was from Sures Village, he realized why he had that strange feeling when he saw her.

Sures Village is the village which Hiro saved from bandits before joining with the Fourth Imperial Army.

Even though he had suppressed the bandits, Hiro was still a stranger, but there was a man there who kindly allowed him to stay the night at his house— That was Milieu’s father, the village chief, Kukuri.

“You know, you’re more of a worrywart than I thought.”

“It may be strange for me to be saying this, having exposed her to many dangers, but I want to return her safely to her parents. I want her to live a peaceful life without anyone discovering her identity.”

Gahda sent his gaze towards a carriage in the rear. Milieu is riding in that carriage.

This heat is too much for a young child, and riding a horse for a long period of time would be nothing but torture for her. Most importantly, Hiro couldn’t possibly be rough with the daughter of a man he owes a favor to. He doesn’t want to repay kindness with evil.

As these thoughts went through his head...

“So, what should I do from here on out?”

Gahda tossed out a problem. He has no place to return to.

He is a zorosta who drifted from a southern island country— Ambyssion.

It seems that Ambyssion is currently in a state of constant disputes. Dozens of kings are fighting for supremacy, and they are rushing into a warring period. Apparently, Gahda governed a number of those countries, but he was defeated in battle by a powerful king. While he was planning a restoration, he was betrayed by one of his subordinates, and his life had come to an end.

Or so he thought, but when he woke up, it seemed he had drifted into the Lichtein Dukedom.

There, he saw the slave situation and decided to carry out a new ambition with Milieu as the leader, but this also ended in defeat. And now, we come to the present.

“Well, I am thinking of a number of possibilities.”

Even if he has lost his Demon Emperor Sword, there’s nothing lacking in the knowledge he’s cultivated as a king, or his battle prowess as a warrior. And judging by the fact that he defeated the duke of the Lichtein Dukedom, there’s likely no problems with his ability to lead.

“Well, I won’t do anything bad, so don’t worry.”

“It’s hard for me to believe that when I look at you...”

Leaving behind a weary face, Gahda falls all the way back to the carriage.

Hiro smiled wryly and looked forward. His thoughts went to the distant Imperial Capital.

(I’ll probably be called sometime soon. I wonder what they’ll make me do this time.)

That thought brings him down. If he’s unable to resolve the problem pushed onto him, there’s no doubt that those who are displeased with him will persecute him at every crucial turn.

But a part of him enjoys planning out how to pull through that.

(I have to make sure I don’t get too worked up. That’s a bad habit of mine.)

He has no choice but to keep focused, gain achievements, and move up in social standing.

As a soldier, his rank is third grade enlisted officer. He also has the title of Fourth Imperial Prince on top of that, but it’s an unstable one.

The journey to the final goal is long. He’s done nothing more than reach the starting point.

(Speaking of which...)

Hiro suddenly remembered something and took a card out from his breast pocket.

It was given to him by First Emperor Altius before he returned to earth.

At first, it was plain and white, but—

— Now, about a third of it was dyed black.



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